

# Improving the use and the usefulness of official statistics:

## An action plan for SUF, RSS and ONS

The goal is to improve the use and the usefulness of official statistics in the UK. This reflects the key message of the UN's fundamental principles for official statistics, in which official statistics are envisioned as providing:

“an indispensable element in the information system of a democratic society, serving the government, the economy and the public with data about the economic, demographic, social and environmental situation. To this end, official statistics that meet the test of practical utility are to be compiled and made available on an impartial basis by official statistical agencies to honour citizens' entitlement to public information” (United Nations, 2014).

The UK has a well-established system for the production and governance of its official statistics. One welcome recent move is that the UKSA is promoting the refreshed code of practice for statistics for use also by organisations beyond ONS/GSS that produce statistics of value to wider society.

Nevertheless, there is more that can and should be done to put users at the heart of everything that ONS/GSS does. This involves:

- ONS/GSS identifying and reaching out to users and potential users, understanding how best to communicate and engage with users
- ONS/GSS gaining insight into users' needs for existing and for new statistics
- Producers and users promoting the value of official statistics to society, including by showcasing official statistics products and developments, and how these are used
- Users, supported by ONS/GSS, to adopt best practice in the analysis and use of statistics, and generally to ensure a strong, self-sustaining user community
- And all of the above needs to be done cost-effectively, with due regard to the resources needed in the production and use of statistics.

For some time there has been the idea that there should be a **strategy for user engagement and insight** that is owned and implemented by the ONS and ideally shared with the whole of the GSS. The RSS's National Statistics Advisory Group (NSAG) is preparing a paper on this, recognising that a fresh focus on the use of official statistics requires that producers refocus their culture “towards better meeting user needs ... Staff should be proactive, rather than reactive, in engaging with users and responsive to those users' needs” (quote from Charles Bean's independent review of UK economic statistics, 2016). The RSS will report on this at the SUF meeting in November 2018.

To complement the development of a strategic framework and to start to put it into practice, ONS Communication Division and SUF members will hold **a series of workshops**. These were proposed by ONS at the SUF meeting in July 2018, where those SUF members present expressed their enthusiasm for this course of action. The workshops are intended to (a) summarise the current state of play, (b) set a clear vision for what we are seeking to achieve, and (c) produce actionable recommendations on how to make improvements in each of the following thematic areas:

- Communication between ONS/GSS and users
- Processes for identifying gaps and reaching new audiences
- How to undertake effective consultations on statistical developments
- User engagement generally in ONS/GSS developments and activities
- The role of technology in user engagement and communication
- User skills, including analytical capacity and capacity building
- Role and membership of SUF

## Next steps

1. SUF and user group members are invited to **volunteer to lead, or to take part in**, any of the seven workshops proposed above. Please **log your interest** with SUF Secretariat – email [statsusernet@ons.gov.uk](mailto:statsusernet@ons.gov.uk) **by Friday 26<sup>th</sup> October**.
2. SUF Secretariat (ONS CD) to assist workshop leaders in making the arrangements for, and holding, workshops. These could be held in premises to which SUF or user group members have access, or they could be hosted in ONS sites. Using ONS also provides the option of holding the workshop as an audio conference, with ONS providing a dial-in facility.
3. Workshop leaders to report back by the end of 2018 (ideally!), circulating the conclusions of the workshop to the full SUF community via StatisticsUserNet.
4. SUF meeting in March 2019 to review all conclusions and recommendations and agree necessary actions with ONS CD.

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15<sup>th</sup> October 2018