

Statistics Commission



Report No. 39
Releasing Official Statistics
A Review of Statistical First Releases
March 2008

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Report by the Statistics Commission

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FOREWORD

By the chairman of the Statistics Commission

Statistical first releases are the most public face of the government statistical service. Often this new information is newsworthy; sometimes it is potentially susceptible to later updating. This study looks at how the many organisations that produce official statistics in the UK guide users in interpreting new data (referred to as statistical first releases in what follows).

The study covers a selection of 37 releases issued in the 12 months to November 2007. It also reviews the practices followed by the many government departments and other bodies that released them. We do not claim to have chosen a random sample. We picked ones we thought were particularly interesting or important and tried to ensure a wide spread across the producer bodies.

In order to make judgements about how effective each release was, we developed a set of six main criteria and 27 sub-criteria against which to judge them. We show in the report the results against the main criteria for each individual release. Of course, to some extent this might be said to be 20:20 hindsight. The releases were prepared before we drew up the assessment criteria and in some cases our criteria focus on matters that were not the key concern of the producer bodies. However, the criteria reflect our understanding of user needs.

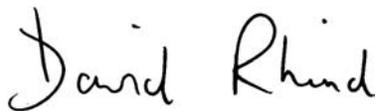
In particular, we have emphasised the importance of relating the strengths and weaknesses of the statistics to the uses to which they are likely to be put. That is a theme that runs through our long dialogue with users of statistics and is also to be found in guidance such as the UN's Handbook on Statistical Organisation which says statistical institutions are obliged to describe "accurately and openly the strengths and weaknesses of the data they publish to explain how much inference the data can support". We were not looking for perfection here, but rather a helpful steer to the user. It is clear however that there is still some way to go.

The releases did much better in terms of being objective and professional. Although we have some concerns about what we detect as a hesitancy to enter into areas of

controversy, we detected little to suggest spin or undue political influence. In seeking to make the service better we must keep in mind that there is a lot that is good about it now.

The detail of the criteria we have developed and our assessments against them are not perhaps our main message. We were looking to the way forward in making statistical first releases more relevant and useful. We now look to the new UK Statistics Authority, which is the successor to the Commission under the Statistics and Registration Services Act, to adopt, adapt and advertise criteria for good statistical first releases.

The recommendations in this report are those of the Statistics Commission. But I would like to acknowledge the substantial contribution of officials in government departments and the devolved administrations who were open and helpful to us at all stages of this review. I would also like to thank Richard Alldritt, Abigail Armstrong and Allen Ritchie from the Statistics Commission Secretariat who carried out the work on this project and Commissioners Ian Beesley and Joly Dixon who directed the research.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Rhind". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Chairman, Statistics Commission
March 2008

1. PART ONE: INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

Introduction

- 1.1 One of the most important ways government bodies communicate new statistical information to the press, public and professional users of statistics is through statistical releases. These and the announcements around them are thus key elements in both delivering the statistical service and influencing public trust in that service.
- 1.2 This report reviews a selection of these statistical first releases, looking both at their content and at the departmental practices and arrangements under which they are issued. We look at how effectively the releases communicate the messages from the statistics and how this communication might be improved.

Conclusions and recommendations

- 1.3 These conclusions and recommendations are set out in more detail in **Part 4**. We have drawn a number of conclusions but limited our recommendations to seven main points shown in the box below.

Recommendations

1. The question of how to develop the content of statistical releases to best serve the reader should be reviewed regularly by all the statistical units in government that produce such releases. This report suggests some general principles to be used but we also recommend that producers ask a wide variety of users, and potential users, about what they would find helpful (paragraphs 4.8-4.11)
2. We recommend that the UK Statistics Authority should develop criteria similar, or equivalent, to those in this report and use them as a means both to assess, and to propose improvements to, regular releases (paragraph 4.7).
3. We recommend that the UKSA, working with the main Whitehall departments and the devolved administrations, consider how to bring relevant information from all UK administrations into statistical releases in the interests of the user (paragraphs 4.12-4.13).
4. We recommend that the approach taken in Scotland in Statistics News Releases which begin with the statement that “Scotland's Chief Statistician today published.... “ should be adopted more generally to emphasise that official statistics are released by professional statisticians (paragraphs 4.16).

5. We recommend a clear and separate publication of statistical outputs *before* ministerial (or departmental) statements on them (paragraph 4.18)
6. We recommend that such ministerial statements should meet certain basic standards and that the UKSA should check that these standards are observed. In particular, ministerial statements should explicitly refer to the statistical release and where the reader can find it; should not be designed to distract media attention away from the statistical release; and should not be issued to the media under embargo, or otherwise trailed, ahead of the publication of the statistical release - which should itself not be made available under embargo (paragraph 4.19)
7. We recommend that the proposed government statistics publication hub should include a comprehensive calendar of National Statistics releases from all departments and administrations. This will be an opportunity to revamp and relaunch the National Statistics release calendar and we recommend that this opportunity be taken (paragraph 4.20).

Other points

- 1.4 Debate about the content of statistical first releases should be encouraged. It is much better that the statistical system be seen publicly to be capable of self-criticism, innovation and progress than to avoid such dialogue in case it attracts criticism.
- 1.5 There is insufficient distinction between statistical first releases and other statistical publications, and this is exacerbated by the use of various alternative styles and nomenclatures – Statistics Bulletin, News Release, etc. It is desirable that all National Statistics releases should share a strong family identity and follow some common rules so that users know what to expect. We understand that steps of this kind are being considered.
- 1.6 The release calendar does not always say what type of release is being issued. We think that uniform labelling of first releases would make it easier for users to identify and navigate them. And it would help to bring meaning and recognition to the National Statistics brand.
- 1.7 The good practice criteria we developed for this report seem to provide a useful degree of discrimination between the releases we examined and we think that they cover at least some of the most important features. They were orientated to

making the use of the statistics easier, particularly for the less expert user. In many cases we found that although the statistics were presented in the format used for evaluating government targets there was no mention of this in the commentary. We suspect this may arise partly through a concern not to say anything that might be seen within government as politically sensitive but we think the interests of the user should come first.

- 1.8 The statistical service may need to point out that the existence of targets can affect reporting practice, sometimes in ways that can undermine the reliability of the data – as has been discussed in reports by the Public Administration Select Committee, the Royal Statistical Society and the Statistics Commission.¹ A standard form of words might be agreed.
- 1.9 We have commented in past reports on what we perceive as inhibition on the part of statistical offices to comment on the quality and utility of statistics. This inhibition may have become institutionalised and accepted within statistical offices but we think the UKSA will need to challenge it.
- 1.10 The layout and presentation of the releases was sometimes less helpful than it might have been and some quick wins could be gained by giving releases clearer and more consistent titles, contents lists, making some of the explanatory text and definitions text more prominent, and ensuring that charts are legible when printed in black and white.
- 1.11 There were several examples of releases that gave no indication of the comparability, or even availability, of corresponding statistics for the other UK administrations. There are however some examples of good practice – the *Mid-Year Population Estimates* published by ONS take on board statistics for Scotland and Northern Ireland already published by GROS and NISRA.
- 1.12 We think there is also wider scope for more collaboration between departments in presenting statistics in tandem where this will help users understand the context or

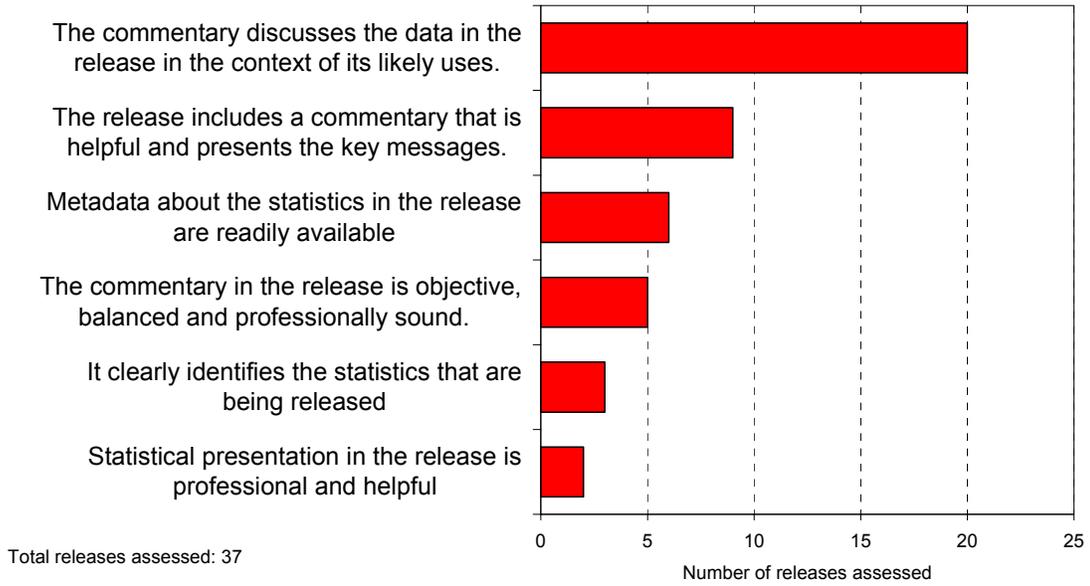
¹ *On Target? Government by Measurement*, Fifth Report of Session 2002-03, Public Administration Select Committee, House of Commons 62-1, 2003; *Performance Indicators: Good, Bad, and Ugly*, J. R. Statist. Soc. A (2005) 168, Part 1, pp. 1–27; *Data on Demand: Access to Official Statistics*, Statistics Commission, Report No. 34, June 2007, on Statistics Commission website.

reliability of the statistics. For example, the *Labour Market Statistics* publication draws together statistical data from ONS, Department of Work and Pensions, Ministry of Defence and other sources.

- 1.13 The arrangements for handling releases vary between producer organisations and this in itself may be unhelpful in relation to public confidence. We welcome the initiative of the proposed publication hub which may serve to create a greater degree of separation between statistical and political comment.
- 1.14 The rules and arrangements relating to access to statistics before they are published need to be more uniform between departments, and considerably stricter, and we hope this will be the result of the secondary legislation on which the Government is currently consulting. Our views on this are set out in detail in the Statistics Commission's response to the consultation.²
- 1.15 Where there is a news or press release accompanying the statistical release, both releases should be readily accessible to all interested parties. The aim should be to avoid a situation in which the most readily accessible summary is that which appears in the departmental (non-statistical) press release or ministerial statement.
- 1.16 The results of our assessments of individual releases are set out in **Annex A**. We emphasise that our sample was not a statistical one and proportions and percentages do not necessarily apply to the full range of releases. Also, no single assessment should be seen as definitive though we would draw attention to the pattern of the 'red' scores – those that do not meet the criteria, as shown in the chart below:

² Statistics Commission response to Cabinet Office/HM Treasury consultation on pre-release access to statistics, 22 Jan 2008, on Statistics Commission website.

Number of releases that did not meet individual criteria



Context

- 1.17 The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 established a new Statistics Board (now called the UK Statistics Authority) which will be fully operational from April 2008. The objective of the Authority is to ‘promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good’. In practice that will mean, among other things, ensuring that the publication of statistics is so organised as to gain maximum public benefit, whilst recognising that such benefit primarily comes from the use of statistics to inform decision-making in government and more generally in all sectors of society.
- 1.18 Thus the form and manner in which new statistics are made public is of direct relevance to the role of the new Authority. Whilst it will not have direct authority over statistical releases issued by bodies other than the Office for National Statistics, it will have several tools to help it ensure a coherent approach. It will for example approve a revised Code of Practice and will have statutory authority to assess compliance against that Code. The Code in turn is likely to be supported by more detailed guidance on standards and expectations.
- 1.19 The current National Statistics Code of Practice does not say very much about the content of statistical releases but gives a steer as to how the release of statistics should be approached. For example, it says³:

Data will be presented to a standard that clearly and accurately expresses the contents to the widest possible audience, with choice and flexibility in the format where possible.

National Statistics will be made accessible to the widest possible community, and where appropriate with a choice of format, helping users to get what they want simply and quickly.

Presentation of National Statistics will be integrated and will focus on users’ needs.

Information will be presented objectively, in line with professional standards, and in ways that make the statistics clear and useful.

³ National Statistics Code of Practice. Protocol on Data Presentation, Dissemination and Pricing, 2004. HMSO

The identity of National Statistics will be promoted as an independent and authoritative source of official information, accessible both directly and through third parties.

1.20 The thrust of these points is that the presentation of the statistics will be clear, accurate, objective and professional, and designed to serve the widest possible audience (which implies clear and simple language drawing out the main messages) and with the focus on making the statistics useful to users. It is also clearly intended that the release of all National Statistics will be co-ordinated and promoted as coming from a single authoritative source. All of these points are consistent with the criteria we have adopted for our review of individual releases.

1.21 The Code of Practice also has some important things to say on release practices⁴, including:

National Statistics will be released separately from statements by Ministers about the figures. Ministerial statements will not be released before the statistics.

Where privileged early access is determined by Ministers, details will be documented and publicly available.

Release arrangements will be open and pre-announced.

Release will be orderly and as early as possible after compilation.

Timing will not be influenced by the content of the release or set in such a way as to create a presumed advantage to any particular group or individual.

As much detail as is reliable and practicable will be made available, subject to legal and confidentiality constraints.

1.22 These points require little amplification and are central to the part of our review that looks at release arrangements (see Part 3).

Proposals for a publications hub

1.23 At the time of our review, proposals were being developed for a new approach to the release of statistical outputs for all producers of official statistics. This is an important part of the context for our review in that it offers the opportunity to revisit

⁴ National Statistics Code of Practice - Protocol on Release Practices, 2002. HMSO

both the release arrangements and the guidance given to departments etc in relation to the content of the releases.

- 1.24 The background to this development has its roots in the new legislation. In the course of parliamentary debate on the Statistics and Registration Service Bill, Ministers acknowledged arguments for new publication arrangements for all National Statistics. Ministers also agreed statistical releases should be clearly separated from any Ministerial comment. Subsequently the government made provision for the development of a 'publication Hub' in the public expenditure settlement. The Hub would be a separate statistics website for all National Statistics.
- 1.25 The current National Statistics website (www.statistics.gov.uk) contains both statistics (new releases and existing statistics) and details about ONS. ONS now proposes to distinguish these two components to produce one website for statistics users containing all National Statistics and a related and linked website with details 'about ONS'.
- 1.26 The main change proposed is to make the release of new National Statistics the most prominent part of the site. New releases would have direct links to the actual statistics on departmental sites.

Government consultation on pre-release access

- 1.27 The provisions of the Statistics and Registration Act allow for principles and rules for pre-release access to official statistics in their final form to be set out in secondary legislation rather than by the new UK Statistics Authority. The Government is proposing to use this secondary legislation to tighten the rules under which pre-release access can be granted. A consultation document *Limiting Pre-release Access to Statistics*⁵ was published in December 2007. The Statistics Commission's response to the consultation is available on our website⁶. The Government proposals include:

⁵ http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/4/A/consult_preaccess101207.pdf

⁶ Statistics Commission response to Cabinet Office/HM Treasury consultation on pre-release access to statistics, 22 Jan 2008, on Statistics Commission website.

- Limiting pre-release access to a strict maximum of 24 hours, reduced from up to 5 working days for certain National Statistics at present.
- Requiring that pre-release access be limited to the minimum necessary number of people and the minimum number of statistics, with decisions on pre-release access taking into account the need to reduce pre-release access to promote public trust.
- Requiring that, where pre-release access is granted, it shall be done in an open and transparent manner, with details documented and published.
- Access will also continue to be allowed in a limited number of special circumstances, for example to allow the Bank of England early access to statistics relating to interest rates.

1.28 The Government aims to have the principles and rules in place as soon as possible after the start of the new system in April 2008. These new arrangements have obvious implications for the release arrangements of individual departments and the prospective changes have been taken into account in our conclusions and recommendations.

The views of others

1.29 Various views on release practices have been expressed by other relevant bodies. For example, the Phillis Report on Government Communications⁷ suggested that accurate statistics are ‘part of the lifeblood of political debate’ and indicated that there should be clearer rules for the release of statistical information. It also suggested that the statistical service should prepare the figures in ways that provide the public with a clear understanding of trends.

1.30 The United Nations has published several guidelines and books which are helpful in identifying best practice around first releases. The Handbook of Statistical Organisations⁸ indicates that professional statisticians and reputable statistical institutions are obliged to describe ‘**accurately and openly the strengths and weaknesses of the data they publish to explain how much inference the data**

⁷ *An Independent Review of Government Communications*, presented to the Minister for the Cabinet Office. Phillis B, 2004.

⁸ *Handbook of Statistical Organisations, Third Edition. The operation and organisation of a statistical agency*, United Nations, 2003.

can support'. It suggests that a statistical agency must be sure that its audience is properly informed regarding the following:

- Where data are to be located, according to subject and time period
- How the data were defined and compiled
- What quality is assigned to the data
- What related data can be issued for comparison or to provide context.

1.31 Again these valuable points of guidance have influenced our own criteria which are entirely consistent with them.

Statistics Commission advice on the Code of Practice

1.32 The Statistics Commission published a report in October 2007 *Proposals for a Code of Practice for Official Statistics*. This included extensive proposed revisions to the existing National Statistics Code of Practice, not least to make it more suitable to be used as a basis for the Assessment function which is a requirement of the Statistics and Registration Service Act. We drew on our proposals in developing our criteria for good practice – this is described further in part 2 of this report. Our proposed Code also relates to release practices and, among other things, says:

Release statistics as soon as they, and any accompanying commentary and analysis, are judged ready so that there is no opportunity, or perception of opportunity, for the release to be withheld or delayed.

Maintain a rolling Timetable of Statistical Releases for a year ahead. This should state the month of release as early as practicable and the exact release date no less than two weeks in advance.

Be consistent from one period to the next in release arrangements for recurring Releases.

Ensure that, subject to the ultimate approval of the National Statistician, the responsibility for the format and content of statistical reports rests with the relevant statistical Head of Profession and require the name of that person to appear in each report for which he or she is responsible.

Draw public attention to any change to a pre-announced release date and explain fully the reasons for the change at the same time.

Limit access before public release to those people essential to production and publication, subject to compliance with the rules and principles on pre-release access made under the Statistics and Registration Service Act (which may allow pre-release access to a wider range of people). Maintain records of all who have access prior to release.

Ensure that no indication of the content of a statistical report is made public, or given to the media or any other external party, before publication. Report to the National Statistician immediately any accidental or wrongful release and initiate immediate investigation of the circumstances.

Do not give journalists, or others, embargoed access to statistical reports except where the Statistics Board has authorised that to do so is in the public interest. Such embargo arrangements shall be regarded as exceptional and reported to Parliament by the Statistics Board.

- 1.33 These proposed revised rules have not as yet been adopted and may not be adopted in this form. However they reflect the Statistics Commissions' views on the sort of arrangements that would help to build confidence that releases were being handled in the public interest.

Structure of the report

- 1.34 This report is set out in four parts.

Part 1 has described the context for the review;

Part 2 presents the assessment of releases against our criteria for good practice;

Part 3 presents the results of our enquiry into release practices;

Part 4 draws conclusions from the research and makes some recommendations.

2. PART TWO: THE REVIEW OF STATISTICAL FIRST RELEASES

The scope of the review

- 2.1 There is no exact definition of what constitutes a statistical first release (SFR) but for the purposes of this review we include any official statistical release (either paper or web publication) from a UK government department, devolved administration or other public body which makes new official statistics available. These currently carry a range of headings – First Release, Statistical Bulletin, News Release, Press Release, etc. Press releases which simply announce the release of statistics are not included.
- 2.2 The variety of heading styles does not present the outside world with an impression of a coherent statistical service and is unlikely to be helpful to less experienced users of statistics who, for example, may search for a first release on a particular topic on the internet without success simply because it is called something else. We therefore think the style of headings used is something which needs to be addressed collectively by the government statistical service but, for the purposes of this review, we are concerned primarily with the content of the releases.
- 2.3 ONS publishes both First Releases and News Releases, but we have not seen a clear explanation of the distinction between them and some new statistics appear in both types. This distinction does not seem to be replicated elsewhere. Each department follows its own conventions.
- 2.4 Where ‘provisional’ data are issued in a first release we would regard the release of the final data as also being a first release. Similarly we regard any release which contains both new and previously released data as a first release.
- 2.5 We did not seek to make a random selection of releases for review. We focused instead on examples we thought were particularly interesting or important. In total we looked at 37 releases from a wide spread of bodies releasing official statistics; and we included some of the largest and most prominent releases – for example the Home Office annual crime statistics, and DCSF school performance.

Standards for statistical releases

2.6 There are no universally accepted standards for statistical first releases. It is implicit in the existing National Statistics Code of Practice that they should be honest, professional, clear and helpful but, as far as we are aware, this has never been translated into a set of more explicit standards. The Statistics Commission's 2007 report *Proposals for a Code of Practice for Official Statistics*⁹ includes the following principle for presenting statistics and we have drawn on these to some extent:

The style and content of statistical reports should be balanced and impartial, and meet the needs of user communities

- 1) Present statistics impartially and in ways that users find helpful.
- 2) Provide full and helpful commentary on the relevance and reliability of statistics in relation to the range of potential uses.
- 3) Prepare and disseminate analyses which aid interpretation and provide context, including analysis of the main findings.
- 4) Where it will help users, include factual information about the policy context of official statistics. However, statistical text and interpretation should not be subject to approval by anyone other than those responsible for the statistical product.
- 5) Release datasets and reference databases in formats that are convenient to the widest range of users.
- 6) Adopt formats for the presentation of statistics in graphs, tables and maps that provide clarity and consistency.

2.7 In order to make the assessments that are central to this review, we developed our own set of good practice standards taking account of both the National Statistics Code of Practice and our own recommendations for the revised Code.

2.8 Six criteria for good practice were developed (in box below), based around that central principle, each with a number of sub-criteria (see Annex B for a full description). We intended each criterion to describe a distinct aspect of good practice, and as such, it should be possible for releases to meet some criteria but not necessarily others.

⁹ *Proposals for a Code of Practice for Official Statistics*, Statistics Commission Report No 35, October 2007, on Statistics Commission website.

The Statistics Commission good practice criteria

A Statistical First Release should contain:

- 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.

2.9 It is perhaps not entirely reasonable to expect first releases to meet criteria that were not drawn up until after they had been published. But our aim is not primarily to identify those individual examples within the sample that we regard as particularly good or less so, although we do this to illustrate specific points. It is more to see how a sample of statistical releases, as a whole, compares with the criteria and learn something about both the criteria and recent releases by doing so.

2.10 On this basis, it is clear that at least one of our criteria is promoting an aspect of good practice which is far from universally accepted as good practice within the government statistical service – this is criterion 4, the inclusion of “commentary that discusses the statistics in the context of their likely uses”. Only a small proportion of the releases we looked at met this criterion fully. However the Statistics Commission has, for some years, been pressing the case for acceptance of this as good practice and we think that with strong support for it by the UN and other bodies, and in the absence of a clear counter-argument, it is reasonable to include it here. One possible counter-argument is that the uses of some sets of statistics – population statistics are a case in point – are so diverse that the text of a release can hardly be expected to do justice to them. We think that in such circumstances it would be sufficient just to give some illustrations of the way the statistics are used and comment on the utility of the figures being published in relation to those illustrations.

Selection of sample for review

2.11 We drew up a list of all the first releases we could identify published in the twelve months to November 2007 and selected around 40 of these for our review, taking into account the number published by each department, the range of topics, frequency of publication and giving preference to the higher profile releases. Thus the selected releases do not necessarily represent the output from each department. Due to time constraints on the research, in a small number of cases we either assessed the release against the criteria or we examined the relevant departmental release arrangements, but not both. For most of the releases we looked at both. We carried out the research between October 2007 and January 2008 and acknowledge that we may not be aware of some subsequent developments.

The traffic light scores

2.12 The selected releases were evaluated (subjectively but systematically) against the six criteria. The aim was to assess how close or far they were from the good practice model. Each release was assessed against each of the sub-criteria and a record made of the assessment and reasons. Then, using a 'traffic lights' scale of green, amber or red, the release was assessed against the six main criteria – so the best possible score was six green, the worst six red. If the release did not satisfy all sub-criteria it was not awarded a "green" rating for that criterion but other than that rule we allowed ourselves some flexibility to give weight to specific aspects depending on whether we thought them important in the context of the release. Thus another reviewer using the same criteria but working independently might reach different ratings in some cases.

The intended audience for releases

2.13 We assumed that the intended audience for all releases included researchers, library staff, individual politicians and their staff, public sector managers (and private and voluntary sector managers where appropriate) and journalists. It is quite clear from some of the releases in the sample that they were intended more particularly for the press and included, for example, the heading 'Notes for Editors'. This is probably a hangover from the days when substantive publications were all produced on paper and short releases were produced

primarily for the press. However we would now favour such press-release characteristics being removed from all first releases. This will help to make clear that they are key statistical documents intended to inform the user of statistics – we recall this as having been stated GSS policy from the early 1990s onwards. Use of technical terms was not penalised if we thought that most of the intended audience would understand them or definitions were included for less common terms.

- 2.14 The assessments made allowance for whether the release was intended to be viewed in printed form (eg pdf documents) or online. Whilst pdf documents are not the most user-friendly format, they do have some advantages and we did not favour any particular format over any other.
- 2.15 The assessments were all based on the judgement of one reviewer but for quality control purposes a selection of assessments were checked by a second reviewer. In addition, originating departments were asked for their comments and these were considered before finalising the report.
- 2.16 In order to assess whether releases included reference to government targets where appropriate (ie where formal targets are based on the statistics being released), we considered both Public Service Agreement and other formal government targets. However, it is possible we missed some, especially if they were not mentioned in the release.

Results from the assessments

- 2.17 Annex A contains a table of results. As emphasised earlier in this report, our sample was not a representative one in a statistical sense and proportions are not necessarily applicable to the full range of statistical releases. Bearing that important caveat in mind, of the 222 separate assessments made (six assessments for each of 37 releases), one-fifth were rated red, over half amber and nearly a quarter green. The high proportion of red and amber is not a surprise since the releases were not produced to meet our criteria.
- 2.18 Generally, releases tend to meet the criterion for objective commentary, clearly identifying the statistics being released and having helpful statistical presentation

with good metadata. Releases tended to be more helpful in their statistical presentation than in their written commentary.

- 2.19 Where releases did less well was in discussing uses of the statistics or providing a commentary that would help the user. The length of commentaries varied. Some were objective and balanced but so brief as to be unhelpful. There also seemed to be some reluctance about commenting on the statistics in relation to government targets that were based on them. We think that the user is best served by including a factual statement about the targets supported by the statistics; and about the latest position in relation to the target. Clearly this should not extend into speculative comment about whether a target will be met in the future but we see no harm and much benefit in saying what the current position is. That is a matter of public record and is likely to be of particular interest to at least some users.
- 2.20 Our criteria cover distinct qualities and this means that it is possible for a release to perform highly on some and poorly on others. No release satisfied all the criteria though some ONS ones came close. Only one release was judged to fall short against all the criteria – the quarterly *NHS Inpatient and Outpatient Waiting Times* - although we also looked at the monthly release. Unlike the quarterly one, the monthly one is not a National Statistics release, but it would have satisfied more of the criteria. We understand that the department is aiming to have the monthly release accepted as a National Statistics release in the future.

Criterion 1. Clear identification of the statistics that are being released

- 2.21 Titles were fairly clear and self-explanatory in the majority of releases assessed. However a quarter of titles did not accurately describe the statistics in the release and instead described the type of release (eg *Quarterly Statistical Summary*), the topic area but not the specific statistics (eg *Environmental Accounts*) or referred to the survey used to collect the statistics (eg *Agricultural and Horticultural Survey June 2007 – UK*).
- 2.22 Some releases included information about the frequency of the data releases in their title (eg *Quarterly Press Release*) while for many releases this information was hard to find; more so if the release and the statistics were both annual -

presumably the authors considered the mention of the year sufficient to indicate that the release was annual but we think there is sometimes room for confusion on this. Some releases just stated the date of the release. We think this can be confusing, for example where the release is quarterly but based on data for the previous twelve months. The relevant information was sometimes in the notes section rather than on the cover page.

- 2.23 It was generally clear which statistics in the release were new, but there were instances where statistics had been revised and this was not made clear when they were quoted in the text.
- 2.24 Many commentaries were short - shorter than we thought helpful - and as such, did not need much in the way of a Contents list to help the reader find their way around the document. Often though, there was just a list of tables somewhere in the middle of the release and no information earlier to help the user. Larger publications tended to have better guides or outlines to what was in the release. Where included in shorter releases we thought such guides were still helpful (eg *Ambulance Services*, *Recorded Crime in Scotland*, or *Average Time From Arrest To Sentence For Persistent Young Offenders*) because they allow new users to access the information more easily.
- 2.25 All the statistical releases assessed were, with one exception¹⁰, National Statistics, but one in five did not supply sufficient information to clearly indicate their status and its meaning. The placement of this information varied too – many showed the NS symbol on the cover page and included explanatory text elsewhere while others placed both symbol and text on the cover. The Scottish Government marks releases as National Statistics but does not use the logo - without publicly explaining the reason.
- 2.26 All releases included the name of the producing department, but some did not supply contact details for further information, possibly due to a departmental decision to channel all enquiries through the departmental press office –contrary t

¹⁰ Statistics in the *NHS Hospital and Community Health Services: Medical and Dental Staff, England 1996-2006* release are official statistics but not National Statistics. Note that the monthly release of *NHS Quarterly Inpatient and Outpatient Waiting Times* does not have National Statistics status, but was not assessed against the criteria.

the accepted practice that statisticians responsible for releases will be identified. We think the inclusion of the name and contact details of a suitable expert is both helpful to users and helps to promote trust and a positive public image. We have heard complaints from journalists that statisticians will sometimes refuse to speak to them. We appreciate the nervousness about being misquoted that may lie behind this inhibition; refusal to talk to journalists is a short term, but unwise solution and is unlikely to help build trust in government statistics.

Criterion 2. Commentary that is helpful and presents the key messages

- 2.27 A few of the releases did not include any commentary eg *Quarterly NHS Inpatient and Outpatient Waiting Times* (though the monthly release has a commentary); some were very brief (eg *Agricultural Survey* or *Armed Forces Quarterly Press Release*) while others were expansive (eg *Crime in England and Wales*). For this criterion we mainly sought to assess quality rather than quantity, although obviously if there was no commentary at all we considered this unhelpful. Two-thirds of the releases we looked at included a summary of the main points in the release at or near the beginning of the document. A couple (*Asylum Statistics* and *Northern Ireland Waiting Lists*) presented a key point at the beginning of each section. But often there was not much in the way of commentary and only a summary (eg *Children Looked After*) while for other releases the content appeared to be regarded as too complex to attempt a summary (eg *Mid Year Population Estimates*).
- 2.28 We considered it unhelpful to use jargon, abbreviations or acronyms except where these were well known or well explained. In most cases the language used was clear, simple and appropriate for its intended audience but a few were awarded a “red” light for example the *Quarterly National Accounts* which uses technical terms without explanation and does not have a definitions section.
- 2.29 A number of releases state percentage changes over time without indicating the starting level eg *Agricultural and Horticultural Survey June 2007 – UK*. While this might be understood by regular users of the statistics, it could be unhelpful to new users. It can be difficult to judge the importance of a percentage increase without knowing the ‘stock’ size. ONS has successfully combined both stocks and levels in its commentary in for example, the *Labour Market Statistics* release.

- 2.30 While commentary is generally a good thing, it does need to do justice to the complexities of the data. The commentary on the reasons for pupil absences was in our view a little thin. We think that as a new statistical series, covering a topic of likely wide public interest not previously collected, it would have benefited from fuller explanation.
- 2.31 Under this criterion, we were also looking for information to be included from other sources (ie not the statistics being released) where this would be helpful in providing a more rounded picture, showing the interdependencies between data sets and helping the user to gauge the reliability of the statistics being released and hence where and how it might be appropriate to use the data. We think that, on the whole, this can be done without harming the neutrality of the release. A number of departments brought together related statistics that served to put each into context – examples include *Labour Market Statistics* and *Quarterly National Accounts* produced by ONS and DWP’s *Quarterly Statistical Summary*. Others brought in other information to provide more context eg in the *Environmental Accounts* (ONS) the UK Tonnage Tax is mentioned as an explanation of the increase in shipping; DASA’s *Deaths in Armed Forces* mentions/describes specific incidents which had a big impact on the numbers. We liked this approach and thought it would be helpful in understanding releases such as the Home Office’s *Asylum Statistics*, for example in explaining the fluctuations in numbers from different countries over time.
- 2.32 DEFRA’s Municipal Waste Management release relates the volume of waste to the population. In contrast, *Northern Ireland Waiting Lists* release presents statistics by provider trust area but without any information on the relative size of the population each serves it is difficult to draw any conclusions. DWP’s *Households Below Average Income* would benefit from a description of the trend in the number of children in households. Sometimes further information is linked but would be more helpful in the main release (eg the FAQs for the ONS *Mid Year Population Estimates* that explain which countries are included in EU migration).

Criterion 3. Commentary that is objective, balanced and professionally sound

- 2.33 Nearly all the releases used neutral language and presented the statistics objectively. There were a couple of exceptions however: DCSF chose to highlight

the Foundation Stage subjects that pupils performed best in; and DCLG's commentary about the performance of local authorities "this represents no improvement" (*Planning applications April to June 2007*) seemed harsh in tone considering it was based on quarterly data – we wonder if statisticians would use this tone in commenting on the performance of their own department.

- 2.34 Most descriptive statements about the statistics were consistent with and supported by the data. However, there were occasional weaknesses. DCSF made some statements about the performance at GCSE of pupils in academies but did not include a table to support these specific statements. ONS's commented on changes in immigration in the last 12 months and neglected to say that immigration from EU countries had been high for two consecutive years. A few releases contained questionable comparisons, such as between unrelated time periods (DCLG *House Building* compared a twelve-month period with a financial year – rather than a corresponding earlier period), between numbers and percentages (eg *Statutory Homelessness*) or compared rates based on too small populations (eg *GCSE and Equivalent Results in England* which presented the range for local authority rates; results for the Isles of Scilly were the highest, but were based on just 17 pupils).
- 2.35 Selecting a year to use as a baseline for subsequent comparisons is a matter of professional judgement, and may depend on the length of the time series, the frequency of data collections and the extent to which the statistics are up-to-date. Sometimes the baseline year was related to a change of policy or administration. As we were looking at statistics published in 2007, the use of a 1997 (General Election) base year may, or may not, be attributed simply to using a ten-year time series but the comparisons with 1999 made by devolved administrations were more obviously a reference to devolution.
- 2.36 Whilst a case can be made for using the start of the current administration or policy as the base year, particularly if users have been consulted and favour this, we had greater concerns about the selection of the peak year (ie, the highest ever recorded figures where high is bad and low is good) as a baseline for comparisons, especially if no specific justification for doing is given in the release (eg *Crime in England and Wales* used the 1995 peak as a baseline for no other

reason that it was the peak year). This approach, whilst it has an appeal in the context of policy debate, also has the effect of ensuring 'good' news in all subsequent comparisons published. In a case such as an outbreak of disease (eg foot and mouth) where the number of cases may be expected to rise to a peak and then fall back towards zero, it clearly makes sense to measure from the peak when that has passed, but that is a different argument. We would like to see the merits of the use of comparisons with a peak year considered by experts, perhaps with a view to international consensus between statistical offices. We are not currently aware of any work in this area.

Criterion 4. Commentary that discusses the data in the release in the context of their likely uses

2.37 This was the criterion against which the releases were weakest. In the main this was because they did not describe what the statistics are used for, and in particular, they did not mention when the statistics are used in monitoring government targets. They were often good at describing the strengths and weaknesses of the data in general terms but by not relating these qualities to the likely uses, this leaves that key step to the (sometimes, non-expert) user. By contrast, we thought the *Environmental Accounts* release was a good example of how to set the figures in context.

2.38 Where uses were described, these tended to mention government targets, but did not, in most cases, discuss what the statistics tell us about the current position in relation to that target. We looked for either factual statements about the current position or an indication of where to find further information of this kind. We did not find many good examples of this (though one good example related to school performance data at Key Stage 2). We think description of the latest statistical position in relation to a target could nearly always be offered in neutral way without giving grounds to question the objectivity of the release. (For example where a target exists for, say, road accidents, a statistical statement might say what the target is and what the latest relevant figures are, and how much further change in the level will be needed to meet the target and what that averages out at for the remaining years). We see no reason not to go that step further. Doing so would help demonstrate the independence of the government statistical service.

2.39 Other uses within government were not often described; for example, the *Child Benefit Statistics* release includes a table showing recipients by the size of family, but there is no explanation of how this information might be used or by whom).

Criterion 5. Readily available metadata about the statistics in the release

2.40 As we have already noted, the releases we looked at were relatively strong on providing information about the statistics or providing links to further information. Where they did less well was in relating the strengths and weaknesses to the purposes that the data may be used for. This was also the difficulty where data definitions or methodology had recently changed. There was insufficient description of these changes, including numerical comparisons that would enable users to see the extent of differences with the previous data series (eg *National Accounts* had no information on definitions or methodology). There was often little mention of the likelihood that the data would be subject to later revision. ONS releases presented information about revisions well, including tables showing their extent. These have been included since the recommendations made in our *Reliability Study Report*¹¹ in 2003.¹²

2.41 Many releases presented statistics that covered the whole of the UK, but where statistics for England (or England and Wales) are published by a Whitehall department we looked for an indication of comparability with other parts of the UK. We found that several departments made no mention nor provided links to statistics about Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland (eg DCLG, DCSF, Home Office (crime statistics), DH).

Criterion 6. Statistical presentation that is professional and helpful

2.42 The *design and layout* of the releases was mostly coherent and helped comprehension but in many examples important information about the statistics was variously included in “technical notes” or “notes for editors”. We thought that splitting notes into different sections was unhelpful and it would be possible to arrange the notes in ways that users would find easier to navigate.

¹¹ *Reliability Study Report*, Report No11, Statistics Commission, 2003, on Statistics Commission website.

¹² *Letter from National Statistician to Chair of Statistics Commission*, 16 February 2004, on Statistics Commission website.

- 2.43 Statistical presentation – in the text, tables, charts and maps - was generally of a very high standard and helpful for users. Sometimes though the tables would benefit from more information in headers and footnotes to allow them to be interpreted relatively independent of the supporting text. There were some releases where it would be helpful to include a chart or map (eg *Municipal Waste Management Statistics* would benefit from inclusion of a map of the government office regions as the regional boundaries are not described), and there were some where the presentation in tables could be improved, eg by removing zeros (eg *Northern Ireland Waiting Lists*). We also found that there was insufficient documentation about revisions, the reasons for those revisions, and presentation of comparative figures on the new and old bases to show the extent of the revisions.
- 2.44 There were a few releases where we would have like to have seen a longer time series, eg the *Asylum Statistics* targets are based on year 2000 but the tables present only the last two years. As such, it is difficult to ascertain any seasonal variation or the trend over time. A longer time series may not need to be in the same level of detail as the most recent statistics; a summary will often suffice.
- 2.45 Many producers made the statistics available in a range of formats, offering choice and flexibility. There were some however, that provided numerous complex tables only in pdf format, which is less helpful to users.
- 2.46 There were a few releases that satisfied much of our criteria and a few that did not satisfy many. We describe these below:

Examples of good practice:

- 2.47 ***“Provisional 2006 UK climate change sustainable development indicator”***, DEFRA, March 2007 – a well written, helpful commentary that discussed targets alongside results, gave links to relevant information about strategies as well as research and contained good charts and tables.
- 2.48 ***“Road Casualties in Great Britain: Quarterly Provisional Estimates Q1 2007”***, DfT, August 2007 – a very clear layout with a contents section, comprehensive metadata and excellent statistical presentation.

2.49 ***“Local authority capital expenditure and receipts, England - provisional outturn 2006-07 and forecast 2007-08”***, DCLG, June 2007 – clear, helpful and some good explanations of adjustments made to the data.

Examples with weaknesses:

2.50 ***“NHS inpatient and outpatient waiting times”***, DH, November 2007 – only online tables are produced, there is no commentary and definitions are aimed at suppliers of the information rather than users. However, we think the monthly release is better in some respects and we welcome that it is being considered for National Statistics status.

2.51 ***“TSP4: UK armed forces quarterly press release - 1 July 2007”***, DASA, August 2007 – a confusing title (the topic is the number of serving personnel and planned requirement over the last 12 months), inadequate commentary and notes and no indication of sources or methods, and defined as a press release and not a statistics release

2.52 ***“House building - Apr-Jun 2007”***, DCLG, August 2007. The text appears to be automated, the commentary compares two statistics that should not be compared (they don't cover the same time period), it does not mention the PSA target for new buildings completed, and the charts are not included in the text – these need to be downloaded separately.

3. PART THREE: RELEASE PRACTICES

- 3.1 This part of the project looked at release practices and arrangements for a selection of statistical first releases. Information about release practices was not always easy to find through desk research alone. This evaluation was carried out in parallel with the assessments rather than as part of the same exercise because it required making direct contact with the departments responsible for the releases selected.
- 3.2 Just as each one of the good practice criteria was designed to be mutually exclusive, the release practices represented a separate dimension of the releases and as such, the results of the evaluation are not directly related to the criteria used for the assessments. Details of the specific questions we asked are shown in **Annex C**.

Aspects of release practices

- 3.3 The analysis looked at four main aspects of release practices:
- **The timing and timetable for the release in question** – when and where an exact publication date is announced, how changes to already-announced release dates are handled, public availability of information about future release dates;
 - **The extent of pre-release access** – who gets access and for what reason, public availability of pre-release access lists;
 - **Press briefing arrangements** – arrangements for briefing the press in advance of or immediately after the release, including release under embargo, ‘lock-up’ briefings, and press conferences;
 - **Parallel ministerial statements and/or non-statistical departmental press releases about the data** – how widespread is this practice, (a) by departments in respect of statistics that they release themselves, (b) by one department on statistics released by another? We sought identification of cases where issue of a ministerial statement is routine, consideration of commentary in ministerial statements against our criteria for evaluation of first releases, and other forms of ministerial statements about the figures, eg. Parliamentary questions.

- 3.4 The focus of this evaluation was on the arrangements for releases in that series, and not just on the latest release.

Timing and timetable for the releases

- 3.5 All new releases of National Statistics are expected to be pre-announced through the release calendar on the ONS website - but in practice not all releases are included there. Pre-announcement of release dates is generally in line with the guidelines in the Code of Practice and associated protocols. But finding information about future, and past, statistical releases is not always straightforward, though we understand that work is in hand to improve this. Many departments maintain their own publications schedules. We think some of these are better designed from the user viewpoint than the ONS calendar. We would favour a re-assertion of the requirement that all releases be pre-announced through the central website and that that website should be as user-friendly as the best of the current departmental publication schedules.
- 3.6 For regular quarterly and monthly releases, exact dates are announced at least 6 months ahead, and in most cases up to 12 months ahead. Although the month for publishing most annual releases is announced up to 12 months ahead, an exact release date is usually not announced until the preceding month, in line with the current Code of Practice. One exception worth noting is the DCSF (formerly DfES) release of provisional Key Stage 2 results, where the release date is now fixed by formula (the first Tuesday in August); DCSF have been criticised in the past for varying the exact dates of the various August examination and assessment results releases for political presentation reasons. However the equivalent 'final' release in December continues to follow the old rules, with an exact release date not announced until the month before.
- 3.7 For one release – DEFRA's *Provisional 2006 UK Climate Change Sustainable Development Indicator* – there appears to be no information at all about future release dates. This is probably an oversight – there is plenty of information on the DEFRA website and on the ONS release calendar about releases of agricultural statistics, but none about environmental statistics releases. We have raised this with the department and they have assured us that they will rectify the omission.

- 3.8 The Code of Practice states that “a programme of national statistics releases will be maintained and regularly updated for a full year ahead”. This is the purpose of the ONS release calendar. There is however some evidence that departments are starting to abandon the ONS release calendar, which is not the most user-friendly website. No releases from the Welsh Assembly Government have been listed since April 2007; HMRC releases do not appear to have been recorded since September 2007. Departments in Northern Ireland have maintained their own schedules for a longer time, and their releases have not appeared on the ONS calendar for several years. This is not at all satisfactory for users.
- 3.9 Evidence on how departments announce changes to previously stated release dates is quite hard to come by – partly because such changes do not happen very often. So, for most releases, we have simply asked departments how they would handle announcement of such a change. However, for a small number of releases there is a recent example of a date change – in a couple of cases an annual release or bulletin has had to be substantially revised and reissued. For example, in 2007, GROS replaced its original April mid-year population estimates with a revised set; public announcement was given in July through the Scottish Government website and through the National Statistics release calendar.

Availability of information about pre-release access

- 3.10 The Code of Practice requires that details of pre-release access are documented and publicly available. Pre-release access lists are available on the releasing department’s website for most of the selected releases. However a few departments (DEFRA, DWP, the Scottish Administration (GROS and Scottish Government)), lists are not directly accessible but are available on request. In one case (the Ministry of Justice), the website carries no details regarding pre-release access.

Number of people on the list

- 3.11 The extent of pre-release access, as evidenced by the publicly available lists, varies substantially between departments. Lists can be surprisingly long, averaging 26 in our sample but can be as many as 89 people. Further, some of the entries in individual pre-release access lists are ‘multiple’, in that they cover a group of people (eg ‘press office’) rather than an individual. This means that it is

not always possible to say exactly how many people have early access to each release. For each of the four selected health statistics releases, around 30 people appear to have pre-release access. For the single DASA release, some 40 get pre-release access. For Home Office *Asylum Statistics*, 30 or more “are given access to finalised publications for information”; for the annual crime statistics bulletin, the number looks to be close to 50. For DWP releases 75 to 100 people are listed; as compendia, these numbers partly reflect the number of people involved in their production.

- 3.12 Numbers are smaller for some other departments – around 25 for DCSF education releases, and as low as 12 for HMRC *Child Benefit Statistics*. These lists usually exclude those who produce the statistics in the release, but not always eg DWP includes them, which suggests that the gap between DWP (75-100) and the Home Office (close to 50) may not be as large as the actual numbers suggest. We looked at these lists in January 2008 and we understand that departments are reviewing and reducing the number of people with pre-release access in anticipation of the new statutory arrangements (eg Home Office for *Asylum Statistics*).

Length and purpose of pre release access

- 3.13 The National Statistics Code of Practice allows for pre-release access for not more than five days for briefing purposes. Access to provisional data can be longer for people with some specialist knowledge in the topic for the purpose of ‘quality assurance’. With one or two exceptions, departments give pre-release access to final statistics up to five days in advance of publication, in line with the Code of Practice, for briefing purposes. The NHS Information Centre explained to us that they maintain a generic list of recipients, who get five days pre-release access to all releases, plus specific lists of additional recipients for each individual release, but that “those on the specific list may see information earlier [than five days] in order to help us develop briefing”. Some people have ten days access to DWP’s *Households Below Average Income* release.
- 3.14 Provisional statistics are also sometimes circulated much earlier than five days for briefing purposes under the guise of ‘emerging findings’. We found that most of those who get pre-release access to the final publication will have already seen the provisional figures – the ‘emerging findings’ – “a few weeks before

publication". These arrangements would appear to be far removed from the spirit of the Code of Practice, even if they are within the letter of the Code.

- 3.15 Four of the releases considered were classified as a 'market sensitive', with a maximum pre-release access period of 40.5 hours. Most on the pre-release access list for the *Public Sector Finances* release were given 17.5 hours. For other releases, the existing Code stipulates that the pre-release access period can be up to five working days. In practice, in many cases, this was five days for officials and one or two days for Ministers. Some departments specified a shorter period - DASA, DCLG (for their quarterly *House Building* release) and DWP have each set a pre-release access period of 48 hours for most people on their lists (a few officials – not ministers or press office – get longer); the majority of people on HMRC pre-release access lists only see releases 24 hours in advance. Home Office specify 72 hours but, as discussed above, most of those who see the final publication 72 hours in advance will have already seen provisional figures in the shape of 'emerging findings' a few weeks earlier.
- 3.16 A number of officials in the Treasury as well as in DWP see DWP's *Households Below Average Income* release up to ten days in advance of publication. The department explained that this was because the statistics cover a Public Service Agreement target that is shared between Government Departments, based on a relatively complex methodology, and that analytical colleagues provide a checking role. However, although the release mentions the PSA target it does not discuss the statistics in relation to the target.

Press briefing by statisticians

- 3.17 Although the Code of Practices specifies what is permissible, it does not require that departments set out publicly the details of their press briefing arrangements. ONS holds press briefing for all of its releases in our sample, generally an hour or two following releases; for releases of market-sensitive statistics, there is also a 'lock-up' agency briefing for accredited news agencies and broadcasters immediately prior to the official release time. Other departments holding press briefings were the Home Office and Scottish Government (for crime statistics), DWP (both HBAI and QS), DCSF (for Key Stage 2). DHSSPS (NI) (for *Northern Ireland Waiting Lists*).

Ministerial and departmental statements

- 3.18 A number of departments published a separate news or press release (separate from the main statistical release, notice or bulletin). However not all news or press releases are 'political', or include a ministerial statement – some are purely statistical (eg for road casualties statistics, DfT issue a statistical news release, with a summary of main points, alongside their statistical bulletin; and The NHS Information Centre issues a press release for ambulance services statistics with a statement about the figures from the IC Chief Executive). Scottish Government practice is to issue a statistical news release, with a summary of main points, for all statistics. Political comment or ministerial statement, if any, then appears in a separate news release. This procedure seems to achieve a clear separation between the statistics and the political message, which some other departments do not manage.
- 3.19 Departments used parallel press releases to put out ministerial statements for fourteen of the releases we studied. This was not always automatic, eg the Scottish Government put out a press release with ministerial statement with the quarterly (Scottish) GDP figures in January and again in July, but the April and October figures were released without political comment.
- 3.20 Overall there appears to be a wide variation between departments as to how they handle press briefing for statistical releases. At one extreme, HMRC appear to do no more for most of their statistics than place the new figures onto their website – though for tax credits statistics they did on one occasion issue a press release with a ministerial statement because the statistics were affected by fraudulent claims in benefits; they do more routinely issue a press release with the annual final figures. At the other extreme, some departments (DCSF, DWP, Home Office) go to some lengths to ensure that the press receive 'the departmental line' on the figures, through separate press releases giving a departmental steer on the numbers with attributable quotes from ministers, and (in the case of Home Office at least) advance press briefings and embargoed release. Since 2007 the Home Office have adopted the ONS practice of a lock-up briefing immediately prior to the official release time.

4. PART FOUR: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 Based on the material in this report, the Statistics Commission draws the following conclusions:
- 4.2 The question of how to develop the content of statistical releases to best serve the reader is an important one and should be reviewed regularly by all the statistical units in government that produce such releases. This report suggests some general principles but it would also be sensible to ask a wide variety of users, and potential users, of the statistical release about what they would find helpful. In doing this attention should not be restricted to the experts. The role of statistical releases must be, in part, to bring the work of the statistical service to the attention of a new individuals and new audiences and help them make beneficial use of the statistical product. The question of how to meet the latent needs – those of people who would benefit if only they knew of the releases or could understand them – is beyond the scope of this study.
- 4.3 More generally, debate about the content of statistical first releases should be encouraged. We do not accept the argument, which was put to us in the production of this report, that criticism of releases undermines public confidence – and therefore discussion must be in private. It is much better that the statistical system be seen publicly to be capable of self-criticism, innovation and progress.

Type of publication

- 4.4 There is insufficient distinction between statistical first releases and other statistical publications, and this is exacerbated by the use of various alternative styles and nomenclatures – Statistics Bulletin, News Release etc. Whilst there are no absolute rules for what should be issued in a first release, we understand the intention to be that new statistics, including those that are new in a regular series, and that are likely to be of wide interest to the media and other users, should be issued at least in summary form in a statistical first release. On this basis, the release serves to draw attention to, and summarise, the key points about some new statistical information.
- 4.5 It is desirable that all National Statistics releases should share a strong family identity and follow some common rules so that users know what to expect. This is

already implicit, and in some respects explicit, in the National Statistics Code of Practice. Some of these rules might relate to the style and content, others to the use of the National Statistics branding and still others to matters of handling. The criteria we have used in this review might serve as a starting point for further consideration of the rules and principles. Some current releases may be more appropriate to other formats. The Crime Statistics release reviewed in this report is nearly 200 pages long and arguably that is too long for a statistical first release. It might suit users better if a summary of the key new data on crime statistics were issued as a first release and the full report as a substantive annual publication.

- 4.6 The release calendar does not always say what type of release is being issued (it often simply says “Internet” for the type). We think that uniform labelling of first releases would make it easier for users to identify and navigate them. And it would help to bring meaning and recognition to the National Statistics brand.

Setting standards

- 4.7 The good practice criteria developed for this report provide a useful degree of discrimination between the releases we examined. We think that they cover at least some of the most important features. We recommend that the UK Statistics Authority should develop similar or equivalent criteria and use them as a means both to assess and to propose improvements to regular releases. Initially, we would expect quite a lot of releases to fail to reach the standards set but that over time the criteria would become the required minimum.

User-orientation and independence

- 4.8 The criteria we adopted were orientated to making the use of the statistics easier, particularly for the less expert user. We highlighted the need for discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the statistics, the effect of revisions, and providing information about the statistics in relation to their likely uses - including their use in government targets as well as in other contexts. In many cases we found that, although the statistics were presented in the format used for evaluating government targets, there was no mention of this in the commentary. We suspect this may arise partly through a concern not to say anything that might be seen within government as politically sensitive but we think the user interest should come first.

- 4.9 The statistical service may need to point out that the existence of targets can affect reporting practice, sometimes in ways that can undermine the reliability of the data – as indeed has been discussed in reports by the Public Administration Select Committee, the Royal Statistical Society and the Statistics Commission.¹³ Why is there no reference to these well-documented statistical hazards in statistical releases? A standard form of words might be agreed to avoid the impression that statisticians are making political comment about a particular target and we think that departments will look to the UK Statistics Authority for guidance on this matter.
- 4.10 We have commented in past reports on what we perceive as inhibition on the part of statistical offices to comment on the quality and utility of statistics. In our proposed revisions to the Code of Practice¹⁴ we include a requirement on departments to “ensure that those producing such (statistical) reports are protected from any political pressures that might influence the presentation of the statistics”. The most common form of such pressure is likely to be pressure not to say, or draw attention to, things that will be unwelcome to the producing department. This inhibition may have become institutionalised and accepted within statistical offices but we think the UK Statistics Authority will need to challenge it. The phrase ‘independence for official statistics’ has been much used in relation to the new legislation. Independence needs to be demonstrated in the explanation and advice that is offered to the user of the statistics.
- 4.11 The layout and presentation of the releases was sometimes less helpful than it might have been. Some quick wins could be gained by giving releases clearer and more consistent titles, contents lists, making some of the explanatory text and definitions text more prominent, and ensuring that charts are legible when printed in black and white.

¹³ *On Target? Government by Measurement*, Fifth Report of Session 2002-03, Public Administration Select Committee, House of Commons 62-1, 2003; *Performance Indicators: Good, Bad, and Ugly*, J. R. Statist. Soc. A (2005) 168, Part 1, pp. 1–27; *Data on Demand: Access to Official Statistics*, Statistics Commission, Report No. 34, June 2007, on Statistics Commission website.

¹⁴ *Proposals for a Code of Practice for Official Statistics*, Statistics Commission Report No. 35, October 2007, on Statistics Commission website (see Principle 1, practice 2).

UK-wide perspective

- 4.12 There were several examples of releases that gave no indication of the comparability, or even availability, of corresponding statistics for the other UK administrations. As we established in our research into the accessibility of statistics¹⁵, this puts a considerable and unnecessary burden on users and is inconsistent with the requirement in the current Code of Practice that “presentation of National Statistics will be integrated and will focus on users’ needs”. Again we see that in practice, presentation is too often producer-orientated and constrained by respect for organisational boundaries rather than on the user.
- 4.13 There are some examples of good practice – the UK mid-year population estimates published by ONS take on board statistics for Scotland and Northern Ireland already published by GROS and NISRA. We recommend that the UKSA, working with the main Whitehall departments and the devolved administrations, consider how to bring the relevant information from other administrations into the relevant releases or at least make reference or link to it, even where systems differ. That the department is not directly responsible for the devolved statistics should not be seen as an impediment, as the ONS example illustrates.

Inter-departmental working

- 4.14 At a more general level, we think there is scope for more collaboration between departments in presenting statistics in tandem where this will help users understand the context or reliability of the statistics. Such collaboration will also help comment on the comparisons and contrasts, as for example in the *Labour Market Statistics* publication which draws together statistical data from ONS, Department of Work and Pensions, Ministry of Defence and other sources.

Release arrangements

- 4.15 The arrangements for handling releases vary between producer organisations and this in itself is unhelpful in relation to public confidence in the service. We welcome the initiative of the proposed publication hub (see Part 1) which may serve to create a greater degree of separation between statistical and political comment.

¹⁵ *Data on Demand: Access to Official Statistics*, Statistics Commission, Report No. 34, June 2007, on Statistics Commission website.

4.16 The approach taken by the Scottish Government in its statistics releases which begin with the statement that “Scotland's Chief Statistician today published.... “ is worth considering in the context of the hub as it could help emphasise that official statistics are released by a departments’ statisticians, rather than by the minister or department.

Pre-release access

4.17 Pre-release access rules and arrangements are currently diverse and out of step with international norms. They should be more uniform across departments and we hope this will be the result of the secondary legislation on which the Government is currently consulting. The evidence is that the current National Statistics Code of Practice, to which all departments are expected to adhere, allows for too much variety in arrangements. Indeed, departmental compliance statements appear at times to be designed to test the boundaries set by the Code. This is unhelpful. The lists of pre-release recipients should, in general, be shorter, as should be the duration of pre-release access. We have also detected a loophole that allows early circulation of provisional figures under the guise of ‘emerging findings’. Our recommendations on this are in the Statistics Commission’s response to the consultation.¹⁶

Simultaneous ministerial statements

4.18 We would further like to see publication of statistical outputs *before* ministerial (or departmental) statements on them. At present, simultaneous publication is common and we think that this may sometimes be intended as much to draw attention away from the statistical release as to complement it. Introducing an interval between the release of statistics and political comment on them would do much to highlight the separation of statistical and policy comment and serve as a public acknowledgement of the intentions behind the new statutory governance arrangements.

¹⁶ Statistics Commission response to Cabinet Office/HM Treasury consultation on pre-release access to statistics, 22 Jan 2008, on Statistics Commission website.

4.19 In our report *Proposals for a Code of Practice for Official Statistics*¹⁷ we argue that ministerial statements should, at least, meet certain basic standards and that the UKSA should check that these standards are observed. In particular, ministerial statements should explicitly refer to the statistical release and where the reader can find it, and should not be designed to distract media attention away from the statistical release. And they should not be issued to the media under embargo, or otherwise trailed, ahead of the statistical release – which should itself not be made available under embargo.

4.20 The publication hub will need to include a comprehensive calendar of future releases scheduled by, and past releases from, all departments and administrations. This will be an opportunity to revamp and relaunch the National Statistics release calendar and we understand that this is already being pursued.

Press briefings

4.21 Where there is a separate news or press release accompanying the statistical release, both releases should be readily accessible to all interested parties. In cases where the main statistical report is lengthy and complex, there should be a separate statistical release, announcing release of the statistics and with a summary of main points and links to the main report. The aim should be to avoid a situation where the most readily accessible summary of what the latest statistics show is that which appears in the departmental (non-statistical) press release or ministerial statement. This necessitates that the statistical release is well-written and easily comprehended.

Assessment of arrangements for individual releases

4.22 Our assessments of individual releases follows in **Annex A**. We do not regard each individual assessment as definitive. There is a significant subjective element in each assessment. However we think the pattern is instructive - as shown in **Part 1**.

¹⁷ *Proposals for a Code of Practice for Official Statistics*, Statistics Commission Report No. 35, October 2007, on Statistics Commission website.

ANNEX A. ASSESSMENTS OF INDIVIDUAL RELEASES

Table 1: Assessments against the good practice criteria

ID number	Dept.	Date	Title of publication	It clearly identifies the statistics that are being released	The release includes a commentary that is helpful and presents the key messages.	The commentary in the release is objective, balanced and professionally sound.	The commentary discusses the data in the release in the context of its likely uses.	Metadata about the statistics in the release are readily available	Statistical presentation in the release is professional and helpful
1	DASA	30/03/2007	Deaths in armed forces - 2006	amber	green	green	red	amber	amber
2	DASA	23/08/2007	TSP4: UK armed forces quarterly press release - 1 July 2007	red	red	green	red	red	amber
3	DCLG	16/08/2007	House building - Apr-Jun 2007	amber	red	red	red	amber	amber
4	DCLG	22/06/2007	Local authority capital expenditure and receipts, England. Prov.outturn 2006-07	amber	green	green	amber	amber	green
5	DCLG	28/09/2007	Planning applications - Apr-Jun 2007	amber	amber	amber	red	red	green
6	DCLG	11/06/2007	Statutory homelessness statistics - Jan-Mar 2007	green	amber	red	red	amber	amber
7	DCSF	20/09/2007	Children looked after in England: including adoptions and care leavers - 2006-07	amber	amber	green	amber	amber	green
8	DIUS (DfES)	17/04/2007	Further education, work based learning - learner outcomes in England - 2005-06	amber	amber	amber	amber	amber	red
9	DCSF	07/08/2007	National curriculum assessments at key stage 2, England - 2007 (provisional)	amber	amber	amber	green	amber	amber
10	DCSF	11/10/2007	Foundation Stage Profile results in England 2006-07	amber	red	red	amber	amber	amber
11	DCSF	18/10/2007	GCSE and Equivalent Results in England 2006-07 (provisional)	amber	red	red	amber	amber	amber
12	DCSF	25/10/2007	Pupil Absence in School;s in England: Autumn Term 2006 & Spring Term 2007	amber	amber	green	amber	amber	amber
13	DEFRA	04/10/2007	Agricultural and Horticultural Survey June 2007 - UK	amber	red	green	red	amber	amber
14	DEFRA	16/11/2006	Municipal waste management statistics, estimates for England 2005/06	amber	amber	green	amber	amber	amber
15	DEFRA	29/03/2007	Provisional 2006 UK climate change sustainable development indicator	amber	green	green	green	green	amber
16	DfT	09/08/2007	Road Casualties in Great Britain: Quarterly Provisional Estimates Q1 2007	green	amber	green	amber	green	green
17	DWP	01/11/2007	Quarterly Statistical Summary	amber	amber	green	red	amber	amber
18	DWP	22/05/2007	Households Below Average Income statistics - revised	amber	amber	green	amber	amber	amber
19a	DH	30/11/2007	NHS Inpatient and Outpatient Waiting Times, Quarter 2 2007/08	red	red	red	red	red	red
20	HMRC	09/08/2007	Child benefit statistics	green	amber	amber	red	amber	amber
21	HMRC	27/04/2007	Child and Working Tax Credits statistics	amber	amber	green	amber	amber	amber
22	Home Office	21/08/2007	Asylum statistics second quarter 2007 - UK	amber	red	amber	red	amber	amber
23	Home Office	19/07/2007	Crime in England and Wales 2006-07	amber	green	amber	red	amber	green
24	ICHSC (NHS)	21/06/2007	Ambulance services, England 2006-07	amber	green	green	amber	amber	green
26	ICHSC (NHS)	26/04/2007	NHS Community and Health Service Staff 2006	amber	amber	green	red	red	amber
27	MoJ	07/09/2007	Average time from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders - Apr-Jun 2007	green	amber	green	green	amber	amber
28	WAG	09/10/2007	National Curriculum Assessments of 7, 11 and 14 year olds 2007 (provisional)	amber	amber	amber	red	amber	amber
29	WAG	20/04/2007	Council tax collection rates in Wales 2006-07	amber	amber	amber	red	amber	green
31	ONS	12/09/2007	Labour market statistics - Sep 2007	amber	amber	green	red	green	green
32	ONS	22/08/2007	Mid year population estimates 2006	red	red	amber	red	amber	amber
33	ONS + HMT	24/09/2007	Public sector finances - August 2007	amber	green	green	amber	green	green
34	ONS	26/09/2007	Quarterly national accounts - Q2 2007	amber	amber	green	red	amber	amber
35	ONS	10/06/2007	Environmental Accounts	amber	green	green	amber	red	amber
36	Scottish Govt.	22/05/2007	Recorded crime in Scotland 2006-07	green	green	amber	amber	amber	green
37	Scottish Govt.	25/07/2007	Scottish quarterly GDP - 2007 Q4	amber	amber	green	red	amber	amber
41	DHSSPS (NI)	07/06/2007	Northern Ireland Waiting Lists March 2007	amber	red	green	red	red	amber
43	PSNI	02/05/2007	Recorded Crime & Clearances 2006-07	amber	amber	amber	red	amber	amber
			Number of releases assessed	37	37	37	37	37	37
			Total red	3	9	5	20	6	2
			Total amber	29	20	11	14	27	25
			Total green	5	8	21	3	4	10

Table 2: Assessment of release arrangements

ID number	Dept.	Date	Title of publication	ANNOUNCEMENT OF RELEASE DATE				PRE-RELEASE ACCESS				PRESS BRIEFING ARRANGEMENTS AND MINISTERIAL				
				Frequency of release	Number of months in advance release date is known	How precise is release date in advance?	Is this info about release on dept website?	Is this info about release in NS calendar?	Number of names on list	Number of people with access	Length of pre-release access (may differ for different groups of people on the list)	Are the statistics market-sensitive?	Main statistical release format (includes those not included in the evaluation of release arrangements)	Is there a statistical news release?	Is there a departmental news release? (MS: includes Ministerial statement)	Is there a press conference or briefing? (M) if with the Minister
1	DASA	30/03/2007	Deaths in armed forces - 2006	Annual	12	Exact date	No	Yes	38	40-45	2 or 5 days	No	Statistical Release	No	No	No
3	DCLG	16/08/2007	House building - Apr-Jun 2007	Quarterly	12	Exact date	Yes	Part	19	20-25	2 days	No	Statistical Release	No	No	No
6	DCLG	11/06/2007	Statutory homelessness statistics - Jan-Mar 2007	Quarterly	12	Exact date	Yes	Part	20	30-35	2 or 5 days	No	Statistical Release	No	Yes +MS	No
7	DCSF	20/09/2007	Children looked after in England: including adoptions and care	Annual	12	Month	Yes	Yes	17	17	3 days	No	Statistical First Release	No	No	No
9	DCSF	07/08/2007	National curriculum assessments at key stage 2, England - 2007	Annual	12	Exact date	Yes	Yes	26	around 30	3 days	No	Statistical First Release	No	Yes +MS	Yes (M)
12	DCSF	25/10/2007	Pupil Absence in School/s in England: Autumn Term 2006 &	Twice yrly	12	Month	Yes	Yes	23	23	3 days	No	Statistical First Release	No	Yes +MS	No
15	DEFRA	29/03/2007	Provisional 2006 UK climate change sustainable development	Annual	12	Exact date	No	No	34	35-40	5 days	No	Statistical Release	No	Yes +MS	No
16	DfT	09/08/2007	Road Casualties in Great Britain: Quarterly Provisional Estimates	Quarterly	12	Exact date	Yes	Yes	11	around 15	5 days	No	Statistics Bulletin	Yes	No	No
17	DWP	01/11/2007	Quarterly Statistical Summary	Quarterly	12	Exact date	No	Yes	89	95-100	2 or 5 days	No	Statistical Summary	No	Yes +MS	Yes
18	DWP	22/05/2007	Households Below Average Income statistics - revised	Annual	6	Month	No	Yes	69	around 75	5/10/3/2/1 day	No	First Release	No	Yes +MS	Yes
19a	DH	30/11/2007	NHS Inpatient and Outpatient Waiting Times, Quarter 2 2007/08	Quarterly	12	Exact date	Yes	Part	24	around 30	5 days	No	Waiting List Statistics	Yes	Yes	No
19b	DH	28/09/2007	NHS Inpatient and Outpatient Waiting Times Figures 31 August	Monthly	12	Exact date	Yes	Part	24	around 30	5 days	No	Statistical Press Notice	No	Yes +MS	No
20	HMRC	09/08/2007	Child benefit statistics	Quarterly	3	Exact date	Yes	Part	12	12	1 or 5 days	No	Statistics Publication	No	No	No
21	HMRC	27/04/2007	Child and Working Tax Credits statistics	Twice yrly	4 or 8	Exact date	Yes	Part	20	20	1 or 5 days	No	Statistics Publication	No	Yes +MS	No
22	Home Office	21/08/2007	Asylum statistics second quarter 2007 - UK	Quarterly	6	Month	No	Yes	17	30-40	3 days	No	Statistical Bulletin	No	Yes +MS	No
23	Home Office	19/07/2007	Crime in England and Wales 2006-07	Annual	12	Month	No	Yes	29	around 50	3 days	No	Statistical Bulletin	No	Yes +MS	Yes
24	ICHSC (NHS)	21/06/2007	Ambulance services, England 2006-07	Annual	6	Month	Yes	Yes	30	around 35	5 days	No	Statistical Bulletin	Yes	No	No
25	ICHSC (NHS)	17/09/2007	Statistics on NHS Stop Smoking Services in England, April 2006	Quarterly	3-12	Week	Yes	Part	29	30-35	5 days	No	Statistical Bulletin	Yes	No	No
26	ICHSC (NHS)	26/04/2007	NHS Community and Health Service Staff 2006	Annual	6	Month	Yes	Yes	29	around 35	5 days	No	Statistical Bulletin	Yes	DH +MS	Yes (M)
27	MoJ	07/09/2007	Average time from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders	Monthly	12	Exact date	Yes	Yes	unknown	unknown	unknown	No	Statistical Bulletin	No	No	No
30	WAG	05/09/2007	Ambulance services in Wales: 1 April to 30 June 2007	Quarterly	9	Exact date	Yes	No	11	15-20	5 days	No	Statistical First Release	No	No	No
31	ONS	12/09/2007	Labour market statistics - Sep 2007	Monthly	12	Exact date	n/a	Yes	38	38	40.5 hrs (or less)	Yes	First Release	Web brief	DWP+MS	Yes x2
32	ONS	22/08/2007	Mid year population estimates 2006	Annual	12	Month	n/a	Yes	12	12	1 or 3 or 2 day	No	First Release	No	No	Yes
33	ONS + HMT	24/09/2007	Public sector finances - August 2007	Monthly	12	Exact date	Yes (HMT)	Yes	31	31	17.5 or 40.5 hr	Yes	First Release	No	No	Yes x2
34	ONS	26/09/2007	Quarterly national accounts - Q2 2007	Quarterly	12	Exact date	n/a	Yes	14	14	40.5 or 17.5 hr	Yes	First Release	Web brief	No	Yes x2
35	ONS	10/06/2007	Environmental Accounts	Twice yrly	6	Month	n/a	No	22/6*	22/6*	2 days	No	News Release	No	No	Yes
36	Scottish Govt.	22/05/2007	Recorded crime in Scotland 2006-07	Annual	12	Month	Missing	No	29	29+8forces	5 days	No	Statistical Bulletin	Yes	Yes +MS	Yes
37	Scottish Govt.	25/07/2007	Scottish quarterly GDP - 2007 Q4	Quarterly	12	Exact date	Yes	Part	28	28	40.5 hrs	Yes	Statistics Publ'n Notice	Yes	Yes +MS	No
38	Scottish Govt.	26/09/2007	SQA - examination results in Scottish schools - 2006-07	Annual	12	Month	Yes	Yes	12	15 (+ LAs)	5 days (1 LAs)	No	Statistics Publ'n Notice	Yes	No	No
39	GROS	27/07/2007	Mid 2006 Population Estimates, Scotland	Annual	12	Month	Yes	No	11	11 (+ LAs)	5 days (1 LAs)	No	Statistics Publication	Yes	No	No
40	NISRA	31/07/2007	Mid-Year Population Estimates Northern Ireland 2006	Annual	12	Exact date	Yes	No	20	20-25	5 days	No	Statistics Press Notice	No	No	No
41	DHSSPS (NI)	07/06/2007	Northern Ireland Waiting Lists March 2007	Quarterly	12	Exact date	Yes	No	16	16	5 days	No	Statistics Release	Yes	Yes +MS	Yes (M)
42	DE (NI)	29/05/2007	Qualifications and destinations of NI school leavers 2005-06	Annual	6	Month	Yes	No	13	13	5 days	No	Statistical Press Release	No	No	No

Number of releases assessed: 33

* 22(spring)/6(autumn)

ANNEX B. CRITERIA FOR GOOD PRACTICE FOR FIRST RELEASES

Details of the criterion
1. It clearly identifies the statistics that are being released
<i>This information should include:</i>
1.1. A title that clearly describes the data released.
1.2. The frequency of the data (annual, quarterly, etc.) and the frequency of data releases.
1.3. Whether the data are “National Statistics” (usually shown by the NS logo), or experimental statistics.
1.4. The originating department or agency, and where to go for further information (eg contact details).
1.5. An outline or guide as what is included in the release (ie a map of the release).
1.6. It is clear which statistics in the release are new.
2. The release includes a commentary that is helpful and presents the key messages.
<i>This commentary should in particular:</i>
2.1. A balanced and valid professional summary of key points in the release, prominently displayed.
2.2. Use language that is clear, simple and appropriate for its intended audience. Jargon, abbreviations and acronyms should be avoided or explained.
2.3. Provide clear interpretation of the statistics, which goes further than a mechanical description of movements in the data, with reasonable emphasis on each statistic.
2.4. Describe the context of the statistics, their reliability, and where and how it might be appropriate to use the data.
<i>NB. It might bring in information from other sources, where applicable, to provide a more rounded picture and show the interdependencies among data.</i>

Details of the criterion
3. The commentary in the release is objective, balanced and professionally sound.
<i>In particular:</i>
3.1. The tone of language is neutral, and information is presented objectively.
3.2. Descriptive statements regarding the statistics are consistent with and supported by the data. <i>For example, they focus on differences that are statistically significant, and are supported by appropriate statistical analyses.</i>
3.3. Statistics are presented in ways that are professionally sound. <i>For example, use of percentages to report results from small samples is avoided, other than where this facilitates comparisons.</i>
4. The commentary discusses the data in the release in the context of its likely uses.
<i>In particular:</i>
4.1. It gives an indication of the strengths and weaknesses of the data in relation to its likely uses.
4.2. It states how the data are used for government targets, and indicates other uses within government.
4.3. Where the data are used for key government targets, the release either includes factual statements about the current position in relation to those targets or else points the user towards where further information about those targets might be found. <i>NB: we would generally like to see the target discussed, unless it is too complex to describe, in which case a pointer to further information will suffice.</i>

Details of the criterion	
5. Metadata about the statistics in the release are readily available	
<i>These metadata, which can be included in the release or else linked to it, should include:</i>	
5.1.	Information about sources, methods, definitions and reliability; and, where applicable, information about how the methods and definitions used relate to EU and international concepts and classifications.
5.2.	A description of the strengths and weaknesses of the data, which says how much inference the data can support and what purposes the data are fit for.
5.3.	An indication of comparability with other similar data, particularly with other parts of the UK where data cover only one of the UK countries. <i>NB. We would particularly expect this where data for England (and Wales) are published by the responsible UK department.</i>
5.4.	Where data definitions or methodology has recently changed, adequate description of these changes, including numerical comparisons that enable users to see the extent of differences with the previous data series.
5.5.	Where data are normally subject to later revision, a clear explanation that that these are initial estimates and when they are likely to be revised as more information becomes available.

Details of the criterion	
6. Statistical presentation in the release is professional and helpful	
<i>Aspects of a professional and helpful presentation include:</i>	
6.1.	Sufficient description of the parameters of the statistics - the date that data were collected, the time periods to which statistics relate, the units of measurement, the geographic coverage - to understand the main points without recourse to the metadata.
6.2.	Tables, charts and maps that are appropriate to the data series (eg line chart for time series), formatted to assist comprehension (including scales, titles and legends) and that give a clear visual message. These should carry sufficient information, in the form of titles, headers, footnotes etc, for the user to be able to interpret them independently of any supporting text. They should also be clear after photocopying or printing in black and white. Three-dimensional charts are avoided <i>NB. Tables, charts and maps should be included if this helps users understand the data.</i>
6.3.	Statistics that are available in as much detail and for as long a period as is reliable and practicable. Time series should cover the minimum period likely to be of interest to users, unless there are good reasons to the contrary (which should be explained).
6.4.	Statistics that are available in a range of formats, offering choice and flexibility.
6.5.	The design and layout is coherent and helps comprehension.
6.6.	Clear indication as to where data have been revised, and of the reasons for those revisions, whether new information or changes to methodology or coverage. Presentation of comparative figures on the new and old bases to show the extent of the revisions.

ANNEX C. RELEASE ARRANGEMENTS QUESTIONS

(1) Timing and timetable for the release

How far ahead is an exact release date announced? How and where is that announcement made? Are future release dates predictable from past dates? (ie. is there an established rule of thumb like the 10th working day of each month?)

Is information on future release dates readily available (a) from the National Statistics website?, (b) from the department's own website?, (c) from the previous release?

How would a change to a previously announced release date be announced? Have there been any recent examples of a release date having to be changed?

Are the data in this release subject to scheduled revisions? Is there a clear statement about scheduled revisions in the release and/or on the website? Are revisions to previously published data clearly signposted in the release?

(2) Pre-release access

Is there a publicly available list of people given access to the release prior to publication (other than those involved in compiling the data)? Does it say why specific individuals have pre-release access?

How long in advance of publication do those on the pre-release access list see the release? Do they see the release in draft, or the final version only?

What input, if any, do those on the pre-release access list have to the final release?

(3) Press briefing arrangements

What are the arrangements, if any, for briefing the press, in addition to mailing them the release and handling telephone queries?

Is a 'lock-up' briefing held immediately prior to the official release time? *[NB. This is ONS practice for some market sensitive releases, but we don't know whether any other departments do it]*

Is the release provided to (selected) press prior to the official release time under embargo? If yes, how long in advance?

Is there any form of press briefing or conference? If yes, when does it take place? And who takes it?

(4) Ministerial statements and non-statistical press releases

Is the statistical release accompanied by a separate press release and/or ministerial statement from the same department, commenting on the figures?

Is the statistical release the trigger for a separate press release and/or ministerial statement from another department, commenting on the figures? *[NB. This may happen with ONS releases, where the department with policy responsibility may want to issue a comment]*

When does the parallel ministerial statement/departmental press release appear? (eg simultaneously/ an hour or two later/the next day)

Does the parallel departmental press release include any data or data presentations that are not available from the statistical release?

What involvement do the department's statisticians have in the parallel press release/ministerial statement? (eg do they write it? comment on a draft? have only a minimal involvement or none?)

How does the content of the parallel press release/ministerial statement compare with the commentary in the statistical release?

Does the department issue a ministerial statement on the figures in a format other than a press release? (eg as a reply to a Parliamentary Question)