

Statistics Commission

**BUILDING LINKS WITH
STAKEHOLDERS: OUR GENERAL
APPROACH
AND REPORT OF PROGRESS SO FAR**

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BUILDING LINKS WITH STAKEHOLDERS: OUR GENERAL APPROACH AND REPORT OF PROGRESS SO FAR

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Introduction

1. This paper describes how the Statistics Commission is approaching one of its key early and continuing tasks: that of building links with stakeholders. It reports progress so far and identifies the main challenges in this area for the immediate future.

Background

2. The White Paper *Building trust in statistics* envisaged that the government would ask the Commission to “recommend to Ministers . . . its own machinery for covering the interests of users and producers of National Statistics...”. While we have not received such a formal request we have taken up the spirit of this, welcomed the flexibility which the absence of a specific formal request has given us, and extended our interpretation of our task slightly to cover the full range of stakeholders in National Statistics.
3. We initially identified three specific groups of stakeholders: users of National Statistics, producers of National Statistics and providers of the raw data on which National Statistics are based. However we also recognise the importance of wider stakeholders and society as a whole. This fourth group covers Parliament and the general public but also specific wider interest groups such as employers, trade unionists or professional societies. We believe that we need to understand the perspectives of all four groups in order to fulfill our remit properly.

General approach

4. Our general approach in this area is less structured and more informal than might be implied by the term “machinery”. We are open minded about the need to establish formal arrangements in the long term but felt it was right to build informal links first. These will help us form a view on whether we should be aiming in due course for a single formal mechanism supplemented by informal links or for a multiplicity of channels. We see a need to make good use of all available methods of communication ranging from informal discussions to making full use of new technology. Our website will have a vital role to play, especially in giving us a rapid and effective way of communicating with many expert users. Work on a new permanent site to replace our temporary webpage is already well advanced. But dependence on this one medium would not enable us to be sensitive to the full range of interests and we see a continuing need for informal, including face to face, contacts of various kinds to ensure we are accessible to users and other stakeholders.
5. One specific point which has been made is that some existing user groups are well placed to represent particular interests to us and that they would be assisted in doing so if we provided funding support. We do not see this as being the way forward. Quite apart from the question of whether our budget is intended for or would be adequate to cover this we do not believe it would help us to take, and be seen to take, a balanced view of the whole scene if we were to become too closely identified with one or more groups in this way. That said we have certainly not ruled out the possibility of commissioning work on areas of interest to us from existing user groups in the same way as we might from academic experts.

Links with users

6. We are conscious that some good links between users and producers of National Statistics exist and that work is in hand following *Framework for National Statistics* to develop these further. These form part of the context within which we need to develop our own links with users, for two main purposes: to understand their perspectives in general; and, more specifically, to allow us to check whether existing National Statistics consultation arrangements are working properly. We are not trying to duplicate National Statistics arrangements. This would be inefficient but it would also risk confusion about roles undermining effective consultation.
7. National Statistics have a wide range of users. We have identified three main groups: - users within government; - expert and specialist users outside government; - general users : members of the public whether as voters or as users of public services; but this is still an oversimplification. For example it does not cover the particular interests of the substantial number of local government users of National Statistics. Because of this diversity we will need correspondingly diverse approaches.
8. We have consciously focused in this initial period on users outside government, but we are aware that National Statistics have many users within government too. We cannot take it for granted that, simply because they work within government, their needs will be met. In particular we are aware of concerns that a higher profile for external users and the “producer only” nature of the theme groups which underpin National Statistics planning may lead to a less responsive service for existing government users. We have not yet seen any evidence that this is the case, but it is a concern to which we will need to be sensitive. We are undertaking a project on the adequacy of National Statistics to monitor the NHS Cancer Plan and, while this was not the main driver which led us to undertake work in the area, it is likely that the project will also help develop our understanding of how best to approach the needs of users within government.
9. In considering the needs of non-government users of official statistics we have been conscious that many of these are specialists and experts, either in aspects of statistics or in the relevant subject area. One of our first priorities has been to establish informal links with a good range of these expert users. There are a number of well-established statistics user groups dealing with different areas, such as business statistics or health statistics, brought together under the Statistics Users’ Council (SUC) umbrella, and we have found these very helpful. Our contact has been in various forms, ranging from the chairman addressing the SUC conference to one-to-one discussions between the chief executive and some individual user group chairs. The SUC conference on 9 November provided an opportunity to take further soundings of expert users. These largely reinforced our existing view of the need for flexibility and identified other groups and interests within the “expert and specialist” area to which we need to link.
10. We also recognise the slightly different needs and perspectives of general or citizen users who are unlikely to participate in user groups. It is less easy to build direct links with these users but we are currently considering the potential for making use of proxies for general users – perhaps journalists, voluntary organisations and parliamentarians – whose views may be easier to assess directly. There is a link here with the wider stakeholders discussed in paragraphs 17 to 19 below.

11. We have more work to do over the next few months to develop our understanding both of current user concerns and of how we can sensibly tap into and supplement existing structures – which are themselves changing. Formal consultation about longerterm arrangements may well be appropriate but we do not think it would be sensible to launch this now when users have not yet had substantial experience of the new National Statistics arrangements.

Links with providers of raw data

12. While understanding users' perspectives seemed to us to be the right starting point for developing our links with stakeholders, since it is their needs which are the logical starting point, we recognise the corresponding needs of and pressures on suppliers of the raw data on which National Statistics are based. The full co-operation of these providers is necessary if National Statistics are to meet the highest quality standards. It is also only right that proper weight should be given both to the burden on providers of supplying raw data and to ensuring that, as far as possible, the design of information collections takes account of the management and other information needs of providers.
13. We know that building links with providers will present its own challenges since, even in organisations which include both users and providers of data, the internal links are not necessarily strong. This phenomenon has been described to us by one user as the "vicious horseshoe" where individuals in one part of a firm or other institution may be unaware of the value, to colleagues in the next office, of the aggregate data to which they contribute. We hope that by building on what we have found helpful with users we will be able to find an effective way forward.

Links with producers of National Statistics

14. This group of stakeholders is slightly different from the others. We need good links with the producers of National Statistics but we also need to interact with them in a way which reinforces and demonstrates our independence and does not risk our becoming, or appearing to become, too close to them. We need to maintain our ability to look critically at what they are doing while understanding their perspectives as well as those of other stakeholders.
15. In our first few months the emphasis of our contact with producers has been on that with the Office for National Statistics, and with the new National Statistician in particular. The National Statistician has attended one Commission meeting as well as meeting with the chairman on various occasions, and a series of visits to the larger ONS sites is underway. At working level, the chief executive meets the ONS head of the national statistics and policy division regularly.
16. Some discussions have taken place between our secretariat and producers of National Statistics outside ONS and we plan to develop these links more actively following the ONS site visits.

Links with wider stakeholders

17. One key driver of the new arrangement is the need for National Statistics to command the trust and confidence of society at large. It would be possible for us to regard individual members of the public and parts of society simply as members of the diverse user community: as end users of statistics, perhaps filtered through intermediaries such as expert users or the media. This approach would however risk focusing on specific pieces of data or specific areas where data were needed and neglecting the more general need of society to trust the full range of National Statistics and have confidence in the infrastructure.
18. This is an area where, even more than in others, we need to be both responsive and proactive, being sensitive to the needs and perspectives of stakeholders but increasingly seeking them out as well as ensuring that we are visible and accessible to all players. We are already in contact with Parliament (through the Treasury Subcommittee) and the Royal Statistical Society and we will continue these links at the same time as developing others. We have identified the CBI, the TUC, the farming community and the media as other key players but will be approaching this without a rigid prior agenda. It will be vital to achieve the right balance between focusing on a few key interests and ensuring that we take account of a wide range of views.
19. These contacts will help us form a judgement on the level of overall public confidence in National Statistics. We also know that the Office for National Statistics has done some work on direct measurement of public confidence and we are currently considering the potential for making use of proxies for public views more generally – perhaps journalists, voluntary organisations and parliamentarians – whose opinions may be easier to assess directly. This is an area in which we need to do more work.

Conclusion

20. The Statistics Commission has already made significant progress in developing its links with a wide variety of National Statistics' stakeholders. The main emphasis of development so far has been with specialist users outside government and with the subset of National Statistics producers within the Office for National Statistics but these have confirmed our approach of starting by building informal links combined with appropriate use of new technology.
21. In the coming months increasing our visibility and consolidating the work we have already begun on building links with stakeholders will be vital. In doing so we will need to be sensitive to their views and to be prepared to develop our approach as we better understand their needs. Our next steps are to complete work on our website and to extend the approach we are already taking to other stakeholder groups. We plan to do more on both these fronts before we address the question of whether some formal structures would be helpful to reinforce this approach in the longer term.