

A. Code 3.0: Understanding the Code and how it supports the public good

Proposal to inform Consultation question 1

'Understanding the Code and how it supports the public good' sets out the core philosophy behind Trustworthiness, Quality and Value and provides a fuller explanation about why we think the Code is so important, giving a deeper insight on what it means to serve the public good.

Main Audience: For anyone producing or using statistics

Understanding the Code and how it supports the public good

For anyone producing or using statistics

The Code of Practice for Statistics ensures that statistics are not just numbers, but reliable tools for understanding the world. When statistics and data are produced in line with the core concepts of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value set out in the Code, they serve the public good.

Taken together, Trustworthiness, Quality and Value provide an ethical framework that can support the publication of any kind of analysis or evidence. They are relevant for anyone in any organisation who wants to ensure that the information they provide serves the public good.

Statistics and the public good

Statistics should serve the public good. They do so when they provide insight and understanding, which supports informed choices and decision making.

Statistics should serve everyone, helping enhance knowledge about every section of society and the economy and people's place within them.

Statistics are vital to support democracy and democratic debate. They provide an evidence base to support policy decisions, enabling accountability and helping to identify what works. But the knowledge and insight they provide are not just for the policymakers at the centre of government; statistics offer knowledge to everyone.

Statistics should therefore be regarded as a public asset, in that they are produced for the public, are about the public and are produced with the public's input and support.

To fully realise the potential of statistics, the organisations producing them should place serving the public good at the heart of their work. These organisations must be conscious of their responsibilities to society and the implicit licence the public grants them to collect data, report them and make them publicly available.

Meeting the public good

Producing statistics that live up to their potential requires recognising that statistics are more than just aggregated numbers. How things are done matters as much as the numbers themselves.

In any social exchange of information, there are three factors at play. Firstly, the audience will consider the culture and behaviours of the information provider and their track record of meeting their commitments. In the case of statistics, this encompasses a wide range of people within the organisation – from the producer of the statistical bulletin to the minister quoting the statistics in a debate. Secondly, there is the nature of the information itself – in the case of the statistics, this means the aggregated statistics and underlying data. Finally, there is the context in which the information is heard and received by an individual as user of the information.

If organisations only focus on the production of the numbers, they risk not fulfilling the practical utility of the statistics and may reduce the confidence in them and their outputs. For people to have confidence, there must be clarity about the Trustworthiness of the organisation, the Quality of the statistics themselves and, crucially, the Value of the statistics to the users.

The Code offers a framework that considers all three factors.

Trustworthiness, Quality and Value

Focusing on Trustworthiness, Quality and Value allows the production and communication of statistics that people can have confidence in and that serve the public good.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness means that the public can have confidence in the people and organisations that produce statistics. It reflects the integrity, professionalism and impartiality of the producers and the statistical system. Trustworthiness signals that statistics are not subject to undue influence, bias or manipulation.

Trustworthiness is a matter of not only following rules but also demonstrating behaviours and attitudes that foster trust. Producers should be accountable for their actions and decisions, and responsive to feedback and criticism.

Trustworthiness also depends on the leadership and culture of the organisations that produce statistics, and the support and recognition they receive from senior leaders and stakeholders.

Quality

Quality means that statistics fit their intended uses, are based on appropriate data and methods and are not materially misleading. It is a key dimension of the usefulness of statistics, determining how well they measure and describe the phenomena they aim to represent.

Producers of statistics should actively promote appropriate quality standards and values. They should encourage a mindset that is open to seeing how their statistics could be wrong without blame and be transparent about their methods, data sources, quality assurance and uncertainty.

Quality is dynamic and evolving, not fixed or absolute, and so requires continuous monitoring and an openness to innovate to meet new needs. It requires effective communication and engagement with users and other stakeholders to ensure that statistics are understood and used appropriately.

Value

Value means that statistics benefit the public by informing and supporting decision making, action and debate. It also means that statistics can be accessed, understood and used by a wide range of users. Providing value is the ultimate goal of statistics, as it reflects their contribution to society and the public good.

Value is not a static or one-off outcome, but a continuous and interactive process. Producers of statistics should regularly consult and involve users and other stakeholders to understand their needs, preferences and feedback. They should be flexible and adaptable to changing user demands, data availability and policy contexts.

The core concepts of the Code work together and reinforce each other, providing a coherent framework for those producing statistics. For the public good to be served, all three must be addressed: Trustworthiness of organisational conduct; Quality of data and methods; and Value for users.

Universality of this framework

Trustworthiness, Quality and Value can support any kind of research or evidence.

TQV does not prescribe a particular way of producing statistics or presenting data; instead, the focus is on the outcome of the public good, which allows for and encourages the adoption of new and innovative approaches in statistics. The framework supports the use of new data sources and new techniques to enable more-powerful insight on any aspect of society.

Wider application of these concepts can support a broad range of activities, for example, both qualitative and quantitative research design, data collection and analysis by charities, universities, local authorities and companies – any organisation that wants to publish information that supports the public good rather than just private interests.

Threats to the public good

There are clear threats to the culture and environment of evidence use that could undermine democratic institutions and erode public confidence.

The current UK statistics environment is, in many ways, a positive one. We have an established statistical system embedded within a wider analytical function. We have a respected research community. We have a wide range of media and social media outlets that draw on statistics and data and act as intermediaries between statistics producers and a wider user audience. Citizens, businesses, academics and decision makers have various ways to engage with and use data and statistics.

But we cannot take these positives for granted. Threats to the culture and environment of evidence use exist, from data gaps to information overload to concerns over deliberate, malicious misinformation to resource constraints faced by many producers of statistics – these threats can be varied and numerous.

While many of these threats have been part of society for some time, they may be magnified in an environment of technological advancement (including both social media and AI). These developments, for all the opportunities they bring, risk creating a degree of uncertainty for people.

Trustworthiness, Quality and Value provide safeguards against threats to the public good

Within the landscape of threats, the challenge is ensuring that accurate, cohesive data and statistics are accessible and available to all. Embedding Trustworthiness, Quality and Value provides strong, resilient safeguards against threats to the public good by helping organisations to demonstrate that they have the public's interest at their core.

The framework of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value helps mitigate the concerns that arise in an environment of abundant data and concerns about misinformation. The fear of misinformation combines three factors: that the provider of information has inappropriate motives; that the information itself is unsound; and that the information leads people to unsound conclusions or judgements.

These concerns can be addressed by providing clarity about an organisation's culture, represented through clear, binding commitments; being clear about the nature and limitations of the data, methods and resulting statistical estimates themselves; and providing insights and value for users.

Concern	Relevance to the Code's framework
Information is provided by organisation or individuals with inappropriate motives	Trustworthiness Clarity about organisational culture through clear, binding commitments
Information is unsound, misleading or false	Quality Clarity about the nature and limitations of data, methods and resulting estimates
Information leads users to unsound conclusions or judgements	Value Clarity about the insights and value for users

Conclusion: Understanding how Trustworthiness, Quality and Value support the public good

The Code of Practice for Statistics is not only a set of guidelines but also a source of inspiration and support for producers and users of statistics.

The framework of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value represents a set of ethical guidelines that can support any kind of research or evidence. Though it originated in the context of the United Kingdom's official statistics, it can be applied more widely.

As a result, it is not just for producers of statistics in government; it is relevant and helpful for anyone in any organisation who wants to ensure that the information they provide serves the public good.

When statistics and data are produced in line with the Code's framework of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value, they serve the public good.

Related information

Guiding Principles from the Code: these principles explain how anyone working with data can put TQV into practice, in a wide range of settings.

Standards for Official Statistics: these standards set out specific statistical practices that those producing official statistics must follow.

Standards for Intelligent Transparency: these standards set out what public bodies need to do to ensure an open, clear and accessible approach to the publication and communication of data, statistics and wider analysis.

Guidance hub: information that supports use of the Code, including understanding and delivery of the principles and standards.