

8 November 2013

To Peter Fullerton  
Office for National Statistics

## **ONS consultation on statistical products 2013: Response from the Statistics Users Forum and Royal Statistical Society**

Thank you for coming to the last meeting of the Statistics Users Forum in September to talk about this consultation, and also for agreeing to extend the deadline for our response. As indicated at the meeting, this response on behalf of the Statistics Users Forum and the Royal Statistical Society concentrates on making some general points, leaving constituent individual user groups to respond to the detailed and individual questions posed in the consultation.

1. The first point that we would like to make is that we value, and are grateful for, the consultation process that has been conducted. The process was open, provided some useful supporting information around each of the products listed to help inform the debate, and a good length of time was allowed for users to respond to the consultation. The consultation questionnaire provided a useful overview of the statistical products, and this overview was helpful in itself. If this process is to be repeated – and we accept that it is a worthwhile process from time to time to review all current outputs, to ensure that they continue to serve key users' needs, whether or not there is a financial imperative – then we hope that the ONS will again conduct this sort of consultation process.

2. The second point is that we hope that any decisions to cease producing outputs do not prejudice what might come out from the 'Statistics the UK Needs/Developing the UK Statistical Infrastructure' project that the UK Statistics Authority has only just embarked upon. We understand that this particular ONS consultation is focused on identifying outputs to cut from the 2014/15 financial year, whilst the UKSA project is running on a longer timescale. We also appreciate that the scope and nature of the two exercises do not exactly overlap, with the UKSA exercise more about process than immediately delivering a set of statistics. Nevertheless, our fear is that the ONS chooses to cut a series in the short term, yet it is subsequently identified as one of the statistical series that the UK needs. We realise that there is no easy answer to this, but we do counsel ONS to take care when yielding the knife in your current exercise! A similar concern arises from the overlapping consultation on the future of the Census. If a decision is made to move from a full Census to using a range of administrative and survey sources, then some of the statistical outputs being considered for reductions may become more important as replacements for Census data. Any decisions on reductions therefore need to take into account the impact of the decision that is made regarding the future of the Census.

3. Our third point is that the ONS should not assume that an absence of responses to this particular consultation implies that a particular product is not necessarily wanted or valued by users. The Forum has done its best to publicise this consultation among its various constituent bodies, to ensure that ONS receives as broad a response as possible, but there are undoubtedly



some bodies who may not be aware of it, yet who would rely on the data. For instance, there may be a number of small NGOs or voluntary sector bodies that rely on health inequalities data, yet do not have the awareness, or the capacity, to respond to a consultation of this nature. Without seeking to extend the exercise, we nevertheless encourage ONS to publicise which series you intend to cut as soon as possible.

4. Our next point is that ONS should, in reaching its decisions following this exercise, take account not just of responses received recently, but also comments submitted in previous similar consultations. Whilst we value the openness and willingness of the ONS/UKSA/GSS to consult widely, the vast majority of members of user groups are volunteers and the sheer number of recent consultations may in some cases engender 'consultation fatigue' and thus a failure to respond to this exercise. Indeed, it is reasonable for users to believe that ONS has logged earlier concerns and that comments submitted in previous exercises on e.g. health data may well still carry meaning, weight and value, and should be incorporated into your decision-making process.

5. The next point is that representatives in the Forum expressed a view that the ONS is valued over and above other producers, particularly for its attention to quality as well as for its perceived integrity and independence. Furthermore, we would ask that if a decision is made to cease production of a statistical product, then we would ask that all attempts are made to place the source data into the public domain, so that some further user community analysis may still be possible. Linking these two points together, we would further ask that ONS take all steps possible to ensure that, elsewhere in government, data information centres are up and running and producing data of high enough quality so that the loss of any ONS published product is not so keenly felt. As an example, some user members of the Forum expressed concern that the Health & Social Care Information Centre is, in some areas, not yet producing data of sufficient quality that users could adequately cope with the loss of some ONS published products, though I do not yet have any further detail to back up this assertion.

6. Finally, we hope that this consultation and decision-making process is an ongoing process, and that the end of October 2013 does not signify an end to the engagement with the wider community, and an internalisation of the ONS decision-making process. I recall you said at the meeting that the ONS would be prepared to attend a future SUF meeting in the New Year to set out your proposals, once the likely outcome of this consultation process was clearer. I am sure the forum would like to take you up on this offer.

I hope these comments are helpful to your deliberations. The RSS and the Statistics Users Forum would welcome further engagement with the ONS once you have got further down the road in your decision-making process.

Yours sincerely

Jon McGinty (Chair, Statistics User Forum)  
On behalf of the Statistics Users Forum and the Royal Statistical Society