

# Code of Practice for Official Statistics

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January 2009

Edition **1.0**

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# **Code of Practice for Official Statistics**

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### **About the UK Statistics Authority**

The UK Statistics Authority is an independent body operating at arm's length from government as a non-ministerial department, directly accountable to Parliament. It was established on 1 April 2008 by the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*.

The Authority's overall objective is to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. The Authority is accordingly required to promote and safeguard the quality and comprehensiveness of official statistics, and good practice in relation to official statistics.

The Statistics Authority has three main functions:

- oversight of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) – the executive office of the Authority
- monitoring and reporting on all official statistics, wherever produced, and
- independent assessment of official statistics.

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# Foreword

## Sir Michael Scholar, Chair of the UK Statistics Authority

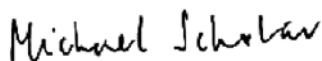
The *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007* created the UK Statistics Authority and empowered it to determine, and assess compliance with, a Code of Practice for official statistics. In a highly decentralised statistical service, the Code will serve to establish common standards and, by so doing, help to ensure a coherent and trustworthy service to the user of statistics.

Publication of this first edition of the Code establishes a cornerstone of the new statutory framework. Compliance with it allows official figures and statistical publications to carry the National Statistics label. We want to see that label recognised as a stamp of assurance that the statistics have been produced and explained to high standards and that they serve the public good.

The Code builds on, and supersedes, the former National Statistics Code of Practice. It also draws on international guidelines and on an extensive round of public consultations. In 2007 the Statistics Commission consulted on *Proposals for a Code of Practice for Official Statistics*. In 2008, the Statistics Authority further developed the Commission's proposals and issued another consultation document, *Official Statistics serving the public good*. The report of that consultation is being published alongside the Code<sup>1</sup>.

The Code applies to all UK bodies that are responsible for official statistics. Compliance with the Code is a statutory requirement on bodies that produce statistics that have already been designated as National Statistics.

I commend this Code of Practice both to the producers and to the users of official statistics. It is a concise yet comprehensive statement of good practice for all the many bodies to which it applies. It is not however fixed forever, and the Authority will update it as required. With that in mind, comments on this first edition are most welcome.



January 2009

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<sup>1</sup> Code of Practice for Official Statistics: Report on the Consultation and Principles and Procedures for Assessment, UK Statistics Authority, January 2009

# Code of Practice for Official Statistics

## Preamble

- i. Official statistics are fundamental to good government, to the delivery of public services and to decision-making in all sectors of society. They provide Parliament and the public with a window on society and the economy, and on the work and performance of government.
- ii. Observance of a common Code of Practice, by all the public bodies that produce official statistics, is central to maintaining a unified statistical service that meets the needs of government and society and is both trustworthy and trusted.
- iii. The *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007* requires the UK Statistics Authority (the 'Statistics Board' in the Act) to prepare and publish a Code of Practice and to assess compliance against it. Official statistics assessed as compliant are to be designated as National Statistics. Bodies that produce National Statistics are required to ensure that the Code continues to be observed. For other official statistics, compliance with the Code is not a formal requirement.
- iv. 'Official statistics' are defined in Section 6 of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*.
- v. This Code is consistent with the United Nations *Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics*<sup>2</sup> and the *European Statistics Code of Practice*<sup>3</sup> (with which all producers of European Statistics are expected to comply).
- vi. It is also consistent with the Civil Service core values of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality<sup>4</sup>. In relation to statistical work, these are interpreted as follows.
  - Integrity – putting the public interest above organisational, political or personal interests.
  - Honesty – being truthful and open about the statistics and their interpretation.
  - Objectivity – using scientific methods to collect statistics and basing statistical advice on rigorous analysis of the evidence.
  - Impartiality – acting solely according to the merits of the statistical evidence, serving equally well all aspects of the public interest.

The National Statistician will publish a related code of conduct for officials working within the Government Statistical Service.

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations Statistics Division *Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics* (2006)

<sup>3</sup> Eurostat *European Statistics Code of Practice: For national and community statistical authorities* (2005)

<sup>4</sup> Cabinet Office Civil Service Code (2006)

[http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/propriety\\_and\\_ethics/civil\\_service/civil\\_service\\_code.aspx](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/propriety_and_ethics/civil_service/civil_service_code.aspx)

- vii. The Code contains eight principles and, in relation to each, a statement of associated practices. It also contains three more detailed protocols – on user engagement; on the release of statistics; and on the use of administrative data for statistical purposes. The Code has been framed to support the assessment of compliance by the UK Statistics Authority.
- viii. Taken together, the principles and protocols of the Code are intended to ensure: that the range of official statistics meets the needs of users; that the statistics are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and that the statistics are well explained.
- ix. As required under Section 11(1) of the Act, the Code does not cover requirements in relation to ‘pre-release’ access to statistics in their final form. Pre-Release Access Orders provide the rules and principles relating to the granting of such access. The Code will apply as if it included these Orders.
- x. The Code is specific but, in many cases, its requirements will need interpretation and professional judgement. The National Statistician and the Head of Assessment<sup>5</sup> will provide supplementary guidance to assist bodies that produce official statistics.
- xi. Some practices set out in the Code are relevant to more than one principle. In the interests of conciseness, the practices are not normally repeated under different principles.
- xii. Under some circumstances it may be appropriate for the UK Statistics Authority to agree exemptions or exceptions to the practices, though not to the principles. Where a body that produces National Statistics is aware of a need for an exemption, it should make a case to the Head of Assessment. Details of all exemptions and exceptions will be made public.
- xiii. It is implicit in the Code that there will be sufficient managerial separation between staff responsible for official statistics and other staff of the organisation, to ensure clear lines of accountability for observance of the Code.
- xiv. The Code uses the following terminology.
- *production, management and dissemination of official statistics* – refers to the entire statistical process from the identification of needs, to the decision to collect or compile data, through to providing advice to the user.
  - *statistical report* – means any statistical output, including any associated commentary and metadata.
  - *relevant statistical Head of Profession* – includes the Chief Statisticians of the Devolved Administrations. (‘Heads of Profession’ are the senior statistical advisers in government departments).

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<sup>5</sup> The National Statistician and Head of Assessment are statutory office holders with responsibilities set out in Sections 30 to 32, and Section 33 of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007* respectively.

## Principle 1: Meeting user needs

**The production, management and dissemination of official statistics should meet the requirements of informed decision-making by government, public services, business, researchers and the public.**

### *Practices*

1. Engage effectively with users of statistics to promote trust and maximise public value, in accordance with Protocol 1.
2. Investigate and document the needs of users of official statistics, the use made of existing statistics and the types of decision they inform.
3. Adopt systematic statistical planning arrangements, including transparent priority setting, that reflect the obligation to serve the public good.
4. Publish statistical reports according to a published timetable that takes account of user needs.
5. Publish information about users' experiences of statistical services, data quality, and the format and timing of reports.



## Principle 2: Impartiality and objectivity

**Official statistics, and information about statistical processes, should be managed impartially and objectively.**

### *Practices*

1. Publish statistical reports in an orderly manner, in accordance with Protocol 2.
2. Present statistics impartially and objectively.
3. Make official statistics equally available to all, subject to statutory provisions for pre-release access.
4. Announce changes to methods or classifications well in advance of the release of the changed statistics.
5. Publish details of any exemption from the practices of the Code, as agreed by the UK Statistics Authority.
6. Publish a Revisions Policy for those outputs that are subject to scheduled revisions. Provide a statement explaining the nature and extent of revisions at the same time that they are released.
7. Correct errors discovered in statistical reports, and alert stakeholders, promptly.
8. Release all regular statistical reports on the internet without charge to the user.
9. For any supplementary statistical services for which a charge is made, adopt clear pricing policies that comply with legislation and relevant policy.

## Principle 3: Integrity

**At all stages in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics, the public interest should prevail over organisational, political or personal interests.**

### *Practices*

1. Issue statistical reports separately from any other statement or comment about the figures and ensure that no statement or comment – based on prior knowledge – is issued to the press or published ahead of the publication of the statistics.
2. Ensure that those producing statistical reports are protected from any political pressures that might influence the production or presentation of the statistics.
3. Ensure that the relevant statistical Head of Profession has the sole responsibility for deciding on statistical methods, standards and procedures, and on the content and timing of statistical releases.
4. Follow all statutory obligations and internationally endorsed guidelines governing the collection of data, confidentiality, and release.
5. Inform the National Statistician about complaints that relate to professional integrity, quality or standards, whether or not they can be resolved directly.
6. Implement controls to ensure that individuals do not abuse the trust placed in them for personal gain.
7. Promote a culture within which statistical experts in government can comment publicly on statistical issues, including the misuse of official statistics.

## Principle 4: Sound methods and assured quality

Statistical methods should be consistent with scientific principles and internationally recognised best practices, and be fully documented. Quality should be monitored and assured taking account of internationally agreed practices.

### *Practices*

1. Ensure that official statistics are produced according to scientific principles. Publish details of the methods adopted, including explanations of why particular choices were made.
2. Ensure that official statistics are produced to a level of quality that meets users' needs, and that users are informed about the quality of statistical outputs, including estimates of the main sources of bias and other errors, and other aspects of the European Statistical System definition of quality<sup>6</sup>.
3. Adopt quality assurance procedures, including the consideration of each statistical product against users' requirements, and of their coherence with other statistical products.
4. Publish quality guidelines, and ensure that staff are suitably trained in quality management.
5. Seek to achieve continuous improvement in statistical processes by, for example, undertaking regular reviews or releasing statistical work in progress such as *experimental statistics*<sup>7</sup>.
6. Promote comparability within the UK and internationally by, for example, adopting common standards, concepts, sampling frames, questions, definitions, statistical units and classifications (including common geographic referencing and coding standards). Make the reasons for any deviations from standard models publicly available.
7. Where time series are revised, or changes are made to methods or coverage, produce consistent historical data where possible.

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<sup>6</sup> The six dimensions of the ESS Quality Framework are: relevance, accuracy, timeliness and punctuality, accessibility and clarity, comparability, and coherence.

<sup>7</sup> Experimental statistics are new official statistics undergoing evaluation. They are published in order to involve users and stakeholders in their development and as a means to build in quality at an early stage.

## Principle 5: Confidentiality

**Private information about individual persons (including bodies corporate) compiled in the production of official statistics is confidential, and should be used for statistical purposes only.**

### *Practices*

1. Ensure that official statistics do not reveal the identity of an individual or organisation, or any private information relating to them, taking into account other relevant sources of information.
2. Keep confidential information secure. Only permit its use by trained staff who have signed a declaration covering their obligations under this Code.
3. Inform respondents to statistical surveys and censuses how confidentiality will be protected.
4. Ensure that arrangements for confidentiality protection are sufficient to protect the privacy of individual information, but not so restrictive as to limit unduly the practical utility of official statistics. Publish details of such arrangements.
5. Seek prior authorisation from the National Statistician or Chief Statistician in a Devolved Administration for any exceptions, required by law or thought to be in the public interest, to the principle of confidentiality protection. Publish details of such authorisations.
6. In every case where confidential statistical records are exchanged for statistical purposes with a third party, prepare written confidentiality protection agreements covering the requirements under this Code. Keep an operational record to detail the manner and purpose of the processing.

## Principle 6: Proportionate burden

**The cost burden on data suppliers should not be excessive and should be assessed relative to the benefits arising from the use of the statistics.**

### *Practices*

1. Report annually the estimated costs (for example, on businesses, service providers, or the public) of responding to statistical surveys and strive to develop methods that will reduce the costs to individual organisations or people.
2. Seek participation in statistical surveys through informed consent, rather than using statutory powers, wherever possible.
3. Promote statistical purposes actively in the design of administrative systems in order to enhance the statistical potential of administrative records.
4. Analyse the costs of proposed new data requirements (to data suppliers) against the potential benefits.
5. Evaluate existing data sources and estimation techniques before undertaking new surveys.

## Principle 7: Resources

**The resources made available for statistical activities should be sufficient to meet the requirements of this Code and should be used efficiently and effectively.**

### *Practices*

1. Ensure that statistical services have the staff, financial and computing resources to produce, manage and disseminate official statistics to the standards of this Code.
2. Consult users before changing the allocation of resources to statistical activities. Include specific resources for user consultation in budgets.
3. Ensure that records are maintained showing the relationship between the statistical planning process, the work programme, the allocation of resources, and the outcomes.
4. Monitor expenditure against work programmes and demonstrate effective stewardship of resources allocated to statistical work.
5. Seek to balance quality (for example, accuracy and timeliness) against costs (including both costs to government and data suppliers), taking into account the expected uses of the statistics.
6. Ensure that appropriately skilled people are employed in the statistical production process. Use an appropriate competence framework to set the requirements of statistical posts and the development needs of staff, and support staff in developing their statistical, management and subject area knowledge.
7. Where administrative sources are used for statistical purposes, follow the practices set out in Protocol 3.

## Principle 8: Frankness and accessibility

**Official statistics, accompanied by full and frank commentary, should be readily accessible to all users.**

### *Practices*

1. Provide information on the quality and reliability of statistics in relation to the range of potential uses, and on methods, procedures, and classifications.
2. Prepare and disseminate commentary and analysis that aid interpretation, and provide factual information about the policy or operational context of official statistics. Adopt formats for the presentation of statistics in graphs, tables and maps that enhance clarity, interpretability and consistency.
3. Make statistics available in as much detail as is reliable and practicable, subject to legal and confidentiality constraints, offering choice and flexibility in the format according to the level of detail required by the user.
4. Publicise official statistics in ways that enable users to identify and access information relevant to their needs. Make access to official statistics as straightforward as possible by providing easy-to-use entry points.
5. Ensure that official statistics are disseminated in forms that, as far as possible, are accessible to a range of different audiences, including those with disabilities.
6. Ensure that official statistics are disseminated in forms that enable and encourage analysis and re-use. Release datasets and reference databases, supported by documentation, in formats that are convenient to users.
7. Manage official statistics in accordance with relevant public records legislation and codes of practice on records management. Deposit official statistics (accompanied by information about their purposes, design and methods) with the relevant national archive as required in legislation.

## Protocol 1: User engagement

Effective user engagement is fundamental both to trust in statistics and securing maximum public value. This Protocol draws together the relevant practices set out elsewhere in the Code and expands on the requirements in relation to consultation.

### *Practices*

1. Identify users. Document their statistical needs, and their wishes in terms of engagement.
2. Make users aware of how they can find the information they need.
3. Take account of users' views on the presentation of statistics, and associated commentary, datasets and metadata.
4. Provide users with information about the quality of statistics, including any statistical biases.
5. Involve users in the evaluation of *experimental statistics*.
6. Seek feedback from users on their experiences of the statistical service they receive, data quality, and the format and timing of outputs. Review the feedback systematically.
7. Consult users before making changes that affect statistics (for example, to coverage, definitions, or methods) or publications. Consultations should be:
  - Informed – by relevant central guidance on how consultations should be conducted; and by the views of user groups on the best means of obtaining views;
  - Efficient – by balancing the importance of the issue and the likely impact of users' views against the time and resources available, so as to obtain good value for money from the consultation process; by liaising and co-ordinating with other producers to avoid duplication of effort and to minimise burdens; and by exploiting different methods of consultation;
  - Clear – by describing the consultation, and expressing the issues, as simply and concisely as possible; and by publishing the timetable for each consultation; and
  - Responsive – by publishing the records of decisions and actions following a consultation, together with explanations for them; and by publishing individual responses, unless anonymity is requested.



## Protocol 2: Release practices

Statistical reports should be released into the public domain in an orderly manner that promotes public confidence and gives equal access to all, subject to relevant legislation<sup>8</sup>.

### *Practices*

1. Release statistical reports as soon as they are judged ready, so that there is no opportunity, or perception of opportunity, for the release to be withheld or delayed.
2. Publish a timetable of statistical releases for twelve months ahead.
3. Ensure that all National Statistics can be accessed from the National Statistics Publication Hub<sup>9</sup>.
4. Issue statistical releases at the standard time of 9.30am on a weekday, to maintain consistency and to permit time for users to understand and respond to the information during normal working hours.
5. Draw public attention to any change to a pre-announced release date and explain fully the reasons for the change at the same time. The relevant statistical Head of Profession has the final decision and should not be influenced by non-statistical matters.
6. Include the name and contact details of the responsible statistician in statistical reports.
7. Subject to compliance with the rules and principles on pre-release access set out in legislation, limit access before public release to those people essential for production and publication, and for quality assurance and operational purposes. Publish records of those who have access prior to release.
8. Ensure that no indication of the substance of a statistical report is made public, or given to the media or any other party not recorded as eligible for access before publication. Report to the National Statistician immediately any accidental or wrongful release, and investigate the circumstances.
9. Ensure that government statements issued alongside official statistics, and referring to, or based upon, them:
  - a. contain a prominent link to the statistical release and clearly refer to the source of the statistics;
  - b. are labelled clearly as policy statements (or ministerial statements) and are readily distinguished from a statistical release; and
  - c. meet basic professional standards (for example, statistics should be cited accurately, and charts should be drawn in an accurate and impartial way).

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2008/draft/ukdsi\\_9780110832203\\_en\\_1](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2008/draft/ukdsi_9780110832203_en_1)

[http://www.opsi.gov.uk/legislation/scotland/ssi2008/draft/sdsi\\_9780111000236\\_en\\_1](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/legislation/scotland/ssi2008/draft/sdsi_9780111000236_en_1)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.statistics.gov.uk>

## Protocol 3: The use of administrative sources for statistical purposes

**Administrative sources should be fully exploited for statistical purposes, subject to adherence to appropriate safeguards.**

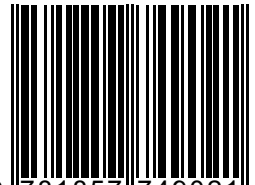
### *Practices*

1. Observe all statutory obligations and relevant codes of practice in relation to the protection of confidentiality and the handling of personal data.
2. Only base statistics on administrative data where the definitions and concepts are good approximations to those appropriate for statistical purposes.
3. Maximise opportunities for the use of administrative data, cross-analysis of sources and for the exchange and re-use of data, to avoid duplicating requests for information. Where possible, use common information technology and information management systems that facilitate the flow of information between producers of statistics.
4. Ensure that no action is taken within the producer body, or public statement made, that might undermine confidence in the independence of the statistics when released.
5. Prepare, in consultation with the National Statistician, a Statement of Administrative Sources which identifies the following.
  - a. The administrative systems currently used in the production of official statistics.
  - b. Procedures to be followed within the organisation to ensure that full account is taken of the implications for official statistics when changes to administrative systems are contemplated.
  - c. Information on other administrative sources that are not currently used in the production of official statistics but have potential to be so used.
  - d. Arrangements for providing statistical staff, whether inside the producer body or elsewhere, with access to administrative data for statistical purposes.
  - e. Arrangements for auditing the quality of administrative data used for statistical purposes.
  - f. Arrangements for ensuring the security of statistical processes that draw on administrative data.

[www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk](http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk)

# Building Trust in Statistics

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