

M&A Note 2/2009
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Presentation of Statistics in First Releases and Elsewhere

The Authority's *Code of Practice for Official Statistics* requires bodies that produce official statistics to observe certain principles and practices. In relation to the publication of statistics, producer bodies are required to ensure that "official statistics, accompanied by full and frank commentary, should be readily accessible to all users".

The former Statistics Commission published a report in March 2008 *Releasing Official Statistics: A Review of Statistical First Releases*¹. This report suggested some general principles to help producers of statistics develop the content of statistical first releases to best serve the reader. The criteria used by the Statistics Commission to evaluate the quality of a range of first releases published across the Government Statistical Service (GSS) were as follows:

1. clear identification of the statistics that are being released.
2. commentary that is helpful and presents the key messages.
3. commentary that is objective, balanced and professionally sound.
4. commentary that discusses the statistics in the context of their likely uses.
5. readily available metadata about the statistics in the release.
6. statistical presentation that is professional and helpful.

These criteria, which apply also to other reports containing official statistics, have not been challenged or improved upon, and have subsequently been developed into practices required in the Code. For example, the criterion relating to "commentary that discusses the statistics in the context of their likely uses" forms the basis of a statement of good practice in the Code that requires producers to "provide information on the quality and reliability of statistics in relation to the range of potential uses ..."

The Authority's Monitoring and Assessment Team will apply these criteria, and their accompanying detail as listed in the Commission's report, when assessing sets of official statistics against the Code.

In most cases we have not yet seen evidence of the sorts of improvements that the Statistics Commission expected. However, an example of one improvement we note is the Department of Communities and Local Government's quarterly release of House Building statistics, which now includes a clearer commentary, and some information on the strengths and weaknesses of the data.

The Authority commends the Statistics Commission's report to statistical producers in the GSS. We expect producers to evaluate their first releases and other reports against the criteria and, in conjunction with users, to improve them as necessary.

¹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/reports---correspondence/archive/statistics-commission-archive/research/report-39-releasing-official-statistics--a-review-of-statistical-first-releases--march-2008-.pdf>

On a related matter, basic publication standards for charts and tables are available in *Plain Figures*² and elsewhere. A wide range of technological developments is now available to enhance the presentation of statistics, for instance the opportunities to exploit the connectivity of the internet through the user community (commonly referred to as 'Web 2.0'). The National Statistician intends to update *Plain Figures*, which when written was intended for civil servants and others who needed to present statistical information, to incorporate such advances.

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² Chapman, M and Wykes, C., *Plain Figures* (2nd edition), HMSO (1996)