

Family Spending statistics from the living costs and food survey

(produced by the Office for National Statistics)

The Office for Statistics Regulation

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

The Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) provides independent regulation of official statistics produced in the UK. Official statistics are statistics produced by Crown bodies and other organisations listed within an [Official Statistics Order](#), on behalf of the UK Government or the devolved governments.

We aim to enhance public confidence in statistics produced by government by setting the standards that they must meet in [the Code of Practice for Statistics](#). We ensure that producers uphold these standards by conducting reviews of statistics against the Code. 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.

Compliance review

A compliance review is a review of any official statistics (or [accredited official statistics](#)) to establish the extent to which they meet the standards of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value in the Code of Practice for Statistics. We might undertake a review with a view to accrediting a set of statistics (this type of compliance review is called an assessment), focus on a specific issue or involve a high-level check of ongoing compliance.

A range of factors determine the scope of and approach to a compliance review, including the type of statistics, their accreditation status, the producer history, the profile of the statistics and the reasons for initiating the review.

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Overview

Based on the findings of this review, the [Family Spending in the UK](#) statistics, which are sourced from the Living Costs and Food survey (LCF), can continue to be published as accredited official statistics.

This report provides our view on whether the statistics included in the [Family Spending in the UK](#) publication continue to meet the standards set out in the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#).

Why did we conduct this review?

We previously [set out](#) our intention to undertake further regulatory work on response issues impacting household surveys. Following our review of [Household total wealth in Great Britain](#) – the latest statistics from the Wealth and Assets Survey – we have reviewed the Family Spending bulletin that uses data from the LCF.

For this review, we have considered:

- how declining response rates may have affected the quality of survey data, any resulting impact on potential biases, and any further actions needed to improve data quality
- the clarity of communication with users around ongoing data quality concerns
- the extent to which these statistics meet user need

Highlighted findings

- The LCF has experienced a long-term decline in response rates, which were also significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Users reported that smaller achieved sample sizes have made analyses more volatile, leading to the need to combine data across two or more years to support statistical precision.
- In response to user demand, ONS increased the LCF sample in April 2024, and will continue investing in LCF improvements, subject to funding and the conclusion of current business planning processes. ONS has made initial steps to increase the resources available to the data production and analysis team, which should mean that other quality issues, such as timeliness, should be improved. Innovations such as modernised processing infrastructure, a digital interviewer-facing diary and receipt-reading tools are being developed to improve data accuracy and reduce the processing burden within the LCF data collection environment.
- Users expressed concern over delays in the data publication, with data from 2022/2023 released approximately 18 months after the close of the survey period, compared to the usual 12 months. To counter this, ONS is working to automate data processing and improve access to microdata, aiming to deliver the Family Spending outputs closer to the target of one year of survey completion, by 2026, and within one year by 2027.

Our judgement

While there have been growing issues around achieved sample size and timeliness, considering the positive user feedback, and the current and planned improvements to the survey, these statistics remain of sufficient value and quality to meet users' needs.

These factors mean that these statistics continue to comply with the Code of Practice for Statistics.

As well as requiring that ONS follow through and report on the improvements in its Economics Statistics Plan (ESP) and its Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan (SIEP), we have three detailed recommendations to further meet users' needs. These focus on further engagement with users to understand their needs, being clear about how ONS can speed up the publication timetable and providing more information about survey representativeness and comparability.

Next steps

We expect ONS to report on its progress against our recommendations for improvement from this compliance review by April 2026.

Introduction

Background to the statistics

1.1 A household expenditure survey has been conducted each year in the UK since 1957. Since 2008, this has been in the form of the Living Costs and Food Survey (LCF). The LCF is an annual survey, designed primarily to measure household expenditure on goods and services. It also gathers information about the income of household members. Respondents, including children, keep a detailed diary of expenditure for two weeks. A proportion of respondents also record the weights and measures of food and drink items bought.

1.2 ONS publishes the data and analyses from the Living Costs and Food Survey (LCF) in a publication titled [Family Spending in the UK](#). These LCF data, along with a range of other data sources, also contribute to the production of other ONS economic statistics, such as the Retail Prices Index (RPI), the Consumer Prices Index (CPI), and the Household Final Consumption Expenditure component in gross domestic product (GDP). ONS also uses the LCF data to produce a range of household income statistics: Average Household Income, UK; Household Income Inequality, UK and Effects of Taxes and Benefits on UK Household Income.

Earlier OSR reviews and outcomes

1.3 In 2021, we carried out [an assessment of the LCF](#), which was undertaken in response to some errors in the RPI. To keep the National Statistics badge (now called accredited official statistics), we required ONS to devise a longer-term solution for the LCF which draws on international best practice and wider transformation initiatives. In response to our requirement that ONS needed to invest time and resource to pursuing initiatives to improve the quality and robustness of LCF data, ONS updated the data processing systems for the LCF, improved the robustness of quality assurance of the data and increased user engagement activities.

1.4 We also required ONS to “develop a solution to address user need for more granular breakdowns of data, so that the devolved administrations and other key users can use the statistics in the way that they need to for the public good.” ONS commissioned the [National Centre for Social Research](#) (Nat Cen) to conduct a review to inform future expenditure data collection. The review covered:

- a summary of user requirements for household expenditure data
- an overview of alternative sources of data, including an assessment of suitability against user needs
- recommendations for a high-level design of expenditure data collection, including highlighting that a move to automation for the collection, coding and processing would have the largest beneficial impact on the survey
- recommending that moving to digital capture for the diary element of the survey would be the most meaningful change the survey could make

We note that ONS has included these improvements in its Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan for Economic Statistics.

1.5 In October 2022, we wrote a [letter](#) to ONS to confirm the continued designation of accredited official statistics for 'Family Spending in the UK' following ONS's completion of the actions needed to meet the requirements of our 2021 assessment report. We noted ONS's plans to transform its Household Financial Surveys (HFST), and that the LCF fitted within this Household Finance Survey (HFS) model and transformation plans. We said, "many of the planned strategic improvements to the LCF survey data are now being taken forward as part of ONS' Household Financial Statistics Transformation (HFST) project".

1.6 ONS published [feedback from a consultation](#) and paused the HFST project in 2023, which meant that some planned developments, such as the redevelopment of the income questions, were not taken forward at that time. However, as part of its work to transform the production of the price indices, ONS strengthened the quality assurance and processing of the LCF data and decided to prioritise the data collection for both the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and LCF from April 2024.

1.7 In response to ongoing challenges in maintaining the quality and reliability of its survey data, in June 2025, ONS published its [Plan for ONS Economic Statistics](#) and its [Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan for Economic Statistics](#). This plan notes that ONS is working to stabilise interviewer capacity and capability on the LCF. It also notes that "We are also investing in improvements to LCF to be introduced from April 2026, subject to funding and the conclusion of current business planning processes. These include an improved questionnaire, a further sample boost to 30,000 issued households and updated processing infrastructure and pipelines to introduce automated methods where possible". These improvements are welcome.

Our approach to this review

1.8 This report provides our high-level view on whether the statistics in this publication continue to meet the standards of the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#).

1.9 We looked at the annual statistical tables and analyses published by ONS as well as supplementary documents, such as the LCF [Quality and Methodology Information](#) (QMI) and the LCF [technical report](#).

1.10 We spoke with users of LCF data from other government departments, arm's length bodies, think tanks and academia. We also liaised with teams in ONS who use these data to help to construct statistical series, such as the Retail Prices Index (RPI) and the Consumer Prices Index (CPI). We reflect on whether the needs of these users are being met.

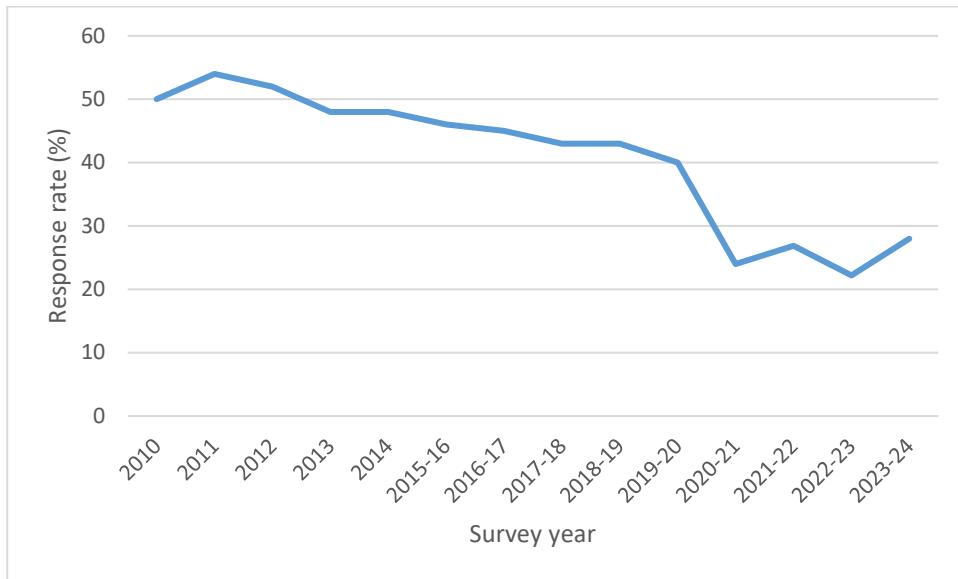
1.11 We engaged with 11 organisations as part of our review (listed in Annex A).

Findings

Achieved sample size

2.1 As is the case with other household surveys, the Living Costs and Food Survey (LCF) has seen a long-term decline in its response rates. This decline was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as demonstrated by ONS in its published [analysis](#) of the impact of the pandemic on social survey data collection. As well as the face-to-face survey, a proportion of the respondents to the LCF are asked to complete a detailed diary of their spending habits over some time. This places an added burden on respondents, and so the LCF was significantly affected by the wider pattern of falling response rates in social surveys. As seen in the chart, the overall response rate for the LCF in Great Britain was 28 per cent in the financial year ending (FYE) 2024. This is a 6-percentage point increase in comparison with FYE 2023. This increase was driven by improved survey management, including enhanced respondent incentives and a targeted communications campaign to improve legitimacy and trust in ONS household surveys.

Chart 1. LCF response rates over time, Great Britain.



Source: [LCF technical report data tables](#) (table 5)

2.2 The achieved sample for the LCF in the FYE 2024 was approximately 4,200 households across the UK. This is a decrease compared to the approximately 4,500 responding households for FYE 2023, and below ONS's ideal target of 6,000 households annually. ONS boosted the issued sample size in April 2024 and, with extra field resource, and as set out in [ONS's Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan for Economic Statistics](#) (SIEP), plans to include a further sample boost to despatch the survey to 30,000 households in Great Britain from April 2026, subject to funding and the conclusion of current business planning processes. For comparison, ONS issued a sample of approximately 14,860 households across Great Britain for FYE 2024.

2.3 Users are concerned that the smaller sample sizes for recent outputs were making their analyses more volatile. To mitigate this, users have been combining data from several years to obtain the precision they needed for their estimates.

2.4 The annex to ONS's Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan for Economic Statistics notes that "On the LCF, alongside exploration of a digital diary, we are also

developing a tool that can read receipts automatically, reducing the need for manual receipt coding. Future digital developments with the diary may improve underreporting, since a digital diary would be completed directly by the respondent without interviewer involvement. This may alleviate some of the unwillingness to share details of this type of spending". These are important developments.

User perspectives on meeting needs

2.5 We found that the Family Spending bulletin and the LCF microdata are valued by users, largely meet their needs and are unique in bringing together income and spending habits with information on the households who are doing the spending. This relationship is something that alternative sources do not tend to capture, as administrative sources of income and spending data do not have the same level of detail on household characteristics.

2.6 Data from the LCF have been published since the 1970s. Users value the long-running back series, using the data to inform key analyses such as:

- deriving weights for price indices, such as the Retail Prices Index, Consumer price inflation and the Household Cost Indices
- including the LCF survey data within the suite of data sources used by ONS, to help compile gross domestic product (GDP)
- contributing to regional estimates of household expenditure
- informing monetary policy briefings
- contributing to the development of measures of poverty
- understanding the impact of inflation and taxation on household income and spending
- publishing official statistics about household dietary and drinking habits

2.7 Users are concerned that the sample size of the LCF means that more-granular estimates are less precise. ONS applies a 3-year average across several regional breakdowns in Family Spending, and this is communicated to users in the bulletin. ONS recognises that the number of household interviews is below their ideal target and has boosted the survey sample size, from April 2024. Since the target for household interviews for Family Spending has not yet been achieved, ONS notes in its [December update to the SIEP](#) that it will "continue investing in LCF improvements as outlined in the SIEP, with earliest changes due from April 2026".

2.8 In the interim, to increase the size of the datasets and precision of their estimates, users are merging datasets across two or three years. However, it is not straightforward to do this. Users told us that they found it difficult to merge microdata to boost the size of the dataset, because of definitional changes or discontinuities over the years. The [LCF technical report FYE 2023](#) does not describe in detail how the methodology has changed prior to the current year. It does, however, direct users to the technical reports of relevant family spending years. To help users mitigate data quality issues, ONS should develop a timetable to provide more-accessible explanations of data changes, engaging with their expert users on what variables they are looking to merge by April 2026, and publish the timetable at the time of the next release.

Timeliness

2.9 The quality and methods information (QMI) published in 2023 notes that the “Annual datasets are made available approximately one year after the end of the survey cycle.” This timeline has drifted, however, and users we spoke to were concerned that the data were subject to a longer time lag. Data from 2022/2023 were published in August 2024, about 17 months following the close of the survey period. ONS told us that, in this year, updating the population data to provide the weights took longer than usual, but that the coherence between income and expenditure data improved as a result.

2.10 Users also told us that they experienced delays in being able to access the microdata. ONS told us that it is working with the data depositories and expediting depositing the microdata from the LCF survey in the [Secure Research Service](#) and the [UK Data Archive](#).

2.11 ONS has increased the resourcing for the survey analysis team, and production of the statistics is becoming more automated, and faster. While this move has caused a short-term delay, it is ultimately expected to improve the timeliness of the 2026 release. However, the delays to data publication are significant and reduce the relevance of the outputs for users. It is important that ONS takes forward its planned improvements. ONS should set out, by April 2026, the steps it is taking to ensure that the speed up of the data processing delivers the Family Spending output closer to the target of one year after the close of the survey data collection period.

Engagement with users

2.12 Most of the users we spoke to were satisfied with the amount of routine and ad hoc engagement they had with ONS. For example, ONS holds quarterly ‘curiosity meetings’ for users involved in producing price index statistics and users involved in producing household expenditure statistics. For other expert users, ONS facilitates a household expenditure steering group meeting twice a year, where it presents any methodological changes or changes to the LCF questionnaire. ONS told us it is reviewing its arrangements for external engagement, to align with the Economic Statistics plan, and will provide an update on the new arrangements by March 2026. Some users felt that ONS could be more proactive in keeping them informed of developments between meetings, and other users told us that ONS had engaged quickly with them to answer detailed technical questions and requests for extra data.

Communicating data quality

2.13 ONS published a [technical report](#) and associated LCF technical data tables alongside its [Family Spending](#) bulletin in September 2025. The report covers response information, questionnaire changes and new or changed methodology for the Living Costs and Food Survey (LCF) for financial year ending (FY) 2024. The LCF [data tables](#) provide information on response, characteristics of the sample, confidence intervals and interview metrics. ONS told us that, at the expenditure steering group meetings, it discusses difficulties with declining response rates and its plans to meet the challenges with expert users.

2.14 In August 2023, ONS published the latest [quality and methodology information \(QMI\) report](#) for the LCF. This includes helpful information about the strengths and

limitations, methodology, users and uses for the LCF. The QMI discusses comparability with the Consumer Trends bulletin and notes that “LCF data feed into some of the estimates published in Consumer Trends, but other sources are also used. Research is ongoing into the different estimates produced and their causes”. The Family Spending bulletin cautions against comparisons by noting that “The expenditure statistics published in this bulletin are not directly comparable with the national income statistics published in our Average household income, UK bulletin”. The QMI and the bulletin should be clearer about which data should and should not be used as comparators for LCF estimates. Whilst ONS publishes details of the characteristics of households by response and non-response (LCF data tables 12 and 13), it has not published an analysis of the representativeness of the households in the sample. To enable users to understand the implications of the sample size on the quality of the data, and allow users to choose the best data for their needs, ONS should update the quality and methodology information and include explanations about survey bias, representativeness, comparability and implications for the use of the data by autumn 2026.

The future of the LCF

2.15 To improve coherence between estimates, and the relevance of spending categories, ONS plans to introduce the 2018 COICOP classification into its data collection from July 2026. ONS told us that the LCF questionnaire will be updated first, to allow the survey data collection to lead the COICOP update. Economic statistics outputs will then adopt the COICOP changes afterwards. We welcome this development and encourage ONS to consider re-publishing a back series of the impacted outputs using the updated COICOP classifications. ONS has committed more investment into developing the LCF in the immediate term, as highlighted in the image below.

Image from Annex 2: Household Social Surveys Quality Targets.

Quality targets	Living Costs and Food Survey (LCF)
Achieved Interviews Target (March 2025)	500 households per month (requirement of 6,000 annually)
Actual Achieved Interviews in March 2025	367 households per month
Response Rate Achieved	23% March 2025
User Needs	LCF sample increased in 2024. Focus in 2025 to 2026 on sustainability and improving processing.
Question or Survey Design	Survey and question design in need of review. Work in 2025 to 2026 to include critical SLC content and develop questionnaire.

Source: [ONS Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan for Economic Statistics annexes](#).

2.16 In the future, users would prefer a single dataset about wealth, income and spending because current data sources are fragmented, collected on different bases and cannot be easily linked. This makes it difficult to form a coherent picture of how these factors interact and influence each other. Users are also concerned that any face-to-face

household survey design does not adequately capture the spending of high-net-worth individuals. In section 5 of its [Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan for Economic Statistics](#) (SIEP), ONS is looking to develop a single dataset, noting “More broadly, we recognise that a new Household Financial Survey (HFS) design is required to ensure we can sustain financial survey collection in the future. This should be complemented by exploring the opportunities of both administrative data to replace survey questions, and online-first data collection. The development of HFS is currently unfunded but we aim to exploit opportunities during this forthcoming Spending Review (SR) period to conduct initial research, design and options analysis, with the aim of delivering a clear way forward ready for future SRs.” ONS is investigating supplementing survey data with administrative tax data, as detailed in its report titled [The data that matter](#) published in December 2025.

2.17 ONS published an [update to its SIEP](#) in December 2025. ONS provides the following update about the LCF “We have successfully launched the Living Costs and Food Survey (LCF) Record of Spending tool, replacing the Excel diary used by interviewers to record detailed spending data provided by respondents”. ONS’s next steps include an evaluation of the benefits over the next six months, and explore automation opportunities in receipt processing and coding as part of the wider LCF uplift. We note these developments.

List of recommendations

As well as requiring that ONS follows through with the improvements in its Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan, based on the findings of this report, we have identified three recommendations for improvements to further meet user needs:

Recommendation 1: To help users mitigate data quality issues, ONS should develop a timetable to provide more-accessible explanations of data changes, engaging with their expert users on what variables they are looking to merge by April 2026, and publish the timetable at the time of the next release.

Recommendation 2: To make the data even more relevant for their analyses of household spending, it would help users to publish the data closer to the end of the survey data collection period. ONS should set out, by April 2026, the steps it is taking to ensure that the speed up of the data processing delivers the family spending output closer to the target of one year after the close of the survey data collection period.

Recommendation 3: To enable users to understand the implications of the sample size on the quality of the data, and allow users to choose the best data for their needs, ONS should update the quality and methodology information and include explanations about survey bias, representativeness, comparability and implications for the use of the data by autumn 2026.

Annex A: Organisations engaged during this review

Bank of England

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Department for Work and Pensions

HM Treasury

Home Office

Institute for Fiscal Studies

London School of Economics

Office for National Statistics

Portsmouth University

Scottish Government

Welsh Government

