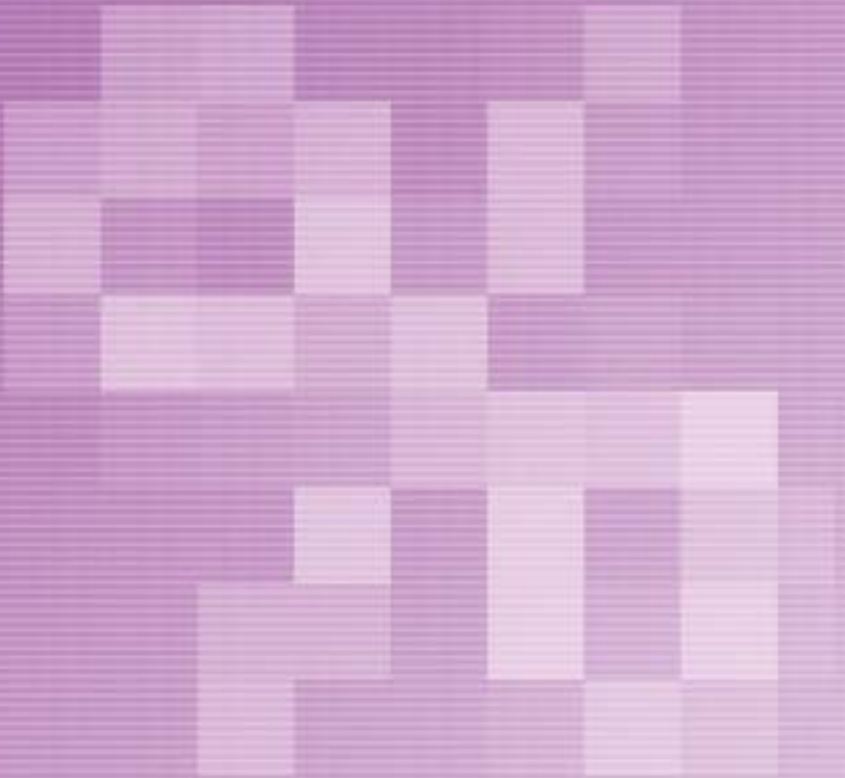


National Statistics Code of Practice

Protocol on Customer Service and User Consultation



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A National Statistics Publication

National Statistics are produced to high professional standards set out in the *National Statistics Code of Practice*. They undergo regular quality assurance reviews to ensure that they meet customer needs.

They are produced free from any political influence.

Contents

Summary of Principles	4
Introduction	6
Scope	6
Exclusions	7
Exceptions	7
Key players	8
Co-ordination	8
A guide to putting the principles into practice	9
Customer Service	9
Organisations will respond openly to all enquiries	9
Access will be as easy as possible	9
Organisations will welcome customer feedback	10
User Consultation	11
User consultation – an integral part of the statistical process	11
Engagement will aim to be clear, simple, transparent	12
– Time to make a useful submission	12
– Responding to feedback	13
Engagement will aim to be focused, scaled, inclusive	13
– Recognise diversity of users	13
– Focus on those with an interest	14
– Make effective use of resources	14
– Provide opportunity to offer submissions	14
– Accept value of dialogue but show no favours	14
Consultations will be co-ordinated	15
– Maximise value, minimise burden	15
References	16
Annex A: General information on the consultation process	17
Who are the users and how they should be engaged	17
Means of consultation	20
Annex B: Consultation on the <i>National Statistics Work Programme</i>	21
Annex C: Extract from Cabinet Office's <i>Code of Practice on Written Consultations</i>	25
Annex D: Statistics User Groups	27

Summary of Principles

Customer Service and User Consultation

Code of Practice – Statement of Principles

National Statistics will meet the needs of government, business and the community, within available resources.

Users' views are essential in ensuring the relevance of National Statistics. Development and implementation of policy and programmes will be based on effective consultation.

Through the processes of consultation, the National Statistician will develop a view of how National Statistics can best provide a balanced, comprehensive picture of changing social and economic conditions, relevant to the mix of needs that are important now and in the future.

The *National Statistics Work Programme* will reflect the needs of stakeholders and bring together the key elements of statistical work across government. Performance will be set out in the *National Statistics Annual Report*.

The planning framework, user consultation and priority-setting process for National Statistics will be transparent, with responses to consultations published whether or not they are adopted.

People involved in producing National Statistics will listen to and respond openly to all enquiries, including from the Statistics Commission and Parliament, and make all records open to scrutiny on request subject to resources and legal and confidentiality constraints.

Additional Principles embodied in this Protocol

Customer Service

All those involved in producing National Statistics will address and respond openly to all enquiries.

Access to National Statistics will be made as easy as possible.

Organisations producing National Statistics will welcome customer feedback.

User Consultation

User consultation will be an integral part of the statistical process.

Engagement with users will aim to be clear, simple and transparent.

Engagement with users will aim to be focused, scaled and inclusive.

Consultations will be co-ordinated to maximise value and minimise burden.

Introduction

For background information on this document please see *An Introduction to the National Statistics Code of Practice and its supporting Protocols*.

Scope

This Protocol sets out how all those involved in the production of National Statistics will meet their responsibilities with respect to customer service and user consultation. These responsibilities – which are outlined in the *Framework for National Statistics* and the *National Statistics Code of Practice* and its supporting Protocols – help to ensure the relevance of National Statistics.

This protocol recognises that users' views can be obtained through both formal and informal consultation. Common sense dictates that the freedom for statistics producers to seek users' views informally and the freedom for statistics users to supply informal feedback – solicited or otherwise – should not be constrained by all the procedures which apply to central government guidance on formal written consultation. By the same token, undertaking informal consultations does not discharge statistics producers from their obligations to undertake formal consultations where these are appropriate.

General information on the consultation process is contained in **Annex A**. Guidance on consultation for the *National Statistics Work Programme* is given in **Annex B**. The protocol covers formal and informal input from users through any media and builds upon central government guidance on consultation procedures – see **Annex C**. A description of the roles of Statistics User Groups is provided in **Annex D**.

Exclusions

This protocol does not cover all consultation arrangements with all stakeholders who have an interest in National Statistics, although these other arrangements should dovetail with the principles set out in the Code of Practice.

The arrangements governing the National Statistician's consultations with UK government ministers, and general consultation with providers of data (except in their capacity as users) are covered by two other protocols: *Consultation Arrangements between the National Statistician and UK Government Ministers* and *Managing Respondent Load* respectively.

Local agreements between statistics users and providers may also apply – commensurate with the range and diversity of local users and their needs – although these are expected to conform to the principles of the Code of Practice and this protocol. To maximise economies of scale, individual departments and devolved administrations will have access to UK level consultations, e.g. National Statistics Work Programme. An example of a specific user consultation framework used by a devolved administration – SCOTSTAT – can be found on the Scottish Executive website at:

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/stats/scotstats>

Issues concerning relations with the media and the dissemination of information through publications, the internet or other means are addressed in other protocols.

Exceptions – when users will not be consulted

In exceptional circumstances the National Statistician, a Head of Profession, or a Chief Statistician in a devolved administration may decide not to consult. For example, consultation may not be possible on changes to market sensitive statistical activity where the consultation, itself, could create market uncertainty. Where this is the case, public explanations will be given at appropriate times through

appropriate media, for example by Press Notice or via the National Statistics website.

There will also be cases where a proposed change is so small, straightforward and non-contentious that statistical producers may decide that consultation is not appropriate as it would not justify the use of limited resources for that purpose, nor justify the burden on consultees.

Key Players

The National Statistics **Theme Working Groups** (TWGs) are inter-departmental groups of statistics producers who are responsible for planning statistical outputs at a strategic level, and for commissioning National Statistics Quality Reviews. Their activities should also take account of user views. For a list of themes, see the National Statistics website at www.statistics.gov.uk. Information on theme-based consultations will be available on this website on the pages dealing with the specific theme. Devolved administrations also participate in Theme Working Groups although final decisions made by devolved administrations will reflect their own consultations with users and providers of their statistics.

Co-ordination

Where practicable, UK government departments and agencies will make information available on formal consultations to the central register of current public written consultations held on the UK Online website.

<http://www.ukonline.gov.uk/CitSpace/Consultations/CSConsultationList/0,1142,~801b22~fs~en,00.html?strRegion=>

Producers of National Statistics are responsible for informing the National Statistician about their formal consultations in order to avoid repetition and overlap and to make widest possible use of ideas, comments and other materials that become available through consultations.

A guide to putting the principles into practice

Customer service

1. All those involved in producing National Statistics will address and respond openly to all enquiries.
 - a) Organisations producing National Statistics will publish customer service statements which include the following commitments:
 - i. Producers of National Statistics will recognise the importance of engaging with the concerns of each customer, and in the case of significant users, the advantage of developing long-term relationships.
 - ii. Responses to customers will be timely and professional. Staff will be approachable and helpful and will readily identify themselves, and will make every reasonable effort to ensure that customers are provided with information that is relevant and accurate.
2. Access to National Statistics will be made as easy as possible.
 - a) Producers of National Statistics will provide facilities which strive to ensure easy, user-friendly access to National Statistics for everyone, including new and non-specialist customers.
 - b) In addition, the National Statistician will:
 - i. Offer guidance to the media on accessing appropriate expert advice on statistical issues. Producers of National Statistics will be expected to pre-announce releases through an accessible, publicised, central calendar provided by the National Statistician.

- ii. Provide online services, continuously available, where information will be set out to meet the needs of regular, professional users as well as casual users and the interested public.
 - iii. Maintain and publicise a contact centre to handle enquiries – whether submitted by e-mail, phone call, or letter.
 - c) Devolved administrations will provide their own access arrangements, which will, in addition, provide reciprocal links to the arrangements put in place by the National Statistician.
- 3. **Organisations producing National Statistics will welcome customer feedback.**
 - a) Producers of National Statistics will recognise the value of customer comments, including criticism and complaints, and will encourage customers to express their views.
 - b) Customer complaints will be dealt with promptly and constructively.
 - i. Each organisation producing National Statistics will have a published policy on handling complaints.
 - ii. Complaints which involve statistical issues, where they cannot otherwise be resolved, should be referred to the Head of Profession of the relevant department or the Chief Statistician in the appropriate devolved administration. If such complaints relate to professional integrity, quality or standards of National Statistics, they should also be referred to the National Statistician.

- c) Producers of National Statistics will make regular assessments of customer satisfaction focusing on key products and activities.
 - i. Feedback from customers, including complaints, will be recorded and analysed and corrective action taken where necessary.
 - ii. Where appropriate, surveys of customer satisfaction will be undertaken.
 - iii. Users will be consulted to assess the relevance of products.

User Consultation

1. User consultation will be an integral part of the statistical process.

An open culture involving genuine and effective user consultation is fundamental to strengthening public confidence in National Statistics. Producers should develop a clear view of who their users are, what are their interests, and how their needs can be met.

- a) Throughout the statistical process, consideration should be given to whether there are issues on which users need to be informed or consulted.
- b) Users should be engaged from the outset in changes to National Statistics involving collections, methodologies and outputs. This applies especially to plans to introduce, withdraw or substantially modify outputs.
- c) Whenever the protocol covering consultation with Ministers is invoked, and where appropriate, other users should be consulted in parallel.
- d) Suitable resources for consultation should be built into budgets.

2. Engagement with users will aim to be clear, simple and transparent.

a) Any initiative to involve users in National Statistics, whether small-scale and informal, or large-scale and formal, will be:

i. Clear

It should be clear who is being consulted, about what issues, and for what purpose.

ii. Simple

Issues will be expressed as simply and concisely as possible. Documentation will be structured to help respondents get to the key points, perhaps through the use of summaries. It should be made as easy as possible for users to respond, make contact or complain.

iii. Transparent

Any consultation documents, records of subsequent decisions and actions – and explanations for decisions and actions – will be publicly available.

b) Anyone interested will be given time to make a useful submission. A timetable will be publicly available and each part of the process given sufficient time for those interested to participate fully and properly.

i. For a formal consultation, a period of at least 12 weeks will normally be given for public submission. Where the period is shorter, there will be a public explanation.

ii. The timing of consultations will be built into the planning of the change being proposed, giving participants the best prospect of improving the relevance of any proposals.

- c) All user feedback will be subject to careful and open-minded analysis. Users will be given responses to their feedback by the following means:
 - i. In formal consultations, a summary will be provided on the National Statistics website, and/or other appropriate media, of who was consulted and the feedback given. As far as possible, clear reasons for adopting or rejecting any recommendations or proposals will also be provided.
 - ii. Users will be alerted as information on consultations becomes available. Paper copies of submissions and of reasons for rejection or adoption – where given – will be available on request. Individual submissions may be made available on request unless respondents have requested confidentiality – an option that should be clear at the time of consultation. Wherever practicable, the individual responses to any consultation should be put into the public domain.
 - iii. Statistics producers should also respond to the feedback they receive when undertaking informal consultation. This response may or may not be in the public domain, should reflect the means used to gather feedback and should ensure that participants are aware of the outcome of the consultation. In many instances this will be a single, general e-mail.
3. Engagement with users will aim to be focused, scaled and inclusive.
- a) Producers of National Statistics will recognise the wide diversity in the user community and the fact that customer groups have differing needs and resources and differing degree of access to the Internet.

- b) Consultation will be focused on those with an interest in the given issue and conducted on an appropriate scale.
 - i. Methods will be tailored to suit the scale and objectives of the consultation, taking into consideration the needs and expectations of the relevant customer groups, their degree of technical expertise, and the reasonable use of resources.
- c) Consultation involves the use of the limited resources and time of all those involved. Statistics producers will endeavour to balance the importance of the issue and the impact of user views against the time and resources available so as to ensure good value for money.
- d) Care will be taken to provide opportunity for anyone interested in an issue to offer submissions or comments. This will include making information available via the National Statistics or departmental websites, and actively notifying user groups and others with a known or predictable interest.
 - i. Those conducting consultations should assume a need for a variety of means of participation including, as appropriate, web sites, email, telephone, written submissions and face to face meetings.
 - ii. Consultations that are small and informal may often still be public and recorded, including notification of those likely to be interested, with information maintained on the internet.
- e) Regular dialogue with informed and committed users can lead to particular benefits but this will be balanced against the need to recognise the interests of a diverse user community.

4. **Consultations will be co-ordinated to maximise value and minimise burden.**
 - a) Producers of National Statistics will work together across departments and administrations to co-ordinate consultations in order to give participants the best opportunity for effective input, and to minimise the burden placed upon them.
 - i. It is the responsibility of producers planning a formal consultation to endeavour to find out recent and ongoing consultations, and to avoid duplication.
 - ii. Theme Working Groups will take responsibility for ensuring that theme based consultation exercises are co-ordinated.

References

Guidance and Consultation – Cabinet Office
www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/guidanceconsult/index.asp

Charter Mark – Cabinet Office
www.chartermark.gov.uk/goodpractice/index.htm

Customer Focus – The Prime Minister’s Office of Public Services Reform
www.pm.gov.uk/output/page261.asp

Annex A

General information on the consultation process

Who are the users and how they should be engaged

Users of National Statistics are many and varied. Producers of National Statistics should ensure that they have an up-to-date view of who are the main users of their statistical outputs, and the main uses they make of the data. Plans for introducing, changing or withdrawing National Statistics should take account of the informed views of a full range of users, data providers and subject experts. The user community includes the following groups, and when applying these standards, arrangements should be made to address their differing needs and expectations in a cost-effective manner. (Consultations can involve any, but not necessarily all, of the following.)

Government and Parliament

Special arrangements exist for consultation between the National Statistician and UK government ministers, especially on matters which impinge on government policy, and they are covered in a separate protocol. In addition, dialogue between National Statistics producers and policy customers will continue as part of the regular conduct of business.

Where National Statistics are produced in one department for use by another department, the arrangements for consultation between them will typically be set out in a publicly available Concordat, Service Level Agreement, or similar document.

Parliament and the devolved legislatures will be involved via Select and other Committees, Parliamentary / Assembly Questions and by placing information in relevant legislature libraries.

The citizen

Citizens who do not belong to interest or user groups can be difficult to engage. Their views can be sought through market research, either quantitative or qualitative as appropriate, for example through focus groups, by complaints monitoring and suggestion schemes, and from feedback through targeted newspapers and magazines. Formal and informal consultation routes can also utilise the National Statistics website, e-mail, and paper publications such as *Horizons*.

The media

There are no arrangements for canvassing the views of the media as a distinct user group. However, they can be encouraged to comment through the same channels as other users, while also enjoying the opportunity to provide feedback at briefing sessions arranged for specific statistical releases. The media, of course, are also in a special position to publicise their views.

User Groups

See Annex D

Private and public sector entities, including businesses, local authorities, trusts and schools

Consultations can be conducted through joint working groups focusing on specific topics, together with paper and internet based consultation exercises. There are also user groups on specific topics, comprising public and private sector interests (please see Annex D). In addition, listening events, for example seminars and conferences can be arranged on specific topics.

Voluntary sector, including charities

Users in this sector can also be difficult to engage. Similar consultation methods to those advocated for the citizen might be appropriate, in

addition to some of the methods advocated for the public and private sectors. Umbrella bodies will be useful contact points.

Specialists including special interest groups, academic and research organisations, and data intermediaries

Specialist users will have things to say on issues that concern their speciality, and producers of National Statistics – in accordance with the Code – have an obligation to notify specialists of any relevant consultations. However, specialists will also have comments and insights on more general issues and they can also be engaged through the same channels as suggested for public and private sectors.

Professional organisations and learned societies

Producers of National Statistics can engage with both users and their fellow professionals through participation in conferences and other events held by organisations covering professional interests, including those held by the Royal Statistical Society.

Regional and sub-national bodies

Producers should engage regional and sub-national bodies as a matter of course where the statistical activity encompasses regional data. Producers should also consider the potential impact of statistical changes on sub-national users and geographical coverage, and consult accordingly.

European and international bodies

Users can be engaged on European issues via the specific user forum CEIES. The United Nations Statistics Division and subject specific forums cover international issues. Consulting other National Statistical Institutes can also help to understand and achieve best practice.

Means of consultation

There is a wide range of consultation mechanisms; they include:

- Formal consultation documents (which should set out and summarise the key issues and might guide the content of submissions by use of questions);
- Issuing a discussion paper to interested parties;
- Listening events such as conferences, roadshows and seminars. These need not be organised by producers of National Statistics. Events held by other organisations, for example proceedings of participation in learned societies and professional organisations such as the Royal Statistical Society, can provide valuable opportunities;
- Visits;
- Meetings with groups or individuals;
- Correspondence and phone calls with groups or individuals;
- Market research;
- Internet mailing groups;
- Complaints monitoring and suggestion schemes.

Annex B:

Consultation on the *National Statistics Work Programme*

The *National Statistics Work Programme (NSWP)* will reflect the needs of stakeholders and bring together the key elements of statistical work across government. Consultation on the NSWP will help to fulfil the National Statistician's remit to 'maintain mechanisms for taking into account the views of users and providers of data in the priority setting process' (*Framework for National Statistics*).

The NSWP will be driven by the National Statistics strategy, which will be formulated with a four-year life expectancy and will itself be issued for consultation by the National Statistician. The NSWP will contain chapters showing the major developments and plans for all of the National Statistics Themes, including all the relevant departments and administrations whose outputs are covered by each Theme. These chapters will be commissioned and produced by Theme Working Groups (TWG), who will also lead on consultation arrangements for the chapters.

The formal NSWP consultation process will be biennial and will precede and inform government statistical spending plans. It should be made clear to users that consulting on proposed theme / departmental plans, priorities and expenditure covers a fairly long time span. Major items of work, requiring significant commitment of resources, will normally require spending approval from government and are unlikely to be launched until the financial year after the approval is published.

This is not to imply that theme-based consultation will be confined to plans and priorities requiring significant levels of resources. Nor does it imply that TWGs should only accept views provided during the formal consultations relating to spending plans. Indeed TWGs should be open to views provided at any time and will typically seek views at other times. Though *NSWP* theme chapters are of necessity at a strategic level, the consultations should allow for user feedback which can inform statistical work in more immediate ways – for example improvements to the format and accessibility of statistical outputs.

The *National Statistics Annual Report* should provide users with a reference where they can identify user needs which were flagged during the consultation process but omitted in the Work Programme, along with an explanation for their exclusion.

Theme Working Groups (and individual administrations and departments) should continue to make use of consultation arrangements which are suitable both for them and for their users. These arrangements will not be the same for each theme and every department. Nevertheless the following arrangements and timetable should normally be followed. (If not followed, an explanation should be made to key users, placed in the public domain and reported in the *National Statistics Annual Report*).

Consultations on cross-cutting issues which span more than one Theme will be covered by the arrangements described in the main body of this Protocol.

Year 1

Normally, January to June

In the normal course of events, formal written consultations will be issued, covering each of the TWGs as well as other matters. They will be placed in the public domain on the *About National Statistics* website and departmental websites, and users alerted to its existence. Each paper will allow at least 12 weeks for submissions.

Each Group will endeavour to facilitate an open meeting with key users, typically involving relevant User Groups (see Annex D).

To make best use of resources, producers and users will also endeavour to make use of existing mechanisms and planned meetings during this period to feed into the TWG strategy.

Normally, April to September

Summaries of TWG consultation submissions will be forwarded to relevant departments for consideration when drawing up their resource bids for the next government spending settlement.

Normally, July to October

TWGs will issue and place in the public domain an interim theme response. This response will be amended in the light of Ministerial decisions on expenditure bids, and reissued in due course.

This whole process should be as transparent as possible, but it will be made clear to users that details of departmental bids for resources cannot be placed in the public domain, and that officials' advice to Ministers must likewise remain confidential.

Year 2

Government spending settlements are generally published in July.

Year 3

The spending settlement will apply for the three financial years beginning 1 April of year 3.

Theme consultations will begin again in the first six months of the year, as indicated for Year 1 above. The process should then repeat the cycle and standards indicated above.

Users in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales may wish to comment on the National Statistics Work Programme. However in order to ensure that they have the opportunity to influence the plans and programmes of the devolved administrations, it will be necessary to engage them in consultations carried out by those administrations.

Annex C

Cabinet Office's Code of Practice on Written Consultations

This Code was issued by the Cabinet Office in November 2000 and applies to consultations carried out by UK departments and agencies, unless Ministers conclude that exceptional circumstances require a departure.

For further information, see the following website:

www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/regulation/Consultation/introduction.htm

The Consultation criteria

These criteria apply to formal written consultations and may well not be appropriate for all informal consultation.

1. Timing of consultation should be built into the planning process for a policy (including legislation) or service from the start, so that it has the best prospect of improving the proposals concerned, and so that sufficient time is left for it at each stage.
2. It should be clear who is being consulted, about what questions, in what timescale and for what purpose.
3. A consultation document should be as simple and concise as possible. It should include a summary, in two pages at most, of the main questions it seeks views on. It should make it as easy as possible for readers to respond, make contact or complain.

4. Documents should be made widely available, with the fullest use of electronic means (though not to the exclusion of others), and effectively drawn to the attention of all interested groups and individuals.
5. Sufficient time should be allowed for considered responses from all groups with an interest. Twelve weeks should be the standard minimum period for a consultation.
6. Responses should be carefully and open-mindedly analysed, and the results made widely available, with an account of the views expressed, and reasons for decisions finally taken.
7. Departments should monitor and evaluate consultations, designating a consultation co-ordinator who will ensure the lessons are disseminated.

Devolved administrations have their own arrangements.

Annex D

Statistics User Groups

In a number of subject areas, users from different backgrounds have joined forces to form their own user groups, which are independent both of government departments and single interest groups. Many of these user groups meet under the wing of the Statistics Users' Council (SUC), a voluntary body formed in 1970 to provide a forum at which users of official statistics can meet, exchange views and liaise with members of the Government Statistical Service. Details of the main user groups are available on the 'User Area' of the National Statistics website:

www.statistics.gov.uk/about/StatisticsUsers/default.asp

Outside the SUC umbrella, a number of other user groups exist, including groups run by the ESRC Data Archive for users of official datasets.

Government Statisticians also participate in a number of learned and professional organisations. In particular the Royal Statistical Society has an Official Statistics Section with a remit to discuss aspects of all official statistics, as well as other Sections and groups with specific subject areas of interest. These provide forums in which to consult fellow statisticians and those with an interest in statistics, both as technical experts and as users of official statistics.

Established user groups provide one very direct means of interacting with large numbers of users. Theme Working Groups will engage with existing user groups and encourage them to feed into National Statistics processes. In cases where there are no user groups, or where a significant portion of the scope of the theme remains uncovered, Theme Working Groups will encourage the establishment of new groups to ensure that expert user input is received. Government

departments may provide funds for adhoc meetings and for seminars arranged by groups which promote and support the development of National Statistics.

Unless a specific agreement about consultation mechanisms with user groups already exists, all statistics producers undertaking formal consultation exercises should, before consultation takes place, contact user group officials and discuss with them the best means of obtaining views from user groups and their members.

Many of the arrangements described for user groups do not apply in Scotland where there is a specific framework for user consultation on statistics produced by or for the Scottish administration – SCOTSTAT. Details can be found at:

www.scotland.gov.uk/stats/scotstats