

Assessment of compliance with the Code of
Practice for Statistics

Statistics from the People and Nature Survey for England

(produced by Natural England)

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.

Executive Summary

Judgement on National Statistics Status

- ES.1 Natural England asked the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) to assess the People and Nature Survey (PaNS) for England. In requesting this assessment, the PaNS team is demonstrating its commitment to produce statistics that meet the standards required of [National Statistics](#) and the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#).
- ES.2 We have identified four requirements for Natural England to fulfil for statistics from the PaNS to be designated as National Statistics. Once Natural England demonstrates that these steps have been undertaken, OSR will recommend that the UK Statistics Authority designate the statistics as National Statistics.
- ES.3 Natural England is working towards having implemented the requirements in time for the next annual publication, expected in late 2023. The PaNS team has agreed to publish an action plan by the end of January 2023, outlining the steps that it will take to address the requirements, and will update us as the work progresses.

Key Findings

- ES.4 Statistics from the PaNS present an overall view of people's enjoyment, access, understanding of and attitudes towards the natural environment, and its contributions to wellbeing. The statistics are valued by a range of users across policy areas, academia, and research.
- ES.5 The team has several welcome developments in the pipeline but could do more to promote these and the survey itself by broadening its user base and taking a more transparent approach to both user engagement and its communication around future development plans, which would further enhance the public value of the PaNS.
- ES.6 Work is progressing on harmonisation between the People and Nature Surveys in England and Wales and therefore the team should also take steps to engage with their counterparts in Scotland and Northern Ireland to explore the feasibility of UK-wide harmonisation in order to address this gap identified by users. Users we spoke to also expressed a need for information on the comparability between PaNS and its predecessor the [Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment](#) (MENE) Survey. We welcome that the team has sought advice and is exploring plans on how to address this.
- ES.7 We have not identified any material concerns around the quality of the PaNS data, and users report that they have confidence in the quality of the survey data. There is a strong relationship between the PaNS team at Natural England and their data supplier with regular engagement which has led to continuous data quality improvements.
- ES.8 A proportion of survey participants are answering 'Don't know/Prefer not to say' to some of the key survey questions which can affect users' interpretation of the statistics. Natural England has agreed to undertake work to understand the reasons behind survey participants answering 'Don't know/Prefer not to say'.

Chapter 1: Public Value

User engagement and public value

- 1.1 Natural England introduced the [People and Nature Survey for England](#) (PaNS) in 2020, building on its [Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment \(MENE\) survey](#) which ran from 2009 to 2019. PaNS gathers data on people's use and enjoyment of the natural environment and its impact on wellbeing.
- 1.2 Statistics and data from the PaNS are used widely within Natural England and by other government departments, researchers, and academics to help understand people's use and enjoyment of the natural environment and its impact on wellbeing. They also contribute to Natural England's delivery of statutory duties, inform Defra policy and natural capital accounting, and contribute to the [outcome indicator framework for the 25 Year Environment Plan](#).
- 1.3 The PaNS went live in April 2020 and with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the PaNS team at Natural England adapted the survey to collect additional information on the impact of COVID-19 and publish timelier monthly data. These monthly indicators stopped in March 2022 and currently the statistics are published on a quarterly and annual basis.
- 1.4 Our [Rapid Regulatory Review](#) carried out in June 2020 found that user engagement around these interim monthly indicators was exemplary. We welcome that this has been built on through the user engagement exercise carried out over summer 2022 which led to over 90 responses via a survey, follow up interviews and workshops. Initial feedback from the exercise has led to refinement of the annual bulletin to reflect how users make use of the annual data.
- 1.5 A key part of the assessment was talking to people who use the statistics, to help us to understand the current value of the statistics, and where there is the potential to increase this. Our engagement gave us some insight into the extent to which the statistics meet different users' needs and into which users feel that the statistics producers engage with them.
- 1.6 Users we spoke to during the assessment recognise the value of PaNS. However, users suggested that the survey could be promoted more as they felt the statistics it do not have the broad audience they deserve. We heard, as an example, of some smaller organisations who work on improving access to the outdoors were not aware of PaNS and so could be missing out on the opportunity to add greater public value.
- 1.7 The PaNS team also has a lot of further development ideas in the pipeline to add further value and insight to the current outputs. These proposals include adding visualisations to the quarterly datasets and making the data available on the UK Data Service (UKDS), including making additional data available to those who are accredited to UKDS for advanced modelling and analysis. This echoes what we heard from some users who said that they would like to see more analysis and infographics. If the data were to be made available on the UKDS this should also help increase the use of PaNS and therefore increase its profile. Natural England has not published any plans for these developments. Having a clear plan that is also transparent about improvements that are not currently feasible, will help manage users' expectations. This plan should be user-led and a result of engagement to understand what developments would be most valuable to users.

Requirement 1: To enhance the public value of PaNS statistics, Natural England should:

- **publish development plans with timescales and share with its newly expanded user base,**
- **ensure that users have opportunities to contribute to development planning, are aware in advance of developments being launched, and have opportunities to contribute their views on new developments once published.**
- **enable wider access to the data by continuing with plans to make it available through the UK Data Service or equivalent platforms.**

This will help ensure that users' needs are fully understood, and their use of the statistics is supported.

- 1.8 There is an established PaNS Research user group, and a stakeholder group where planned work is discussed, and users are able to give feedback. Publishing a summary of relevant minutes and actions from these group meetings would demonstrate transparency about the team's approach to engaging with users and to help foster wider user engagement, which may in turn lead to further improvements in the statistics. We welcome that the team has committed to publishing these minutes and actions.
- 1.9 The team responds to ad-hoc data requests and is working to identify common requests that will shape future thematic reports to improve the equality of access to data and insights to more users.
- 1.10 Users we spoke to during the assessment process expressed an interest in having detailed spatial data about where people go when engaging with the outdoors and more-granular data for example down to local authority level. However, users do acknowledge that the data could become less robust when presented at a lower level and this may not be resolved without increasing the sample size.
- 1.11 User feedback also suggested a need to be able to see a UK-wide picture of people's views on engaging with nature. There are equivalent People and Nature Surveys for Wales and Scotland, and the respective teams meet a couple of times a year to discuss the potential for alignment and adding value through collaboration. This potential is limited by the differing interests of the organisations that fund each of the surveys. However, the Natural England team is interested in exploring the feasibility of using data from England, Scotland, and Wales to create a composite indicator for engagement with the natural environment in collaboration with the Office for National Statistics (ONS). We have also heard that the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland is investigating setting up its own equivalent survey on people, nature, and the outdoors, and so we suggest reaching out to the team and involving it in any UK-wide discussions. While we understand that the PaNS team has not had the resource to fully assess the key similarities and differences with the other UK countries People and Nature Surveys, we welcome that the Natural England team has agreed to reference them in its outputs so that users can access them more easily and draw their own comparisons as appropriate.

Requirement 2: To help users develop a coherent understanding of people and nature across the UK, Natural England should assess the similarities and differences between each country’s surveys and explain these to users.

Enhancing accessibility

- 1.12 Natural England has published a wealth of documentation and material to support the PaNS statistics on its main [web page](#). These include the welcome addition of the new [data dashboard](#) as well as further useful material on the [People and Nature User hub](#) such as an informative video and a link to the survey questionnaire.
- 1.13 The majority of users we spoke to during the assessment process tended to be ‘expert’ users and mainly use the published data tables, but those who did make use of the statistical bulletin and other supporting material were generally happy with the presentation and content of the statistics. However, navigation between the different outputs and supporting material is not straightforward.
- 1.14 Presenting the material in a more coherent and joined-up way with clearer signposting would make navigation to the most relevant data and guidance for particular uses easier. The PaNS web page itself contains a mixture of current and discontinued material and there is some inconsistency in the naming conventions of the annual reports. Natural England has committed to refreshing the PaNS webpage which should help to address these issues. We appreciate that at the same time this has to be balanced with some of the limitations of the capability of the gov.uk webpage.
- 1.15 As mentioned in para 1.7 Natural England plans to introduce infographics or other visual tools alongside the quarterly data releases, similar to the [one produced](#) to accompany the Year 1 report. We have highlighted to the team the need to follow accessibility legislation, (see Government Analysis Function guidance [here](#)) as while this infographic was produced using Natural England branding and followed Natural England guidelines, the infographic may not be as accessible to all users as it could be.
- 1.16 The team agreed it would be beneficial to users to re-instate the glossary that was removed from the latest annual publication in 2022 and to expand it to include other technical terms that some users may not be familiar with.

Chapter 2: Quality

Findings

- 2.1 PaNS data are produced from an online panel survey run by a contractor. The PaNS team at Natural England has a strong relationship with this data provider with regular contact ensuring continuous data quality improvements. There are known issues with the representativeness of panel samples and Natural England has published a good summary of the limitations within the published [survey methods and technical details](#) for the People and Nature Survey. Natural England also publishes detailed information about the quality assurance checks that the data go through within the PaNS team and by the data suppliers, some of which were developed in collaboration between the teams.
- 2.2 At the start of this assessment some parts of the [Technical Report](#) did not reflect current developments. It is good that the team reviewed and refreshed the Technical Report as a matter of priority and published an updated version to reflect the latest plans in November 2022.
- 2.3 Users we spoke to reported that they have confidence in the quality of the survey data and that they found the quality of the PaNS data appears to be improved compared to its predecessor the [MENE survey](#) (see para 1.1).
- 2.4 Natural England had planned to parallel run PaNS with MENE to enable backwards harmonisation between the two surveys and provide a consistent time series. However, COVID-19 restrictions stopped this from happening as MENE was a face-to-face survey. The team sought advice from [ONS's Methodology Advisory Service](#) who concluded that the backwards harmonisation would not be feasible due to the time that has elapsed since MENE stopped, the different survey modes used (MENE was a face-to-face survey and PaNS is an online panel survey) and changes to the questions. The team understands that additional work needs to be done to explain the discontinuity between the two sets of statistics to users and plans to explore the issues during its next Steering Group meeting later this year. Users we spoke to also expressed a need for information on the comparability between MENE and PaNS so that they could look at the longer-term trends in people's interactions with nature.

Requirement 3: To help users understand the differences between the PaNS and MENE, Natural England should investigate the discontinuity between the two timeseries and publish their findings.

- 2.5 Work to implement Reproducible Analytical Pipelines (RAP) is ongoing and is increasing the automation within the quality assurance processes. Introducing automation into the production of statistics helps to reduce the potential for human error and also frees up time, allowing statistics producers to spend more time on other aspects of the production process. We have published a [review into the use of RAP principles and overcoming barriers](#) which may be useful to the team as a more automated approach is considered.
- 2.6 Within the survey, participants are given the option to answer 'Don't know' or 'Prefer not to say' which for the latest headline figure of 'People who had visited green and natural spaces in the last 14 days', accounts for around 10 per cent of answers. This level of 'Don't know'/'Prefer not to say' could affect the interpretation of the statistics as it is not known what impact the true number of visits made by these

participants would have on the average number of visits, and how this changes over time. It is reassuring to know that the data supplier checks for high levels of these types of answers, but there is potential for further work to be done to understand why survey participants are answering with “Don’t know” such as through adding a follow-up question within the survey. This further work should help to identify if there is any potential misunderstanding of some of the survey questions, the need for any adjustments (such as the introduction of specific guidance) and by reducing the number of ‘Don’t know’ answers, it should allow a more robust dataset to be produced.

Requirement 4: To help provide a more robust set of data, Natural England should work with the data supplier to understand the reasons behind survey participants answering ‘Don’t know/Prefer not to say’ and look at how these can be addressed where this would be practicable and valuable. In the interests of transparency any findings should be communicated to users.

Chapter 3: Trustworthiness

Findings

- 3.1 The statistics from the PaNS are produced independently and presented impartially and pre-release access is kept to a minimum. The survey data are collected, stored, and processed in line with the relevant government legislation.
- 3.2 There are good links with the Head of Profession for statistics at DEFRA and his deputy, with the PaNS team at Natural England seeing them as an invaluable resource to provide support and advice. Staff are recruited in line with the relevant competency frameworks and receive on-the-job training as well as more organisation-wide training including on the Code of Practice for statistics.
- 3.3 There have been previous breaches of the Code of Practice for Statistics. It is good that the team has learnt lessons from these and is applying best practice to prevent any further breaches, including extra measures within their quality assurance processes.
- 3.4 It is not clear if there are any revisions or corrections made to the data. To provide transparency around revisions and corrections Natural England has agreed to signpost users to the [Defra group revisions and corrections policy statement](#).

