Monitoring Brief

Findings from the first 100 Assessment Reports

The UK Statistics Authority has published over 100 Assessment Reports. Under the legislation that created the Authority, it is required to review all statistics that carry the National Statistics label to ensure that they comply with the revised Code of Practice for Official Statistics, introduced in January 2009.

At the time the legislation came in to force there were over 1,200 sets of National Statistics, some 450 of which were covered in the first 100 reports[1]. Whilst this is not yet half way through the full programme, many of the most widely used official statistics have now been assessed.

All assessments so far have found some further steps that needed to be taken to meet the challenging standards of the new Code. In practice a 'conditional designation' is normally given and a timetable agreed for the extra steps that need to be taken. After that, the improvements made are documented and designation is then granted. Through this mechanism, assessment is a powerful tool for guiding and driving the development of UK official statistics.

For each assessment, a report is published on the Authority's website[2]; and whilst this has driven many specific improvements, it has also shown that the great majority of official statistics do meet identified user needs, are produced according to sound methods and are managed impartially and objectively. Thus assessment also provides a large measure of public reassurance that the statistics are produced to high standards and are of value to both government and society more generally.

The Statistics Authority remains committed to the agenda of maintaining and developing the Code of Practice for Official Statistics and ensuring through assessment that it is used continuously to develop the service across all four UK administrations. We shall keep both the Code and assessment process under review to see that they do not impose unreasonable demands on those who manage the many parts of the UK statistical service.

This series of Briefs is part of a continuing process of reviewing the results of assessment. The assessment process is designed to ensure that the whole UK statistical service, to which a large number of government organisations contribute, works to common standards. Over time, this should provide a sound basis for the UK statistical service to be seen both in the UK and internationally as being of the very highest quality.

In this Brief we summarise the main findings from the first 100 Assessment Reports, identifying key areas for improvement and examples of good practice. It updates the findings published in earlier

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[1] A full list of Assessment Reports to date can be found at:
http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html
[2] http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html

summaries, *Findings of the 2009 Assessment Programme*[3] and *Findings from the first 50 Assessment Reports*[4].

Findings – Action points

The assessment programme so far points to the need for organisations that produce official statistics to address three main recommendations as set out below. These recommendations are, in substance, similar to those presented in an earlier report, *Findings from the First 50 Assessment Reports*.

1. Improve commentary

For official statistics to be understood and used in ways that deliver value, it is important that appropriate written advice ('commentary') is published alongside the figures. Commentary should be seen as the heart of every statistical release, not just an introduction for the less expert user. The Authority has published a note setting out its views on good practice in preparing commentary[5], including the following requirements:

- A summary of the main messages - those points that the informed reader would regard as the most interesting and relevant to public debate about the subject of the statistics.
- Language that is straightforward and widely understood and does not need to be 'translated' by journalists or commentators into more familiar terms. Where technical terms are needed, they should be explained immediately in the text, not just in a footnote.
- Explanation of the statistics that goes further than simply describing rises and falls. A narrative that brings to life the story the statistics contain, making suitable comparisons - over time, between areas within the country, and internationally. Use of graphs, tables and maps to illustrate these.
- Factual information about the policy and administrative context of the statistics; why they are important, to whom, and for what they are likely to be used. Include comment on the strengths and limitations of the statistics in relation to those uses.

2. Improve engagement with users

Statistics only realise their full potential when they are used in ways that serve the public good. To achieve this, more systematic engagement with organisations and individuals whose decisions or actions are informed by official statistics is required. Users of statistics within central government can usually find ways to make their needs known and to ensure that they are met; users outside central government – business, local government, academia, and charities, for example – find this more difficult but in aggregate their use is of immense importance and value. Engagement with these wider users is therefore likely to require more effort and imagination but will be repaid in terms of added public value. The Authority's recommendations relating to engagement with users can be found in the Monitoring Report, *Strengthening User Engagement*[6].

The Authority also sees great value in building on user engagement to enhance public understanding and documentation of the main uses made of official statistics. Without a well-developed understanding of *use*, it is difficult for anyone to make judgements about the adequacy

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[3] http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-briefs/monitoring---assessment-note-2-2010--findings-of-the-2009-assessment-programme.pdf
[4] http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-briefs/monitoring-brief-4-2010---findings-from-the-first-50-assessment-reports.pdf
[5] http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html
[6] http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/reports---correspondence/reports/strengthening-user-engagement--final-report.pdf

or quality of statistics; or indeed the need to continue to produce them. The Authority has published guidance[7] about documenting the use made of statistics.

3. Improve documentation

The *Code* requires the publication of supporting documents intended to improve understanding of different aspects of the statistics – including details of methods and sources used to produce the statistics, the uses made of the statistics and a statement detailing the use of administrative sources for statistical purposes. Although in many cases such documentation is already available for internal use, this is still an area where *Code* compliance needs to be strengthened.

Findings - Examples of good practice

This section highlights examples of good practice that the Monitoring and Assessment team has identified in the most recent Assessment Reports. Although we find much statistical activity that is fully compliant with the *Code*, the purpose of this section is to identify aspects of statistical activity that we think are particularly positive.

Principle 1 – Meeting user needs

Example – Welsh Assembly Government – Welsh Short-Term Output Indicators (Assessment Report 82)

The Welsh Assembly Government formally consults users every three years to investigate and document their needs. It has recently introduced a six-monthly Economic and Labour Market Statistics Newsletter[8] to keep users informed about recent and forthcoming developments and to enable user feedback. Records are kept of all user engagement including requests and feedback.

Example – HM Revenue and Customs – Statistics on UK Trade in Goods (Assessment Report 93)

HM Revenue and Customs has set up a client manager network to manage engagement with groups of users. An individual client manager is allocated to each group of users. These groups are: stakeholders (ONS, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), Eurostat, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations), other government users (the Department for Energy and Climate Change, Defra, the Department for Transport and the Welsh Assembly Government), and commercial and academic users represented by the International Business Statistics User Group (IBSUG). Client managers meet with users at least once a year and communicate at least every three months. They produce monthly reports which are fed into quarterly client manager network meetings. The client manager network is also used as a means of consulting users about business and survey issues. HM Revenue and Customs told the Assessment team that this system ensures that there is a consistent communication of messages to and from users. The majority of users who responded to the consultation as part of this assessment were very satisfied with their engagement with HM Revenue and Customs.

Principle 4 – Sound methods and assured quality

Example – Office for National Statistics – Consumer Price Indices (Assessment Report 79)

ONS publishes two documents that explain how it compiles the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and Retail Prices Index (RPI). The *Consumer Price Indices Technical Manual*[9] is a useful reference document that provides extensive technical documentation. It includes information about the main uses of consumer price indices and provides detailed information about the different ways in which the CPI and RPI have been constructed. *Consumer Price Indices – A Brief Guide*[10], is a shorter

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[7] http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-briefs/monitoring-brief-6-2010---the-use-made-of-official-statistics.pdf

[8] http://wales.gov.uk/docs/statistics/news/100917economicnews1en.pdf

[9] http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/product.asp?vlnk=2328

[10] http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/product.asp?vlnk=62

document that is aimed at a non-specialist audience. It provides clear and accessible information about why consumer price indices are important and how they have been produced, and explains the differences between the two main measures, the CPI and RPI.

Example – Scottish Government – Scottish Macro-Economic Statistics (Assessment Report 83)
The Scottish Government has launched the Scottish National Accounts Project (SNAP)[11] to extend the range and quality of economic statistics it produces, releasing additional statistics alongside the quarterly Gross Domestic Product (GDP) release as 'statistics being developed'.

Principle 8 – Frankness and accessibility
Example – NHS Information Centre – Lifestyles Statistics Compendium Publications (Assessment Report 64)
The compendia on smoking[12], drug misuse[13] and alcohol[14] produced by the NHS Information Centre are well presented and accessible, with information about data sources, quality, methods and classifications published in the appendices of each. Most of the commentary is full and frank and accompanied by appropriate tables and charts. Each compendium also has an appendix that covers government policy and targets.

Example – Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) – Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (NIMDM) (Assessment Report 69)
The *NIMDM 2010 Report*[15] contains a well-organised analysis of the data with complementary charts and maps to illustrate the statistics. The commentary is clear with well presented tables and maps. A range of supporting documents and maps is available on NISRA's website with some of the maps in fixed format and others user-generated. A large print version of the report is available on NISRA's website and a Braille version is available on request.

Evidence for the findings
For almost all of the sets of statistics assessed, a 'conditional designation' has been awarded. This means that the producer body is required to take certain specified steps – Requirements – to improve its compliance with the *Code* prior to the set of statistics being designated as National Statistics. Of the first 100 assessments, 99 have resulted in conditional designations. One assessment judged that the statistics were not suitable for designation at this stage. The producer of these statistics is currently implementing a number of substantial improvements to strengthen compliance with the *Code*. This should result in future releases being issued with the National Statistics badge. In addition, one particular analysis within an otherwise broadly compliant set of statistics was de-designated; again, further work is required before this analysis can be badged as National Statistics.

No set of statistics has been 'unconditionally designated' – that is, found to be completely compliant with the *Code* - at the time of its assessment. However, once producers have addressed the Requirements in a Report, and the Authority has considered a producer's response, unconditional designation can be granted. The Authority has so far granted this in relation to 47 sets of statistics.

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[11] http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Economy/SNAP
[12] http://www.ic.nhs.uk/statistics-and-data-collections/health-and-lifestyles/smoking/statistics-on-smoking-in-england-2010-[ns]
[13] http://www.ic.nhs.uk/statistics-and-data-collections/health-and-lifestyles/drug-misuse/statistics-on-drug-misuse-england--2010-report
[14] http://www.ic.nhs.uk/statistics-and-data-collections/health-and-lifestyles/alcohol/statistics-on-alcohol-england-2010
[15] http://www.nisra.gov.uk/deprivation/archive/Updateof2005Measures/NIMDM_2010_Report.pdf

Figure 1 shows the aggregate proportion of compliance with each of the practices and principles of the *Code* achieved by the first 100 Assessment Reports. As reported in previous Briefs, producers continue to demonstrate that they 'produce their statistics with integrity' and continue to 'consider the level of burden placed on respondents' and 'the resources required to produce their statistics'. However, 'meeting user needs' and 'ensuring that the statistics are accessible and accompanied by full and frank commentary and analysis' are areas of the *Code* that require strengthening. This picture is reflected in Figure 2, which shows the total number of Requirements given for each Principle and Protocol.

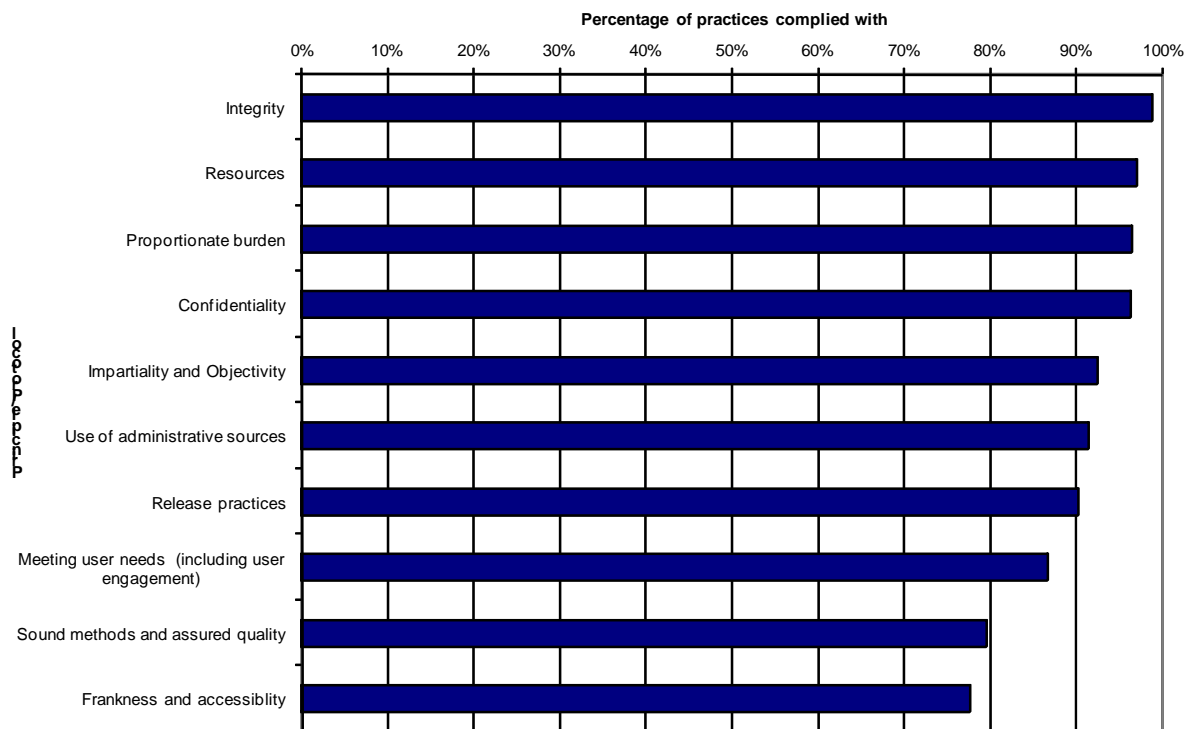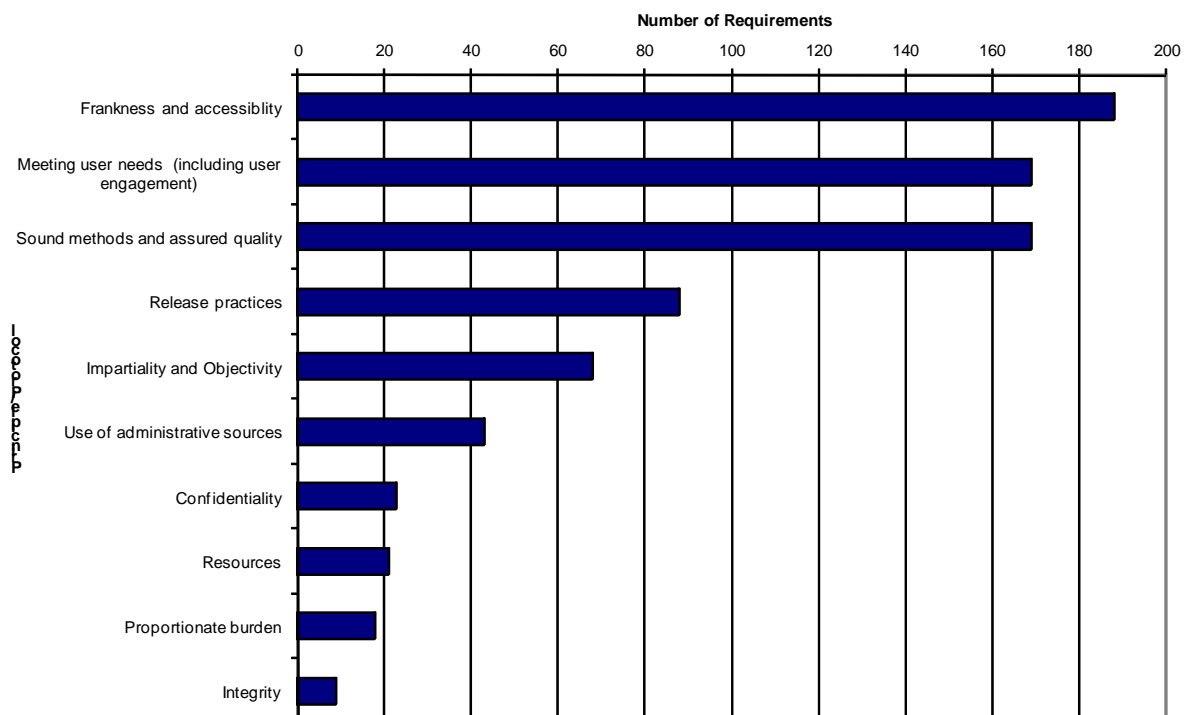*Figure 1   Percentage of practices complied with, by Principle and Protocol*

Figure 2   Number of Requirements, by Principle and Protocol

'Organisational compliance'

In early 2010, the Monitoring and Assessment team began a small exercise to review the extent to which five producer organisations, whose statistics we had not at the time formally assessed, complied with the 'organisational' aspects of the *Code*. This covered practices such as 'publish documentation about aspects of statistical policy', or 'accessibility of statistics through the organisation's website'. The purpose was to help these producers to strengthen their statistical arrangements prior to the formal assessment of their statistics.

The main Principle under which these producer organisations needed to strengthen their compliance with the *Code* was in 'meeting user needs'. To improve this, the team indicated to producers the likely Requirements that would otherwise be made in an Assessment Report – typically to publish information on the 'uses made of their statistics' and to document 'the needs of users' and their 'experiences of the statistical services'. Other points raised by the team included the 'publication of a timetable of their releases for the following 12 months', the provision of 'information about the methods adopted', the 'reasons for the choice of methods', and the 'maintenance of records of the planning of statistical processes'.

Response to suggestions

In addition to the inclusion of Requirements in Assessment Reports, each Report has included a number of Suggestions. The implementation of these Suggestions is not required for designation as National Statistics: instead they address aspects of the set of statistics that might be strengthened in order to improve public confidence in their production, management and dissemination. They often extend beyond the provisions of the *Code*, and reflect the professional views of the Monitoring and Assessment team.

Figure 3 shows the total number of Suggestions included in the first 100 Assessment Reports as a whole. This shows a similar pattern to the distribution of the total number of Requirements shown in Figure 2.

Figure 3   Number of Suggestions, by Principle and Protocol
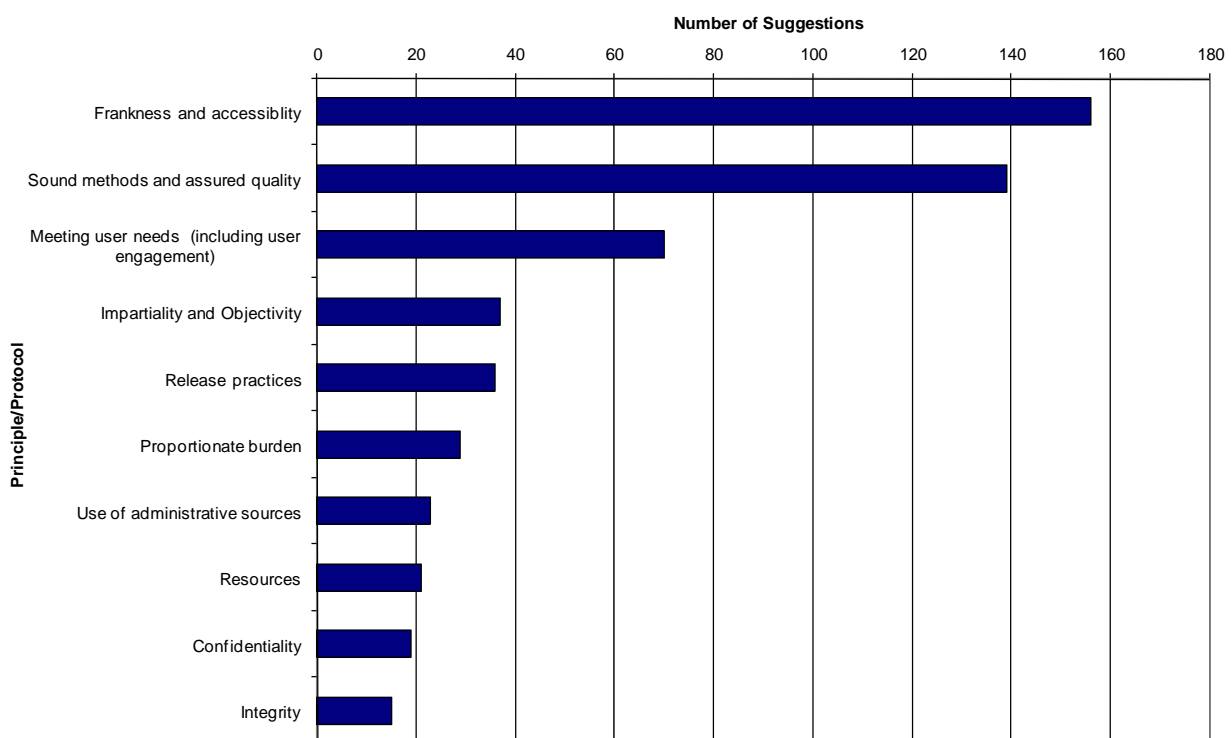
The Monitoring and Assessment team has reviewed the extent to which producer organisations have addressed Suggestions; this, and discussions with producers, suggests attention has tended to be focused on Requirements rather than Suggestions, although producers have told us that they consider Suggestions to be a useful feature of Assessment Reports. It appears that producer organisations have implemented those Suggestions which are relatively straightforward or which support the implementation of a Requirement.