

SUF and RSS response to ONS Consultation on Changes to ONS Products 2015

This response has been prepared by the Statistics User Forum and the National Statistics Advisory Group of the Royal Statistical Society to address general issues raised by this consultation. This joint response does not address the consultation questions, which we have encouraged individual users and user groups to respond to in terms of the specific products and outputs that they require. Comments submitted separately by users and by user groups such as the Health Statistics User Group should therefore be taken strongly into account. Given our concerns about the user engagement process set out below, we believe responses will be far from comprehensive. If there are lesser or lower level of responses from users on certain products, this should not be assumed to mean that they are of less value.

The first broad issue that we think needs to be addressed is the question of how ONS plans to transform itself on a strategic basis. This appears to be yet another salami slicing exercise. It should be recognised that 'salami slicing' in the ONS budget has been taking place over a long period, in which statistics required by legislation are ring fenced and all other outputs are then cut by varying degrees to meet a budgetary target. For this spending round as much as previously, there are substantial data quality issues that can arise by this process. There also appears to have been no attempt to integrate and understand plans for ONS products with what is happening to GSS products and outputs, beyond those of ONS, or how there was scope for more coherent, topic-based analysis and data dissemination, drawing on sources that are not just limited to ONS.

To highlight a few of the current proposals:

- Cancellation of the Opinions and Lifestyles Survey, which is ONS's only random options sample survey available to Government. The cancellation is proposed on the grounds that the contracts are relatively easier to cancel. This decision would be better based on assessment of the quality of an online alternative and how it would be possible to achieve random results from this alternative method. Such an assessment has not preceded this consultation. The British Polling Council's Inquiry into the Failure of the 2015 election polls suggests some of the key methodological issues that can arise in opinion surveys, and that would need to be assessed.
- Proposals to reduce the frequency of national and sub-national population projections could have serious implications for planning and delivery of public services. There is clearly a demand for ONS data in this area to move toward being more timely, rather than less so. Population projections are one such output, and appear highly likely to have strategic implications for ONS.
- The relative strength of the Wealth and Assets Survey's current sample size of 20,000 appears not to have been assessed in statistical terms, only by comparison to other countries, where the evidence gathered may be far weaker. If incentives to complete the survey are reduced or are dropped, this would increase response bias. If the survey sample size is reduced, then this reduces the ability to make comparisons between groups. This is likely to weaken the survey as a source of information about society.

Delays in engaging expert users substantively in ONS's transformation process have been regrettable, as current and previous consultations appear insufficient to ensure a strong evidence base for decisions. We have supported proposals from ONS to take a more strategic approach in thinking about the data infrastructure we need as a country, and about innovation and adoption of new methods to collect, analyse and disseminate statistics. We were also supportive of a proposal from ONS to perform a stock take across all ONS products, with regular user engagement after the last such consultation in 2013. One of the regrettable developments has been that consultation exercises such as this and the previous exercises are one-off stocktakes, which start from scratch, rather than being part of an effective continuous form of user engagement which builds on a stocktake such as the current one. The National Statistician has stated that users are at the heart of his mission for 'better data, better decisions', so we now await sight of a coherent and deliverable user engagement strategy in order to achieve this. The Bean Review of UK economic statistics has also recognised this need, and has called for ONS to become better engaged with statistics users across the country.

We see some constructive aspects to points of detail in the consultation. For example with regard to point 1) in the consultation ('changing how we publish our statistics, including stopping production of some statistical bulletins'), it may well be that ONS 'first release' statistical bulletins can be improved. We note that the Department for Transport publishes succinct and usable bulletins and their approach could be more widely adopted. However this is not preceded by any assessment across-the-piece of which statistics are collected, how they are collected, and how statistical information that is relevant to current economic, social and environmental issues is made available.

For addressing the quality of ONS' consultations and product development overall, we believe user engagement is necessary and is not currently sufficient. With ongoing shortfalls in producer-led engagement, centralised support for user engagement has not been a panacea. However the secondment to RSS for this purpose played a valued and necessary part to build consistency between topics, foster and spread good practice, and remind producers of their responsibilities to users and avenues for user engagement that they can take. The UK Statistics Authority needs to put into order its leadership on this aspect of its role, which has been subject to cuts. We look to them to firmly establish proactive user engagement in ONS, and to set out a strategy for this.

User engagement at its best is a dialogue in which needs are expressed and potential ways of meeting those needs are explored. Unfortunately the present ONS consultation is some way away from this model. Users stand ready to engage with ONS and with the rest of the GSS, to help deliver the data infrastructure that the UK needs, and to inform funding decisions.

About the RSS and SUF

The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) is a learned society and professional body for statisticians and data analysts, with almost 8000 members around the world. As a charity, we advocate the key role of statistics and data in society, and have done so since we were founded in 1834. One of our six strategic goals is for statistics to be used effectively in the public interest, so that policy formulation and decision-making are informed by evidence of the good of society.

The Royal Statistical Society's Statistics User Forum (SUF) aims to be the strategic voice of users of official statistics. SUF acts as an umbrella organisation for user groups, each of which covers a particular area across the spectrum of official statistics. SUF seeks to enable open and

constructive dialogue between users and producers of official statistics and encourages communication across the user community.

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