Two-year update report

Systemic Review of the Public Value of Statistics on Housing and Planning in the UK

February 2020

1. Introduction

Our systemic review of <u>The Public Value of Statistics on Housing and Planning in the UK</u> was published in November 2017. This comprehensive review looked across a wide range of the statistics within our Housing, Planning and Local Services regulatory area.

This two-year update report shares the progress made since the review, highlights the challenges that remain and outlines our proposed work plan approach for this regulatory area.

In our 2017 review, we judged that statistical improvements were required at two levels: in statistical outputs and system wide working. Within this, we identified seven areas for improvement as outlined in figure 1.

Improvements needed to **STATISTICAL OUTPUTS**	1. Coherence across official statistics publications could be improved including better signposting to navigate the landscape
	2. Accessibility of official statistics could be improved to help users to access the information they seek and permit Government to maximise the value of data they hold
	3. Gaps in official statistics should be addressed to help answer key questions
	4. Transparency of official statistics could be increased through improved information about statistical definitions, methods, and strengths and limitations of official statistics
	5. Quality of key official statistics data sources could be improved
Improvements needed to **SYSTEM wide working**	6. Strengthened collaboration and strategic coordination between government departments could make the statistical system more effective
	7. The statistical system should engage more effectively with a wider range of stakeholders who are recognised as being at the heart of increasing the public value of official statistics

Figure 1 – 2017 systemic review key findings

Closely following publication of the review, housing statisticians from the UK's four countries met to discuss a joint approach to the review's findings, forming a cross-government housing and planning statistics steering group, and associated Housing and Planning and Homelessness statistics working groups. This resulted in a cross-government work programme, published in June 2018, outlining producers commitments to take work forward in five key areas – improve coherence; improve quality; harmonise data definitions where feasible; improve data accessibility; put all users at the heart of the system.

In all areas we have seen steps to address the original systemic review's findings and are pleased by, not just the progress to date, but also the commitment from producers who are having to balance the cross-government work with their day-to-day responsibilities. Feedback from producers we have spoken to has been positive in recognising the value that the cross-government steering and working groups have brought, and we would like to highlight the leadership role that the GSS Strategy Delivery team are demonstrating.

There are some areas however where improvements have been more limited, such as addressing some of the significant gaps that users have identified in the housing and planning landscape.

This report reviews progress against the seven themes, highlighting where significant work has been undertaken to drive improvements, where key challenges remain and outlines our future regulatory approach in our Housing, Planning and Local Services area.

2. Progress updates

2.1 Coherence

Official statistics publications could be improved including better signposting to navigate the landscape.

In our 2017 review, we identified that statistics publications should be drawing on a wider range of related sources and analysis to help them present a more coherent picture of housing and planning for users.

We have seen evidence of increased collaboration between the GSS Strategy Delivery team, the GSS Harmonisation team and statistics producers from the four UK countries. This has resulted in some positive examples of producers working towards improved coherence in the areas of homelessness and affordable housing, in particular.

Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Update

The GSS Harmonisation team, along with input from statistics producers and users, explored the <u>feasibility of harmonising the definitions of homelessness</u> for official statistics as a means to address users' confusion and the incoherence on the comparability of homelessness statistics across the UK.

Due to the substantive differences in the data collection systems and legal definitions of homelessness, the report concluded that in the short term it was not possible to develop a consistent definition of homelessness for UK official statistics.

In response to the report the GSS Strategy Delivery team then produced an <u>article</u> which set out planned improvements to homeless statistics as well as an <u>assessment of the comparability and coherence</u> of the existing government data sources on homelessness.

To further help users to understand and compare official statistics on homelessness and rough sleeping the GSS Harmonisation team, along with considerable involvement from producers, have launched an experimental interactive <u>homelessness tool</u>.

Affordable Housing Update

The GSS Harmonisation team have produced a <u>report</u> looking at the feasibility of harmonising the definitions and terminology used for affordable housing statistics.

As with homelessness, due to the different approaches taken in each country, the report concluded that it was not possible to develop a consistent definition. The report also concluded that there is not a strong user need for such harmonisation, particularly when considered against other priorities.

To complement the harmonisation report, the GSS Strategy Delivery team also produced an affordable housing analytical <u>article</u> exploring the similarities and differences in affordable housing across the UK.

Due to a concerted effort from producers, we have also seen increasing references to other related statistics within statistical bulletins:

- <u>Scottish Housing statistics</u> now include improved information on comparability with other UK Housing statistics and signposts users to this information.
- <u>MHCLG's Social Housing Lettings bulletin</u> has an enhanced related statistics section.

To further support coherence, the Welsh Government has developed links with the GSS Strategy Delivery team inviting them to be part of its regular <u>Housing Information Group</u>, which brings together a wide range of stakeholders in Wales. The GSS strategy team have presented at the group's last two annual seminars which have focussed on the private rental sector and housing and health.

Coherence - future work plans

The updates above highlight how producers' work to improve coherence has enabled a clearer UK perspective on the topic areas of homelessness and affordable housing. This work has provided users with a broad range of statistical information in one place, while also highlighting the existing work of each of the four countries statistics producers and helping to enhance users' overall experience of these statistics.

However, further work to enhance coherence and the insights that can be drawn from UK affordable housing and homelessness statistics appears to be moving at a good pace. This is evidenced in the updated cross-government <u>housing and planning statistics</u>, and the new <u>homelessness statistics</u> work plans, both published February 2020.

Other areas identified in our review where coherence should be improved included housing conditions and house building statistics, both of which have significant relevance in current housing policy debates. These areas are referenced in the producers' latest plans, and we look forward to seeing the progress made in enhancing both the coherence of UK statistics on these important topics and the insights that they are able to provide.

House building statistics - we welcome that producer teams from across the UK are working on developments to improve coherence, and that descriptions around coherence and limitations of the current UK house building statistics are being communicated through publications in October 2019 and, more recently in February 2020.

Housing Conditions - we envisage that any harmonisation work will examine existing sources and concentrate on issues of timeliness and consistency across the UK, to facilitate UK comparisons in the quality of housing stock and how it has changed over time.

As noted in the original review, users told us that it would be valuable to be able to track the extent to which planning permissions then equate to houses being built over time, as there is currently little accessible evidence to help users understand this.

In the medium term, we would like to see the coherence work taken further to provide coherent UK level statistical outputs that offer enhanced UK level insights for users. Where possible, these should potentially draw on a wider pool of evidence, including non-government sources, to help add further value and insight to users' key questions, in line with the original review's findings. For example, the review highlighted the Chartered Institute of Housing's annual Housing Review compendium as an example where there is scope for official statistics publications to similarly draw on related sources and analyses to present a more-coherent picture and enhance the public value of housing and planning statistics across the UK.

We appreciate that there is a need to balance further new work with other user demands, and while continuing to produce the existing statistics for the four UK countries. However, user feedback identified a clear need for statistics which describe the UK as a whole, and without the appropriate information it is not possible to assess how different housing and planning policies across the four UK countries are impacting the housing and planning landscape. As highlighted in the above examples, we also appreciate and value the transparency demonstrated by producers where achieving coherence has been particularly challenging.

2.2 Accessibility

Official statistics could be improved to help users to access the information they seek and permit Government to maximise the value of data they hold.

In our review, we identified issues where users found it difficult to locate what they are looking for. For example, at the time of the review, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), were not routinely publishing regional statistics meaning users had to combine data themselves to get a regional figure.

These accessibility issues were compounded by there being multiple producers and multiple sources/ websites where information is held. Notwithstanding this, we have seen improvements in accessibility in the following areas.

- A new interactive Housing and planning statistics landscape tool launched in February 2020. In line with the existing 'Experimental Overview of UK Housing & Planning statistics', this covers demand, supply, and stock but also housing experience and external factors. We understand the tool will be undergoing extensive user testing to ensure that it meets users' needs.

- MHCLG now including regional codes in their annual rough sleeping snapshot and statutory homelessness data tables; starting to include regional breakdowns across their housing and planning products, making more of this data available through open access, and through new innovations such as this dashboard for statistics on district planning applications at national and local planning levels.

- The cross-government work on Homelessness and Affordable Housing (highlighted in section 2.1) which has resulted in collated UK outputs being made available on a common website with interactive definition tools to assist users to make informed decisions about the data.

- We are starting to see producers address our accessibility related findings following compliance checks we have completed of key housing statistics against the Code of Practice for Statistics. For example, Scottish Homelessness statistics have implemented temporary fixes to help users navigate more easily during the transition from old to new website.

Accessibility - future work plans

It is important to highlight the large amount of work that is progressing, but we also judge that there is still more that needs to be done.

Monitoring and publishing details of ad hoc data requests and identifying common themes or sources of particular user interest to inform future developments.

Granting access to the underlying micro data to enable further analysis, wherever possible.

Utilising innovations in presentational software to enhance accessibility.

Acting on user feedback to improve accessibility in line with guidance in the Code.

As part of our ongoing regulatory work, we will continue to highlight and share examples of good practice around accessibility, identify where further improvements are needed and monitor ongoing producer activities in this area.

2.3 Gaps
Official statistics should to help answer key questions.

Our 2017 review identified several examples of existing gaps in the housing and planning statistics landscape or gaps in insight to help users answer important questions. These included the private rented sector, the planning system and land ownership and use, as well as the link between housing statistics and other topics.

Since publication in 2017, there have been a number of innovative developments which have added significant value to housing statistics landscape. We have highlighted these in the following case studies.

Case Study – Deaths of homelessness people (England, Wales & Scotland)

Since the review, the first ONS experimental publication of the 'Deaths of Homeless People in England and Wales' was published in December 2018, with a further update edition published in October 2019.

This innovative piece of work drew on a range of data sources demonstrating what can be achieved through joined-up working and deservedly won the Royal Statistical Society's 2019 Campion Award for Excellence in Official Statistics.

We very much welcome the National Records of Scotland developing their own homelessness deaths publication Homelessness deaths experimental statistics for Scotland, published in February 2020.

Case Study - Homelessness statistics (Northern Ireland)

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) published their first set of experimental bi-annual Homelessness statistics in March and then September 2019, and are helping to fill what was previously a significant gap in public understanding on this important topic.

Case Study – Land use stock statistics (England)

Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) published new experimental land use stock statistics in May 2019 covering what land is used for in England in addition to existing National Statistics on land use change.

MHCLG also ran a consultation on further developments to their suite of land use statistics, which closed in July 2019. We look forward to seeing the results of this and the potential this work might offer for other countries to develop land stock and land use statistics.

Case Study – Housing condition statistics (Wales)

In December 2018, Welsh Government published their first set of Housing Conditions results for Wales (April 2017 to March 2018) since 2008, which were assessed against the Code of Practice and designated as National Statistics.

In addition to these developments we have also seen some progress towards addressing gaps in private rental sector statistics. Users told us that they wanted robust statistics about actual rent prices for all four countries that are comparable over time and across geography; and which can distinguish between new and existing lets. They also wanted to know more about the characteristics of those living in private rented accommodation, and the types and conditions of the accommodation.

In January 2018, ONS published an analytical article of existing UK data sources on the private rented sector, assessing their comparability, coherence and data limitations. The article also outlines ONS's plans for improvements based on the user feedback in our 2017 review, drawing on data held by the Valuation Office

Agency. ONS have also produced a research output exploring alternative methods and data sources to produce annual subnational estimates of the dwelling stock by tenure to go towards addressing the lack of an annual sub-national estimate of the size of the private rental sector. A recent example, an ONS analysis of the English Housing Survey in its Living Longer data series, highlighted changing trends in renting and owner-occupation by age group.

Gaps - future work plans

Current and planned work, which will further complement the existing statistical landscape, includes the following:

> We welcome news that ONS plans to publish a development proposal for new UK-wide private sector rent level statistics in the next few months, with a view to publishing initial analyses later this year. As this remains a key gap in the housing evidence base, we are keen for the development of these new statistics to happen at pace.

> Welsh Government is conducting a feasibility study into the introduction of an individual case level homelessness data collection, with more information due to be published on this in Spring 2020.

> Scottish Government are working with the Centre for Homelessness Impact on an options appraisal for a national data and monitoring system for street homelessness in Scotland.

> MHCLG are working on improvements to their homelessness and rough sleeping statistics and have run a user consultation on development of their quarterly homelessness release, which closed at the end of October 2019 with over 130 responses.

Although there has been progress in England, detailed UK level statistics on land stock, availability and use, remain a gap to be addressed. This has been highlighted externally through the Missing Numbers blog, which looks at gaps in all areas of government data, not just housing and planning, and has already highlighted missing rental costs data and missing data on 'land options' (private agreements that housebuilders and other firms use to control land). Having official statistics on these topics would support public understanding of the issues and inform public debate.

We are currently reviewing existing official planning statistics, starting with an assessment of Northern Ireland planning statistics, with a view to these being upgraded to National Statistics. As highlighted earlier, users told us there is value in being able to track the extent to which planning permissions equate to house building completions over time. Further cross government work may be required to bring planning and house building sources together to better understand this area.

2.4 Transparency

Transparency could be increased through improved information about statistical definitions, methods, and strengths and limitations of official statistics.

Producers have been working together to improve the information that they present jointly, as evidenced by the cross-government housing and planning and homelessness workplans, and recent new and improved statistical outputs. This includes the work already undertaken on homelessness (including proposed initiatives to improve UK homelessness and rough sleeping statistics), and on affordable housing.

Case Study - ONS Household Projections for England

Responsibility for producing Household Projections for England transferred from MHCLG to ONS in January 2017. In our review we set out clear expectations for ONS, including for it to:

- publish information about the robustness of assumptions in their proposed method and the accuracy of their projections, by assessing past performance of the projections

- present a clear demonstration of how any methodology changes address the limitations of the previous methodology used, and

- include clear guidance about what decisions these projections can reliably inform and the extent to which these statistics relate to other housing measures.

Our compliance check of Household projections in 2018 found many positive examples around ONS's production and presentation of the projections, though we also identified several areas for improvement around clarity and insight, and accessibility of key assumptions.

Since the compliance check, ONS has been keeping us updated with the work they have done to address our findings. For example, setting out their plans to update the methods guidance and review the quality documentation, and their collaborative work with producers of household projections from the other UK countries to improve the guidance about the coherence and comparability of projections produced for each of the four countries of the UK. We very much welcome this progress.

ONS published an update for users in September 2019 outlining the steps taken since publishing its first set of 2016-based household projections for England, in 2018. ONS will be working closely with MHCLG as it develops new 2018-based household projections to ensure that clear guidance is available for users on how the projections can be used for local housing need planning. The 2018 projections are due for publication in spring/summer 2020.

Our July 2019 compliance check of Welsh Government's Affordable Housing provision statistics highlighted a good example of transparent working practices,

where making the agenda and minutes of the quarterly Housing Information Group publicly available demonstrated an open and transparent approach to statistical production.

In Northern Ireland the Department for Communities have published evidence of their compliance with the Code in their Housing Statistics Reports, therefore providing transparency around the processes that they follow to support trustworthiness in these statistics.

Transparency - future work plans

The Code of Practice for Statistics highlights the need for producers to identify the strengths and limitations of data, sources and methods and communicate these transparently to users to facilitate the appropriate interpretation and use of the statistics. Through our regulatory work, such as compliance checks and assessments, we will identify where producers could increase transparency to improve statistics users' experiences.

> Our October 2019 compliance check of Scottish Housing statistics identified a need for the producers to take a more transparent approach when engaging and communicating with users on development plans and progress, to help demonstrate a level of trustworthiness and support user confidence in the data.

We look forward to seeing producers continue to develop and evolve transparent ways of working to further support users' confidence in the statistical production process at both GSS and departmental team level, and so that users know how, and when to feed in their views into planned statistical developments.

2.5 Quality
The quality of key official statistics data sources could be improved.

The majority of statistics on housing and planning are based on data collected through local authorities providing services within their community. The quality of official statistics is therefore dependent on the robustness of data collection practices and adequate quality assurances at different stages of the statistical production process.

We welcome that in response to our review, 'Quality' became one of the five key work stream areas identified by the GSS steering group and has led to collaboration across government to improve quality against specific quality actions. For example, in the 2019/20 housing and planning and homelessness work plans, topics included: improving the quality of house building statistics in England and Wales; improving the measurement and understanding of Homelessness and Rough Sleepers; and sharing best practice across departments/devolved administrations.

In our original 2017 review we identified quality issues around house building statistics, where there is a widespread view that quarterly statistics on house

building in England and Wales undercount the number of houses built. We acknowledged that it is not certain that the issues identified with house building statistics would be remedied with enhanced quality assurance, but improved reporting on quality issues and quality assurance would support users trying to interpret these statistics.

Since then MHCLG have published an action plan explaining the activity they have undertaken to assure and improve the coverage of its statistics relating to new homes built and outlining a plan of further steps for continued improvements, which includes working with ONS and Welsh Government statisticians to improve the quality and coherence of UK House building statistics (see section 2.1).

Focus on administrative data quality

In 2015, we introduced a new Regulatory Standard on the Quality Assurance of Administrative Data (QAAD). Our 2017 review set out our expectations in seeing a clearer demonstration of how this new standard has been applied across a range of housing statistics to assure users about the quality of these statistics.

Given the reliance of many housing and planning statistics on local level administrative data collection, development of producers' awareness and assurances around the quality of the administrative sources used is essential. Quality is also an essential pillar of the Code of Practice for Statistics**.**

We have completed a range of housing statistics compliance checks following the review, and have seen good examples of producers publishing updated and more comprehensive quality documentation in line with our compliance check findings. These include for Wales Homelessness Statistics and in Scottish Homelessness Statistics.

When we undertake a compliance check we provide guidance to producers on following the Code and QAAD guidance, involving the GSS Good Practice Team and Quality Centre where necessary to assist producers. Should the need arise, we also have the option of providing workshops on applying QAAD and specific workshops to further support producers' awareness and understanding.

Quality - future work plans

We welcome that the latest update to the cross-government work programme provides a continued focus on improving the quality of house building statistics in

England and Wales, and the measurement of Homelessness and Rough Sleeping, and to work collaboratively and draw on administrative sources to achieve this. There is still more work to be done by producers in terms of their understanding of the quality of administrative data used to produce housing and planning statistics.

This includes producers:

- being more proactive in enhancing their understanding of the operational context in which administrative data is recorded by data suppliers
- understanding the quality assurance processes that their data suppliers undertake
- being able to explain clearly their own quality assurance processes
- continually reviewing their quality documentation and reporting to reflect their improved understanding in these areas, so that users are informed about any relevant strengths and limitations.

We will continue to highlight these essential aspects of data quality assurance through our planned regulatory work, including our forthcoming compliance checks of the rough sleeping statistics produced by MHCLG and the Welsh Government.

2.6 Strengthened collaboration and coordination
Taking a strategic approach to make the statistical system more effective.

Our 2017 review found there were limited examples of statistical coordination and strategic collaboration between the statisticians in different departments producing housing and planning statistics.

The creation of the cross-government Housing and planning statistics steering group, overseeing and setting the direction for the work of the Housing and planning statistics working group, and separate homelessness and rough sleeping statistics working group, with their own work plans are significant positive milestones.

These have had a significant and positive impact - increasing engagement between the producer teams across the four countries and creating more joined-up and collaborative working. From this working group we have seen the following positive developments for users of statistics:

- evidence of coordinated planning to address issues with coherence and accessibility of housing and planning statistics outputs
- several coordinated releases of statistics
- a new UK homelessness article and interactive guidance tool and new UK statistics on affordable housing
- plans for more coordinated themed work on housing conditions next year
- enhanced interactive guidance for users and commitment to develop new experimental statistics on private sector rent levels
- evidence of coordinated UK user engagement activities to provide opportunities for users to feed into these various developments.

Case study – homelessness collaboration (UK)

A good example of collaboration is the work ONS have done in partnership with the Centre for Homelessness Impact (CHI) to create a new SHARE indicator framework published in February 2020 with an accompanying blog, to monitor progress towards ending homelessness sustainably across the UK.

Case Study – housing need collaboration (Wales)

Another example is Welsh Government publishing estimates of additional housing need by tenure in June 2019, at a national and regional level for the first time. This was achieved though collaboration with Scottish Government to adopt and adapt their methodology.

Collaboration - future work plans

We are greatly encouraged by the creation of the GSS cross-government steering and working groups, and we look forward to seeing this collaboration continue to grow, and for the groups to maintain their momentum and impact.

As highlighted in our 2017 review, we also recommended that producers establish effective and collaborative relationships with other organisations outside the GSS, that are also working to answer society's key questions in the housing and planning statistics area.

These included the Chartered Institute for Housing and the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE). We welcome the discussions that have already taken place between producers and CaCHE, and the continued engagement around CaCHE's data navigator hub as evidence of this collaboration.

As producers build such links, we encourage them to advocate the Voluntary Adoption of the Code of Practice pillars to help non-government organisations demonstrate their commitment to the Trustworthiness, Quality and Value of any new insights or evidence that are produced.

2.7 Engagement with a wider range of stakeholders
To increase the public value of housing and planning official statistics.

We have found that engaging with a wide range of stakeholders supports improvements in the public value of official statistics. In our 2017 review, we found there are limited mechanisms for a wider range of users of housing and planning statistics to engage with government statisticians, beyond their instigating contact with individual statisticians or policy officials. Such wider engagement could include formal or informal user groups.

It is very positive therefore to see 'put all users at the heart of the system' as one of the key themes identified in the - cross-government group work plan.

Since the review, the GSS Strategy Delivery team ran a user survey seeking views on how current housing and planning statistics are being used and how they could be improved. The survey identified the following key issues:

• geography – produce statistics at lower levels of geography

• methodology – use consistent definitions across departments

• accessibility – make statistics easier to find and use.

A significant amount of further engagement and user events have also been held.

Case Study – 2019 homelessness user engagement events

The first homelessness event took place during the annual Wales Housing Information Group seminar on 24 January 2019, followed by a cross-UK event in London on 14 February 2019. There have since been further events including those run by the Scottish Government on Private Rented Sector Statistics in June 2019 and on Homelessness Statistics in October 2019.

The sessions updated users about a wide range of planned statistical developments. This provided an opportunity for users to comment on proposals and feed in their views and for producers to better understand users' needs. They also further support transparency as highlighted in section 2.4.

As highlighted earlier in this update, MHCLG have also run a number of user consultations which have included direct, face to face user engagement sessions.

Engagement – future work plans

We understand that MHCLG have Homelessness statistics user events planned for Spring 2020 following their consultation towards the end of 2019.

Housing and planning statisticians are now working to prioritise their future engagement work and we look forward to seeing the further outputs from this. We expect to see producers maximise the value that they can draw from the user survey results already obtained, especially from any country-specific analysis, and share details of their priorities based on this intelligence with users appropriately.

We would like to see continued user engagement, for example, through more user events, user surveys and with producers becoming more transparent about their potential future plans and developments as part of a normal, collaborative way of working.

3. Our next steps

When we published the review in 2017, we anticipated that positive outcomes would be tangible within 1-3 years. Now two thirds of the way through that period, we recognise that the GSS cross-government working group is successfully coordinating and carrying forward a great deal of the required work.

We will continue to monitor progress – keeping up to date with developments from the steering and working groups, responding when necessary, and maintaining contact with statisticians and stakeholders through our usual domain regulatory work and engagement.

In particular, we look forward to seeing gaps in UK private rental sector levels and land use and availability statistics being addressed, and cross-government housing conditions and house building statistics developments being explored in depth over the coming year, alongside further developments to UK homelessness and rough sleeping statistics.

Through our forthcoming regulatory work, we will continue to identify areas in need of improvement and highlight examples of producers work that we believe should be recognised as case studies of good practice.