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## **THE UK STANDARDS AND GUIDANCE FRAMEWORK PROJECT**

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### **Contributed paper**

#### **SUMMARY**

The UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) is undertaking a standards and guidance project to develop an electronic framework to store all methodologies and statistical processes used in carrying out its business. The project has been underway for a year and a half. In that time a Lotus Notes database has been developed which incorporates multiple views, an automated change control facility, restricted editor access for individual business areas, a glossary and links to other useful information. It currently contains information from high level methodologies to desk instructions, is used by around 500 staff and is accessed by all ONS staff. It is expected to take another two years to fully populate the database and make it a key reference tool for the ONS.

The business benefits for the organisation are:

- helping staff carry out their work effectively and efficiently;
- identifying gaps where more guidance is needed;
- encouraging dissemination of good practice across ONS;
- facilitating the development of more coherent and consistent standards;
- facilitating the comparison of procedures between work areas;
- facilitating continuous improvement.

In the future, it is planned to use some of the information in the framework to achieve greater transparency in the production of UK statistics by having direct links from the framework to the National Statistics Website.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

1. The UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) is undertaking a Standards and Guidance (STaG) project to develop an electronic framework to centrally store all existing methodologies and work processes. The main purpose of the framework is to facilitate the sharing of information to achieve best practice. The framework is presented in Lotus Notes and is widely available to all staff in the ONS.

#### **II. BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT**

2. In October 1999 the UK Government published a White Paper entitled "Statistics: A Matter of Trust". The White Paper emphasised the need for statistical work to have high professional standards by maintaining and building on existing arrangements for the UK Government Statistical Service. It was

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared by Heather Gregory.

recommended that these arrangements should include mechanisms to share best practice between those involved in official statistical work. Following this, as part of a programme of internal audits during 2000, KMPG (an audit company) examined statistical methodology in the ONS, focusing on the guidelines and standards currently in place. The audit recognised that much good material existed, but it pointed to the lack of a systematic framework and central guidance. While central guidance for staff matters, finance, project management, etc. existed on Lotus Notes, guidance was not available in a similar way for the main business processes. Specifically, the audit report noted that:

- communication on methodology issues between locations was limited since issues tend to be specific to the inquiry i.e. business or demographic;
- guidance currently available may be derived from a variety of sources, lacking in a cohesive structure and, hence, cumbersome to use;
- there is a risk of inconsistency of approach with staff uncertain how to resolve difficulties;
- incomplete or out of date instructions may lead to inappropriate or out of date methodologies being adopted;
- a lack of structured guidance leads to ongoing verbal updates to methodologies being unsupported.

3. To address these issues, the Audit recommended that:

- a framework for statistical standards and guidance be developed and be available to all staff;
- there is a mechanism and agreed strategy for owners to keep their own guidance up to date.

The Standards and Guidance (STaG) project has been established to implement the recommendations of the Internal Audit Report.

### **III. STRUCTURE OF THE PROJECT**

4. The framework is being developed under ONS project management guidelines. Formal controls include:

#### **III.1 Project Board**

5. The Project Board meets for the following reasons:

- Project Initiation Meeting - met at the start of the project to discuss the Project Initiation Document (PID);
- End Stage Assessment Meetings - meet at the end of each stage of the project (normally quarterly) for the Project Board to formally review the project status, review of the completed stage and approve the action plan for the next stage. Highlight Reports are prepared by the Project Manager at monthly intervals between the meeting to keep the Project Board informed of progress;
- Mid Stage Assessment Meetings - will be called in the middle of a stage if the project is likely to go outside the scope or the set tolerances. This has not yet happened on STaG;
- Exception Meetings - will be called if there are changes to the tolerance set for the project which will the cost or the time the project takes to complete. This has not yet happened on STaG;
- Project Closure Meeting - when the STaG database is fully populated and all the gaps in the guidance are filled the project will be "signed off". Arrangements will be put into place to support and maintain the database and ensure the benefits of the project are maintained.

#### **III.2 Working Groups**

6. Individual business areas provide the resources required to develop guidance for the STaG database. Working Groups co-ordinate the work and act as links between the business areas and the STaG Project Team. Meetings between the Project Team and the Working Groups are held as often as necessary while their guidance is being transferred. Some of the meetings deal with editor training in the effective use of STaG.

### **III.3 Logs**

7. A risk log, an issue log and a lessons learned log were set up at project initiation: they are maintained and updated for each meeting of the Project Board.

## **IV. WORK UNDERTAKEN TO DATE**

### **IV.1 Inventory**

8. Using an electronic template, the project team carried out an audit of all existing statistical methodologies and processes to establish what was available, the format it was in (e.g. Lotus Notes, Word, Excel etc.) and if there were gaps in the guidance available. This informed the staging of the project and determined the extent of the work required to bring the guidance together in a framework on a single Lotus Notes database.

### **IV.2 The Database**

9. The STaG database was piloted by a work area with quality accreditation for their guidance and was launched to all ONS staff in March 2000. Response was favourable. It now includes a broad range of statistical methodologies and processes from commissioning through to disseminating statistics. As the project progresses, all levels of guidance will be put onto the database from departmental guidance to desk instructions used in all ONS statistical surveys. The database has an efficient change control mechanism and an archive facility to ensure an audit trail.

10. Work is being undertaken by another project to redesign and update the ONS Glossary database, which links into the STaG database. The statistical terminology element of the Glossary will provide easy access to terminology definitions for staff using STaG.

11. The STaG database is being developed with the NS Website in mind to help ensure we install our National Statistician's vision and "store once use many times".

## **V. BUSINESS BENEFITS**

12. The STaG Project will play a key role in implementing the UK National Statistician's vision for complete knowledge management in the ONS. He promotes the use of Lotus Notes for storing and sharing information in business areas and wants office wide policies in place rather than local policies. The STaG database will help facilitate the storing and sharing of information by having a central database, for managing and maintaining statistical methodologies and processes.

Further, the provision of a central framework is expected to bring several benefits for the organisation. These will include:

- helping staff carry out their work effectively and efficiently;
- identifying gaps where more guidance is needed;
- encouraging dissemination of good practice across ONS;
- facilitating the development of more coherent and consistent standards;
- facilitating the comparison of procedures between work areas;
- facilitating continuous improvement.

13. Business areas with guidance on STaG are already realising the benefits of methodologies and processes being in one place:

- Working Groups are developing common practices and linking into related business areas;
- All staff have easy access to high level guidance (National Statistics Protocols; ONS Guidance & Methodologies; Divisional Methodologies);
- Dissemination of revised guidance to staff through an automated function of the database;
- Automation used to limit editor access to maintain control;

- Editors automatically advised of requests for change;
- Version control of documents;
- Links to other databases and websites direct from STaG.

## **VI. QUALITY STANDARD**

14. The Standards and Guidance (STaG) framework has been based on the Retail Prices Index Quality Management System (RPI QMS) which has achieved ISO 9002 accreditation, which is an international standard for quality. The RPI QMS was used as a pilot for STaG and has maintained its ISO accreditation since the transfer of the guidance to STaG.

15. We recognise that the guidance for each work area is very individual and needs to meet business requirements. However, the generic specification listed below is used, wherever possible, when any guidance is transferred to the Standards and Guidance database:

- Plain English should be used throughout the guidance.
- Graphs/diagrams/tables should be used wherever possible to illustrate the text.
- Where appropriate, there should be references to publications and links to other databases.
- There should be periodic reviews of the guidance.
- Templates should be used to notify changes to the information on the database.
- A team/person will be nominated to facilitate database changes with limited Editor access.

16. On complete population of the database it is planned to raise the quality so it meets the ISO 9002 standard. How this is to be achieved will be considered as the project progresses and it becomes clear what guidance is available.

## **VII. CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION**

17. The importance of 'ownership' of the framework by the business areas is recognised. Business areas need to be convinced of the benefits of the approach, both to them and to the organisation. A communication strategy is therefore an important thread of the project team's work. We have used various methods of communication to ensure the success of the project:

- Periodic updates on our internal communication network and via the GSS News;
- Awareness seminars for ONS senior managers and other Government Departments;
- Discussion with senior managers in business areas transferring guidance to arrange resourcing etc;
- Regular informal meetings and other contact with business area Working Groups;
- Discussion groups with work areas going "live" on STaG to ensure staff are fully aware of its functionality.

## **VIII. TIMETABLE**

18. The project is expected to be completed in June 2003. However this will depend upon:

- the information for the database being readily available;
- the number of gaps in the information where guidance has to be created;
- the availability of staff to assist in the project.

19. The transfer of the guidance is being managed in stages to ensure it is put onto the database accurately and that mechanisms for change are in place. Target dates are set at the beginning of each stage but may be subject to change depending on the above factors. An up to date Action Plan is provided for each meeting of the Project Board.

## **IX. LINKS WITH OTHER PROJECTS**

20. Links with other key ONS initiatives have developed over the past year:
- The Statistical Infrastructure Development Programme (SIDP) is looking at the development of standard methodologies, planning and making arrangements for the statistical development work required. STaG has created a "Statistical Components View" which will identify key processes within guidance material on the database. This will facilitate the creation of standard methodologies and best practice processes through SIDP;
  - The Information Management Programme (IMP) will be looking at lifting information directly from STaG onto the National Statistics Website in the next few years. The statistical components view will help them to do this. The Programme will also be involved in the development of a standard template so that statistical guidance can be viewed on the National Statistics Website in a structured and consistent way.

## **X. THE FUTURE**

21. It is not within the scope of the STaG project to compare and contrast guidance on the database to achieve best practice. At the moment we can only encourage Working Groups to extend their work, after business area guidance has been transferred to STaG, to compare and contrast guidance from similar work areas to achieve best practice. It has been recognised that this needs to be taken further on a more formal basis, either by extending the scope of STaG or setting up a new project. The cost and resource implications are being considered.

## **XI. CONCLUSION**

22. The STaG project is part of the ONS vision for a fully integrated information system. We will be instrumental in making a difference to the way ONS works by facilitating the creation of best practice and making information readily available for transfer to the NS Website subject to business area agreement. Not only will information be more widely available to staff in the ONS but, in time, ONS can be transparent about the way it does its business using the National Statistics Website.