



Public Confidence in British Official Statistics

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INTRODUCTION

Early in 2004 the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the Statistics Commission agreed to jointly undertake a project to assess public confidence in British official statistics. The aim of the project was to build an understanding of the issues underlying public confidence in official statistics and to develop a measure of public confidence. This report brings together the overall findings of that project.

KEY FINDINGS

- Public confidence is a complex issue and confidence levels vary between statistical series and between participants.
- On the whole participants had more confidence in the quality of official statistics than in the delivery of official statistics.
- There was considerable confidence in the methodologies used to produce official statistics and the accuracy of outputs.
- Participants were concerned that there was interference at certain stages of the statistical process particularly in determining statistical definitions and choosing which statistics to collect.
- There were conflicting views regarding the independence of the Government Statistical Service (GSS) and ONS. Participants emphasised that the independence of statistical services was one of the most important factors for ensuring confidence in statistics.
- Participants believed that the statistical service's communication mechanisms were poor in a number of areas. Improving communication was seen as vital.
- There was a perception among participants that the Government manipulated official statistics.
- Participants believed that the media misrepresented official statistics. Selective reporting by the media, based on particular biases, was considered widespread.

BACKGROUND

Context

Understanding, measuring and addressing public confidence in Government and government institutions is a key objective of the UK Government. Ensuring good faith in the nation's statistics, which are vital for decision-making not only in government but all sectors of society, is a key aspect of this objective. As a consequence addressing public confidence in official statistics is embedded in the aims and objectives of the statistical system.

In 2000 the *Framework for National Statistics* was launched which sets out the UK statistical system's governance arrangements and describes the roles and responsibilities of each of the key stakeholders. The Framework articulates the Government's commitment to providing 'a statistical service that is open and responsive to society's needs and ...better and more reliable official statistics that command public confidence' (NSID 2000, p.3).

One of the objectives of National Statistics is to improve public confidence in official statistics. A key development in recent years has been the publication of the *National Statistics Code of Practice* and its supporting Protocols. These publicly present the principles by which official statistics should be produced, the professional standards to which government statisticians work, and the protection statisticians have against political interference.

ONS is the principal producer of official statistics in the UK. As such one of its corporate targets is to improve public confidence in the integrity and validity of outputs. The ONS Annual Report 2002/03 stated that the National Statistician would develop methods for measuring public confidence in official statistics and measure confidence through independent survey (ONS 2003, p.27). This commitment was backed at the Treasury Select Committee hearing in October 2003 when the National Statistician agreed to undertake a national survey to assess public confidence.

Current environment

Trust and confidence in government institutions has long been recognised as an issue of importance. Without the backing of the general public the capacity of the Government and the Civil Service to execute their responsibilities is seriously undermined. In the case of a statistical office it undermines its capacity to command stakeholder respect for its outputs as well as its capacity to carry out core functions such as public surveys (Ryan 2000).

In recent decades there has been a marked decline in trust in many government institutions not only in the UK but in a number of OECD countries (Cabinet Office 2004, Duffy et al 2003, Ryan 2000). In Great Britain this is exemplified by a decline from 39 per cent in 1974 to 16 per cent in 2000 of people who trusted 'British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party' (Haezewindt 2003, p.20). Trust in the Civil Service has also declined, falling from 46 per cent in 1983 to 17 per cent in 2002 (up from 14 per cent in 1996) (Duffy et al 2003).

Unravelling the drivers of public confidence and trust is recognised internationally as vitally important but very difficult. Consequently, a number of recent studies have sought to identify those factors that have the most influence on trust in public services or products (Duffy et al 2003, Opinion Leader Research 2002). Among the most important identified were dependable products, strong leadership, independence, clear communication and engagement with stakeholders. Fellegi (2004) identified three factors required for confidence in a statistical office:

- Structural factors - organisational independence
- Statistical factors – sound statistical processes and quality outputs
- Reputational factors - good communication with stakeholders

The meaning of ‘confidence’

The concept of ‘public confidence’ in official statistics is complex, and though widely used is ill defined. It is often considered tantamount to trust. However, in terms of statistical services it encompasses more than just trust in the quality of statistical outputs but also includes satisfaction with the delivery of those outputs.

In a recent study, *Trust in public institutions*, MORI sought to define public trust in terms of government institutions. It was proposed that people’s perceptions of public services had two distinctive though related dimensions. Firstly, the honesty or trustworthiness of the information provided by the service. Secondly, satisfaction with the service provided. The report concluded that with regard to public services ‘trust is synonymous with confidence...and based on the outcome of the service and the way it is delivered’ (Duffy et al 2003, p4).

The public confidence in official statistics quantitative and qualitative studies highlighted a two dimensional approach to participants assessment of statistics. Generally, they made a clear distinction between the quality of outputs (the outcome of the service) and the delivery of outputs (how the service is delivered).

Quality of statistical outputs encompassed the production of statistics. It covered factors such as the choice of statistics collected, methodologies used, accuracy of the figures, competence of statisticians, and independence of the producing organisation.

Delivery of statistical outputs encompassed the communication of statistics in terms of their dissemination, presentation and use. It covered factors such as the timing of statistical releases, promotion of statistical outputs, accessibility of statistics, explanations on errors and revisions, relevance of statistical reports, media coverage and Government use of statistics.

For the purposes of this report public confidence in official statistics is therefore defined as having two dimensions – quality of outputs and delivery of outputs.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Aim of project

As stated earlier, ONS and the Statistics Commission agreed to jointly fund a project to build an understanding of, and measure, public confidence in British official statistics. Its aims were to:

- understand the issues underlying or driving public confidence in official statistics;
- assess the level of confidence the public has in official statistics; and
- develop a quantitative measure of public confidence.

A steering group with representatives from across government was established to oversee the project.

Methodology

The project consisted of four separate but related studies. Each study is briefly described below. More detail can be found at the links provided.

Desk research on similar projects undertaken by other National Statistical Offices.

The main objectives were to determine if:

- other National Statistical Offices had undertaken similar research;
- methods used in other countries could be adopted in Great Britain;
- a benchmark could be found for Great Britain; and
- activities are undertaken to improve public confidence.

Around 31 countries were contacted via email in May 2004. Of the 31 contacted 18 responded. Their feedback was used to inform the subsequent qualitative and quantitative studies. A report on the study was released today and can be found on the National Statistics website

(http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/data/public_confidence/reports.asp).

Qualitative study of the general public's confidence in official statistics.

The objectives were to develop an understanding of:

- the public's confidence in official statistics;
- the factors that influence public confidence; and
- ways to improve the level of public confidence.

Nine focus groups, totalling 70 participants, were held across England, Wales and Scotland in summer 2004. The groups were stratified by educational attainment with men and women from a range of age groups. A detailed report on the study, its methodology and findings, was released today

(http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/data/public_confidence/reports.asp).

Qualitative study of key opinion-formers¹ views of official statistics.

The objectives were to record opinion-formers views on the:

- credibility and reliability of official statistics;
- presentation and use of official statistics,
- key drivers of perceptions; and
- means of improving public perceptions.

¹ Opinion-formers were seen as those members of society that have the capacity to influence the views of the general public.

Thirty-six unstructured interviews were held with opinion-formers from a wide range of disciplines including the media, Parliamentarians, academia, and the voluntary sector. The Statistics Commission released a report on the qualitative study today which can be found on their website (<http://www.statscom.org.uk>). The report provides details on the findings of the study and the Statistics Commission's response to those findings.

Quantitative study of the general public's confidence in official statistics.

The objectives were to determine the:

- level of public trust in particular statistical series;
- reasons for trusting or distrusting those statistics; and
- personal characteristics associated with trusting or distrusting official statistics.

The data were collected in July 2004 using the ONS Omnibus Survey. Around 1700 respondents took part in the survey from across England, Wales and Scotland. An interim report on the quantitative study was released in October 2004. The final report was released today which gives a detailed description of the study and its findings (http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/data/public_confidence/reports.asp).

FINDINGS

Each of the studies identified issues that were most relevant to the group participating in the particular study, dictated by the method used to gather the information. However, there were a number of key themes that permeated each of the four studies and, in particular, the qualitative and quantitative studies. The themes presented in this report are those that were evident in two or more of the underlying studies. More detail can be found in the reports highlighted in the previous section.

It must be emphasised that the summary below is based on information gathered from participants in each of the studies. Some views are based on misunderstandings; these are presented without correction in order to be true to participant feedback. Any future strategy to address public confidence must seek to rectify these misunderstandings.

Main messages

Confidence in official statistics is a complex issue, driven by a number of factors. These ranged from the personal characteristics of participants, to the political climate surrounding a particular statistic, to the perceived independence of the statistical organisation. Therefore, levels of confidence varied between particular statistical series and between participants.

On the whole there was more confidence in the quality of official statistics than in the delivery of official statistics. This was evident in the three quantitative and qualitative studies. The statistical quality of official outputs was considered to be generally good and to rival the best in the world. However, participants were dissatisfied with the dissemination, presentation and use of official statistics.

The quality of official statistics

Definition of official statistics

Official statistics were generally believed to be of better quality than 'other' statistics. However, there was uncertainty as to which organisations produced official statistics and what determined whether a statistic was 'official' or not. Most participants believed that government bodies, or publicly funded organisations, were the producers of official statistics and that such statistics were subject to some kind of protocol for production.

Promotion of the role and responsibilities of the GSS, as a key producer of official statistics, was seen as essential. This included a desire for information on the protocols that the GSS (and other organisations) adhered to when producing official statistics.

The introduction and promotion of a kitemark for official statistics was suggested to differentiate these statistics from others (the National Statistics kitemark was not widely known). Indicators of the degree of quality and usability of statistics, e.g. if future revisions were expected, were seen as vital.

Independence of producers

The independence of the producing organisation is one of the most salient factors in engendering confidence in statistics. There were conflicting views, and much concern, regarding the independence of the GSS generally and ONS in particular. Government influence on, and the politicisation of, statistics were the key issues of concern.

There was a strong feeling that producers of official statistics must be publicly recognised as independent of Government. Many called for ONS to be given greater autonomy, reporting directly to Parliament, thus increasing the distance between the Government and ONS. Some suggested that an independent body to monitor the production of statistical outputs, including the capacity to address complaints, be established. Others believed that the current level of GSS and ONS independence should be promoted.

Process of production

There was considerable confidence in the methodologies used to produce official statistics and the accuracy of outputs. However, anxiety did exist regarding undue influence at various stages in the statistical process by those with a vested interest. Common perceptions among survey respondents were that there was political interference in the production of statistics, and that the public would not be told if mistakes were made in the production process. There was particular concern among participants that there was interference in determining statistical definitions.

There was also concern regarding the choice of statistics collected. Many believed that this was solely determined by the Government, and thus based on political motivations rather than the needs of society. Others thought that the statistics collected did not adequately reflect the current complex social

and economic environment, and that there was scope for the relevance of collections to improve.

It was suggested that more contextual information accompany statistical outputs. Information on why and how data were collected, by whom and for whom, was seen as vital, as was how the choice of statistics collected was determined and prioritised. There was also a call for wider consultation with users on the most appropriate statistics to collect.

Educating the public on how to critically interpret statistical outputs was seen as important for improving perceptions. This would involve raising awareness on the processes used to produce official statistics.

The delivery of official statistics

Relevance of the statistical message

The public had more of an interest in statistics that were of direct relevance to their everyday lives. These were statistics that were presented in such a way as to highlight the impact on them, or that reflected their personal circumstances e.g. hospital waiting lists or local crime rates. However, even where the statistics presented were relevant to participants' personal circumstances they were less likely to have confidence in them if they did not equate with their own experiences.

Presenting statistical information so as to make it more relevant to the general public was suggested as a way of raising the profile of official statistics. Mainstreaming statistics was also seen as a way of improving public perceptions, such as regularly having a credible television personality present new and interesting statistics.

Communication on revisions and errors

Revisions were believed to inadvertently diminish confidence in official statistics, despite many understanding and accepting the need for them. Communication was seen as the key issue. It was suggested that when a figure was expected to be revised that this be clearly highlighted on release, along with information on why the figure was to be revised and when the revision was to occur.

Errors were also thought to undermine public confidence, though again it was acknowledged that these would occur at times. Good communication when errors arose was seen as fundamental. This meant responding in a timely and transparent manner, explaining why the error occurred and what would be done to avoid it occurring again.

Information on the official statistics available

There was little knowledge of what statistical outputs were available or how to access them. Few knew of the depth or breadth of official statistics collected and many did not know if they were available or how they were accessible. Those who were aware of the products available cited difficulties in gaining access to them. It was widely acknowledged that the National Statistics website should both be improved and promoted.

Timing of releases

There was considerable concern regarding the timing of statistical releases. Many believed that the Government determined, or unduly influenced, when or if statistics were published. Releases were believed to be either delayed or brought forward depending on what was most favourable for the Government. Some also lamented the time lag between collection and release rendering outputs out-of-date. Improving communication on the timing of releases, and how this is determined, was considered critical.

Manipulation and misrepresentation by the Government and media

There was a perception among participants that the Government and the media manipulated and misrepresented official statistics. The majority of survey respondents believed that the Government did not use official statistics honestly when talking about its policies and that statistics were changed to support an argument.

Participants believed that Government manipulation of official statistics was commonplace. Pre-release access was seen to give Government unnecessary opportunity to 'spin' the message and many believed this should be abolished or at least reduced. There was also concern that political arguments regarding the quality and integrity of particular statistics undermined public confidence generally.

Participants considered media misrepresentation of statistics widespread. The media's political biases, and selective reporting of statistics, were widely acknowledged by participants. Some also believed that the media was disproportionately critical of the GSS.

So as to mitigate misrepresentation it was considered important to provide explanatory information with statistical releases such as information on how to interpret the outputs and guidance on their appropriate use. Publicly commenting when statistics were misused or misinterpreted was seen as important. It was also suggested that educating the media, in terms of reporting and presentation of statistics, could assist in preventing misinterpretation.

Determinants of public confidence

A key objective of the project was to identify those factors that were associated with, and possibly driving, the British public's confidence in official statistics. Different, though related factors, were indicated by the two quantitative and qualitative studies undertaken by ONS.

The quantitative study identified three factors that had the most pronounced influence on confidence in official statistics. These were survey respondents': general level of trust in government institutions; views on the importance of statistics for decision-making; and age.

The qualitative study with the general public identified four factors that participants used to determine their level of trust in a particular statistic.

These were perceived independence and perceived accuracy of the statistic and personal knowledge and personal experience of the subject matter.

Neither study found that factors such as socio-economic status, gender, region, education and income had a consistent impact on confidence.

BUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE

The findings presented in this report and the four accompanying studies highlight both the areas where the public has confidence in official statistics and the areas where it is lacking. Many of the suggestions made by participants are projects that are already underway, such as raising the profile of the GSS and ONS, developing a well-known kitemark for official statistics, and providing more information on the quality and use of outputs. In other areas mechanisms are already in place such as the pre-announcement of publication dates, protocols for the production of official statistics, and free educational material for schools – the challenge is to raise awareness of these mechanisms.

Internationally it is widely acknowledged that it is difficult in the short-term to influence public perceptions regarding official statistics. However, more needs to be done in Great Britain to build public confidence in official statistics. This will necessarily involve developing a strategy to address the issues raised in this report and collaboration between members of the GSS, other government colleagues, the Statistics Commission, the Royal Statistical Society and the media. Before developing such a strategy assurance that the messages highlighted in this report are consistent is essential. ONS therefore intends to run another survey in March 2005 to assess confidence in British official statistics. These results will be used to further inform our understanding of public perceptions.

At this stage there are five areas which are likely to be integral to any future work to address public confidence.

- Using good communication: Communication was a key issue that permeated all four studies and should be the principal focus of any strategy to address public confidence. Effective mechanisms are required for all stages in the statistical cycle.
- Ensuring information is accessible: Promoting what is published and how it can be accessed is vital. As well as presenting statistical information so it is meaningful and relevant to the general public.
- Providing assurances on quality: Promoting the mechanisms used to produce quality outputs is important. As is clearly highlighting the level of quality of official statistics and appropriate uses.
- Reinforcing independence. Promoting the current level of independence of statistical services and outputs. As well as pursuing mechanisms for strengthening independence.
- Educating others: Providing opportunities for the public and the media to improve their statistical skills.

NEXT STEPS

The initial stage of this project is now complete, however, a number of critical tasks will be undertaken over the coming 12 months to build on this knowledge base. As stated above, ONS intends to conduct a follow-up survey on public confidence in official statistics on the March 2005 ONS Omnibus Survey. This information will be assessed in light of the information contained in this report and the underlying studies. ONS will then convene a working group to address the issue of public confidence in official statistics. The principal role of this group will be to develop and publish a detailed strategy aimed at building confidence in official statistics.

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