STATEMENT

COVID-19: Production and use of management information by government and other official bodies

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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.

COVID-19: Production and use of management information by government and other official bodies

This guidance note summarises our position and expectations on the use of management information by government and other official bodies

During times of rapid change there is an increased need for timely and detailed data. It is important that ministers have up-to-date information to inform government's response to the coronavirus pandemic. This can include such data on how to manage hospital capacity, or how to most effectively process the increased volume of benefit claimants. This type of data, used to inform operational delivery, policy decisions and measure operational performance, are often termed management information.

With increased scrutiny of all decisions, and a greater thirst for timely information from the media and the public, it is unsurprising that ministers and other public figures find themselves quoting management information in public forums, such as in parliament and in media interviews.

The Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) recognises the importance of management information to the operations of government. There is currently a need to share information more widely than usual to inform decisions in response to the pandemic and the efforts being made by analysts to meet the increased demand for timely management information. It is clear that statisticians are focused on getting the most relevant data into the public domain, including where necessary, reprioritising outputs to allow for new publications.

Our expectations

Notwithstanding these positive developments, OSR recommends that producers and users of management information should be guided by the following three principles of use.

Equality of access: When management information is used publicly to inform Parliament, the media and the public, *it should be published in an accessible form*, with appropriate explanations of context and sources.

Regulatory intervention: In cases where management information is quoted and is material to public debate, we will consider *a public intervention to highlight the failure to preserve equality of access.*

Proportionality: We recognise there will be occasions when ministers refer briefly or in passing to the management information they have access to in responding to questions. *We will be proportionate in judging when we step in*, and we will distinguish between a one-off use that is marginal to the issues of interest, and those figures that are material to public debate.

Delivering on these expectations

The use of management information in the public domain

Given the volume of data flowing around government and the pace at which things are changing, there are inevitably instances when unpublished figures are being quoted in the public domain. It is right that ministers have access to up to date information. It is also right that this information is shared with the media and the public, but it remains important this is done in a way that promotes transparency and clarity. Otherwise it has the potential to cause confusion and undermine confidence in the statistics and organisations that produce them.

The Code of Practice for Statistics

While we appreciate the need for pragmatism during this unprecedented time, the Code of Practice for Statistics provides principles which should guide the release of management information as well as official statistics. It sets out clear expectations that organisations should commit to releasing statistics in an open and transparent manner that promotes public confidence – this includes being clear about appropriate caveats or quality concerns and ensuring a coherent narrative across different sources of information. It also highlights the need for organisations to look after people's information securely and manage data in ways that are consistent with relevant legislation and serve the public good.

The role of Head of Profession for Statistics

An organisation's Head of Profession for Statistics should play a key role in advising on the use of data and in guiding judgements. As an example, difficult choices may be needed on whether data are of sufficient quality to support the use being made; professional analysts are well placed to advise, and to balance the inherent risks.

We encourage public organisations to work with Heads of Profession for Statistics to ensure the Code standards of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value are considered as data are used to assist the government's response to COVID-19 and support public accountability.

National Statistician's guidance on management information

OSR endorses the National Statistician's guidance on handling management information (October 2019). It highlights four high-level principles that should be considered:

- Maximum value should be made of the information

- Equality of access to data on which public statements are based

- Transparency should guide decisions about the use and release of data

- Integrity of official statistics – nothing should be done to undermine confidence in the independence of related official statistics