

National Statistics Code of Practice

Protocol on Consultation
Arrangements Between the
National Statistician and
UK Government Ministers



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Introduction

For a summary of the founding documents, roles and institutions associated with National Statistics, please see the section covering Scope in the *National Statistics Code of Practice – Statement of Principles*. This document also includes an explanation of the structure of the *Code* itself, along with a brief guide to the process by which a particular statistic is included in National Statistics.

The *National Statistics Code of Practice* consists of two parts. The *Statement of Principles* sets out the broad principles which all those involved in National Statistics are expected to follow and uphold. The Protocols describe how the principles are implemented in practice, and include descriptions of roles, responsibilities, structures, functions and processes. Where necessary, desk instructions will provide detailed technical procedures.

Authority for this protocol derives from the *Framework for National Statistics*, published by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in 2000, and it is written in accordance with the *National Statistics Code of Practice – Statement of Principles*, published by the National Statistician in 2002.

The Framework for National Statistics states –

The National Statistician will be responsible for ensuring that the Chancellor of the Exchequer, as Minister for National Statistics, and departmental Ministers are consulted on proposals that impinge on matters of government policy.

The National Statistics Code of Practice – Statement of Principles states –

Development and implementation of policy and programmes will be based on effective consultation.

Scope

This protocol sets out arrangements for consultation between the National Statistician and UK government Ministers. It sets out issues on which the National Statistician will be expected to consult with UK government Ministers – namely, where proposals for change in National Statistics policy or practice impinge on government policy. Guidelines are provided on how consultations should be organised and procedures in the event of substantive disagreement. This will help Ministers in ensuring they have the information they need to discharge their responsibilities for National Statistics. It will also help the National Statistician in carrying out his or her responsibility for the timing, content and release of National Statistics.

Exclusions

This protocol does not cover general consultations in which Ministers would normally be included, which are covered in the *Protocol on User Consultation*. Neither does it cover the devolved administrations. The National Statistician's responsibilities as Registrar General are laid down by Parliament in statute and are also not covered here.

Related protocols

- *User Consultation*
- *Release Practices*
- *Revisions*

Key roles and institutions

The **National Statistician** is head of the Government Statistical Service and has overall responsibility for the integrity of National Statistics. Departmental **Heads of Profession** for Statistics are responsible to the National Statistician for the quality of National Statistics within their departments. **Chief Statisticians** are responsible for statistics in the devolved administrations. For further information, please see the *Framework for National Statistics*.

The **Government Statistical Service** (GSS) comprises a wide range of people across most departments of government who contribute to statistical products. The GSS sets standards in professional competence, including qualifications and training.

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Reference documents

- *National Statistics Annual Report*
- Service Level Agreement between Office for National Statistics and the Bank of England

A guide to implementation

1. Submissions from the National Statistician to the Minister for National Statistics, or appropriate departmental Ministers

Decisions

- (a) Where the National Statistician is seeking a decision from the Minister, this will be clearly indicated in the submission. It will set out available options, make a recommendation, and use a format with a timescale preferred by the Minister.

Information

- (b) There is a general range of National Statistics activity where the Minister needs to be kept informed of progress or outcomes. This includes the regular developments submission, progress on major developments and briefing on revisions and new releases. Such submissions should clearly state that the submission is for information and that no decision is required.
- (c) Routine releases of statistics are matters where the Minister has stated a need to be informed. Because of the particular sensitivities surrounding release arrangements, these (including pre-release access) are the subject of a further protocol which should be taken as definitive in such matters.

Consultation

- (d) It is the National Statistician's responsibility to decide which issues require consultation, bearing in mind the requirement to consult on proposals that impinge on government policy. In exercising this responsibility the National Statistician is accountable in the usual way to Parliament and Ministers and the National Statistician's actions, through their impact on National Statistics, are subject to the monitoring role of the Statistics Commission.

- (e) A record of Ministerial consultations will be kept and reported annually in the *National Statistics Annual Report*.

2. Issues where Ministers consult the National Statistician

- (a) As the government's chief professional adviser on statistics, there will be occasions when Ministers consult the National Statistician (usually through the Head of Profession), for example when new statistics are required to measure particular phenomena or explain what is happening in society or the economy.
- (b) Departmental Ministers should also consult the National Statistician (usually via the Head of Profession) when changes are planned for administrative systems that impinge on National Statistics.

3. Proposals which impinge on government policy

Resources

- (a) The National Statistician has the power to move resources between projects within the Office for National Statistics, but must keep within the overall budget as agreed with the Minister for National Statistics.
- (b) Changes to the strategy set out in the agreed ONS business plan need to be agreed with the Minister, taking into account, for example, increase in compliance costs and any implications for the following year's business plan.
- (c) Where the National Statistician makes proposals that have resource implications for other departments he or she should secure agreement with the relevant Head of Profession. Agreement may also need to be reached at Ministerial level.

Errors and technical changes

- (d) Responsibility for decisions on changes in the way that some National Statistics are produced rests with the National Statistician or Head of Profession. Where they judge that a change will have significant policy implications, the view of the relevant Minister must first be considered. The Governor of the Bank of England will be included when appropriate.

4. Procedures for Consultations

- (a) Where consultation is appropriate, it will take place when proposals for change are at an early stage. Consultation should indicate, where possible, the impact on published series, resources and compliance costs, and should take place well before any changes are implemented.
- (b) The consultation should focus on the impact changes will have on statistics relevant to public policy, rather than on methodological issues.
- (c) Where a proposed change is judged by a Minister to have a significant impact on policy, and time is needed to consider how policy might need to be adjusted, the Minister may request the National Statistician to maintain the previous methodology in parallel with the new for a limited time. Both sets of results will be published.
- (d) Consultation on revisions will be initiated with the aim of publishing changes as soon as practicable, consistent with the National Statistics revisions policy. The National Statistician will determine the content, format and timing of publication. Normal pre-release access will apply.

5. When the Minister for National Statistics disagrees with the National Statistician

- (a) Attempts will be made to reach agreement involving discussions at official or (if needed) at Ministerial level.
- (b) Ministers will not direct the National Statistician on professional statistical matters. In the unlikely event that agreement cannot be reached on other issues, the Minister for National Statistics may direct the National Statistician to a particular course of action. In this event –
 - (i) the Minister for National Statistics, within one working day of this decision, shall inform the Chairman of the Statistics Commission that such a direction has taken place, its nature, and the reasons for the decision, and what consultations took place under this protocol;
 - (ii) the National Statistician will at the same time inform the Chairman of the Statistics Commission of any objections or qualifications she or he may have in regard to the given direction.

6. Method of Consultation

- (a) The National Statistician will consult the Minister for National Statistics and, if appropriate, departmental Ministers, in writing, making it clear that the consultation is under the terms of this protocol.
- (b) Sufficient time will be allowed to seek further information from the National Statistician and for Ministers to consult more widely. Normally, at least five working days will be allowed between Ministers' receipt of the consultation document and the time when a decision is required. In complex cases more time should be allowed. Exceptionally, as may be the case for market sensitive statistics, the National Statistician may request a shorter interval for response.

Annex

Roles and Responsibilities of Ministers and the National Statistician, extracted from the *Framework for National Statistics*

The Chancellor, as Minister for National Statistics, will be responsible for co-ordination across National Statistics.

Departmental Ministers, including the Minister responsible for ONS, will –

- be accountable for the statistical activities of their department and for the resources allocated to it, but will not normally become involved in the operational aspects of statistical work;
- determine the policy and resources framework within which the statistical work in their Department operates and set performance targets for National Statistics;
- ensure that their Department operates in accordance with this Framework for National Statistics and that National Statistics produced by their department are free from political interference;
- determine which individuals should have access to National Statistics produced by their Department in advance of their release, having first consulted the National Statistician;

The National Statistician, the UK Government's chief professional adviser on statistical matters, will –

- have responsibility for the professional quality of the outputs comprising National Statistics;
- be responsible for ensuring that the Chancellor of the Exchequer, as Minister for National Statistics, and Departmental Ministers are consulted on proposals that impinge on matters of government policy;

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- be responsible for definitions and methodology of National Statistics within the framework of international agreements and conventions, and within the restrictions of administrative systems;
- develop and maintain a professional code of practice for producers of National Statistics and, as necessary, resolve any issues concerning interpretation of the code of practice;
- have responsibility for the professional integrity of those outputs comprising National Statistics, including responsibility for the timing of their release, and for the content and format of that release, taking into account the views of users;
- set professional standards for National Statistics, including standards for release arrangements and quality assessment, and has the authority to determine whether or not a statistical output meets those standards;
- prepare an annual report on the performance of National Statistics to the Chancellor, as Minister for National Statistics.

