

The UK's Code of Practice for Official Statistics: Realising the Benefits

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Summary

Many statistical organisations have adopted Codes of Practice, to provide guidance to staff and to demonstrate to external commentators the standards to which producers of statistics work. The UK has been no exception to this pattern. However, two (inter-related) sets of issues in the UK have led to changes in the codification of statistical good practice. First, the UK statistical system is unusually decentralised, with over two hundred separate producers of official statistics. Second, levels of trust in UK official statistics are comparatively low. In response to this problem of trust, the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007* established the UK Statistics Authority, and required it to publish a Code of Practice for Official Statistics and to assess producers' compliance with the Code. Those sets of statistics judged to be compliant may then be designated as National Statistics.

This paper briefly describes the Code, the process of assessment, and related 'scrutiny' activity. It then offers a three-fold classification of different ways in which we might consider benefits of 'scrutiny' activity to accrue, and some examples of specific benefits we have observed as a result of different 'interventions' under the broad heading of 'scrutiny'. It concludes by summarising some of the high level effects which the new regime of independent scrutiny appears to be having.

Maintaining standards in the UK's decentralised statistical system

The substantially, and increasingly decentralised nature of UK official statistics is well-documented¹, as are its strengths and limitations². With over 200 producers of official statistics in the UK – we think: a definitive list does not exist at present - it is inherently more difficult to agree and maintain standards than in a single statistical institute. This is often exacerbated in the UK by the relatively junior position of statisticians within their Departments' hierarchies.

The development and promulgation of standards has been a focus of the work of the head of the Government Statistical Service³ (GSS) and statistical Heads of Profession⁴ within departments for a number of years. But the establishment in April 2008 of the UK Statistics Authority⁵ - with a remit to safeguard the production and publication of official statistics to serve the public good – has provided a statutory basis to support the establishment of common standards across the GSS. The *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*⁶, which established the Authority, also

¹ "Boundary issues in relation to official statistics", CES, Geneva 2009 – ECE/CES/2009/23.

² "Strengthening integrity in the UK's decentralised statistical system", ISI, Durban 2009 – paper for STCPM13.

³ The head of the GSS is the National Statistician.

⁴ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/uk-statistical-system/index.html>

⁵ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/about-the-authority/index.html>

⁶ http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2007/ukpga_20070018_en_1

required the Authority to publish a Code of Practice. To this extent, we consider that the Code has a statutory basis even though it is not itself set out in statute.

The Authority published the Code of Practice for Official Statistics⁷ in January 2009. It sets out a series of principles and associated practices⁸ related to the production, management and dissemination of official statistics (and in two important respects it goes beyond this – it supports the practice of statistical experts commenting on the subsequent misuse of statistics, and it sets out a number of requirements relating to government statements issued alongside the release of statistics). Compliance with the principles and practices is a requirement for designation as National Statistics and is advisory for other, non-National (official) statistics - National Statistics being a subset of official statistics. The extent of compliance with the Code is determined by means of a formal process of Assessment⁹, conducted by the Authority's Monitoring and Assessment (M&A) Team.

The process of Assessment is evidence-based. We collect information from the producer of a set of statistics about the extent to which they consider that they meet the 74 practices set out in the Code; and we collect information from users, and from the providers of raw information (such as the owners of administrative databases, or representatives of survey respondents). We then analyse this information, bringing to bear our own views about, for example, the accessibility of statistical reports, or the effectiveness of confidentiality protection, and we publish our findings in the form of Assessment Reports¹⁰.

As well as assessments, the M&A team also conducts other 'scrutiny' work – via substantial 'monitoring' reports (such as the recently published review of the progress made in improving migration statistics¹¹); via brief M&A Notes¹²; and in the course of answering correspondence¹³ addressed to the Chair of the Authority.

Impact of the Code and scrutiny activity

There are two main reasons why we are interested in assessing the benefits of our 'scrutiny' work. First, at some point we (the M&A Team) will be challenged – by a producer, a Parliamentary Committee, or even by the Chair of the Authority – to demonstrate the value of our activity. Do the benefits of the 'scrutiny' regime merit the costs; is the investment in M&A contributing adequately to improved trust in the statistical system? To answer these sorts of questions requires us to maintain an evidence base, albeit qualitative rather than quantitative in nature. Second, by

⁷ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html>

⁸ The Code of Practice for Official Statistics superseded an earlier National Statistics Code of Practice. Whilst there is considerable similarity in the issues addressed in the Codes, the Authority deliberately set the standard in key areas, such as engagement with users, and the commentary about statistics, higher than current practice – and it will re-calibrate the Code over time to drive standards up.

⁹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/principles---procedures/index.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

¹¹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/reports---correspondence/reports/authority-report-4--migration-statistics-the-way-ahead.pdf>

¹² <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring-and-assessment-notes/index.html>

¹³ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/reports---correspondence/correspondence/index.html>

systematically reviewing our interventions we may be able to offer more strategic guidance: to generalise from the particular to the whole.

This section outlines some ways in which the new ‘scrutiny’ regime, supported by the Code of Practice, has stimulated change both in the environment in which statistics are produced and used, and in relation to particular statistical topics.

Conceptually, we might think about three types of benefits resulting from the ‘scrutiny’ regime:

1. Cases where, in the absence of the new arrangements, poor practices might have occurred (or continued to occur) – particularly relating to matters of integrity or propriety. For example, with no real prospect of discovery, release dates for statistics might be determined for non-statistical reasons. The ‘scrutiny’ regime therefore contributes to a climate in which people think twice.
2. Cases where producers change their statistical practices in order to become more compliant with the Code as a result of formal scrutiny of the statistics that they produce.
3. Cases where producers change their statistical practices in order to become more compliant with the Code as a result of formal scrutiny of a set of statistics produced by *another* organisation.

Examples of Type 1 benefits

The most significant such benefit to date stemmed from the publication by the Authority of M&A Note 1/2009¹⁴.

In December 2008, the UK’s Home Office¹⁵ released a “Tackling Knives Action Programme” Fact Sheet, containing a number of pieces of statistical information which purported to show the effectiveness of the Government’s efforts to reduce the number of teenagers killed or seriously wounded by knives.

The Fact Sheet contained information of the following types:

- Information on hospital admissions, drawn from a National Health Service administrative system, which is regularly published as official statistics by the Information Centre for Health and Social Care
- Information collected by the Home Office from the police forces that had taken part in the Tackling Knives Action Programme.

While initial attention was concerned with the Fact Sheet containing hospital admissions statistics before their scheduled publication, the Authority’s Note comparing the statistics in the Fact Sheet against the Code of Practice led not only to

¹⁴ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring-and-assessment-notes/knife-crime-statistics---a-review-against-the-code-of-practice.pdf>

¹⁵ Equivalent of a Ministry of the Interior

further media discussion, but also to a parliamentary hearing¹⁶. As a direct result of the media coverage, the Head of the UK Civil Service issued guidance to non-statistical staff (see annex A). This has had substantial repercussions across government; anecdotal evidence suggests that in many departments, Ministers and officials are increasingly calling upon statisticians for advice, and that they are following this advice.

A further example of a Type 1 benefit related to the publication of statistics on the deportation of foreign national prisoners in a Home Office news release on 26 December 2008. Following an investigation by the M&A Team and correspondence between the Chair of the Statistics Authority and the relevant government Minister and officials, these statistics are now published as part of a pre-announced statistical release.

Examples of Type 2 benefits

It is not easy to identify cases of producers making changes to their statistics to become more Code compliant, of their own volition – it is still relatively early days for the ‘scrutiny’ regime, and it will anyway always be difficult to attribute motive. However, we are aware that producers are considering the Assessment reports we publish, with a view to strengthening compliance for their own sets of statistics. Indeed, some Departments have been systematically reviewing their whole statistical operations with a view to becoming as Code compliant as possible *before* we assess their statistics. To this extent it is arguable that there is likely to be a step-change in the implementation of good statistical practice in the UK in 2009-10, associated with the publication of the Code of Practice and the beginning of assessment – even though this step-change may not be readily discernible.

However, some examples of type 2 benefits are clearly identifiable. For example, following a complaint about the presentation of statistics on Penalty Notices for Disorder (PNDs) – a non-custodial sanction which can be applied by the police in response to some sorts of anti-social behaviour – we found that young people who receive a PND are not classified as offenders and so are not included in statistics of first time entrants (to the criminal justice system), but that PNDs *are* included in separate statistics on the number of offences brought to justice. The relevant Government departments have published a Statistical Notice¹⁷ setting out the issues, and committing to undertake analytical work aiming to improve the presentation of statistics on numbers of first time entrants.

The M&A Team also explored the circumstances in which the Office for National Statistics brought forward the publication of a set of statistics (on the numbers of UK born and non-UK born people in employment) from the pre-announced publication date. The Chair of the Statistics Authority publicly supported ONS’ decision, though the accompanying M&A Note said that ONS should have formally announced the decision at the time it was made, and that the commentary in the release should have been strengthened in certain respects. A subsequent Parliamentary hearing helped reinforce these messages, not least that the National Statistician’s decision about the release date was not politically motivated, as had been suggested in the

¹⁶http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/public_administration_select_committee/pasc0809pn13.cfm

¹⁷<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/STR/d000864/000864StatisticalPressNotice.pdf>

media. This whole episode reinforced the position of the National Statistician, and has brought to life some practices in the Code.

Each of the (nine) Assessment Reports we have published to date has included a set of requirements which the producer must implement in order to gain (or regain) the National Statistics logo. Whilst some of these simply involve documentation, such as the publication of a revisions policy, or quality guidelines, others are of greater significance. For example, publications of statistics about road casualties will in future draw attention to the fact that the statistics show only a subset of the true number of road casualties – only those reported to the police (and hence included in the database from which the statistics are compiled). Not only will the producers improve the statistical commentary in order to make this point clearly and consistently, but they will change the title of the statistical publication, and they will contextualise the figures by including best approximations of the likely total number of casualties. And the publication of statistics of recorded crime in Scotland will, in future, include commentary about the statistics written by statisticians rather than supplied by the police forces and quoted verbatim.

Examples of Type 3 benefits

It is too early to identify any type 3 benefits with real confidence, although there are a number of encouraging signs. The Authority has published an M&A Note in which it drew attention to work undertaken to improve the comparability of hospital admission waiting time data by the relevant statistical offices in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. We think that our Note will encourage others to improve the consistency of UK aggregated data, and we are pressing for this in relevant Assessment reports.

We are also proposing to stimulate type 3 benefits quite actively. Later in 2009, when we have published 20-30 Assessment reports, we will analyse them and suggest to the Authority general approaches to address any problems with Code compliance that seem to be occurring frequently. For example, it is already clear that most producers are not engaging with a broad range of users and documenting their needs, as required by the Code. Rather than tackle this issue piece-meal the Authority may want to offer more detailed guidance to help producers and users¹⁸.

Conclusion

Whilst the Code of Practice has not yet been in place for a year, and the formal process of assessment is in its infancy, we can postulate with some confidence a number of beneficial impacts upon UK official statistics, and the statistical system, that are the direct result of the new arrangements – the independent investigation of the extent of compliance with the Code of Practice, and the public reporting of our investigation (we believe that this is more effective than working behind the scenes to influence, though of course sometimes this may be our preferred approach). Chief amongst these impacts are:

1. increasing awareness of the Authority's views on good statistical practice

¹⁸ Indeed, the Authority is currently undertaking a Monitoring Review called "Strengthening the User Voice", intended to improve the effectiveness of user engagement with producers.

2. a raised profile for the Authority, and hence increasing public and parliamentary awareness that the UK statistical system is independently regulated in order to serve the public good
3. improving standards of documentation, including metadata
4. signs of an acceptance by producers of the need to engage with a wider range of users than previously, and to develop statistical plans that take account of users' needs
5. an acceptance of the need to provide more informative and helpful commentary, and early signs that statistical commentary is beginning to improve
6. Ministerial/policy officials concern to be 'seen to do the right thing'.

Whether these changes are sufficient to rebuild public confidence is not yet clear. Indeed the Authority has faced criticism that by investigating concerns, some of which may prove to have little substance, it is undermining rather than enhancing, public trust in the statistical service. However, the Chair of the Authority has said¹⁹ that "it is essential to examine and report frankly on such matters to Parliament and the public ... in time we believe that our impartial investigations will be seen as evidence that the UK statistical system is strong and open, and able to make changes where this is in the public interest".

¹⁹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/about-the-authority/what-we-do/annual-report-and-accounts/volume-i---annual-report.pdf>

Annex A

Guidance to non-statistical staff issued by the Head of the UK Civil Service

- When preparing any publication containing statistics, including those drawn from administrative or management information, you must involve statistical professionals at the earliest opportunity
- You must not use unpublished statistics without the advice of a statistical professional
- You must not selectively quote favourable data from any unpublished dataset
- Decisions taken by statistical professionals are final
- Any publication containing official statistics must provide information relating to their quality, reliability and usability
- Pre-release access to official statistics is a privilege. You must not disclose any information, nor seek to alter it in any way
- Ignoring any of the above may constitute a breach of the Code and result in an investigation by the UK Statistics Authority and a published report to Parliament.