



The UK system of official statistics

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This note briefly describes the UK system of official statistics, looking at who produces official statistics, the standards they should produce them to, and the monitoring and assessment of official statistics.

Many official statistics are produced by members of the Government Statistical Service, based in the Office for National Statistics, in UK government departments and agencies and in the devolved administrations. The Government Statistical Service is led by the National Statistician, Jil Matheson.

The UK Statistics Authority promotes and safeguards the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. It does this through:

- Setting the Code of Practice for Official Statistics
- Monitoring the production and publication of official statistics
- Assessing key official statistics against the Code of Practice for Official Statistics – statistics that are assessed as complying with the Code are designated as ‘National Statistics’; and
- Overseeing the work of the Office for National Statistics, the UK’s largest producer of official statistics.

In the House of Commons, the Public Administration Select Committee examines the work of the UK Statistics Authority.

There are a number of topics of ongoing controversy in the statistical system, these include the rules for access to statistics ahead of their release (‘pre-release access’) and aspects of crime statistics.

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Official statistics are used by a wide range of people and organisations, including government, business, the media, citizens and Parliament. They cover almost all aspects of people's lives, from health and education to transport and the economy.

This note briefly describes the organisation of the UK statistical system, looking at the bodies that produce official statistics, the standards they produce them to, and the monitoring and assessment of official statistics. It reflects the changes to the UK statistical system associated with the [Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007](#).¹

1 The UK Statistics Authority

The UK Statistics Authority was set up under the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007* with the objective of promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. The Statistics Authority is chaired by Sir Michael Scholar.² The Authority promotes the quality of official statistics, including their impartiality, accuracy, relevance and coherence; good practice in relation to official statistics, including their accessibility; and the comprehensiveness of official statistics.³ The Statistics Authority:

- sets the Code of Practice for Official Statistics
- monitors the production and publication of official statistics
- assesses key official statistics against the Code of Practice for Official Statistics – statistics that are assessed as complying with the Code are designated as 'National Statistics'; and
- oversees the work of the Office for National Statistics, the UK's largest producer of official statistics.

The Authority's remit extends across the UK, including to statistics produced by the devolved administrations. It reports to the UK Parliament and to the devolved legislatures.⁴

2 The production of official statistics

Statistics are considered to be official statistics if they are produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), a UK government department, the devolved administrations, Crown bodies, or a body specified in an order made under the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007.⁵

2.1 The Government Statistical Service

Many official statistics are produced by statisticians in the Government Statistical Service. Members of the Government Statistical Service are based in the Office for National Statistics

¹ For further information regarding the Act and the debates around it, see House of Commons Library Research Papers 06/66 [Statistics and Registration Service Bill](#) and 07/25 [Statistics and Registration Service Bill: Committee Stage Report](#).

² More information about Sir Michael and his appointment can be found in [Standard Note SN/SG/4396 Chair of the Statistics Board](#)

³ More information about the UK Statistics Authority and its board can be found on its [website](#).

⁴ The Minister for the Cabinet Office acts as a link between Parliament and the UK Statistics Authority where necessary, for example acting as the conduit for Parliamentary Questions answered by the Authority and National Statistician. The Minister also leads on appointments to the UK Statistics Authority.

⁵ The most recent order for non-devolved statistics is [The Official Statistics Order 2009](#). The devolved administrations make similar orders setting out which statistics on devolved topics should be considered to be official statistics.

– the UK’s National Statistical Institute, in UK Government departments and agencies, and in the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales.⁶

The National Statistician, Jil Matheson, heads the Government Statistical Service, providing professional leadership to its members. The National Statistician is also the Chief Executive of the UK Statistics Authority’s Board, is the UK Government’s Chief Adviser on Statistics and has oversight of the Office for National Statistics.

In practice responsibility for the Office for National Statistics is delegated to its Director-General, Stephen Penneck. Day to day responsibility for the statistics produced outside the Office for National Statistics in the UK Government lies with departmental Heads of Profession for Statistics and with Chief Statisticians in the devolved administrations.

2.2 Other statistical producers

Some official statistics are produced by bodies without staff in the Government Statistical Service, although these bodies will often have a professional link to a Head of Profession for Statistics or a Chief Statistician in the devolved administrations.

3 Code of Practice for Official Statistics

The UK Statistics Authority is responsible for producing the statutory [Code of Practice for Official Statistics](#), which sets out a range of standard practices for statistical producers to follow. The Code covers practices relating to:

- Meeting user needs
- Impartiality and objectivity
- Integrity
- Sound methods and assured quality
- Confidentiality
- Proportionate burden
- Resources
- Frankness and accessibility

The Code also includes more detailed protocols for user engagement, the release of statistics and the use of administrative data for statistical purposes.

The Code of Practice is complemented by rules for “pre-release” access to statistics. These are rules explaining who may see statistics ahead of their publication, and in what circumstances. These rules are set out in secondary legislation, made by the Minister for the Cabinet Office, and by the devolved administrations for devolved statistics (see below for a discussion of the controversy around these rules).⁷

⁶ Equivalent staff in Northern Ireland are not affiliated to the Government Statistical Service but work closely with it and share a common professional culture.

⁷ For example the [Pre-release Access to Official Statistics Order 2008](#) – made by the Minister for the Cabinet Office, with the approval of both Houses of Parliament – sets out the rules for statistics that are not devolved to Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland.

4 Monitoring and assessing statistics

4.1 Monitoring statistics

The UK Statistics Authority monitors the production and publication of official statistics. It looks at long-term and topical issues, and publishes notes, reports and correspondence on these.⁸ Issues it has considered so far include:

- Improving migration statistics;
- The Office for National Statistics' proposals for the Census in 2011;
- The presentation and reporting of certain statistics, including Office for National Statistics figures on foreign-born workers, and the presentation of differences in pay by gender by the Government Equalities Office;
- Apparent breaches of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics and the pre-release rules, including for certain statistics on knife crime; and
- The establishment of a National Address Register

Issues the UK Statistics Authority is currently examining, or plans to examine in the future, include:

- better ways to identify and support users of statistics;
- barriers to trust in relation to crime statistics;
- the communication of inflation and prices;
- the adequacy of environmental statistics; and
- the review of the Government's arrangements for pre-release access to statistics⁹

4.2 Assessment of statistics

The Authority also assesses certain statistics against the Code of Practice for Official Statistics (including the rules for pre-release set out in secondary legislation and discussed above). Statistics that are judged to comply with the Code are designated to be National Statistics and are given the National Statistics logo, which shown to the right.¹⁰ The Authority publishes a report on each assessment it carries out.¹¹



Statistics assessed since the start of the Statistics Authority's assessment programme range from statistics on road casualty in Great Britain to prison population projections for England and Wales. Statistics currently being assessed or due to be assessed soon include cancer statistics, criminal justice statistics, aspects of the Census, regional statistics, labour market statistics and education statistics.¹²

Not all official statistics are National Statistics. For a new statistic to become a National Statistics, the responsible Ministers – or the National Statistician for statistics produced by the Office for National Statistics – must first request that it be assessed.

⁸ Available at <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/>

⁹ [UK Statistics Authority: Annual report and Resource Accounts](#). See also the [speech](#) by Sir Michael Scholar to the Annual Conference of the Royal Statistical Society, University of Edinburgh, 10 September 2009

¹⁰ Until March 2008, key official statistics were called National Statistics if they were produced according to the earlier Code of Practice for National Statistics (although they were not assessed against it). The UK Statistics Authority has started a programme of assessment for these statistics. Until they are assessed for the first time, they retain the National Statistics badge.

¹¹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

¹² The Statistics Authority publishes its [programme for assessments](#) on its website

When the UK Statistics Authority believes that a statistic should be assessed to become a National Statistic, it can notify the responsible Minister, who must consider the notification and respond. This last happened in January 2009, when the UK Statistics Authority announced its immediate priorities for assessment – a range of statistics from the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Department for International Development, the Ministry of Justice and the Information Centre for Social Care.¹³ The Ministers responsible for these statistics agreed to submit these statistics for assessment.¹⁴

All National Statistics are published on the [National Statistics publication hub](#), along with certain other statistics.¹⁵

4.3 Parliamentary scrutiny

The UK Statistics Authority reports to Parliament and the devolved legislatures on its work, including through an annual report.

In the House of Commons, the Public Administration Select Committee investigates topics relating to the work of the UK Statistics Authority and the Office for National Statistics. It has held evidence sessions on the 2011 Census, migration statistics and the publication of statistics relating to knife crime.

Other Select Committees may choose to investigate matters relating to official statistics, for example the House of Commons Transport Committee held an evidence session on the Statistics Authority's assessment of road casualty statistics in November 2009.

The House of Lords Liaison Committee has suggested that there should be a Joint Committee of both Houses to scrutinise the work of the UK Statistics Authority, but this proposal has not been taken up.¹⁶

An All Party Parliamentary Group on Statistics was recently created, chaired by Lord Lipsey.

5 Ongoing topics of controversy

5.1 Pre-release access to statistics

The rules for access to statistics ahead of their release was a topic of significant controversy when the *Statistics and Registration Service Bill* was being debated by Parliament, with a range of views expressed on who should get access to statistics and when.

Under the Act, the rules for pre-release access are to be set out in secondary legislation. Following a consultation,¹⁷ the rules for statistics that are not devolved were set out in the [Pre-release Access to Official Statistics Order 2008](#) – these include restrictions on the number of people who could access statistics before publication and the time for which access could be given (to 24 hours, reduced from two days for market sensitive statistics and five days for other statistics). Similar rules were introduced for Northern Ireland devolved statistics.¹⁸ Rules for Scottish and Welsh devolved statistics – made by Scottish and Welsh

¹³ [Priorities for Designation as National Statistics](#)

¹⁴ Ministers lay responses to these requests before Parliament.

¹⁵ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/hub/index.html>

¹⁶ See the Liaison Committee [1st and 2nd reports](#) of the 2007-08 Session

¹⁷ See [Limiting pre-release access to statistics: a consultation document](#) and [Limiting pre-release access to statistics: the Government's response to the consultation exercise](#)

¹⁸ [The Pre-release Access to Official Statistics Order \(Northern Ireland\) 2009](#)

Ministers – allow them to be accessed up to five days in advance of publication (statistics that are market sensitive are subject to shorter time limits).¹⁹

A number of groups – including the Royal Statistical Society – have argued that pre-release access should be less than 24 hours, or else be abolished altogether. Sir Michael Scholar, Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, has also said that his belief is that pre-release access should be abolished, or at least minimised to, say, three hours.²⁰

A group of journalists – who traditionally had access to certain education statistics more than 24 hours in advance – have argued that the 24 hour limit is too short to allow them to produce and publish education league tables.

The UK Government has stated that it will review the first year of operation of the pre-release rules, including assessing whether they remain consistent with the broader objective of building trust in the statistical system.²¹ The UK Statistics Authority will also carry out its own review, as will the Scottish Government.

5.2 Crime statistics

There has long been concern about trust in crime statistics, which come from two main sources of crime statistics – police records of crime and the British Crime Survey – which may give different results on levels of crime or trends in crime. This has led to a number of reviews of crime statistics, including one in 2006 chaired by Adrian Smith and with a panel including nominees from the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties.²²

In January 2009, the Conservative party launched proposals with the aim of increasing public trust in crime statistics:²³

- Removing responsibility for compiling and publishing recorded crime statistics and the British Crime Survey from the Home Office – and place it with the Office for National Statistics.
- Abolishing pre-release access that Ministers, officials and special advisors have to crime statistics, so that they will no longer get more advance notice of the contents of statistical publications than the public, the press or Opposition MPs.

5.3 Harmonisation of statistics across the UK

Where topics are devolved, statistics are often produced separately for the different countries of the UK, and they sometimes cannot be compared easily. Some users feel that it is too difficult to find statistics for the UK or comparable statistics for the different countries, and that more should be done to improve this.²⁴

¹⁹ [The Pre-release Access to Official Statistics \(Scotland\) Order 2008](#), [The Pre-release Access to Official Statistics \(Wales\) Order 2009](#)

²⁰ See also the [speech](#) by Sir Michael Scholar to the Annual Conference of the Royal Statistical Society, University of Edinburgh, 10 September 2009

²¹ [Limiting pre-release access to statistics: the Government's response to the consultation exercise](#)

²² [Crime Statistics: An independent review](#)

²³ [Restoring public trust in crime statistics](#)

²⁴ For example the [Statistics Users' Forum](#) has as one of its priorities that the main government departments should address the need for UK-wide consistent statistics, starting with an assessment of the need for UK consistent data in each subject area.

5.4 Statistical institutions and their responsibilities

The UK Statistics Authority oversees the work of the Office for National Statistics, as well as monitoring the quality of all official statistics and assessing National Statistics, as described above. During the debates on the Statistics and Registration Service Bill, concerns were raised that there might be tensions between these roles – perhaps leading the Statistics Authority to monitor the statistics produced by the Office for National Statistics to different standards to those of other producers.²⁵ Provisions were included in the Bill to separate these roles, and the Statistics Authority has now set up separate sub-committees for (i) the oversight of ONS and (ii) its scrutiny functions for the UK official statistical system.

5.5 Other issues

A range of additional priorities for the UK Statistics Authority, including statistical planning and the communication of statistics, has been suggested by the Royal Statistical Society.²⁶ These have been welcomed by the UK Statistics Authority.²⁷

6 Useful websites

[The UK Statistics Authority](#)

[The National Statistics Publication Hub](#)

[The Royal Statistical Society](#) – a UK professional society devoted to the interests of statistics and statisticians

[Straight Statistics](#) – a campaign established by journalists and statisticians to improve the understanding and use of statistics by government, politicians, companies, advertisers and the mass media

²⁵ See, for example, the Treasury Select Committee's report [Independence for Statistics](#) HC1111 2005-06

²⁶ Letter from David Hand, President, Royal Statistical Society to Sir Michael Scholar on the [Authority's forward agenda](#), January 2009

²⁷ Letter from Sir Michael Scholar to David Hand on the [Authority's forward agenda](#), February 2009