

Review of compliance with the Code of
Practice for Statistics

Statistical Business Register

Statistics producer: Office for National Statistics

Report by: Office for Statistics Regulation

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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

The Statistical Business Register (SBR) is a planned register of UK businesses intended to serve as a data source for business statistics, a sampling frame for business surveys, and a means of supporting the production of a wide range of economic statistics. The SBR will replace the Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR), which currently performs these functions, and represents a major transformation programme within the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The SBR programme is intended to incorporate a larger list of businesses than the IDBR, and to support wider data integration ambitions and future economic statistics quality improvements.

In order to provide recommendations to support this development, this review considered whether the development and implementation of the SBR are consistent with the principles of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value in the Code of Practice for Statistics.

Why we did this review

The SBR programme has strategic importance for economic statistics. The SBR is expected to support implementation of new international economic statistical standards and classifications through the International Macroeconomic Statistical Standards (IMSS) programme, helping maintain the international comparability of UK economic statistics. The programme is also an important part of reducing reliance on ageing technology and strengthening the resilience of ONS's statistical infrastructure.

Importantly, the SBR is intended to support better quality statistics and create opportunities for the register to play a greater role as a source of statistical insight in its own right, rather than predominantly as a survey sampling frame. Realising these benefits will depend on successful delivery of the programme, enabled by effective data-sharing arrangements across government.

The SBR is a long-running programme that has experienced several delays and changes in delivery approach. In spring 2026 the programme underwent a ten-week reset exercise to establish a more realistic and deliverable path forward.

This compliance review was initiated because of the strategic importance of the SBR and OSR's concerns, arising from delivery delays. The review sought to understand the programme's focus and progress following the reset, the arrangements for managing and assuring quality (including how quality would inform future decision making), the effectiveness of user engagement, and the decision making and accountability associated with the SBR plans. Our review considered published updates from ONS, internal papers provided to us by ONS and engagement with ONS staff working on different aspects of the programme and external stakeholders who would likely use the SBR or its outputs.

Findings

- We found clear evidence that the ten-week reset has had a positive impact on the programme. Teams across ONS consistently described a clearer delivery plan, improved governance, more effective leadership engagement and greater collaboration between teams. However, ONS staff and external stakeholders also emphasised that these improvements remain relatively recent and need to be embedded. The SBR has historically struggled to maintain organisational visibility because much of its work underpins statistical production rather than generating immediately visible statistical outputs. Continued senior sponsorship and prioritisation will therefore be important, particularly because much of the programme's most significant activity remains several years away and much of the anticipated value will be realised in later transition stages.
- Stakeholders were positive about the potential statistical quality benefits of the SBR, including improved coverage of smaller businesses; access to a wider range of variables to support sampling and stratification; greater use of administrative data; and the longer-term potential for the SBR to support statistical outputs directly. However, stakeholders were less clear on how these benefits would be realised, and how they would inform delivery decisions. We heard a consistent call for a clearer analytical strategy, stronger articulation of quality and success criteria, and greater clarity on what evidence would be required to demonstrate readiness at different stages of transition. Many of the anticipated benefits also depend on later delivery phases and the successful implementation of data-sharing arrangements.
- The relationship between the SBR and the IMSS programme was identified by ONS teams and external stakeholders as one of the programme's most important strategic dependencies and is central to the future comparability of UK economic statistics. Recent work has improved understanding and collaboration between programmes, but uncertainty remains regarding sequencing of work, timescales and future requirements. Some of those we spoke to questioned whether existing organisational approaches to dependency management are sufficient for programmes of this complexity. If SBR delays affect implementation of new international standards and classifications, ONS may face increased operational complexity, additional quality risks and reduced ability to maintain international comparability. This makes clear joint planning, decision points and escalation routes between SBR, IMSS and related statistical areas especially important.
- We identified broader strategic risks associated with continued reliance on the IDBR. Although the IDBR remains operationally effective, stakeholders identified it as having limited scope for further development. Several stakeholders specifically highlighted uncertainty about how, for example, the move to the new Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) codes – part of the IMSS workstream – could be managed should implementation of the SBR be delayed.
- Stakeholders described a complex programme operating in a challenging environment, including the impacts of COVID-19, competing organisational priorities, evolving requirements and the challenge of replacing a critical business register while maintaining ongoing statistical production. Engagement was widely

regarded as a strength of the programme. Users described constructive engagement and welcomed the move towards a phased delivery approach. Most stakeholders now understand the rationale for phased implementation and recognise the benefits of reducing delivery risks where possible. However, the review identified some signs of stakeholder fatigue arising from the length of the development (going back almost a decade), the history of delays and changes in key personnel. While stakeholders generally support the revised approach, several expressed uncertainties about when (or even if) specific benefits will be realised and how future transition stages will affect their own planning. Evidence was also less clear on how stakeholder priorities are reflected in programme choices.

- We found limited publicly available information about this development and its progress. Stakeholders would benefit from clearer explanations, even under the revised plans, of why the programme remains so complex and time-consuming. Stakeholders would also welcome greater transparency about the phased delivery approach, including what functionality and quality benefits will be delivered at different stages and when. We also heard a clear desire for greater clarity about future data-sharing developments, particularly where these are necessary to realise the anticipated quality improvements associated with the SBR. Several stakeholders suggested that more-regular written updates could help maintain confidence and understanding as the programme progresses.

Our judgement

The SBR is a strategically important programme that will replace a critical component of the statistical production system.

We found clear evidence that the ten-week reset in 2026 has been effective. Governance has strengthened, collaboration between delivery partners has improved and ONS has established a more credible phased delivery approach. Together, these changes have increased confidence in near-term delivery.

However, the most significant challenges still lie ahead. While the phased approach is sensible, much of the programme's complexity, risk and benefit realisation sits within the later transition stages. Moving from the IDBR to the SBR will require careful management of testing, integration and parallel running arrangements. Sustained leadership focus, effective collaboration and continued organisational commitment will be critical.

The next challenge is less about governance and more about establishing a shared understanding of quality and success. ONS should clearly articulate the statistical improvements the programme is expected to deliver, how quality will inform delivery decisions and how benefits will be measured. Clear quality criteria, effective dependency management, successful data-sharing arrangements and transparent stakeholder communication will be central to successful delivery. ONS should also be clearer about how feedback is assessed and used to inform delivery decisions, quality criteria and implementation planning, particularly around phasing, functionality and readiness for transition.

Based on the findings of this review, we have identified four recommendations that ONS should address to further enhance the programme's Trustworthiness, Quality and Value:

Recommendation 1: To maintain recent progress, ONS should continue embedding the governance, leadership and collaborative ways of working established through the reset. Particular attention should be given to sustaining partnership working between different ONS teams (in particular the Surveys and Economic Statistics and Digital Services teams) and maintaining senior organisational focus on the programme through the later transition stages.

Recommendation 2: To support transparent and evidence-based decision making, ONS should establish and communicate clear quality criteria, success measures and assurance requirements for each phase of implementation. These should articulate how the programme will measure, deliver and demonstrate its expected quality benefits, including improved business coverage, enhanced sampling and stratification, and greater use of administrative data. ONS should define the evidence required to demonstrate readiness at key transition points and explain how that evidence will inform implementation decisions. It should also ensure that plans to secure and effectively use key administrative data sources are sufficiently developed to realise the intended quality benefits of the SBR.

Recommendation 3: To support user confidence and effective planning, ONS should provide clearer and more-regular communication about the phased delivery approach, expected benefits, future milestones and the implications of any changes to plans. This should include communication about future data-sharing developments, when key quality benefits are expected to be realised, how users can prepare for future changes and how stakeholder feedback is influencing delivery decisions, quality criteria and implementation planning.

Recommendation 4: To reduce delivery risk, ONS should continue strengthening its management of dependencies between the SBR, IMSS and other related programmes. This should include clear ownership of dependencies, agreed decision points and effective escalation routes where risks emerge. Particular attention should be given to dependencies that affect future implementation of international standards and classifications.

Next steps

ONS should provide public updates on its progress against our recommendations at least every 6 months as part of the Surveys and Economic Statistics Improvement Plan updates.

