

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics published in Rural Scotland Key Facts

(produced by the Scottish Government)

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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 set of statistics published in *Rural Scotland Key Facts*⁴, produced by the Scottish Government.
- 1.1.2 Assessments of compendium publications against the *Code of Practice* relate to the processes involved in preparing the publication, rather than in producing the statistics that are included. Those sets of statistics will normally be subject to separate assessment. Designation of a compendium publication as National Statistics therefore means that the producer body has, for example: identified and met user needs in terms of the content of the publication; considered the appropriateness of each series for inclusion; and written appropriate commentary.
- 1.1.3 This report is shorter than normal. In particular, section 3 adopts an ‘exception reporting’ approach – it includes text only to support the Requirements made to strengthen compliance with the *Code* and Suggestions made to improve confidence in the production, management and dissemination of these statistics. This abbreviated style of report reflects the Head of Assessment’s consideration of aspects of risk and materiality⁵. The Assessment team nonetheless assessed compliance with all relevant parts of the *Code of Practice* and has commented on all those in respect of which some remedial action is recommended.
- 1.1.4 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 *Rural Scotland Key Facts* can be designated as National Statistics, subject to the Scottish Government implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by October 2011.

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.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Agriculture-Fisheries/PubRural>

⁵ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/guidance-about-assessment/criteria-for-deciding-upon-the-format-of-an-assessment-report.pdf>

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

- 1.3.1 *Rural Scotland Key Facts* provides information about rural issues in Scotland that is useful for a wide range of policy-making and research purposes. The Scottish Government has consulted with users of the publication and has taken steps to improve the content and format of the publication in response to the views expressed by users. The Scottish Government could document the uses of the statistics better.
- 1.3.2 The publication seeks to minimise respondent burden by bringing together statistics from a range of already published sources. It provides some information about the data sources and quality issues surrounding the statistics from those sources. The Scottish Government has a good relationship with the suppliers of the data. The classification used for the statistics is particular to Scotland and the statistics lack comparability with rural statistics in the rest of the UK and internationally. This could be explained better in the publication.
- 1.3.3 The Scottish Government presents the statistics in an accessible and straight-forward manner. The commentary provided is impartial, but it could be more insightful and provide a better overview of the situation in rural areas. The Scottish Government could also provide more contextual information to aid interpretation of the statistics.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

- 1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that the Scottish Government 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 | Expand information about the uses made of the statistics and the types of decision they inform (para 3.1). |
| Requirement 2 | Publish more information in <i>Rural Scotland Key Facts</i> about the reasons for using the preferred urban rural classification (para 3.2). |
| Requirement 3 | Explain the distinction between National Statistics and other types of statistics presented in the publication, and label the individual tables accordingly (para 3.3). |
| Requirement 4 | Improve the commentary in <i>Rural Scotland Key Facts</i> , for example by adding a summary with the main messages and including information on rural policy context and uses of the statistics (para 3.4). |

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 *Rural Scotland Key Facts* is an annual compendium publication that presents statistics for rural areas in Scotland on a range of topics, such as the economy, transport, education and health. The Scottish Government has published *Rural Scotland Key Facts* annually since 2004.
- 2.2 The publication provides evidence on the situation in rural Scotland in relation to key Scottish Government policy areas to inform the development of rural aspects of national policies. Some of the statistics in the publication relate directly to *Scotland Performs*⁶ National Indicators, such as the perception of the neighbourhood as a good place to live, reduction in crime rates, proportion of journeys to work made by public transport and business start-up rates. Users outside central government include local authorities for planning services and monitoring perceptions, rural interest groups for use in rural development campaigns and academics researching rural community issues.
- 2.3 The statistics in *Rural Scotland Key Facts* are presented according to the Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification⁷. It divides Scotland into remote rural, accessible rural and rest of Scotland based on settlement size and estimated drive time to larger settlements. The Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification was introduced in 2000 and is updated every two years. In 2009 the Scottish Government commissioned an independent review of the use of its Urban Rural Classification⁸. This review concluded that, while the classification was broadly appropriate for use in Scotland, more information could be published about using the classification and that work should be done to investigate issues of coherence with other classifications.
- 2.4 *Rural Scotland Key Facts* collates statistics from surveys and administrative sources. These include the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings⁹, mid-year population estimates published by National Records of Scotland¹⁰, the Inter-Departmental Business Register¹¹ published by the Office for National Statistics, and the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey¹² and the Scottish Household Survey¹³, both published by the Scottish Government. All the statistics presented in *Rural Scotland Key Facts* are taken from already published statistics. No new data are collected for the publication although some new breakdowns are produced, according to the Urban Rural Classification.
- 2.5 The Scottish Government estimates that the annual cost of producing *Rural Scotland Key Facts* is around £20.5k, of which £3.5k is for publishing the hard copy booklet of the publication.

⁶ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/About/scotPerforms>

⁷ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/About/Methodology/UrbanRuralClassification>

⁸ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/08/07115535/0>

⁹ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/product.asp?vlnk=13101>

¹⁰ <http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk/statistics/theme/population/estimates/mid-year/index.html>

¹¹ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/idbr/idbr.asp>

¹² <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Crime-Justice/crime-and-justice-survey>

¹³ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/16002>

3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 The Scottish Government carried out a formal consultation in 2010 on the content and format of *Rural Scotland Key Facts*. The consultation took the form of an online questionnaire and was sent to 100 users who had previously expressed an interest in participation. The Scottish Government published the findings¹⁴ from this consultation along with its planned response. This response included some changes to the publication, such as adding more content on socio-economic divides, and consideration of the feasibility of producing time series analyses. The consultation report mentions some categories of use of the publication. These could be expanded and clarified, for example, to define the types of policy decisions made, the types of analysis carried out and the specific targets that are monitored. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the Scottish Government should expand the information about the uses made of the statistics and the types of decision they inform¹⁵ (Requirement 1).
- 3.2 The Scottish Government publishes some information on the Urban Rural Classification used in *Rural Scotland Key Facts* and the publication provides links to where more detailed information can be found. However the publication does not explain why it uses the three-fold breakdown of the classification, or how it compares to similar rural classifications in the rest of the UK and the EU. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the Scottish Government should publish more information in *Rural Scotland Key Facts* about the reasons for using the preferred urban rural classification¹⁶ (Requirement 2). We also suggest that the Scottish Government work with the other UK administrations to document the differences between each administration's urban rural classification and consider the feasibility and user need for comparable datasets.
- 3.3 *Rural Scotland Key Facts* contains helpful summary information about the data sources used in the publication, their quality and links to where further information about these sources can be found. Some of the sources used in the publication are National Statistics, some are official statistics and some come from external sources but this is not clearly stated. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the Scottish Government should explain the distinction between National Statistics and other types of statistics presented in the publication, and label the individual tables accordingly¹⁷ (Requirement 3).
- 3.4 *Rural Scotland Key Facts* contains short explanatory text for each of the tables and diagrams. However the Scottish Government provides little overall contextual information and commentary to aid users' interpretation of the statistics. The Scottish Government publishes a separate press release¹⁸ that provides a short summary of the statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the Scottish Government should improve the commentary in *Rural Scotland Key Facts*, for example by adding a summary with the main messages and including information on rural policy context and uses of the

¹⁴ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Agriculture-Fisheries/facts>

¹⁵ In relation to Principle 1 Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

¹⁶ In relation to Principle 4 Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

¹⁷ In relation to Principle 4 Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

¹⁸ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2010/09/22165518>

statistics¹⁹ (Requirement 4). In meeting this requirement the Scottish Government should consider the points detailed in annex 2.

- 3.5 *Rural Scotland Key Facts* does not present any time series, apart from a short time series of the population in rural areas. The Scottish Government told us that it is not possible to compare other statistics over time because of the changes made to the Urban Rural Classification every two years, although these changes are usually minimal. We suggest that the Scottish Government investigate the possibility of providing some information on trends for the topics that are of particular interest to users, such as employment and housing.
- 3.6 The Scottish Government provides pre-release access to *Rural Scotland Key Facts* to around 40 individuals, primarily those supplying the data. We suggest that the Scottish Government publish records of those granted pre-release access to these statistics in their final form. We also suggest that the Scottish Government review the composition of the list to ensure that it is minimised as much as possible.

¹⁹ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to *Rural Scotland Key Facts*, 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 | Work with the other UK administrations to document the differences between each administration's urban rural classification and consider the feasibility and user need for comparable datasets (para 3.2). |
| Suggestion 2 | Investigate the possibility of providing some information on trends for the topics that are of particular interest to users, such as employment and housing (para 3.5). |
| Suggestion 3 | Publish records of those granted pre-release access to these statistics in their final form (para 3.6). |
| Suggestion 4 | Review the composition of the pre-release access list to ensure that it is minimised as much as possible (para 3.6). |

Annex 2: Compliance with the Standards for Statistical Releases

- A2.1 In October 2010, the Statistics Authority issued a statement on *Standards for Statistical Releases*²⁰. Whilst this is not part of the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*, the Authority regards it as advice that will promote both understanding and observation of the Code. In relation to *Rural Scotland Key Facts*, this annex comments on compliance with the statement on standards.
- A2.2 In implementing any Requirements of this report (at paragraph 1.5) which relate to the content of statistical releases, we encourage the producer body to apply the standards as fully as possible.

Appropriate identification of the statistics being released

- A2.3 The title describes the coverage of the statistics. The period given is 2010 which is the year of publication rather than the reference years of the statistics (which come from 2008, 2009 and 2010). The National Statistics logo is included on the front cover of the publication and the publication identifies the originating department. The contact details for the responsible statistician are given at the back of the publication. The publication has a contents page and an introduction outlining the statistics included in the publication.

Include commentary that is helpful to the non-expert and presents the main messages in plain English

- A2.4 The publication does not contain a summary with the main messages. Key points are published in a press release but nothing is included in the publication itself. The language used in the publication is straightforward and clear. The explanation of the statistics outlines rises and falls but has little further explanation to describe what the statistics are showing. The text primarily describes what the relevant graph, diagram or table is showing. The publication does not include comparisons over time, across the UK or internationally due to the classification used. There is good use of maps, tables and charts to illustrate the statistics. Maps and charts use inconsistent colours for the classifications, which does not aid users' interpretation.

Use language that is impartial, objective and professionally sound

- A2.5 The text is impartial and evidence-based. The commentary in the publication does contain descriptive statements that are consistent with the statistics. The text includes useful and professionally sound comments on changes. Percentage change figures are mainly used to compare changes over the period.

Include information about the context and likely uses

- A2.6 The publication outlines the main purpose of the statistics but does not contain any further information on the context or uses. The information on quality and reliability of the statistics presented is adequate for a compendium publication.

²⁰ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html>

The publication contains some text outlining the relationship between National and Official Statistics, although no statement is made about the quality of these. The publication explains that a particular non-Official Statistics source is considered to be a good source although individual tables based on non-Official Statistics sources are not labelled as such.

Include, or link to, appropriate metadata

A2.7 The publication provides information in the back section on sources and their quality, with links to further information, for example on the Scottish Household Survey. Limited information is provided about the classification used although the publication does contain links to more detailed information. The statistics are, by their nature, focused on Scotland. No indication is given of comparability with rural areas in other UK countries or internationally. No links are provided to similar statistics in other countries. The publication notes some recent changes to some of the sources, such as the Scottish Household Survey. No indication is given of the extent and impact of the regular changes to the classification. The data are not subject to revisions.

Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A3.1 This assessment was conducted from March to July 2011.

A3.2 The Assessment team – Cathy Kruger and Neil Jackson – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of the Scottish Government in March. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 3 May. The Assessment team subsequently discussed the draft report and compliance with the *Code of Practice* with the Scottish Government during June, taking account of the written evidence provided and other relevant sources of evidence.

Summary of users contacted, and issues raised

A3.3 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.

A3.4 The Assessment team received 11 responses from the user/supplier consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Scottish Government | 2 |
| Academic/researcher | 1 |
| Interest group | 3 |
| Supplier | 5 |

A3.5 *Rural Scotland Key Facts* is used to provide background on rural issues for the purposes of research and policy making in a variety of areas, such as housing, community development and the provision of services in rural areas. The users responding to our consultation were happy with the presentation and timeliness of the statistics although some mentioned a need for further geographic breakdowns²¹ and more focused and insightful commentary. Those who had been in contact with Scottish Government were happy with the responsiveness of the team. However, two non-government users claimed not to have been consulted on the publication and its content.

A3.6 Suppliers of the data to *Rural Scotland Key Facts* were content with the data supply procedure. They found the instructions and guidelines to be clear and helpful and the deadlines given were reasonable. They noted that the data supplied were generally produced for other purposes anyway although some commented that it was time consuming to provide in the breakdowns requested.

²¹ This has been investigated by the Scottish Government but it is not generally possible to provide local authority and urban/rural breakdowns due to the small sample sizes of the source data.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

