

Building Trust in Numbers and Communicating Statistics

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1. Ensuring Independence in the Production and Regulation of Statistics

The [UK statistics system](#) has been established to ensure independence in both the production and regulation of statistics.

Led by the [UK Statistics Authority](#) there is a statutory objective of promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of official statistics that 'serve the public good'.

The public good includes:

- informing the public about social and economic matters;
- assisting in the development and evaluation of public policy; and
- regulating quality and publicly challenging the misuse of statistics.

The Authority believes that official statistics are for the benefit of society and the economy as a whole; not only in government policy-making and the evaluation of government performance, but also informing the direction of economic and commercial activities.

Statistics provide valuable data and evidence for analysts, researchers, public and voluntary bodies, enabling the public to hold to account organisations that spend public money, and informing wider public debate.

The Authority wants to see official statistics enabling sound policy decisions, and providing a firm evidence base for decision-making both inside and outside of government.

2. Measuring Public Confidence in Official Statistics

The UK Statistics Authority undertakes an independent survey every couple of years to measure public confidence in official statistics.

The last [Public Confidence in Official Statistics survey](#), was conducted in 2021 by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen).

Results found that public confidence in official statistics remains high, and engagement with official statistics has increased since 2018.

Awareness of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and its parent body the UK Statistics Authority had increased since 2018. A very high proportion of respondents trusted ONS (89% of those able to express a view) and its statistics (87%). The report also found:

- 82% of people able to express an opinion agreed that official statistics are generally accurate, up from 78% in 2018.
- 90% agreed that personal information provided to ONS would be kept confidential.
- Trust in ONS remained similarly high to 2018 and was highest of all institutions that were asked about, including the Government, the Bank of England, and the Civil Service as a whole.

With the ONS delivering the 2021 Census in England and Wales, the Coronavirus Infection Survey, and producing more detailed health statistics during the pandemic, there were increases in the proportion of people who said they had participated in and used ONS statistics:

- 78% said they had participated in an ONS survey (up from 57% in 2018)*.
- Around one in 10 (11%) reported having taken part in the Coronavirus Infection Survey**
- 44% of people said they had used ONS COVID-19 statistics. They were more commonly used than any of the other statistics asked about with the exception of the census.

In 2021, more people were aware of the UK Statistics Authority (48% of those who gave a response, up from 33% in 2018) and for the first time people were asked about its regulatory arm, the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR). Of those able to express a view:

- 96% agreed that it is important for there to be a body such as the Authority to speak out against the misuse of statistics.
- 94% agreed about the importance of there being a body to ensure that official statistics are produced without political interference.
- 74% of people able to express a view in 2021 agreed statistics are produced free from political interference. This is similar to 2018 (73%).
- 41% of those able to give a response had heard of the OSR.

3. Intelligent Transparency

Transparency and clarity support public confidence in statistics and the organisations that produce them and minimise the risk of misinterpretation of statistics and data.

Statistics and data should serve the public good. They should allow individuals to reach informed decisions, answer important questions and provide a mechanism for holding government to account.

At its heart [intelligent transparency](#) is about proactively taking an open, clear and accessible approach to the release and use of data, statistics and wider analysis.

There are three core principles which combine to support intelligent transparency:

- equality of access;
- enhancing understanding; and
- analytical leadership.

Intelligent transparency is at the core of many of the practices outlined in the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#).

[OSR's latest work on transparency - OSR publishes new regulatory guidance as part of its transparency campaign](#)

Supporting Blogs

[Transparency is fundamental to trust – the government must learn from mistakes during the pandemic](#)

[Transparency: How open communication helps statistics serve the public good](#)

4. Why Does Analytical Leadership Matter?

At the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR), we believe that strong analysis can inform decisions that help improve the lives of citizens.

We saw first-hand how data and analysis entered the spotlight during the COVID-19 pandemic and the benefits that came from this, including cross-department collaboration, producing analysis quickly to respond to emerging issues and using analysis to inform a wide range of policy and operational decisions.

OSR would like to see analysis stay in that spotlight by applying learning from these successes to other key societal issues, including, for example, on climate change, levelling up and increasing living costs.

Effective analytical leadership ensures that the right data and analyses are available, and that analysts are skilled and resourced to answer society's most important questions.

Following our previously published [statistical leadership](#) systemic review, which highlighted the importance of government(s) showing leadership and being role models for the use of data and evidence, we will continue work to explore the broader analysis context, engaging with new stakeholders to support this throughout 2022/23.

DG for Regulation, Ed Humpherson said:

“Our planned work on Analytical leadership will show how the TQV (Trustworthiness, Quality and Value) framework can be relevant and helpful to everyone working with data and analysis in government. The framework supports confidence in analysis and decisions informed by analysis. By drawing on TQV, government analysis can more fully serve the wider public good.”

Here is OSR's latest blog – [Analytical leadership: How do we make sure the gains we've made stay for \(the public\) good?](#)

5. Talking Numbers and Making Them Count

Communications professionals use insights and ideas to implement and deliver impactful communications. Using statistics is a great way to use evidence and explain complicated information, but comms people are not always well-known for their statistical literacy and this can sometimes cause problems.

During a busy day in the comms team, any use of numbers in a press release, tweet or presentation should align with the Code, ensuring messages are clear, measured and appropriately tell the story. It is essential that production and use of statistics by governments command confidence in the statistics and organisations using them and help those listening understand the key messages.

At the Office for Statistics Regulation we are interested in how numbers can be used powerfully and collectively across government, to convey important messages and information. Statistical leadership by government is essential to ensure the right data and analysis exist; to ensure they are used at the right time to inform decisions; and to ensure they are communicated clearly and transparently in a way which will support confidence in the data and decisions made on the basis of it.

Statistical leadership is not just about having good leadership of the statistics profession. While this is important, we want to make sure individuals inside and outside the statistics profession show leadership. This should happen right through from the most junior analysts producing statistics to the most senior Ministers quoting statistics in parliament and media. It is relevant to all professions including policy and communications specialists.

Communications teams should work in close partnership with their department's analysts, to ensure that any use of statistics does not distract from your key communications messages, or itself become the story. The winning situation is using statistics in a helpful way, to convey the right impact, help tell the story, gain understanding and enhance the organisation's reputation in the process.

The Code of Practice for Statistics and its principles and practices of 'trustworthiness, quality and value' provides an excellent guide to ensure this is done as effectively as possible, to ensure users can confidently make decisions about the statistics that are presented to them, using them without question to access what they require and need.

Statistics can really add to public debate as we have seen during the events of COVID-19, when the nation has used numbers to understand the pandemic and its impacts on society, the economy and wider. But it is essential that anyone using numbers and speaking on behalf of government can communicate statistics effectively, in a way that commands confidence and helps those listening understand the key messages. The simplest way to achieve these outcomes and empower your message is to ask the right questions about statistics before you use them. And, if you still feel unsure then find another way to evidence your point.

However, comms people don't need to know the Code inside out and should always work closely with Heads of Profession for Statistics for advice, support on using numbers and understanding of guiding principles.

Example tips...

- Does it look right? Is that an implausible number? If it's unusual, it could be wrong... what's behind the surprise?
- What exactly are we measuring and why? Is the source reputable and did they show their working?
- Where do the data come from? What is the backstory and always be curious about someone else's data. What do we discover if we go another click?
- Only compare the comparable. Watch out for changes in definitions and different ways to measure the same thing . What's the historical trend?
- Presentation is key. Good use of pictures and graphics help convey meaning and should never cause confusion or misrepresentation
- Remember to ask your Head of Profession for statistics, or a statistician who has worked to produce the data, for advice on how best to present numbers in communications.