

Official Statistics Policy

Changes to statistical outputs including National Statistics during the coronavirus outbreak

March 2020

Office for Statistics Regulation

We provide independent regulation of all official statistics produced in the UK. Statistics are an essential public asset. We aim to enhance public confidence in the trustworthiness, quality and value of statistics produced by government.

We do this by setting the standards they must meet in the *Code of Practice for Statistics*. We ensure that producers of government statistics uphold these standards by conducting assessments against the *Code*. Those which meet the standards are given National Statistics status, indicating that they meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and value. We also report publicly on system-wide issues and on the way statistics are being used, celebrating when the standards are upheld and challenging publicly when they are not.

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Introduction

This note covers arrangements for rapid awarding of National Statistics (NS) designations, and for temporarily suspending existing NS designations. These measures are designed to support producers at a highly pressured and sensitive time, and reflect OSR's aim to be very flexible in the light of the exceptional and difficult circumstances.

The NS designation provides a clear public signal that statistics meet the highest standards of statistical practice. Awarding the NS designation follows a full assessment against the Code of Practice's three pillars – trustworthiness, quality and value – which encompasses the process to produce the statistics and an evaluation of the impact and public value of the statistics.

Rapid NS designation

In the current environment of a rapidly changing data need, OSR proposes, and is able, to carry out rapid 'mini assessments' in order to similarly provide a clear public signal through confirming that NS designation for rapidly produced supplementary or complementary statistics can be inherited from the parent National Statistics, for the duration of their essential publication. These guidelines would apply only where the parent statistical series is already designated as National Statistics, and the mini assessments would assume continuing Code compliance of the parent output.

Recognising that time is of the essence, we would look to get these assurances in as efficient and undistruptive a way as possible – our priority is to ensure that people who need good data get good data, and not to waylay statisticians from getting statistics published. Our approach would mirror assessment in that as much as possible, we would form judgements based on:

- what we already know about the organisation and the parent statistics, supplemented by additional desk research
- reference to documents that have already been published or written within organisations, and emails, meeting notes etc discussing the statistics in question that already exist within producer teams
- quick virtual meetings with the statistical teams where possible to seek any additional clarity needed, make sure we fully understand the context and any concerns (eg around data quality) or to fill gaps in our understanding.

As usual, we would also look primarily for producer teams to be upfront and transparent about the user need for the statistics, the purposes to which they can be put, and most especially quality limitations or other relevant caveats.

We also propose to use a similar process to provide an endorsement (but not NS designation) of any completely new statistics that are produced in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. These statistics could be accompanied with a statement as follows: "These statistics have been produced quickly in response to developing world events. The Office for Statistics Regulation, on behalf of the UK Statistics Authority, has reviewed them against several key aspects of the Code of Practice for Statistics and regards them as consistent with the Code's pillars of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value".

Our mini assessments would focus on the three pillars of the Code of Practice for Statistics – Trustworthiness, Quality and Value. The main concepts within the Code are listed below along with

references to the specific practices of the Code that we expect would usually be most relevant. We expect that these would apply to a varying extent depending on context, and the list is given as a guide, rather than a comprehensive account.

Value is about producing statistics that support society's needs for information. We will seek assurance of:

- current understanding of uses and information needs and ways to address them [V1.1, V1.5]
- an open and proportionate dialogue with users [V1.4]
- clear statistics that are explained meaningfully [V3 especially V3.1, V3.2, V3.5]

Quality is about using data and methods that produce assured statistics. We will seek assurance of:

- appropriate data and methods, consistent with the parent National Statistics [Q1.1, Q1.4, Q2.1, Q2.2]
- effective quality assurance [Q3.2, Q3.4]
- clear explanations about relevant limitations and their impact [Q1.5, Q1.6, Q2.3, Q2.4, Q3.1]

Trustworthiness is about having confidence in the people and organisations that produce statistics and data. We will seek assurance of:

- independent statistical decision-making – free from vested interests [T1.3, T2.1]
- orderly release – pre-announced, appropriate PRA, separate ministerial/policy statements [T3 especially T3.1, T3.2, T3.5]

Suspension of NS designation

We have well-established procedures for reviewing existing NS designations and suspending them for a period of time where appropriate. This would usually be because of a temporary drop in quality that resulted in statistics that were not sufficiently good for the purposes for which they were intended. We would expect to restore the NS designation once quality was shown to have returned to an appropriate level. In considering suspension, we encourage producer teams to approach OSR as soon as they have concerns so that suspensions can be made in an orderly and supportive way, with no sense of criticism whatsoever of the producer body. More detail is available in OSR's [guidance](#), which includes the following.

Designation as National Statistics can be suspended when:

- a) The non-compliance with the Code of Practice is isolated – where it is notable but limited in scope, a suspension is more appropriate than de-designation.
- b) Corrective action can be delivered in a timely way – a suspension will be appropriate when the producer expects to correct the problem within a defined, reasonable period of time.

Exemptions

There may be other occasions where an [exemption](#) from some aspects of the Code of Practice might be appropriate, for example around release practices. We encourage producer teams to discuss with OSR if they think this could be the case. Again we will be very supportive of these requests.

