

Futureproofing the Code of Practice for Statistics: findings and next steps from our review

Summary

The [Code of Practice for Statistics](#) sets the standards that producers of official statistics should commit to. It supports producers in ensuring the statistics they provide are of high quality and answer society's questions. It also provides the means to hold producer bodies and their representatives to account when statistics, or the use of statistics, fall short of meeting users' needs.

It is now more than five years since the second edition of the Code of Practice for Statistics was published. Since that time, the Code has been firmly embedded into the work of government analysts producing official statistics and by some analytical organisations outside of government, but there has also been a lot of change in the data landscape, an increased desire for statistics from users, and changes in the ways statistics are produced.

We launched a review of the Code – [Futureproofing the Code](#) – in September 2023 to provide an opportunity to hear thoughts from stakeholders across a wide range of settings about the suitability of the Code and on how it can be adapted to meet the challenges and opportunities related to data and statistics on the horizon.

We held a series of public events and sessions with producers and stakeholders over the autumn of 2023, as well as a written [call for evidence](#).

We are now able to present the findings and recommendations from these engagement activities. The key outcomes of the review are as follow:

1. We will refresh the Code of Practice, producing a third edition.

While a strong message received throughout the review is that the Code is highly regarded by those producing official statistics, as well as by other stakeholders, there was wide acceptance of the changed and further evolving data landscape over the past five years and consensus that the Code can be enhanced both in its content and presentation. Therefore, in line with our own view that to be effective the Code should remain relevant and reflective of the needs and nature of society, OSR will refresh the current Code. We will consult publicly on our ideas for a refreshed code later in 2024.

2. OSR will replace the National Statistics badge with one for accredited official statistics. OSR will not introduce badges for official statistics and official statistics in development.

The call for evidence sought views on introducing new badges for accredited official statistics (known as National Statistics in the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007) and other official statistics. The responses received largely

supported replacing the current accredited official statistics badge, which include the words 'National Statistics' with a new badge using the words 'Accredited Official Statistics'. Responses on new proposed badges for official statistics and official statistics in development (previously known as 'experimental statistics') were more mixed and we heard concerns over additional badges causing confusion for users of statistics. As a result, we do not propose to introduce the new badges, instead asking producers to focus on even clearer written labelling of official statistics and official statistics in development.

3. OSR will further review the voluntary application (VA) scheme, considering the detail of the feedback provided in the call for evidence, in partnership with the members of the VA community of practice in 2024.

The call for evidence also asked for views about the voluntary application of the Code pillars beyond official statistics. OSR believes that the Code pillars are universal and provide a helpful framework for data, statistics and analysis produced beyond government. This view was endorsed in the responses to the questions about voluntary application. The responses provided many helpful suggestions for areas OSR can focus on to further grow and develop the VA scheme, which we will consider in 2024.

Findings from OSR's Call for Evidence

In autumn 2023, OSR invited stakeholders to share their thinking about the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#) (the Code) and how it may need to evolve to meet challenges and opportunities in the data and statistics landscape. OSR initiated a series of [engagement events](#) to stimulate discussion and ideas, and ran a written call for evidence between 13 September and 11 December 2023.

The call for evidence posed questions to stakeholders on three areas:

1. the Code itself – on how well it supports official statistics to serve the public good;
2. new proposed badges for accredited official statistics, official statistics and official statistics in development; and
3. ideas for enhancing and growing the voluntary application scheme

The full details of the call for evidence can be found [here](#).

We received 51 responses to the call for evidence – from 24 individuals and 27 organisations, of which 14 were official statistics producers.

This report presents an overview of the findings from the call for evidence and sets out how we indeed to act on this feedback.

We are grateful to everyone who participated in the events and to all individuals and organisations that contributed their views in the call for evidence. It has been a valuable process and is shaping our understanding of how to best refresh the content of the Code, as well as how we can best communicate and present the Code and its standards.

1. The Code of Practice for Statistics

The call for evidence asked three questions to gather stakeholders' views about the Code:

- a) how they saw the Code currently achieving or not achieving its ambitions;
- b) how well or poorly they thought the Code supported analysts and others to deliver and use statistics that serve the public good; and
- c) how they thought the Code could be strengthened and improved.

There were 40 responses on these questions.

Ten other respondents used the call for evidence to provide specific feedback on the application of the current principle T3.6, which enables alternative release times for official statistics when this is judged to be in the public good, to market sensitive economic statistics. OSR is looking into the issues raised by these respondents. We will report separately on this matter.

What you told us

A strong message received throughout the Code review, and endorsed in the call for evidence, is that the Code of Practice is highly regarded by those producing official statistics, as well as by other stakeholders. The current three pillars – Trustworthiness, Quality and Value – were found to be a clear framing of fundamental aspects of good statistical practice, that are memorable and easily explained to others to support application of the Code. However, there was also wide recognition of the evolving nature of the data landscape over recent years and consensus that the Code can be enhanced both in its content and presentation.

The following paragraphs briefly summarise key views shared that relate to each pillar of the current Code.

The feedback highlighted that we could enhance standards relating to Trustworthiness by:

- further clarifying independent statistical leadership authority and a Head of Profession for Statistics' responsibilities
- integrating OSR's concept and guidance on [Intelligent Transparency](#)
- reviewing the orderly release principle
- better addressing the communication of statistics
- expanding the standards regarding data ethics
- updating current practices relating to data governance to be in line with GDPR legislation

Respondents recommended that we strengthen the Quality pillar by:

- more fully addressing different types of data sources (such as administrative data) and the boundaries with other types of government numerical information (such as management information and research)

- clarifying comparability requirements
- addressing the balancing of timeliness and accuracy to meet user needs
- clarifying expectations around quality assurance
- better integrating with international frameworks for quality management
- incorporating learning from our spotlight on quality indicator framework

Stakeholders emphasised that we could strengthen the Value pillar by:

- further prioritising meeting user needs and addressing the balance of different user needs within and outside government
- considering the implications of the RSS's concept of '[public statistics](#)' (in which the official statistics start from identifying the questions that need answering and being clear about the purpose)
- further encouraging and supporting innovation by providing guidance on the use of new technologies such as AI
- emphasising the need to address data gaps
- requiring transparency around business planning and achieving value for money

Beyond changes to the Code itself, a wide range of feedback emphasised the importance of finding more effective ways to support understanding of the three pillars by members of the public and of analysts outside of government and of non-statistical staff in government, to support their use of data and statistics.

While it was recognised that there is a body of guidance alongside the Code already, those producing official statistics asked for more accessible materials. This guidance could range from simple high-level guides about the pillars to detailed material aimed at some of the most challenging current statistical issues, such as the implications of AI and the greater use of administrative data.

OSR's response

Based on the feedback received, it is clear that our stakeholders have identified various opportunities for us to enhance the content of the Code, as well as how we communicate and present its standards. In addition, we recognise that the Code could better support understanding of how statistics serve the public good by drawing on OSR's research and our developing definition of this concept and that we could incorporate learning from UN value of official statistics task force.

Outcome and next steps

We will refresh the Code of Practice to produce a third edition.

We anticipate that this refresh will update and extend the content of the Code.

We will also review the presentation of the Code, both online and on paper, to improve the clarity and accessibility of the Code for a range of different audiences.

We will consider how topic specific guidance can be integrated into the Code to address emerging specific statistical practices.

The refresh will commence in February 2024. We are planning to consider the content of the Code in detail over the following three months and aim to begin a period of engagement about the refreshed Code in the summer of 2024. We will run a public consultation on the refreshed Code.

2. National Statistics and official statistics labelling

The call for evidence asked respondents to consider whether to:

- a) move from the current National Statistics badge to one for accredited official statistics
- b) introduce a new badge for official statistics and a new badge for official statistics in development.

To help analyse the views we received to these questions, we categorised respondents as a producer (an official statistics analyst or producer organisation), or as a non-producer (a user or other stakeholder), to further consider the patterns of response.

While there were 51 responses to the call for evidence, there was a relatively high level of non-response to the four badge questions (that is, 21-23 respondents did not respond to the badge questions), particularly among non-producers (with 20-22 non-responding users or other stakeholders).

It was a small study and not generalisable to the whole population, but we have found the responses informative in guiding our decision making.

- a) Replacing the National Statistics badge with an accredited official statistics badge

What you told us

Among those who responded to the question about the existing National Statistics badge, there was majority support for adopting the language of 'accredited official statistics' in place of 'National Statistics'.

OSR's response

We consider this feedback, combined with evidence gathered in our [National Statistics Designation Review and Refresh](#) project, which showed that the term 'National Statistics' is not well understood by users of statistics, as sufficient reassurance to adopt the change of wording in the badge design.

Outcome and next steps

OSR will replace the National Statistics badge with one for accredited official statistics.

We will develop a plan for the launch of the new badge in consultation with Heads of Profession for Statistics. The date of the launch is to be agreed: we will publish updates on our website in due course.

b) Badges for official statistics and official statistics in development

What you told us

The badges proposed for official statistics and official statistics in development produced contrasting reactions between respondents in producer organisations compared with respondents described as users and other stakeholders.

Producers who responded to the questions showed strong support for introducing the new badges, while the picture was more mixed for other respondents. While there was a slight preference for introducing the new proposed badges among non-producer respondents among those who answered, there was a high level of non-response to the badge questions. In addition, three key stakeholder organisations specifically warned against the adoption of badges for official statistics without independent verification of compliance.

OSR response

OSR intended for the new proposed badges for official statistics to clarify provenance of the statistics for users. The high levels of non-response could suggest a lack of interest among users, while some of the comments received indicate that a badge for non-accredited official statistics may be inferred as conveying approval by the regulator that is not warranted.

Given these findings, we conclude that we do not have sufficient reassurance that introducing badges for official statistics and official statistics in development will help users to understand the nature of official statistics in the way we would like, or that users will be appropriately guided by them.

Outcome and next steps

OSR will not introduce badges for official statistics and official statistics in development. It will instead require the use of clear written labels for official statistics and official statistics in development on these statistics.

OSR will prepare guidance for producers on the labelling of official statistics alongside the plans for the adoption of the new AOS badge.

3. Voluntary application of the Code

The call for evidence asked respondents how they would like to see voluntary application (VA) evolve and for any other comments about developing VA.

Around half of the call for evidence responses provided feedback on VA.

What you told us

We received various suggestions from our stakeholders regarding VA of the Code. These included:

- Considering the name and how to make the scheme appealing, such as by introducing a kite mark
- Developing a marketing strategy to appropriately target analysts and organisations most likely to find the pillars helpful, such as larger charities, academics, private sector analysts
- Providing guidance and training that provides clear exemplars of good practice, with practical tools and how to guides, demonstrations and learning resources
- Establishing a means for accountability with respect to meeting the Code standards, and for enforcing this
- Considering a system approach to the scheme and how to balance the available resources within OSR with the needs of supporting the Code adopters.

OSR's response

The comments provide a broad range of ways that voluntary application can be further developed, to better target the use of the Code standards in the places that may benefit from and be receptive to applying them.

These high-level findings and ideas broadly chime with what we have heard in discussions about how we could strengthen and extend VA with existing members of the VA community.

Outcome and next steps

OSR will further review the voluntary application scheme, considering the detail of the feedback provided in the call for evidence, in partnership with the members of the existing VA community of practice by autumn 2024.

Since OSR has limited resources and does not have the statutory authority to regulate non-official statistics producers, we will explore with stakeholders some ways to verify that the Code pillars are being appropriately applied by members of the scheme.