

Statistical Policy Statement on Meeting User Needs through Engagement with Users

The Code of Practice for Official Statistics requires all producers of Official Statistics to publish transparent guidance on their policy for meeting user needs through engagement with users.

This paper describes how the Post-16 Education & Skills Statistical First Release ¹ (SFR) complies with the seven practices outlined under Protocol 1 (User Engagement) of the UK Statistics Authority's Code of Practice for Official Statistics². Planned work to improve compliance is also listed.

User Engagement

Practices

1. Identified Users

Analysis of enquiries to the Data Service's Service Desk, alongside internal discussions has identified several different types of user of the SFR. Current identified users include:

- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) who use the statistics to report on targets; develop and monitor policies; and to answer parliamentary questions.
- Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA) who use the SFR to respond to requests for participation, achievement and success rates information from external partners and organisations.
- Skills Funding Agency
- National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) who use the SFR for all statistics shared externally including press releases and for responding to requests from educational bodies such as sector skills councils.

¹ <http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/statistics>

² <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html>

- Ofsted (for success rates information)
- Researchers
- Media
- General public

The producers of the SFR are keen to engage users in ways that satisfy their own wishes, from collating suggestions gathered through the web site to inviting users to attend meetings of the user group and have their say. Users who are not satisfied they are experiencing sufficient engagement are contacted to discuss improvements.

2. User Awareness

The Data Service primarily uses their Statistics website³ to make users aware of the information available in the SFR.

Once the publication date and content of each SFR has been agreed (see practice (3) below for more on how this happens) the Data Service publishes the proposed publication date and template tables on their website that show which information will be published in the SFR, although these are not populated with statistics.

A large number of supplementary tables are published with each SFR to complement the main tables and provide additional, more detailed information. The commentary and tables footnotes in the SFR make clear where this additional information is located. Prior to each publication a list detailing the supplementary tables that will be published is made available on the website. This list includes the expected publication date of each supplementary table. Tables are published in two distinct batches, one at the time of the SFR and the other 4 weeks later.

In addition documents on the methodology and statistical protocols are available on the website. These are available in one section of the website to enable users to easily find the information they need.

The Data Service's Service Desk is kept briefed on the statistics and information available in the SFR and accompanying tables. They process a large volume of queries and therefore are able to inform many users of the location of suitable information. It is hoped that recent improvements to the design and structure of the Statistics website will help more users find the information they require. The Data Service acknowledges the need to increase awareness of the SFR and its contents to an audience that is not already engaged with the Statistics website.

³ <http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/statistics/>

3. Users' Views

Following the Statistical First Release, the Data Service hosts at least one user group to discuss the presentation of statistics in each SFR. The membership of the user group consists of nominated individuals from the key users identified in practice (1) above, as well as a representative from the Service Desk (who can represent the views of external users) and a representative from the Data Service's wider MI team.

Prior to the meetings the Data Service SFR team review Service Desk calls with the Service Desk representative to be able to present other users' views to the user group. These meetings discuss various aspects of the SFR including the statistical content and design of the tables. The roles and responsibilities of members of the user group are available on the SFR website⁴. The priority at which tables with new supplementary breakdowns of statistical information are developed is discussed at these user groups and users are able to make known their views on their preferences and the use they would expect to get from new tables. An increasing number of supplementary tables contained in the SFR are as a result of views from users.

The SFR web site and the SFR commentary invites users to contact the Service Desk if they have any comments about any element of the release however this has not yet resulted in significant amounts of feedback.

Before each release is published the statistics are thoroughly scrutinised by technical experts with pre-release access to ensure that their presentation is clear and meaningful for all users. The roles and responsibilities of the technical experts are available on the SFR website.⁵

4. Quality

Each SFR is published with a detailed commentary that includes information about the quality of the latest year's statistics, including biases that exist due to changes in the sector (e.g. a change to the way learners are funded) and an indication of how final (and therefore subject to revision in future releases) each data set used to populate the statistics is. The expected coverage and quality of data for the next SFR is also highlighted in each release. Important information on quality issues is reported in the 'Notes to Editors' section of each release. This includes information on the learning provision in and out of scope for the release, which should be known to fully understand the statistics reported.

Further information about how each statistic is derived is reported in a definitions document available on the Data Service website. Any changes to

⁴ http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/statistics/statisticalfirstrelease/sfr_user_engagement/

⁵ <http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/methodology/>

these definitions from the previous release that have affected the statistics in a significant way are reported in this document. This document also has links to significant amounts of further information published on the websites of the Data Service and Information Authority.

Any specific issues with the quality of data returns used in SFRs are reported on the Data Service web site⁶. Quality assessments against quality standards for source data are also published on the web site⁷. These assessments detail the results of completeness checks on important fields in the ILR collections and allow judgements to be made on the validity of reporting official statistics with these fields.

A Revisions Policy⁸ is published on the SFR website detailing when and how revisions to existing releases are published, the impact they have on statistics and the process for ensuring the users are informed about the revisions.

General information about data and management information, including issues with quality, are reported in the Data Service's internal e-mail newsletter 'Data News'. This provides further information to users in the Skills Funding Agency, YPLA and National Apprenticeship Service. There is also a newsletter published by *the information authority* and the Data Service, titled 'Inform', which is used to inform the wider further education sector on news about data and statistics.

5. Evaluation of Experimental Statistics

Currently the SFR does not contain experimental statistics and does not have any plans to do so. If experimental statistics were to be made available in the SFR, the user group would be consulted to discuss and evaluate these statistics. Plans for new experimental statistics would be announced on the SFR website. Key external customers would be contacted in order to seek comments and feedback on the planned approach.

6. Feedback

Feedback is sought from users through the SFR itself, and the SFR web site. Feedback is also logged through the Data Service Service Desk.

Enquiries raised by users are logged in a log and reviewed during the development phase of each quarterly SFR.

⁶ <http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/Services/DataQuality/known+issues/>

⁷ <http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/Services/DataQuality/quality-assessments>

⁸ http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/66499185-E311-40A4-A3C7-76D8D8FC252E/0/Revisions_Policy.pdf

Each SFR is developed according to a high level plan that is informed by the needs of users. Releases are designed to ensure the data required by users is made available as soon as possible, subject to quality thresholds.

The SFR and accompanying supplementary tables are produced with the aim that they answer as many of the expected questions as is possible and the increasing provision of supplementary information is as a direct result of feedback from users.

7. Consultation

The SFR User Group is the primary means of consulting users on changes to the statistics published in each release.

From May 2010 the Data Service has produced interim releases between each quarterly SFR for internal use and quality assessment only. These demonstrate the impact of changes and allow critical users and stakeholders (only those with pre-release access) to assess the effects of changes.

Any feedback received will be logged to ensure transparency, and a decisions log will give an accurate record of how changes have been decided on and implemented.

Prior to each actual release near-final table templates (without any data) are published on the website, as discussed in practice (2). This is usually one month in advance of the publication date. This allows users an early sight of the proposed statistics for the next release and an opportunity to comment on the proposals.

Future Developments

The Data Service recognises the importance of continually improving the SFR and ensuring it consistently meets users' needs. Planned future developments include:

- Actively seek feedback when publishing templates and the SFR by communicating with known users.
- Promote feedback on the website by including a specific feedback and through carrying out some survey work with identified users.
- Internal briefings to Agency/YPLA/NAS staff and an improvement in the information provided to the Data Service's Service Desk.
- More work on formal consultations with users.
- A small review of the timing and presentation of data contained in Post-16 further education and skills Releases.

Queries and Feedback

Any queries or feedback on this document should be forwarded to the service desk at the Data Service. They can be contacted at servicedesk@thedata-service.org.uk.