

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Retail Sales

*(produced by the Office for National
Statistics)*

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About the UK Statistics Authority

The UK Statistics Authority is an independent body operating at arm's length from government as a non-ministerial department, directly accountable to Parliament. It was established on 1 April 2008 by the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*.

The Authority's overall objective is to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. It is also required to promote and safeguard the quality and comprehensiveness of official statistics, and good practice in relation to official statistics.

The Statistics Authority has two main functions:

1. oversight of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) – the executive office of the Authority;
2. independent scrutiny (monitoring and assessment) of all official statistics produced in the UK.

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ASSESSMENT AND DESIGNATION

The *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007* gives the UK Statistics Authority a statutory power to assess sets of statistics against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*.

Assessment will determine whether it is appropriate for the statistics to be designated as National Statistics.

Designation as National Statistics means that the statistics comply with the *Code of Practice*. The *Code* is wide-ranging. Designation can be interpreted to mean that the statistics: meet identified user needs; are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and are explained well.

Designation as National Statistics should not be interpreted to mean that the statistics are always correct. For example, whilst the *Code* requires statistics to be produced to a level of accuracy that meets users' needs, it also recognises that errors can occur – in which case it requires them to be corrected and publicised.

Assessment Reports will not normally comment further on a set of statistics, for example on their validity as social or economic measures. However, Reports may point to such questions if the Authority believes that further research would be desirable.

Assessment Reports typically provide an overview of any noteworthy features of the methods used to produce the statistics, and will highlight substantial concerns about quality. Assessment Reports also describe aspects of the ways in which the producer addresses the 'sound methods and assured quality' principle of the *Code*, but do not themselves constitute a review of the methods used to produce the statistics. However the *Code* requires producers to "seek to achieve continuous improvement in statistical processes by, for example, undertaking regular reviews".

The Authority may grant designation on condition that the producer body takes steps, within a stated timeframe, to fully meet the *Code's* requirements. This is to avoid public confusion and does not reduce the obligation to comply with the *Code*.

The Authority grants designation on the basis of three main sources of information:

- i. factual evidence and assurances by senior statisticians in the producer body;
- ii. the views of users who we contact, or who contact us, and;
- iii. our own review activity.

Should further information come to light subsequently which changes the Authority's analysis, it may withdraw the Assessment Report and revise it as necessary.

It is a statutory requirement on the producer body to ensure that it continues to produce the set of statistics designated as National Statistics in compliance with the *Code of Practice*.

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1 Summary of findings

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 This is one of a series of reports¹ prepared under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*². The Act requires all statistics currently designated as National Statistics to be assessed against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*³. The report covers the statistical bulletin *Retail Sales* and the publication *Retail Sales – Business Monitor SDM28*⁴ (*Business Monitor*), produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

1.1.2 This report was prepared by the Authority's Assessment team, and approved by the Board of the Statistics Authority on the advice of the Head of Assessment.

1.2 Decision concerning designation as National Statistics

1.2.1 The Statistics Authority judges that the statistics covered by this report are readily accessible, produced according to sound methods and managed impartially and objectively in the public interest, subject to any points for action in this report. The Statistics Authority confirms that the statistics published in *Retail Sales* and *Business Monitor* are designated as National Statistics, subject to ONS implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by March 2011.

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

1.3.1 The retail sales statistics are released just over two weeks after the reference period, making them one of the earliest indicators of changes in economic activity. ONS engages well with main users within government, but engagement with other users has been limited. ONS are introducing a new user engagement strategy⁵ to tackle this.

1.3.2 ONS has developed the statistics over the last few years, introducing a series on internet sales and improving the methods. Significant changes to methods are explained in detailed articles. However, the commentary in the main bulletin should be improved to aid user interpretation and the information on methods and quality needs to be enhanced.

1.3.3 The *Business Monitor* release provides tables of more detailed data, but lacks commentary, context and links to other explanatory material.

¹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

² http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga_20070018_en.pdf

³ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html>

⁴ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=1478>

⁵ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about/consultations/user-engagement-strategy/index.html>

1.4 Detailed recommendations

1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that ONS could strengthen its compliance with the *Code*. Those which the Assessment team considers essential to enable designation as National Statistics are listed in section 1.5. Other suggestions, which would improve the statistics and the service provided to users but which are not formally required for their designation, are listed at annex 1.

1.5 Requirements for designation as National Statistics

Requirement 1	Take steps to develop a greater understanding of the use made of retail sales statistics; publish the relevant information and assumptions and use them to better support the use of the statistics (para 3.3).
Requirement 2	Improve the documentation on methods, to make it more coherent and include explanations of why particular choices were made (para 3.8).
Requirement 3	Improve information about the quality of the statistics, including estimates of the main sources of bias and estimates of sampling error (para 3.9).
Requirement 4	Publish a plan to review the data sources and methods used to produce the experimental statistics, to ensure that they are produced to a level of quality that meets users' needs (para 3.11).
Requirement 5	Demonstrate effective stewardship of resources allocated to retail sales statistics, including how expenditure is monitored against its work programmes (para 3.18).
Requirement 6	Improve the explanatory commentary and contextual information in the <i>Retail Sales</i> bulletin to aid user interpretation (para 3.19).
Requirement 7	Improve the commentary and contextual information in the <i>Business Monitor</i> , including links to supporting material on methods and quality (para 3.22).
Requirement 8	Ensure all releases are issued at 9.30am on the day of release (para 3.26).

2 Subject of the assessment

2.1 This assessment report covers two monthly releases that present statistics on retail sales:

- *Retail Sales*

This statistical bulletin presents headline measures of retail sales for Great Britain, including the retail sales index, estimated prices and the total value of sales. The retail sales index is published in terms of value (value of sales 'through the till') and volume (constant prices – removing the effect of price changes from the value series). Data are analysed by retail sector and size of business. The bulletin also includes an estimate of the total value of internet retail sales.

- *Retail Sales – Business Monitor SDM28 (Business Monitor)*

This report is released alongside the main *Retail Sales* bulletin and presents the detailed data, including analysis by more detailed classification of retail sector, size of business and commodity.

2.2 The data in the releases are from the Retail Sales Inquiry (RSI). The RSI is a statutory sample survey of approximately 5,000 retailers each month, which collects information about retail turnover and internet sales. The sample includes all large retailers and a representative panel of smaller retailers. ONS collect further information on commodities from around 33 of the largest retailers who respond to the RSI, using a separate questionnaire. This is known as the Monthly Commodity Inquiry (MCI). The total production cost of the RSI is £580,000.

2.3 Retail sales statistics are used as an important economic indicator. The statistics are released just over two weeks after the reference period, making them one of the earliest indicators of short term changes in economic activity. The retailing sector constitutes approximately 5 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Retail sales statistics inform economic decision-making in government and the Bank of England. The statistics are used within the retail industry and more widely to monitor trends and feed into models and forecasting. The statistical office of the European Community, Eurostat, requires monthly retail sales data from Member States under Regulation⁶. Data from the RSI also feed into other ONS outputs including the Index of Services⁷ and Consumer Trends⁸.

2.4 Retail sales data have been collected since the 1930s. The data in their current form are available from 1988. The last Triennial Review of the RSI was conducted from July 2007 to February 2008, and ONS published a report⁹ in October 2008. There have been some changes to methods in recent years, including changes to the weighting and data editing routines.

⁶ Regulation EC No 1165/98; <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:1998:162:0001:0015:EN:PDF>

⁷ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/product.asp?vlnk=9333>

⁸ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/Product.asp?vlnk=242&Pos=&ColRank=1&Rank=422>

⁹ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/Product.asp?vlnk=13527>

2.5 The data on internet sales were originally collected only for the businesses covered by the MCI and were published as experimental statistics¹⁰. ONS used this information to produce an estimate for the whole retail sector. In March 2009, a question on internet sales was added to the RSI questionnaire. ONS still call the series experimental statistics.

2.6 Other organisations publish statistics on retail sales. The British Retail Consortium (BRC) produces a *Retail Sales Monitor*¹¹, which is based on the monthly value of sales of its members – approximately 70 retailers. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) carries out a Distributive Trades Survey¹² –, which also covers approximately 70 retailers. The data cover sales as well as expectations for the forthcoming month.

2.7 ONS's retail sales statistics have been the subject of criticism in recent years, most notably by the BRC, which felt that the statistics were not an accurate reflection of actual retail sales. This view stemmed from unexpectedly large estimates of monthly changes in the volume of retail sales in Great Britain in May and June 2008. ONS carried out investigations into the data and published Special Background Notes¹³ alongside the statistics released in the following months, which concluded that the estimates reflected actual changes in retail sales. Continued discussion in the media and elsewhere led to the publication of a UK Statistics Authority Monitoring and Assessment Note¹⁴, in October 2008, which agreed with the ONS conclusions, and made two suggestions for improvements:

- to produce guidance for users on the accuracy of the published estimates – including numerical indicators of reliability; and
- to improve the presentation of estimates of change – in particular so that users do not place undue emphasis on volatile monthly data.

ONS has carried out some work to address these points – this is discussed under Principle 4 and Principle 8 of this report. Users continued to express concern about the data in the months following the Monitoring and Assessment Note. In May 2009, ONS introduced chain linking (annual updating of the weights used to produce the statistics) in response to a recommendation in the Triennial Review. This led to downward revisions to the retail sales growth estimates.

¹⁰ Experimental statistics are new official statistics undergoing evaluation. They are published in order to involve users and stakeholders in their development and as a means to build in quality at an early stage.

¹¹ <http://www.brc.org.uk/RSM04.asp?iCat=53&sCat=THE+BRC%96KPMG+RETAIL+SALES+MONITOR>

¹² <http://www.cbi.org.uk/ndbs/content.nsf/802737AED3E3420580256706005390AE/911690571235FD5380256E20003E999B>

¹³ For example:

http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_economy/June_08_Special_Background_note.pdf

¹⁴ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-briefs/volatility-of-the-retail-sales-index.pdf>

3 Assessment findings

Principle 1: Meeting user needs

The production, management and dissemination of official statistics should meet the requirements of informed decision-making by government, public services, business, researchers and the public.

- 3.1 ONS takes steps to engage with the main users in government, including consulting them about significant forthcoming changes. A wider range of users were consulted during the Triennial Review (see footnote 9), but this stopped short of a full user consultation. ONS maintains a record of contact with users. However, ONS has not fully documented the user needs for these statistics, nor the experiences of users. Users are not always consulted about forthcoming changes, and there is no clear evidence that users' views inform statistical planning and priority-setting.
- 3.2 ONS statisticians told us that they are developing a new user engagement strategy for the retail sales statistics, to improve engagement with users. This will include a regular user feedback survey. It complements a wider initiative across the whole organisation to review the mechanisms for user engagement, which has been the subject of a public consultation¹⁵. We look forward to publication of further details about this improved user engagement.
- 3.3 As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should take steps to develop a greater understanding of the use made of retail sales statistics; publish the relevant information and assumptions and use them to better support the use of the statistics¹⁶ (Requirement 1).

¹⁵ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about/consultations/user-engagement-strategy/index.html>

¹⁶ In relation to Principle 1 Practice 2 of the Code of Practice.

Principle 2: Impartiality and objectivity

Official statistics, and information about statistical processes, should be managed impartially and objectively.

- 3.4 The presentation of the statistics is impartial and objective. Where there have been errors in the published outputs they have been corrected appropriately.
- 3.5 ONS has an organisational revisions policy¹⁷ and there is a separate revisions policy¹⁸ for the retail sales index. The series is subject to many revisions, for instance, due to updated weights and seasonal adjustment.
- 3.6 The *Retail Sales* bulletin includes a section highlighting forthcoming methodological changes. While the number of revisions and methodological changes can cause some confusion for users, ONS statisticians told us that they take steps to minimise the disruption, for instance by combining revisions and changes so they are all introduced in the same release. ONS has published articles explaining the most significant methodological changes.

¹⁷ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/data/methodology/revisions/corp-stat-policy.asp>

¹⁸ http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_economy/RSIRevisionsPolicy.pdf

Principle 3: Integrity

At all stages in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics, the public interest should prevail over organisational, political or personal interests.

- 3.7 No incidents of political pressure or abuse of trust were reported to or identified by the Assessment team in the course of this assessment. ONS statisticians are involved in press briefings at the time of statistical releases. This ensures that statistical experts can comment publicly on statistical issues, and minimises the opportunity for misinterpretation of the statistics.

Principle 4: Sound methods and assured quality

Statistical methods should be consistent with scientific principles and internationally recognised best practices, and be fully documented. Quality should be monitored and assured taking account of internationally agreed practices.

- 3.8 ONS provides a summary of methods in the main release, which includes links to further information. However, much of the additional information, although useful, is spread out across articles and reports, so the documentation is not very coherent. For instance, it is not obvious that the *Report on the full Triennial Review of the Retail Sales Inquiry 2007* is the key source of information for users who are looking for an explanation of methods. Published articles explain the most significant methodological changes, but there has not always been sufficient information for users to understand the effect of other changes to methods. For example, the recent move to a new selective editing methodology was noted in the August release, but there is no explanation of what this means, or what effect it might have had on the data. ONS statisticians told us that they intend to produce more coherent methods documentation. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should improve the documentation on methods to make it more coherent and include explanations of why particular choices were made¹⁹ (Requirement 2).
- 3.9 The Retail Sales bulletin includes some information about the quality of the statistics, including guidance on how to interpret the data, response rates and revisions analysis. There is also a Summary Quality Report for Retail Sales²⁰, which provides further information about the quality of the statistics. However, the documentation is not complete – for instance, there is no discussion of possible bias introduced by retailers incorrectly classifying the data they supply, nor of the work ONS has done to investigate this. ONS statisticians told us that they are developing measures of sampling error, in response to the Authority’s Monitoring and Assessment Note (see paragraph 2.7). These estimates will greatly help users to interpret the data. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should improve information about the quality of the statistics, including estimates of the main sources of bias and estimates of sampling error²¹ (Requirement 3). In addition, in view of the concerns among retail sector users, at various times in the past, about the validity of the index, the Authority suggests that ONS commission and publish a review of the methods and document a process for regular future reviews, to maintain the trust of external commentators.
- 3.10 ONS has detailed quality assurance guidance for use in the production of the statistics. However, there is such an abundance of guidance that it is not clear how it is all used, or whether all of the documentation is relevant. We suggest ONS review its internal quality assurance guidance, to ensure that it is clear and relevant.

¹⁹ In relation to Principle 4 Practice 1 of the Code of Practice.

²⁰ http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/methodology_by_theme/retail_sales/downloads/RetailSalesSQR.August.2009.pdf

²¹ In relation to Principle 4 Practice 2 of the Code of Practice.

- 3.11 The *Retail Sales* bulletin includes a series on the total value of internet sales. The series is not currently seasonally adjusted and there is no commodity breakdown. ONS statisticians told us that they consider this a priority area for development, given the increasing importance of internet sales to the retail sector. The statistics on internet sales are called experimental statistics, but are collected as part of the same survey using the same methods as the other retail sales statistics in the release. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should publish a plan to review the data sources and methods used to produce the experimental statistics, to ensure that they are produced to a level of quality that meets users' needs²² (Requirement 4).
- 3.12 ONS statisticians told us about many options for future development of the statistics. For instance, the statisticians are starting to review how data are collected for the MCI. Some users who contacted us regarding this assessment reported that they would like more detailed data to be made available, including more detailed industry analysis and geographic breakdowns of the data. ONS indicated that the data do not support more detailed industry analysis on a monthly basis. However, the Assessment team wonder if this may be possible quarterly or annually.
- 3.13 Given the extent of previous changes and possible future developments, particularly to the internet sales series, it is surprising that there has been no full user consultation to establish user views and priorities. As part of the user engagement discussed under Principle 1, we suggest that ONS clearly set out the options for future development of these statistics, outline its plans and invite user views.
- 3.14 Eurostat requires retail sales data for the UK. The RSI covers Great Britain, so ONS uses data from the Annual Business Survey²³ to generate UK data. The RSI data differ from international standards because they are collected for either four or five week periods, rather than by calendar month. The statistics in the releases are adjusted to compensate for the differences in reporting periods, and data are adjusted to calendar months for use by Eurostat. This is explained in the release. ONS is currently investigating whether retail businesses are able to provide data on a calendar month basis.

²² In relation to Principle 4 Practice 5 of the Code of Practice.

²³ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/abs/>

Principle 5: Confidentiality

Private information about individual persons (including bodies corporate) compiled in the production of official statistics is confidential, and should be used for statistical purposes only.

- 3.15 ONS has assured us that it takes all necessary steps to protect the confidentiality of the data it collects. This includes statistical disclosure controls to ensure that individual businesses are not identified in the published statistics. Data are shared with Eurostat under Regulation and with the Scottish Government using secure electronic file transfer.

Principle 6: Proportionate burden

The cost burden on data suppliers should not be excessive and should be assessed relative to the benefits arising from the use of the statistics.

- 3.16 ONS reports the estimated costs of responding to business surveys in its annual *Simplification Plan*²⁴. The RSI questionnaire has a section explaining how important the data are and how they are used – to encourage participation through informed consent. ONS statisticians told us that the cost of the proposed internet sales data collection was analysed before the question was included in the RSI. Other existing sources of data on internet sales were evaluated and reported in a Supplementary Note²⁵ in December 2008.
- 3.17 The RSI data are collected by a mixture of paper questionnaire and telephone data entry, while the MCI data are collected only by paper. ONS statisticians told us that they intend to evaluate other means of data collection that may reduce the burden on data suppliers, including secure electronic file transfer and internet collection.

²⁴ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=14683>

²⁵ http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_economy/November_2008_Internet_Supplementary_note.pdf

Principle 7: Resources

The resources made available for statistical activities should be sufficient to meet the requirements of this Code and should be used efficiently and effectively.

- 3.18 The production of retail sales statistics appears to be adequately resourced. The RSI costs £580,000, which is entirely funded by ONS. ONS is required by European Regulation to collect the data. However, it is not clear how ONS monitors and reviews its expenditure on retail sales statistics, to ensure the most efficient use of resources. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should demonstrate effective stewardship of resources allocated to retail sales statistics, including how expenditure is monitored against its work programmes²⁶ (Requirement 5).

²⁶ In relation to Principle 7 Practice 4 of the Code of Practice.

Principle 8: Frankness and accessibility

Official statistics, accompanied by full and frank commentary, should be readily accessible to all users.

- 3.19 The *Retail Sales* release presents a range of data with some useful, clear graphs and a detailed notes section that covers methods and data quality. The release is factual, but does not include much explanation of the data to aid interpretation. ONS statisticians told us that the quick turnaround time for these outputs places constraints on the amount of explanatory commentary that they can produce. The release does not include any information on the wider context, including the use and potential uses of the data. There are no links to the *Business Monitor* from the *Retail Sales* bulletin. In some places, the clarity could be improved – for instance, by explaining the terms value and volume at the outset, explaining the response rates table more clearly, improving explanations of revisions and including more links to relevant documents, such as the *Summary Quality Report for Retail Sales*. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should improve the explanatory commentary and contextual information in the *Retail Sales* bulletin to aid user interpretation²⁷ (Requirement 6).
- 3.20 The introduction of estimates of sampling error (as discussed under Principle 4) will provide a good opportunity for ONS to improve the commentary in the *Retail Sales* bulletin – in particular, to provide commentary and guidance that helps users interpret the monthly data appropriately. We suggest that ONS review the balance between presenting monthly changes and longer-term trends in the *Retail Sales* bulletin, when the sampling errors and information on other sources of bias become available.
- 3.21 The *Retail Sales* bulletin does not explain how the retail sales data relate to other ONS outputs. There are no links to ONS publications about consumer trends and consumer price indices and no guidance for users explaining the differences between the sources, and their respective uses. ONS statisticians told us that the bulletin has been reviewed in consultation with main users in government – but it is not clear what consideration has been given to other users. The need to consult a wider range of users has been addressed under Principle 1. However, we also suggest that as part of its user engagement strategy, ONS seek wider feedback on the content of the main release and establish whether there is a need for a user guide to its retail statistics, and whether users would welcome commentary on the broader patterns emerging across these outputs.
- 3.22 The *Business Monitor* presents retail sales data analysed by commodity. This is not included in the *Retail Sales* bulletin. This analysis can be an important factor to help understand changes in retail activity. However, the *Business Monitor* is a collection of tables, with no commentary to help users find what they are looking for or interpret the data. There is no link to information about methods, data quality or revisions. ONS told us that there are historic reasons that the retail sales statistics are split across two releases and it is likely to review the need for the *Business Monitor* as a separate output, but it is not

²⁷ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 2 of the Code of Practice.

clear when this will happen. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should improve the commentary and contextual information in the *Business Monitor*, including links to supporting material on methods and quality²⁸ (Requirement 7). We also suggest that ONS change the title of the *Business Monitor* to describe more obviously what it contains. The current title dates from when it was part of a series of Monitor publications.

- 3.23 Many users who contacted us regarding this assessment expressed dissatisfaction with ONS's website, which is very difficult to navigate. This has been discussed in previous assessment reports. ONS has told us that it has a development programme to improve its website, which is aiming to deliver improvements in 2011.

²⁸ In relation to Principle 8 Practices 1 and 2 of the Code of Practice.

Protocol 1: User engagement

Effective user engagement is fundamental both to trust in statistics and securing maximum public value. This Protocol draws together the relevant practices set out elsewhere in the Code and expands on the requirements in relation to consultation.

3.24 The requirements for this protocol have been covered elsewhere in this report.

Protocol 2: Release practices

Statistical reports should be released into the public domain in an orderly manner that promotes public confidence and gives equal access to all, subject to relevant legislation.

- 3.25 The statistics are released 15 to 20 days after the reference period. This very quick turnaround is a factor in the importance of these statistics as one of the earliest indicators of changes in economic activity. However, ONS statisticians also cited the quick turnaround as a constraint on the amount commentary that they could produce. We suggest that ONS review the timetable for the production of the statistics, in consultation with users, to ensure an appropriate trade-off between timeliness and allowing time to produce commentary that aids interpretation.
- 3.26 Both the releases are accessible from the National Statistics Publication Hub. ONS releases the statistics at 9.30am, although as noted in Assessment Report 34²⁹ (*Labour Market Statistics*) there is sometimes a delay before releases are available on ONS's website. ONS informed us that this matter is being reviewed as part of its web development programme, which is due to be completed in 2011. As set out in Assessment Report 34 and subsequent reports, as part as the designation as National Statistics ONS should ensure all releases are issued at 9.30am on the day of release³⁰ (Requirement 8).
- 3.27 The release of the *Retail Sales* bulletin in May 2010 was delayed by 15 minutes, due to a technical problem. ONS ensured that the issue was resolved as quickly as possible, investigated the problems and has taken steps to ensure that lessons are learned. There were no user complaints about the delay.
- 3.28 ONS has recently undertaken a corporate review of pre-release access lists, in order to minimise them. The pre-release access list for these releases now includes 33 individuals, all of whom are outside ONS.

²⁹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

³⁰ In relation to Protocol 2 Practice 4 of the Code of Practice.

Protocol 3: The use of administrative sources for statistical purposes

Administrative sources should be fully exploited for statistical purposes, subject to adherence to appropriate safeguards.

3.29 These retail statistics releases are based on survey data and do not use administrative data sources. ONS told us that there are no administrative sources that would provide the monthly data required for these releases.

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to ONS's retail sales statistics, in the interest of the public good. These are not formally required for designation, but the Assessment team considers that their implementation will improve public confidence in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics.

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| Suggestion 1 | Commission and publish a review of the methods and document a process for regular future reviews, to maintain the trust of external commentators (para 3.9). |
| Suggestion 2 | Review its internal quality assurance guidance, to ensure that it is clear and relevant (para 3.10). |
| Suggestion 3 | Clearly set out the options for future development of these statistics, outline its plans and invite user views (para 3.13). |
| Suggestion 4 | Review the balance between presenting monthly changes and longer-term trends in the <i>Retail Sales</i> bulletin, when the sampling errors and information on other sources of bias become available (para 3.20). |
| Suggestion 5 | Seek wider feedback on the content of the main release and establish whether there is a need for a user guide to its retail statistics, and whether users would welcome commentary on the broader patterns emerging across these outputs (para 3.21). |
| Suggestion 6 | Change the title of the <i>Business Monitor</i> to describe more obviously what it contains (para 3.22). |
| Suggestion 7 | Review the timetable for the production of the statistics, in consultation with users, to ensure an appropriate trade-off between timeliness and allowing time to produce commentary that aids interpretation (para 3.25). |

Annex 2: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A2.1 This assessment was conducted from July to September 2010.

A2.2 The Assessment team – Jacob Wilcock and Emma Bowditch – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of ONS in August. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 25 August. The Assessment team subsequently met with ONS during September to review compliance with the *Code of Practice*, taking account of the written evidence provided and other relevant sources of evidence.

Summary of users contacted, and issues raised

A2.3 Part of the assessment process involves our consideration of the views of users. We approach some known and potential users of the set of statistics, and we invite comments via an open note on the Authority's website. This process is not a statistical survey, but it enables us to gain some insights about the extent to which the statistics meet users' needs and the extent to which users feel that the producers of those statistics engage with them. We are aware that responses from users may not be representative of wider views, and we take account of this in the way that we prepare assessment reports.

A2.4 The Assessment team received 11 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Government Departments	2
Other public bodies	3
Retail and financial sector	4
Other	3

A2.5 Most of the users who responded had an interest in the retail sector specifically, using the statistics to monitor the performance of the sector. Some used retail sales statistics in the context of wider economic analysis. The main points raised by users were:

- the commentary that accompanies the statistics could be improved, to help users interpret the data;
- the number of data revisions and methods changes can be confusing and ONS could do more to explain them; and
- a need for more detailed data.

Users expressed dissatisfaction with ONS's website, but responded positively about their experiences of engaging with ONS statisticians.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

