

4 August 2010

Reflecting better the views of users in the Assessment process

This Statement sets out the UK Statistics Authority's plans to enhance the collection, use and reporting of the views of users of official statistics in the Assessment process.

Why we want user views

The central aim of the Code of Practice is to ensure that official statistics meet the needs of users. Maximising the value of the statistical service requires an understanding of users' needs.

Producers of official statistics know about some of the uses and users of their statistics, and they provide such information as part of the assessment process. To complement this, the Assessment team approaches users directly to obtain their views. The aim of the consultation is to collect direct evidence about the use of the statistics and the extent to which the statistics meet users' needs, and to understand the process of engagement with the producers. To be most effective, the Team seeks to communicate with a wide range of users – in particular, those from outside the organisations that themselves produce the statistics.

Annex A describes the main features of the way in which the team has sought users' views in the assessments undertaken over the last year.

What more we will do

Following a review of the effectiveness of this approach, the Assessment team will take the following steps, intended to reflect better the views of a wider range of users in the Assessment process:

Identifying users better

- For each assessment, we will consider potential users, to ensure that we approach as wide a group as is practicable.
- We will discuss with the Data Archive the feasibility of identifying specialist users of statistics on different topics (such as housing, education, employment).
- We will encourage producers to both publicise forthcoming assessments on their websites, and ask users to provide views to the Assessment team.
- After each assessment we will identify, record and share with the whole Assessment team any lessons learned from the assessment - including aspects of user consultation which were particularly successful, and user groups which might be relevant to future assessments.
- We will review and enhance our internal guidance material in relation to best practice for user consultation, drawing on experience.

Increasing awareness

- We will further publicise the Assessment process, and forthcoming Assessments – via the User Group structure, the RSS' e-News, and the Data Archive. This will benefit from the

current work to enhance the Authority's website, on which more prominence will be given to Assessment issues.

- For some assessments we will consider holding open meetings to discuss users' views about the group of statistics to be assessed.
- We will seek to provide links and features about assessment on the websites of producers and user groups.
- We will continue to participate in events to publicise the work of the Authority.

Tackling any barriers perceived by users

- We will identify a few examples of non-response from selected users, and we will discuss with them what we might have done differently.
- We will seek to contact users earlier in order to give them longer to respond.

Improve the quality of information about users from producers

- We will review and enhance the guidance to producers on what we require - to ensure that producers are clear what we mean by users, and that they provide information about users and potential users.

Describing user input to Assessment reports

- We will provide more information in assessment reports on the types of users who have provided views, in particular whether we are content that the key users have provided input.

Annex A Summary of the approach to collecting users' views for Assessment

For each assessment the Assessment team collects user views by approaching some known and potential users of statistics identified from the following:

- The list provided by producers;
- Users and potential users identified as part of background research by the Assessment team;
- Users who have previously expressed interest in forthcoming assessments, and;
- Key Authority contacts including the Bank of England, Parliaments, and the Royal Statistical Society (RSS) / Statistics User Forum (SUF).

The team also invites comments via an open note on the Authority's website. Where appropriate, the UK Data Archive is approached to identify users of datasets. Some producers contact known users to forewarn them of the forthcoming assessment, and to publicise the call for user views on their own websites.

The team makes considerable effort to obtain users' views - by email, phone or, in some cases, face-to-face meetings. Email reminders are sent to non-responders. The email follows a standard format, asking users to provide information on:

- how they use the statistics and whether they meet their needs;
- areas for improvement, and
- the level of engagement with the providers. Sometimes the email to users is tailored slightly to explain to the user how they were identified.

The approach described above has been the basis of collecting users' views for most assessments carried out to date. In the earlier assessments a more detailed questionnaire was sent out to capture users' views; following feedback from users on the burden of completing this, the questionnaire was rationalised into the current form.

To complement this activity related to individual assessments, members of the Assessment team have made formal presentations at meetings of ScotStat, the Transport Statistics User Group, the Business Statistics User group, the Society of Business Economists, and the Statistics User Forum – all with a view to raising awareness about forthcoming assessments.

What the team does with the results

The issues identified from the user consultation provide evidence of compliance with some parts of the Code, and a summary of the findings is included in the Assessment reports (at Annex 2 of each Report). Where respondents have agreed, their comments are passed on to the producers.

Outcome of user consultations

From the first 40 assessments completed:

- The number of users contacted¹ has ranged from 19 (Statistics on Children Looked After by Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland) to 415² (Scottish Labour Market Statistics), with a median number of 90 contacts.

¹ This relates to those users who the Assessment team contacts. As we also invite comments openly, we do not treat our activity in contacting users as a statistical survey – the concept of response rates is not valid, for example.

² A large number of contacts were approached for Scottish Labour Market statistics as this used the complete list of users registered with the consultation network Scotstat. Since then the Assessment team has taken a sample from large user lists in future to reduce the workload involved in sending out emails. Users on Scotstat have been asked to register interest in particular assessments.

- The numbers of user responses which have been received range from 2 responses (Cancer in Scotland) to 28 responses to Labour Market statistics, with a median of 12 responses.

The raw numbers of users providing their views, as reported in some Assessment reports, presents only a partial story about the user consultation. It is often the case that the views of a single user (such as a consolidated response from a User Group) can represent those of a much larger community, whilst another single submission might be from a particularly important user (such as the Bank, or HM Treasury, in relation to economic statistics). The Assessment team consciously tries to ensure that as wide a range of users as possible has responded.

For the same set of assessments, the team has received views from the following main categories of user:

Central Government/Devolved Administrations	52%
Local Government	14%
Academia/research	8%
Trade Associations / Third sector bodies	7%
Other (includes media, international, providers)	19%

The user consultation typically takes place over a two to three week period at the start of an assessment. Given this relatively short timescale, the views are likely to come from users who see this as a priority and means that there is little time for users to consult more widely before providing views.