

Regulatory Guidance

Transparent release and use of statistics and data

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Office for Statistics Regulation

We provide independent regulation of all official statistics produced in the UK. Statistics are an essential public asset. We aim to enhance public confidence in the trustworthiness, quality and value of statistics produced by government.

We do this by setting the standards they must meet in the *Code of Practice for Statistics*. We ensure that producers of government statistics uphold these standards by conducting assessments against the *Code*. Those which meet the standards are given National Statistics status, indicating that they meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and value. We also report publicly on system-wide issues and on the way statistics are being used, celebrating when the standards are upheld and challenging publicly when they are not.

Regulatory guidance for the transparent release and use of statistics and data

This guidance sets out the Office for Statistics Regulation's expectations for the transparent release and use of statistics and data. It outlines principles and provides practical advice on how to deliver on these principles. It is informed by the principles set out in the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#) and supports the Office for Statistics Regulation's [interventions policy](#) approach.

Why is transparency important?

Statistics and data should serve the public good. They should allow individuals to reach informed decisions, answer important questions and provide a mechanism for holding governments to account. Statistics and data also underpin successful implementation of government policies, and individuals' views on the effectiveness of policy decisions.

Transparency and clarity support public confidence in statistics and the organisations that produce them and minimise the risk of misinterpretation of statistics and data.

For many who see the publication of numerical information by governments, the distinction between official statistics and other data, such as management information or research, may seem artificial. Therefore, it is important to consistently adopt a transparent and accessible approach to communicating statistics, data and wider research.

What are the guiding principles?

Intelligent transparency is informed by three principles:

- I. **Equality of access:** Data quoted publicly, for example in parliament or the media, should be made available to all in a transparent way. This includes providing sources and appropriate explanation of context, including strengths and limitations.
- II. **Understanding:** Analytical professions need to work together to provide data which enhances understanding of societal and economic matters, including the impacts of policy. Governments should consider data needs when developing policy and be transparent in sharing analytical and research plans and outputs with the public.
- III. **Leadership:** Organisations need strong analytical leadership, within and beyond analytical professions. Decisions about the publication of statistics and data, such as content and timing, should be independent of political and policy processes. These decisions should be made by analytical leaders, who should also be given freedom to collaborate across organisational boundaries to support statistics that serve the public good. Their expertise and decision-making authority should be endorsed by Permanent Secretaries.

How can I implement these principles?

1. Data needs should be considered when developing policies and management systems

It is important to think about what data will be needed to understand impacts of the policy and to enable the public to hold governments to account. Professional advice should be sought from analysts when developing and implementing new performance measures or making changes to existing measures. This was highlighted in OSR's work on [the importance of involving statisticians in the evolution of NHS performance measures](#). When developing policies and management systems, you should:

- Determine the desired outcomes and specify what data will be used to monitor whether the outcomes are being achieved.
- Engage with a range of users, internal and external to Government, to understand their future data needs.
- Be open about analysis development plans and share progress against them.
- Review your understanding of data needs and the data collected at regular intervals.

The Code states that an organisation's Head of Profession for Statistics (or equivalent) has authority for deciding on how and when official statistics are published, including determining the need for new statistical outputs. The advice of analytical leaders across analytical professions should be central to decisions about transparent publication of other research and analysis outputs.

2. When data are quoted publicly, they should be published in an accessible form

Organisations should seek to comply with the principles set out in the Code of Practice when making public statements that refer to data, regardless of the status of the data. Specifically:

- Data to support any public statement should be published in advance or at the same time as the statement is made, with a clear explanation of strengths and limitations.
- Where unpublished data are referred to unexpectedly, the information should be published as soon as possible after any statement has been made – ideally on the same day as the analysis should already be available and a grid slot should not be required, given the data have already been quoted. This can be done via an ad-hoc release. For example, the Department for Work and Pensions has a [page dedicated to ad hoc statistical analyses](#).
- The data or analysis should be published separately from the related policy statements.
- Where data are quoted in a policy document, official press release or on social media, links to the sources of the data should be clearly set out.
- As far as possible, data should be published in structured form and accessible to a wide range of users. For example, following [best practice for releasing statistics in spreadsheets](#).

- The principles of the Code should be applied on a voluntarily basis whether the output is statistics or other analysis. [Voluntary application \(VA\) of the Code](#) is for any producer of data, statistics and analysis which are not official statistics, whether inside government or beyond, to help them produce analytical outputs that are high quality, useful for supporting decisions, and well respected.

Ad hoc releases are an effective way of supporting governments announcements in fast-moving situations where new management information, research or analysis help explain or support the announcement. Such releases need not be long, or technical – they are a way of making the data available in line with the principles set out above. As these releases would simply be clarifying figures that have been or are due to be used in announcements, they should not require grid slots.

Where possible, public statements should draw on the latest published official statistics. Access to official statistics should be limited before their public release, and data should be published in line with the guidance set out in the Code of Practice for Statistics.

For more information, see OSR's previously published [Statement on data transparency and the role of Heads of Profession for Statistics](#) and guidance on [Production and use of management information by government and other official bodies](#).

3. The presentation and communication of statistics and data should aid understanding and prevent misinterpretation

There must be an awareness that numbers are subject to interpretation and this will inform decisions. To support appropriate interpretation of data and analysis, the publication of data to support public statements or otherwise should include clear information on how the data or analysis have been produced, and how it can be used. Specifically, you should include information about:

- How the data have been produced and collected (e.g. are the data sourced from administrative or survey data)
- The definitions used within the data and any impact on how they can be interpreted (e.g. are financial data in real or cash terms?)
- Any notable strengths and limitations of the data.

Care should be taken to avoid selective use of data or use of data without appropriate context as this can lead to misuse which damages public trust. OSR's [Guidance for statements about public funding](#) provides further examples of things that should be considered in the context of public funding announcements.

Annex:

Where else can I look for guidance on transparency?

The OSR offers specific guidance on the following topics:

- Publishing, pre-announcing and labelling statistics: OSR's [regulatory guidance on publishing official and National statistics](#). The guidance includes information on publishing ad hoc releases.
- Models: OSR's [Guidance for Models](#) provides information on how the principles in the Code can support good practice and transparency in designing, developing and using models. The guidance covers traditional statistical techniques and newer techniques including machine learning.
- Evaluation: OSR's explainer on [how the Code can help support evaluation](#) highlights that users and the intended use should be at the centre of the evaluation. Published data and analysis should be made equally available to all, being open about the nature of the evaluation and how it serves the public good.
- Leadership: OSR published its review of [Statistical Leadership: Making Analytical Insight Count](#) in February 2021, which looked at how statistical leadership can be strengthened across governments. Statistical leadership can help ensure the right data and analysis exist, that they are used at the right time to inform decisions, and that they are communicated clearly and transparently in a way that supports confidence in the data and decisions made on the basis of them.

The [Government Social Research: Publication protocol](#) details five principles that should be adhered to in the publication and release of all government social research products. These are consistent with the Code of Practice for Statistics. It clearly sets out how social research conducted by or for government should be released; who should be responsible for the release; the timing of the release and the independence of the research.

While the guidance referred to in this document primarily relates to analytical professions, the key principles and thinking apply to many settings and professions. In the recent [Declaration on Government Reform](#), Government committed to ensuring “all data is as open as possible to public and third parties”.

