

## Statistics User Forum response to the House of Commons' Public Administration Select Committee fourth study: Communicating and Publishing Statistics

### A. Introduction and summary

Statistics cannot be used unless they are made available and communicated in a clear and open manner. Thus championing the need for excellent communication and publication of statistics lies at the heart of the concerns of the Statistics User Forum (SUF). SUF has welcomed the fact that these requirements are now reflected in the Code of Practice for Statistics. However, there is still a long way to go before users' needs in this respect are met. SUF views on each of the questions raised in the study are given in detail below but we highlight the following points as being of particular importance:

- The balance between resource expended on producing statistics and communicating/providing access to them is not yet right – more effort should go into the latter in order to maximise utility.
- Access arrangements should accommodate the requirements of the full range of levels of expertise among users.
- Users need a 'one-stop shop' to find out what official statistics are available on a particular topic.
- Effective user engagement should be a continuous dialogue, not just a series of one-off consultations.
- Explaining the strengths and weaknesses of particular statistics is an essential part of their communication to users, as is providing impartial interpretation of what underlies trends and comparisons.
- The publication strategy for official statistics is responding rather slowly and quite patchily across departments to the opportunities offered by the internet.

SUF is an umbrella organisation for a growing number of groups and networks of users of official statistics and represents the shared views of this very diverse community. It was set up in 2004, succeeding the long-established Statistics User Council, and operates under the aegis of the Royal Statistical Society.

### B. Response to specific questions

#### 1. How well are the practices for the release of official statistics, and pre-publication access to those statistics ("pre-release access") working?

1.1 The mechanics of the processes for the release of 'headline' official statistics work reasonably well. Future publication dates are published and updated and it is possible in many cases to sign up for alerts for newly published data. However, it is in the range of what is made available and the formats in which detailed information is released which pose much greater problems for users (see our response to question 4).

1.2 Users of official statistics rarely find pre-release access an issue of concern in their day-to-day work. Apart from users in the media, most are probably unaware of pre-release access, and would be surprised if they knew that it existed. Where there is that knowledge, it acts to reduce public confidence because it reinforces the perception that the data may have been subject to political manipulation, even when there is no evidence that this has happened.

#### 2. Has the right balance been struck between the resources devoted to producing statistics and those devoted to communicating them? What should be the future of

## **the National Statistics Hub, particularly in the context of the proposed single Government domain for communicating data?**

2.1 In response to the first question, the short answer is no. Priorities are skewed too much towards producing statistics rather than communicating and providing access to them. Ideally we would prefer more resource to be devoted to communication without reducing that devoted to production. However, if resource constraints make choices necessary, then we would argue that resource should be diverted to make existing statistics easily accessible and excellently communicated. Improving access to statistics increases their use, and thus maximises their value: this can be described as “going the last 100 yards”. Simple extracts with explanatory commentary – for example, opening up the richness of data available from sample surveys such as the Living Costs and Food Survey - can engage non-specialist users, whereas very large and detailed datasets can be daunting. Also, investing in the ONS and departmental websites to improve access, leading to greater use, must be a top priority.

2.2 Many users obtain official statistics through the press, broadcasters, social media, and other secondary sources. The Government Statistical Service (GSS) could do more to help these mediators to disseminate statistics, through presenting them in simple formats with informative explanations to which links can be made. This would not only widen the use of official statistics but would also improve the accuracy with which they are reported.

2.3 Our vision for the National Statistics Hub is that it should be a ‘one-stop shop’ for users to find out what official statistics are available on a particular topic. Ideally this would then provide them with links through to the statistics themselves, irrespective of the government department/agency website on which they are stored. Unfortunately at present the Hub falls far short of this ideal.

2.4 It is not clear to us how a single government domain for communicating data would improve this situation. Clearly the Hub should be integrated with any such initiatives, but it is important that users should be able to distinguish between national statistics, which have been validated and assessed against the Code of Practice, and other information.

### **3. In what circumstances should the UK Statistics Authority comment on the use or misuse of statistics?**

3.1 To be effective, the UK Statistics Authority has to be selective in the instances of misuse on which it chooses to comment. Our feeling is that such interventions should focus on issues of national importance, for example where misuse affects public or Parliamentary debate or if commentators outside government are making sustained attempts to mislead the public on the meaning of a particular set of official statistics. We consider that this is the approach which was taken by Sir Michael Scholar in his term of office at the Authority and we hope that Andrew Dilnot will continue to exercise this sort of judgment.

### **4. To what extent are the requirements of users taken into account in decisions on the communication and publication of official statistics? How easy is it for users to find the official statistics they need, whether via the Office for National Statistics website, other websites, the National Statistics Publication Hub or elsewhere? How well do the formats used for releasing official statistics meet user needs? How effectively does the UK Statistics Authority engage with the user community to understand its requirements and what, if anything, should it do differently?**

4.1 There are some examples of good practice in taking into account users’ requirements in decisions on the communication and publication of statistics, notably the extensive consultation in the lead-up to the 2011 Census, but they are few and far between. The user

community is wide and diverse, ranging from analysts requiring the latest economic data for modelling work to a member of the public wanting to know the population of their town or village. The GSS needs to do more to embrace this diversity by finding out what the differing needs of users are, and then by providing a range of access routes which provide for different levels of knowledge and expertise. One result of such an approach would be to involve more users, which in turn would help the producers to develop and improve the statistics for which they are responsible.

4.2 All too often it is extremely difficult even for the expert user to find the statistics they need from the ONS and departmental websites. Search engines leave much to be desired – most users rely on Google. The relaunch of the ONS website in late summer 2011, if anything, made things worse, as many links were lost. The Publication Hub does not provide a user-friendly interface for the non-expert (see 2.2).

4.3 Access arrangements should accommodate the requirements of the full range of levels of expertise among users: open data formats for those whose main aim is to use official statistics for secondary analysis, modelling, etc, through to simple tables and charts with informative commentary for the lay audience whose main aim is to be informed about trends in society and the economy. The general move towards HTML based publications, with user friendly spreadsheets, is to be welcomed.

4.4 The UK Statistics Authority, through the assessment process and its championing of the need for user engagement, has made considerable efforts to understand the needs of the user community. Its report 'Strengthening User Engagement' (2010) was an important articulation of the importance of user engagement and how it could best be achieved. The Authority has followed this through with the secondment of a User Engagement Programme Manager (UEPM) to support the work of SUF within the RSS and this has enabled real progress to be made towards much more productive user engagement through the internet using the potential of social media. The UEPM was largely responsible for the successful launch in late February 2012 of StatsUserNet, a new website which facilitates user-user and user-producer engagement. There are already over 1,200 registrations on the site, and it has provided an online forum for discussing important issues such as those surrounding the Retail Prices Index and the Consumer Prices Index.

4.5 However, it is primarily within the ONS and other government departments rather than the Authority that the culture shift advocated in the 'Strengthening User Engagement' report has to be achieved. Effective user engagement should be a continuous dialogue, not just a series of one-off consultations, particularly when users' perception is often that consultations are held when decisions have in effect already been made. Some progress is being made in this area: SUF is working with the National Statistician's Office (NSO) to develop best practice guidelines for user engagement which we would like to see implemented throughout the GSS and the user community.

## **5. How well are trends in, and limitations of, official statistics (produced by the Office for National Statistics and elsewhere) explained to users? Do the explanations have the right level of detail and how balanced are they?**

5.1 Explaining the strengths and weaknesses of particular statistics is an essential part of their communication to users, as is providing impartial interpretation of what underlies trends and comparisons. This sort of commentary is particularly important for non-expert users. It requires culture change in the GSS, where many statisticians still see their task as just providing the numbers. We welcome best practice guidelines on statistical commentary recently developed by the GSS, and the formation of the 'Helpers' team by the UK Statistics

Authority and the NSO to embed these and other best practices across departments. However, these developments need to be maintained and developed.

5.2 Even when this sort of information is provided, the casual user may find it difficult to find and interpret. Often, commentary concentrates exclusively on the latest published figures rather providing a longer term context. Producers need to develop the ability to put themselves in the place of users: what story might they draw from the data and why are the data of interest/importance to them?

5.3 There is no 'right' level of detail in explanations of trends and limitations: different users require different levels of detail and this should be recognised in the way that the GSS structures their communications, particularly on the web. Producers need to be proactively diagnosing where users (expert and non-expert alike) are evidently not understanding the commentary and explanations they provide and adjusting them accordingly.

## **6. How well do producers of official statistics respond to ad hoc requests for data, and what should be the publication policy in respect of responses to these requests?**

6.1 This is a very mixed picture. Some government departments respond well, others not so well. Requests that are not too time-consuming are responded to fairly readily. However, often users face seemingly insurmountable barriers in gaining access to official data and it is often only in response to initiatives by users (rather than producers) that progress is made – for example, the development of the Samples of Anonymised Records from the Census.

6.2 The data provided in response to ad hoc requests should routinely be made available to other users, and the evidence from ad hoc/FOI requests about what users' needs are should be used to extend the range of information made routinely available. This will then help to avoid the need for future ad hoc requests

## **7. How well are the opportunities afforded by the internet being exploited in the publication strategy for official statistics?**

7.1 The publication strategy for official statistics is responding rather slowly and quite patchily across departments to the opportunities offered by the internet. There has been some progress – less reliance on large PDFs, and a better range of more user-friendly formats for download of data. Most GSS outputs are available somewhere on the web. However, it is still very difficult for many users – particularly the non-expert users – to find what they need, in a format that is suitable to their needs.

7.2 The ONS website and the Publication Hub are still far from satisfactory in many respects – for example their search facilities. For example, the first publication appearing in a search for National Accounts in the Economy theme in the Publication Hub is the Annual Abstract of Statistics and the Blue Book does not appear until number 32.

7.3 Data visualisation, harnessing the potential of technology to provide interactive content, is very important to engage a lay audience. There are some good examples of its effective use on the ONS website, such as the interactive presentation of data from the 2011 Census. However, such examples are not routine throughout the GSS or indeed in all areas of ONS output. Similarly, the potential for hierarchical presentation of information has not been widely exploited – ie top level very user-friendly and simple to engage the lay audience, with ability to drill down for the expert user to reach the level of detail that they require.