

# Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

## Statistics from the Armed Forces Continuous Attitudes Survey

*(produced by the Ministry of Defence)*

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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 reports<sup>1</sup> prepared under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*<sup>2</sup>. The Act requires all statistics currently designated as National Statistics to be assessed against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*<sup>3</sup>. The Act also allows Departments to request an assessment of other official statistics in order for them to gain National Statistics status. This report is in response to such a request. The report covers the set of statistics reported in *Armed Forces Continuous Attitudes Surveys: AFCAS Report*<sup>4</sup> (*AFCAS Report*), produced by the Ministry of Defence<sup>5</sup> (MOD).

1.1.2 Section 3 of this report 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 materiality<sup>6</sup>. The Assessment team nonetheless assessed compliance with all parts of the *Code of Practice* and has commented on all those in respect of which some remedial action is recommended.

1.1.3 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 *AFCAS Report* can be designated as National Statistics, subject to the MOD implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by March 2012.

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

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga\\_20070018\\_en.pdf](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga_20070018_en.pdf)

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

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.dasa.mod.uk/index.php?pub=AFCAS-MAIN>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/Home/>

<sup>6</sup> <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 The statistics team consults its main users within the MOD regularly but does not have good communication links with users outside the MOD. The MOD has not published information about users' experiences of the statistics.
- 1.3.2 The MOD publishes useful information about the context in which the statistics are produced and how they are used. It publishes information about methods within *AFCAS Report* and information about the quality of the statistics in a separate *Background Quality Report for the Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey*<sup>7</sup> (*Quality Report*) which is presented clearly.
- 1.3.3 The MOD has linked responses (using Service number) to demographic data on its Joint Personnel Administration system<sup>8</sup>. This has enabled the MOD to reduce the number of questions on the survey (and hence reduce the survey costs) and to minimise the burden on respondents.
- 1.3.4 *AFCAS Report* includes tables with key results, but the tables contain little commentary making it difficult to identify the main messages.

### 1.4 Detailed recommendations

- 1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that the MOD 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

<b>Requirement 1</b>	Take steps to develop a greater understanding of the use made of the statistics, publish the relevant information and assumptions and use them to better support the use of the statistics (para 3.1).
<b>Requirement 2</b>	Publish information about the impact of the recent change in methods on the statistics and include information about why particular choices were made (para 3.2).
<b>Requirement 3</b>	Improve the information provided about the quality of the statistics to ensure that users are informed of all main sources of error and bias, and the implications for the expected uses of the statistics (para 3.3).

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.dasa.mod.uk/index.php?pub=QR\\_AFCAS](http://www.dasa.mod.uk/index.php?pub=QR_AFCAS)

<sup>8</sup> The Joint Personnel Administration system contains demographic information about Armed Forces personnel.

- Requirement 4** Confirm that the MOD will improve the commentary and presentation of the statistics in *AFCAS Report* to aid user interpretation and to reinforce the integrity of the statistics (para 3.6).
- Requirement 5** Include the name and contact details of the responsible statistician in *AFCAS Report* (para 3.7).
- Requirement 6** Ensure that the statistics are available in a format that encourages re-use (para 3.8).



## 2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 The annual Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey (AFCAS) was first conducted in 2007. It replaced three separate surveys of the Naval Services<sup>9</sup>, the Army and the Royal Air Force to provide a picture of the Armed Forces as a whole and to enable data comparisons between the Services. The aim of AFCAS is to assess and monitor the attitudes of Service personnel across the Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Army and Royal Air Force on a variety of topics including pay, morale and organisational engagement. It is one of the main ways that the MOD gathers information about the views and experiences of Armed Forces personnel. The survey estimates are presented in *Armed Forces Continuous Attitudes Surveys: AFCAS Report (AFCAS Report)*.
- 2.2 Questionnaires are sent to a stratified random sample of approximately 28,000 trained Regular Service personnel; those in each of the Services receive a different questionnaire, although most (80 per cent) of the survey questions are the same for each Service. The MOD contracts out the administration of the paper questionnaires, including the inputting of responses from paper responses into electronic documents, to acet Ltd<sup>10</sup>. In 2011, the MOD introduced the option of completing the survey online; it administers this in-house. The MOD carries out its own quality assurance and analysis of the data.
- 2.3 The results are used within the MOD to develop and monitor policies for: training; support; accommodation; grievances, and the terms and conditions of service. The department within MOD that is responsible for personnel matters - Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Personnel and Training) - uses the statistics to identify where measures are needed to influence motivation and retention in the Armed Forces. The statistics are also used by the Armed Forces Pay Review Body<sup>11</sup> (AFPRB) to provide advice to the Secretary of State for Defence and the Prime Minister on the pay, and terms and conditions, of Armed Forces personnel.
- 2.4 The production period for *AFCAS Report 2011* was shortened so that it was ready for publication in September 2011 to better meet the needs of users. To enable a shorter production period, data were collected in a single wave instead of two; this took place from February to May, 2011. Prior to this, MOD collected data in two waves; one from April to July, and a second from September to December.
- 2.5 The MOD told us that in 2010, it cost about £200,000 to produce the statistics. This includes staff costs and external contractor costs.

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<sup>9</sup> The Naval Services are comprised of the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines

<sup>10</sup> [www.acet4data.com](http://www.acet4data.com)

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.ome.uk.com/example/Armed\\_Forces\\_Pay\\_Review\\_Body.aspx](http://www.ome.uk.com/example/Armed_Forces_Pay_Review_Body.aspx)

### 3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 The MOD seeks feedback from users of the statistics through the AFCAS Steering Group and the AFCAS Working Group. The Steering Group meets at least once a year prior to the start of a new survey and discusses the scope of the survey and any major changes. The Working Group manages the design and implementation of the survey and meets every two months. The membership of both groups includes users from different parts of the MOD; neither group's membership includes users from outside the MOD. The statistics team communicates regularly with its main users within the MOD and has adapted the design of AFCAS in order to meet these users' needs. For example, it has implemented changes to the data collection processes so that *AFCAS Report* can be published earlier. The MOD has analysed its web usage data and is aware of the number of users of *AFCAS Report* from outside the MOD, but it has not investigated their needs. The MOD publishes information about the main uses of the statistics within *AFCAS Report* and the separate *Quality Report*<sup>12</sup>, but has not published any information about users' feedback. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the MOD should take steps to develop a greater understanding of the use made of the statistics, publish the relevant information and assumptions and use them to better support the use of the statistics<sup>13</sup> (Requirement 1). We suggest that the MOD refer to the generic classes of use put forward in the Authority's Monitoring Brief<sup>14</sup>, *The Use Made of Official Statistics*, in meeting this requirement.
- 3.2 In 2011, the MOD reduced the number of survey waves from two to one so that the release date of *AFCAS Report* could be brought forward to better meet users' needs. While we consider this to be good practice, the MOD has not published any information to explain the original rationale for collecting the data in two waves nor the impact of the change on the statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the MOD should publish information about the impact of the recent change in methods on the statistics and include information about why particular choices were made<sup>15</sup> (Requirement 2). We suggest that this include a review of whether any seasonality in the results might impact upon the continuity of the statistics.
- 3.3 *AFCAS Report* includes standard errors which are presented alongside the statistics in tables. *Quality Report* also presents some useful information about the quality of the statistics, for example bias introduced as a result of the sample or differing levels of response. There is scope to extend this to include non-sampling sources of error or bias, and to identify the implications for the expected uses of the statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the MOD should improve the information provided about the quality of the statistics to ensure that users are informed of all main sources of error and

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<sup>12</sup><http://www.dasa.mod.uk/applications/newWeb/www/index.php?page=48&pubType=3&thiscontent=2240&PublishTime=09:30:00&date=2011-08-23&disText=Single%20Report&from=listing&topDate=2011-08-23>

<sup>13</sup> In relation to Principle 1, Practices 1, 2 & 5 and Protocol 1, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>14</sup> <http://statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-briefs/monitoring-brief-6-2010---the-use-made-of-official-statistics.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> In relation to Principle 2, Practice 4 and Principle 4, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

- bias, and the implications for the expected uses of the statistics<sup>16</sup> (Requirement 3).
- 3.4 The MOD seeks to keep burden to a minimum, and has taken steps to reduce cost by linking responses (using Service number) to demographic data on its Joint Personnel Administration system to reduce the number of questions on the survey. We consider this to be good practice.
  - 3.5 *Quality Report* states that *AFCAS Report* consists mainly of statistical tables so that users can access the statistics as soon as possible. However, we consider that more commentary is required to enable users to understand and interpret the statistics appropriately. *AFCAS Report* does not present the time series clearly and does not use graphs to display trends. Furthermore, *AFCAS report* includes a foreword that is written by a senior official. Although this provides a useful context for the statistics, any statements from those outside the statistical production process should be published separately, to avoid any concerns about the integrity of the production process.
  - 3.6 As part of the designation as National Statistics, the MOD should confirm that it will improve the commentary and presentation of the statistics in *AFCAS Report* to aid user interpretation and to reinforce the integrity of the statistics<sup>17</sup> (Requirement 4). We suggest that in meeting this requirement the MOD should consider the points detailed in annex 2.
  - 3.7 The release does not include the name and contact details of the responsible statistician. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the MOD should include the name and contact details of the responsible statistician in *AFCAS Report*<sup>18</sup> (Requirement 5).
  - 3.8 *AFCAS Report* presents statistics within tables, but these are not available in any other format for easy re-use, for example in spreadsheet format. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the MOD should ensure that the statistics are available in a format that encourages re-use<sup>19</sup> (Requirement 6).
  - 3.9 The pre-release access list<sup>20</sup> for these statistics consists of 36 posts. These are mostly military personnel but it also includes Ministers and senior government officials. The MOD told us that it has recently reviewed this list to ensure that it is limited to those individuals who require it.

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<sup>16</sup> In relation to Principle 4, Practice 2 and Principle 8, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>17</sup> In relation to Principle 8, Practice 2 and Principle 3, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>18</sup> In relation to Protocol 2, Practice 6 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>19</sup> In relation to Principle 8, Practice 6 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.dasa.mod.uk/index.php?pub=QR\\_PRAL](http://www.dasa.mod.uk/index.php?pub=QR_PRAL)

## Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to the MOD's statistics from the Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey, 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**

Refer to the generic classes of use put forward in the Authority's Monitoring Brief, The Use Made of Official Statistics, in meeting Requirement 1 (para 3.1).

### **Suggestion 2**

Review of whether any seasonality in the results might impact upon the continuity of the statistics, as part of meeting Requirement 2 (para 3.2).

### **Suggestion 3**

Consider the points detailed in annex 2, in seeking to improve the statistical releases (para 3.6).

## **Annex 2: Compliance with Standards for Statistical Releases**

- A2.1 In October 2010, the Statistics Authority issued a statement on *Standards for Statistical Releases*<sup>21</sup>. 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 compliance with the *Code*. In relation to the statistical release associated with the Armed Forces Continuous Attitudes Survey, 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 indicates that the survey is about Armed Forces attitudes but it does not specify the geographical coverage or the period to which the statistics relate. The title includes the term 'Continuous' which users could potentially find misleading since the survey runs for a specific period each year.
- A2.4 The release does not include a statement about the frequency of the release or the frequency with which the statistics are compiled or updated, although this is implied within the text. It contains the name of the originating department but it does not contain the name and contact details of the responsible statistician. The release includes a foreword written by a DCDS official which provides a useful context for the statistics presented within the release, and conveys a sense of 'ownership' from a significant MOD user of the statistics. (However, the Assessment team considers that it would be more appropriate in relation to the *Code of Practice* if it were written by the statistical Head of Profession or, published separately).
- A2.5 The release contains a contents page and, after the key results tables, it also includes a brief account of what is included in the release.

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

- A2.6 The release includes results tables at the start which are presented alongside a short summary which identifies the main messages. The language is fairly straightforward and includes a 'Definitions' section to explain the terminology used in the report. However explaining at the outset some of the terminology that is used in the summary would improve accessibility, for example by explaining what is meant by the 'X-Factor'.
- A2.7 The release does not include an explanation of the results to bring to life the messages, make comparisons and identify trends in the statistics. The commentary should be improved by drawing out relevant contextual issues, for example by identifying influences which might be driving the observed changes. The release does not use graphs to illustrate comparisons. The

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html>

introductory text explains why the statistics are important and how they are used.

A2.8 *AFCAS Report* is quite long and the assessment team considers that there may be scope to review its contents in the light of users' experience.

### **Use language that is impartial, objective and professionally sound**

A2.9 The text in the release is impartial and the statements that are made about the statistics are professionally sound.

### **Include information about the context and likely uses**

A2.10 *AFCAS Report* and *Quality Report* both provide factual information about the policy and operational context in which the statistics have been collected and how they will be used.

A2.11 *Quality Report* includes useful information about the history of AFCAS and provides a step by step summary of the production process. It also presents information about the key aspects of the quality of the statistics. There is scope to improve *Quality Report* by providing more information about potential sources of non sampling error and by commenting on the strengths and weaknesses of the statistics in relation to their potential uses.

### **Include, or link to, appropriate metadata**

A2.12 The MOD publishes useful information about the methods used to produce these statistics within the *AFCAS Report* and publishes the survey questionnaires as Annexes<sup>22</sup> in a separate document. The methods information is well presented and clearly explained, but should include more details about the impact of the recent methodological changes.

A2.13 *AFCAS Report* includes information about comparability with Service-specific survey results (see paragraph 2.2), where similar questions are used.

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.dasa.mod.uk/index.php?pub=AFCAS-ANNEXES>

## Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A3.1 This assessment was conducted from August to October 2011.

A3.2 The Assessment team – Ruth James and Emma Bowditch – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of the MOD in August. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 19 August. The Assessment team subsequently liaised with the MOD during August and 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

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 5 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

MOD	4
Data supplier	1

A3.5 Users were generally content with the statistics and their presentation. Users highlighted timeliness as an area of concern; AFCAS is an annual survey, which has replaced quarterly Service-specific surveys. By the time users are able to access the results for the AFCAS reference period they are considered of historic rather than current relevance; the Services have therefore introduced their own additional 'pulse surveys' or other monitoring procedures to acquire a more current picture. Despite this, *AFCAS Report* was reported as useful. Users were complimentary about the helpfulness and responsiveness of the statistical team who produce *AFCAS Report*. The data supplier reported a good relationship with the MOD and feel that they are adequately and regularly consulted about changes to data requirements.

### Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

