

NATIONAL STATISTICIAN'S GUIDANCE: IDENTIFYING OFFICIAL STATISTICS¹

Introduction

1. The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 brings all 'official statistics' under the remit of the UK Statistics Authority, and with that the need to observe the Code of Practice for Official Statistics².
2. Whilst the Act identifies the types of *bodies* that will produce official statistics, it does not provide a definition of the types of *quantitative information* that might constitute an official statistic. This remains a matter for judgement; decisions are not always clear-cut and should be made on a case-by-case basis by the Statistical Head of Profession³ in the producer body or be based on their advice in accordance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This guidance is intended to provide help in making that judgement by highlighting the kinds of questions that may arise and the issues that might be considered. In particular, its purpose is to ensure that a decision about treating an output as an official statistic takes account of relevant standards, avoids the risk of public criticism and upholds trustworthiness in the overall official statistics system.

Background

3. The UK Statistics Authority published a Statement⁴ on 21 March 2011 setting out the two considerations on which it will place particular weight in coming to a view whether data should be treated as an official statistic. An extract from the Statement is reproduced in Annex 1. The two considerations are as follows:-
 - the data are used publicly by the organisation in support of major decisions on policy, resource allocation or other topics of public interest, or
 - the data attract public controversy when published and the Authority takes the view that public debate would be better informed if the figures were, in future, handled as official statistics.

This information will clearly be helpful to Heads of Profession in determining whether any data are official statistics.

¹ This Guidance supersedes that published on 23 February 2010

² <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/code-of-practice-for-official-statistics.pdf>.

³ References to the Statistical Head of Profession are also intended to refer to the equivalent Lead Official in an arm's length body.

⁴ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/statement---management-information-and-research-data-as-official-statistics---21032011.pdf>

Criteria for identifying Official Statistics

4. A dataset or quantitative product should be considered a strong candidate for treatment as an 'official statistic' if it meets the five criteria below. For an ad-hoc release of statistics or statistical analysis, it is understood that it may not be possible to meet the first criteria when it is not known whether it will be repeated. Even where this is the case, meeting the other four criteria would make an ad-hoc release a likely candidate for categorisation as an official statistic.

i. Collection

The process of collecting the raw data used to compile the product is conducted on either a regular or recurring basis, or there is an intention or strong probability for that to be the case.

ii. Methodology

The raw data are collected, and the results are compiled, using widely accepted statistical methods. This equally applies to administrative data even where the statistical methods are straightforward.

iii. Coverage

The information compiled from the raw data is complete in the sense that it is representative of the total population of entities that it embraces.

iv. Subject matter

The subject-matter covered by the product includes one or more of the following categories of information:

- used to monitor or measure the government's performance or delivery (either generally, or against formal targets);
- has the potential to impinge substantially on the formulation, implementation, evaluation, or monitoring of public policy;
- has the potential to inform, or impact on, decisions about the management of government services, or the allocation of public funds or resources;
- provides a window on the work of government by, for example, allowing citizens to assess the impact of public policies and actions;
- can serve the 'public good' by meeting the needs of business, academia, etc;
- has had a high public profile in the past (i.e. regularly generated column inches in the print media or regularly attracted the attention of the broadcast media) or is likely to generate significant public interest, and perhaps even controversy, in the future;
- information which is market-sensitive (likely to have a significant effect on the value or traded volume of any investment).

v. Accessibility

The information derived from the raw data is placed in the public domain by a producer, a person on their behalf or a third party. It does not matter whether the information is published as a statistical release, as part of an answer to a Parliamentary Question or Freedom of Information request or as evidence to a Select Committee, it is the characteristics of the information that are paramount.

5. Additionally the National Statistician has produced Guidance⁵ on a series of topics to assist with interpretation of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. The National Statistician's Guidance on Use of Administrative or Management Information may be of particular assistance.
6. The National Statistician and the Chief Government Social Scientist published joint guidance in 2010 on the distinction between statistics and social research outputs. It is recognised that research is not restricted to social research, but similar principles may be applicable to other forms of research. The joint guidance may therefore provide a further source of help to Heads of Profession in identifying whether an output should be viewed as an official statistic. An extract from the guidance is included in **Annex 2**.
7. Finally, **Annex 3** contains a decision tree which brings together the various criteria. It has been designed to help Heads of Profession and others through the process of determining whether or not an output should be treated as official statistics. Any output that is deemed to be an official statistic falls within the ambit of statistical legislation and the Code of Practice for Official Statistics and must be treated accordingly.

Practical approaches

8. Figures which would be viewed as official statistics, and which must therefore be handled in accordance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, may arise in contexts other than the publication of a formal statistical release. For example, producer bodies as public authorities are obliged to respond to FoI requests, PQs and enquiries from Select Committees. Where figures are to be released in this way, the Head of Profession needs to decide whether they should be viewed as official statistics, and if so, then the Code of Practice for Official Statistics should apply to their release, or their separate publication should be arranged.
9. Any potential departure from compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics for an ad-hoc release of statistics or statistical analysis must be referred to the Head of Profession for a decision. For example, if the date of publication was not known in sufficient time to be pre-announced, it is acceptable for this information to be published as soon as practicable. It is suggested that a webpage is dedicated for this purpose that contains a suitably worded explanation to provide context for such releases. Similarly, it is understood that it may not always be possible to publish an ad-hoc release at 9.30am. More information about releasing statistics is contained in the National Statistician's Guidance on 'Presentation and Publication of Official Statistics'⁶.

Further information or assistance

10. For further information and/or assistance in determining whether data should be viewed as official statistics, contact the National Statistician's Office at nsoffice.enquiries@statistics.gov.uk.

⁵ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/national-statistician/guidance/index.html>

⁶ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/national-statistician/ns-reports--reviews-and-guidance/national-statistician-s-guidance/presentation-and-publication-of-official-statistics.pdf>

THE UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY'S INTERPRETATION OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS

The Authority may propose that data that have not been treated as official statistics should in future be treated as such, and that the requirements of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics should be observed.

In their Statement of 21 March 2011 the Authority stated that it will place particular weight on two considerations in deciding whether to propose that data should in future be treated as official statistics:

- the data are used publicly by the organisation in support of major decisions on policy, resource allocation or other topics of public interest, or:
- the data attract public controversy when published and the Authority takes the view that public debate would be better informed if the figures were, in future, handled as official statistics.

The Authority will not press for data to be treated as official statistics where it believes that, despite public use, the data share few characteristics in common with what are accepted as official statistics by Parliament or the public.

The decision on whether to treat data as official statistics remains with the producer body. However, where the Authority concludes that the data should be treated as official statistics, it will write to the Minister, or senior official, responsible for the producer body to explain its view.

DISTINCTION BETWEEN STATISTICS AND SOCIAL RESEARCH

NB The full current Joint Guidance on the Distinction between Statistical and Social Research Outputs is available on the Civil Service website⁷.

PRINCIPLE	STATISTICS	SOCIAL RESEARCH
1. NATIONAL REPRESENTATION	<p>1. MUST be nationally representative</p> <p>Nationally complete data – covering one or more of the national or geographic territories; or covering every one of the entities that it might reasonably be expected to embrace.</p>	<p>1. MAY be nationally Representative</p> <p>Statistically representative of any target group of interest; qualitative samples selected to ensure inclusion of <u>range</u> of experience/ characteristics.</p>
2. PART OF A SERIES	<p>2a. Structured data collection system which is part of a series</p> <p>The collection process is conducted on either a regular or recurring basis, or there are publicly announced plans to develop such series.</p> <p>e.g. Routine outputs from management information and other data which comment on progress of nationally rolled out programmes</p> <p>e.g. First-release outputs from regular nationally representative surveys</p> <p>OR</p> <p>2b. A data collection exercise is undertaken to test whether a series can be developed or benchmark an existing data collection exercise.</p> <p>e.g. Experimental statistics.</p>	<p>2. Where data collection is structured it MAY be repeated but is not intended at the outset to be part of a long-term series</p> <p>e.g. one-off survey where the intention was to answer a specific policy question</p> <p>e.g. Evaluation reports of pilot policies, drawing on a range of survey, management information and other data.</p>
3. DATA COLLECTION AND EVIDENCE & ANALYSIS BASE IS ROBUST	<p>3. Application of sound statistical principles</p> <p>Application of sound statistical principles, consistent with international statistical practice, and quality assured by professional statisticians.</p>	<p>3. Evidence and analysis is rigorous and robust, based on scientific methods</p> <p>Range of professional standards apply depending on the methods used. These include statistical principles – especially those relating to</p>

⁷ http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/GSSGSRguidanceFeb2010_tcm6-35926.pdf

		statistical inference – where appropriate. Methods and outputs quality assured by appropriate professional specialists.
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ARE THE DATA OFFICIAL STATISTICS?

