

Public Confidence in Official Statistics

A qualitative study on behalf of the Office for National Statistics and the Statistics Commission

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February 2005

Acknowledgments

This report was written by Data Collection Methodology Centre of Expertise (DCM) at the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

The authors would like to thank everyone involved in the research and the production of the report, including the following.

- The members of the Public Confidence in Official Statistics steering group, in particular Maryanne Kelly of ONS and Barbara Buckley Owen of the Statistics Commission, for their support and advice.
- The moderators of the focus groups: Peter Betts, Amanda Wilmot, Eleanor Simmons and Rosalyn Harper.
- Our colleagues in DCM who provided administrative support and recruited the participants, in particular Zeeshan Rahman and Lucy O'Doherty.
- Most importantly, the members of the public who participated in the focus groups, for giving their time and their views.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors, not necessarily those of ONS or the Statistics Commission (nor do they reflect Government Policy).

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Executive summary

Data Collection Methodology (DCM) at the Office for National Statistics (ONS) was commissioned by the ONS and the Statistics Commission to conduct a qualitative investigation into the nature of public confidence in official statistics. In total nine focus groups (seventy participants), were held across England, Scotland and Wales during the summer of 2004.

For the general public, confidence in statistics was a matter of trust. This was the terminology used by participants during the discussions.

- Four determinants of trust were consistently identified across all of the focus groups. These were perceived independence, perceived accuracy, personal knowledge and experience. All of the determinants were used by people to establish an overall level of trust in specific statistics. However, the emphasis placed on each, and therefore the balance between the determinants, varied.
- Across the focus groups similar themes emerged irrespective of location, education level, gender or age. There were no apparent differences in opinion with respect to information disseminated by the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Executive or the UK Government.
- Generally, the more highly educated groups tended to intellectualise the subject of statistics, whereas the less highly educated related the discussion more closely to their own personal experiences or that of people they knew.
- Participants had a basic understanding of what was meant by a statistic, where statistics came from, when and why they would be used, and their importance to society. However, their understanding of the statistical process and methodology was limited. Those in the

more highly educated groups had a more informed and refined view and greater experience of using statistics in their every day life.

- Participants tended to take an interest in statistics they could relate to, and as a consequence, regional and sub-group statistics were preferred to national statistics.
- Official statistics were thought to be those produced by any accountable, professional statistical organisation or, at the very least, quality assured by them.
- Participants expressed a wish for a more explicit definition of when statistics were deemed 'official statistics'. Since more credibility was given to the concept of official statistics.
- Public access to official statistics was seen as important for validating independence and accuracy.
- It became apparent across all groups that, in general, participants had less trust in the way official statistics were presented to them than in the accuracy of the data themselves.
- Trust in the independence and accuracy of official statistics was influenced by whether or not people perceived that their production was free from political interference, as they thought that the production process could be influenced at any stage by those with a vested interest in the results. Furthermore, whether or not the producers were perceived to be credible and statistically competent also affected their opinion.
- Self-validation, through personal knowledge and experience was used as the basis for determining trust when other determinants were absent or in doubt.
- Across the groups there was distrust of the use of official statistics by politicians and the media due to selective reporting. Distrust was also based on confusion over the fact that

different statistics appeared to be produced from the same source, or that different sources produced different statistics on the same subject.

- Participants were also less trusting of official statistics reported by the media, again because of their perceived political affiliations. The printed press, in particular the tabloids, were thought less reliable than other modes because of this. The sensationalist style of reporting in the tabloid press was thought to be a contributing factor.
- Information about the data source and the methodology was important to participants in determining independence and accuracy and therefore trust. Where this was not evident people relied on personal knowledge and experience.
- Participants felt overloaded by statistics, and a lot of these they perceived to be on trivial matters. They preferred that some focus be given to the type and way in which statistics were presented to them.
- Participants felt that official statistics should be monitored, checked and 'rubber stamped' by an independent authoritative body.

1 Introduction

Data Collection Methodology (DCM) at the Office for National Statistics (ONS) was commissioned by the National Statistics and International Division at ONS and the Statistics Commission to contribute qualitative and quantitative expertise to the public confidence in official statistics project (Wilmot, 2004). The remit was twofold: firstly to qualitatively examine the public's views about official statistics and secondly to develop a quantitative measure of public confidence suitable for inclusion as a module on the ONS Omnibus Survey. Both strands were part of a broader commissioned programme of work on public confidence in official statistics; other strands included research to identify issues relating to confidence in official statistics in other countries, and a qualitative study of opinion formers views of official statistics (Kelly, 2004). This document reports on the findings of the first of the sub-projects; a qualitative analysis of the general public's views of official statistics.

The work was commissioned in response to a corporate target, stated in the ONS Annual Report (2002/2003), to improve confidence in official statistics and a request from the Treasury Select Committee for the National Statistician to undertake a survey on public confidence. Indeed, one of the key objectives of National Statistics is to improve public confidence in official statistics by demonstrating that they are produced to the highest professional standards and are free from political interference (Kelly, 2004). Examining public confidence is also part of the Statistics Commission's business plan for 2003/2004 (Rhind, 2004).

The policy context for this work lies with the “perceptions gap” agenda at the Cabinet Office. The Strategy Unit at the Cabinet Office are carrying out a project designed to assess public trust in, and more particularly perceptions of, government and political institutions. Results from the project indicate that the role of the media is very important in influencing the public's views, especially levels of satisfaction with services (Strategic Audit, 2004). The Economic and Social Research Council have also identified the media as important in people's understanding of, and trust in, science (Hargreaves et al, 2002). However, there has been relatively little research to date on public confidence in official statistics in the UK.

The specific aims of this sub-project were threefold. Firstly, to gain an understanding of the nature of public confidence in official statistics. Secondly, to identify what the public's views about the trustworthiness of statistics are based on, and finally to consider the implications of the public's views and what can be done to address any issues identified.

1.1 Background

As indicated above, there is a paucity of research literature available on confidence in official statistics in the UK. Confidence in the context of official statistics is poorly defined and is difficult to pin down conceptually. There is however a great deal of information available on the measurement of trust, particularly in the medical field and the trust between physician and patient (Hall *et al* 2002). Trust is seen as important because it gives medical relationships intrinsic value. Trust is considered critical to patients' willingness to seek care, reveal sensitive information and follow recommendations. To a certain extent the same could be said for the importance of public confidence in official statistics. Confidence is critical to the public's willingness to trust the statistics, to participate in government surveys and follow policy recommendations arising from official statistics.

Healy (2002) argued that trust is considered to describe a belief about the good intentions and expected behaviour of others and should not be confused with customer satisfaction. He divided trust into three types which have been incorporated into the design of both the quantitative and qualitative research elements. They are:

- willingness to trust others including strangers (generalised trust);
- willingness to trust familiars such as one's family, workplace or neighbours; and
- willingness to trust specific groups of people (e.g. doctors), or institutions (e.g. the courts).

Research carried out by the Cabinet Office (2004) highlighted both a depletion of trust between authority and the public, and a decline in levels of trust in public institutions over time. The patterns are complex in that trust in some of the professions remained high e.g. family doctors,

teachers. However, trust in other professions was low e.g. journalists, estate agents and politicians. Trust in the political system was also relatively low. The researchers suggest that the public are increasingly influenced by friends and family rather than government or other large institutions. This trend of lower levels of trust is reflected in the trust we have in other people. In 1959, 56% of adults indicated that “most people can be trusted”, in 2000 this had dropped to 45% of adults (Haezewindt, 2003).

In 1996, ONS carried out research into public confidence in official statistics and awareness of the ONS as a provider of official statistics. The aim was to find out what the general public understood by the term official statistics and to find out whether a quantitative metric of public confidence in official statistics was viable (Wilmot 2004). The qualitative results indicated that members of the public were not interested in statistical information and were unfamiliar with the statistical terms commonly used by ONS. There was no commonly agreed understanding of what official statistics were and people did not distinguish between statistics and other types of information. This research, along with subsequent quantitative work carried out in 2001, indicated that it was better to ask about particular statistics produced (e.g. unemployment) rather than official statistics generally (Goddard, 2001).

This report is split into seven chapters. Chapter two details the data collection methods employed in this project, chapter three explains the group dynamic, chapters four through to seven present the research findings.

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2. Methodology

2.1 What is qualitative research?

It is impossible to discuss qualitative research methods and findings without first defining what is meant by qualitative research. It is also important to understand how qualitative methods can be applied in the social survey context and work along side quantitative methods.

The term ‘qualitative research’ is used as an overarching category covering a wide range of approaches and methods. Although there is still some debate, the general consensus is that qualitative research is a naturalistic, interpretative approach concerned with understanding the meanings which people attach to actions, decisions, beliefs, values etc. within their social world (Richie & Lewis, 2003). An understanding of the mental mapping process that respondents use to make sense of, and interpret the world around them.

Qualitative research can stand alone or along side quantitative survey inquiry to provide depth and richness to an investigation. It describes the contextual setting of what exists, an explanation of the reasons for or the associations between what exists, an evaluation of the effectiveness of what exists and an aid to the development of theories or strategies.

There are a number of qualitative research techniques that can be used to support investigation and inquiry, including one-to-one in-depth interview and group discussion. Qualitative methods may be semi-structured or free flowing depending on the research questions and objectives. Qualitative methods are resource intensive from the point of view of the research time required, not only in relation to data collection but the way in which qualitative data are analysed and reported on.

2.2. Supporting quantitative inquiry

This qualitative element of the research programme was intended to inform the design of the quantitative element and add depth to those findings¹. The qualitative research provides the ‘hows’ and the ‘whys’ behind the top level findings from the quantitative element, which used the National Statistics (NS) Omnibus survey as its data collection vehicle.

However, qualitative investigation cannot provide a quantitative measure or provide estimates of prevalence. Qualitative research cannot be generalised on a statistical basis but provides a range of views, opinions and experiences and the factors that shape them, which can be inferred to the research population.

Reliability and validity cannot be measured in the traditional way. For qualitative research, reliability can be judged on the basis that similar findings were found throughout the investigation. Validity can be judged by checking for credibility and transferability by confirming findings with respondents. Furthermore the findings can be validated against external sources, in this case the quantitative research element.

2.3 Data collection method

2.3.1 Review

Initially, an international literature review was carried out examining research already conducted on the subject of trust, and literature focusing specifically on trust in official statistics. From the review it became apparent that little specific research has been conducted on the inquiry topic. The researchers were also guided by specialists steering the project from across the UK Government.

¹ Jones F, Jones A M (2005) Quantitative analysis of the general public’s view of official statistics. Office for National Statistics, http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/data/public_confidence/downloads/QuantitativeAnalysis.pdf

2.3.2 Focus groups

A decision was taken early on to use focus groups as the data collection method. Focus groups comprise around 8 to 10 participants physically coming together to discuss the research issues under investigation.

The group context provides a very different environment from one-to-one interviews. Participants are able to interact, stimulating discussion, refining ideas and taking inspiration from one another, and routes of enquiry which might not become apparent during a one-to-one interview. Participants are put under less pressure to provide immediate responses and have time to consider and reflect on the issues being discussed.

Ideally, a group will be homogeneous in some way to enable participants to find commonality during the discussion. Participants feel confident and able to communicate with one another through common language. Greater spontaneity and depth of discussion is achieved, particularly if the subject matter is complex and difficult to understand. The group dynamic particular to this study is discussed in chapter 3.

The study population was defined as ‘the general public’. As such, this is a broad remit, comprising different types of people from different backgrounds and with different life experiences. The group situation was therefore considered a more efficient method of obtaining information about the subject from a diverse group of people.

We know from previous research (Goddard, 1996) that, in general, the public is not well informed on the subject of ‘statistics’. With this in mind, focus groups were thought to provide the most fruitful data collection method, the subject matter more suitable for group discussion because of the advantages of group dynamic mentioned above.

Focus groups are led by a skilled moderator who guides, but not necessarily leads the discussion, taking more of a listening role. The moderator ensures that the key research questions are

addressed and that all participants have an opportunity to express their views and opinions in a safe and confidential forum. It is understood that each group will have a personality of its own but will generally follow the group process of forming (getting to know one another and the subject matter); storming (some individuals will try to gain power or control); norming (establishing commonality); performing (participants focus on the task and begin to co-operate, addressing the research objectives) and mourning (participants realise that they are about to return to everyday life) (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Understanding the group process is essential to ensuring skilled moderation.

Groups were convened at various locations and lasted around one and a half to two hours. A topic guide was designed for use by the moderator to stimulate creative thinking and ensure that the key research questions were addressed by the group in the time available². The topic guide was agreed with the steering group in advance but refined as data collection progressed.

The aim of the groups was twofold. Firstly to understand how and why people hold the views they do and the language they use in discussion, with a view to designing a measurement of confidence instrument. Secondly to provide a more in-depth understanding of, and insight into, how confidence in official statistics is formulated in order to identify what issues need to be addressed to reinforce confidence.

At the beginning of each group discussion a word association game was used to demonstrate to participants that they did indeed have some knowledge of the subject matter and could feel confident talking about it. Other stimuli such as newspaper cuttings, radio and TV headlines and bulletins were used at a later stage aimed at focussing attention on specific issues. These stimuli were not used during the initial discussions but towards the end of the group sessions as the researchers did not want to influence participants' thoughts in any way. However many of the issues highlighted in the stimulus materials were in fact raised by participants before their use.

² See appendix 1

2.3.3 Sampling strategy

In an ideal world qualitative investigation would be based on grounded theory. Using this approach, the process of data collection and conceptualisation continues until ‘saturated’, that is new data do not add to the developing theory. However, because of resource constraints it is more practical to sample respondents for qualitative data capture purposively. Respondents are chosen because they have particular features or characteristics which will enable detailed exploration of the research objectives. It is important to reiterate that it is not possible to draw statistical inferences from this kind of sampling method since with a purposive non-random sample the number of people interviewed is less important than the criteria used to select them.

In total nine focus groups were held across England, Scotland and Wales during the summer of 2004. The aim was to address any regional or country differences that might result from the different governance structures: the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the UK Parliament. The groups were stratified by educational attainment level. Exploratory work had found educational attainment to be the most influencing factor affecting the group dynamic, with respect to the research subject, ensuring some homogeneity. A balance by age and sex was also thought to be important.

Groups were split by those who were more highly educated (MHE) (above A’ level or equivalent) and those less highly educated (LHE) (A’ level or equivalent and below). Focus groups for each education type were held in Wales (2), Scotland (2), London (2), Manchester (2), Bristol (1). Seventy participants took part in total. See Appendix 2 for detail.

2.3.4 Recruitment method

Focus group participants were purposively sampled by ONS research staff using the ONS qualitative respondent register. The register is built using respondent details from the monthly NS Omnibus survey, who have given permission for ONS to contact them again for future research. Omnibus respondent data, including around 50 classificatory variables collected during

the Omnibus interview, are maintained in a secure environment; the register is supplemented with new respondent details on a monthly basis.

Initially members of the public were recruited to the study by telephone. Where a potential participant declined, a participant with the same or similar characteristics was contacted for replacement. Following agreement by participants to this initial verbal invitation, confirmation letters were sent by post.

It is common practice to offer a payment to participants for their time and travel expenses. Therefore, a payment of £25 was made to each participant, on arrival at the focus group location.

2.4. Analysis technique

The discussions were recorded and transcribed into Word by a professional transcription agency to allow research staff to conduct a more thorough and impartial analysis than could be achieved by simply listening and taking notes. Participant confidentiality was maintained throughout the process. Transcriptions were quality assured by the research staff working on the project then analysed using a thematic modelling approach.

Analysis of qualitative data requires sensitivity to detail and context. The researcher aims to create an understanding of a situation by exploring and interpreting the data. Data are categorised to form ideas and concepts. It should be borne in mind that in qualitative analysis the researcher acts as the analysis instrument. The analysis relies completely on the integrity of the researcher, who is immersed in the data, and the quality assurance procedures put in place to assure that integrity.

2.5 Reporting and interpretation

The report details the themes emerging from the focus groups corresponding with the ideas and views of those who took part.

The findings presented in the following sections are based solely on the opinions and experiences of the participants, that is the general public involved in the focus groups, and not the views of the researchers. Where the report makes reference to verbatim statements, the participant's account is italicised.

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3. Establishing a Group Dynamic

The following chapter explains the way in which participants were assured of the value of their contribution to the focus groups, that there were no right or wrong answers, and that they should all be confident in their ability to add to the group discussion. It was essential to make this explicit to participants as, prior to attending the focus groups, few considered that they had much knowledge or prior interest in official statistics as a subject matter for debate.

In addition, the section explains how using a group dynamic as a method for gathering information can be an effective way of gaining rich insight into people's views on a subject many might find hard to verbalise.

3.1 Participant knowledge and interest

As agreement to participate did not necessarily mean people had a prior interest in statistics, or an ability to give informed opinions, the researchers were unsure what to expect from the groups.

During recruitment it became apparent that levels of knowledge and degrees of insight varied widely within and across groups with some participants expressing that they had no knowledge at all of the subject. However, lack of specific knowledge did not necessarily preclude the ability to discuss the issues pertinently and perceptively. Although those who had an interest in, or knowledge of the subject, gained from their work or studies, often found it easier to express their views than those for whom it was not a topic area they considered much in their everyday lives.

3.2 Stimulating discussion

In order to heighten participants' confidence in their ability to join in the discussion, particularly those who felt their knowledge was limited, each focus group began with a word association exercise. This 'ice breaker' acted as a way in which to encourage participants to openly talk with and get to know one another, as well as creating a safe environment for them to voice their immediate thoughts on statistics and feel comfortable with the subject matter. Participants were

asked to call out words and phrases they associated with the word ‘statistics’. In doing so, participants demonstrated to themselves that they possessed more knowledge and interest than they had initially credited themselves with. This ice breaking technique also put into practice and reinforced the roles of moderator and participant introduced by the researcher at the beginning of the group discussion.

3.3 Developing breadth of discussion

Participants contributed some wide ranging associations with the word ‘statistics’ and these provided breadth to areas of interest the moderator wished to explore with participants in subsequent stages of the discussions. At these times, participants would be asked to elaborate on the points they had made during the exercise, and others also encouraged to add their opinion.

Across the focus groups similar themes emerged irrespective of location, education level, gender or age. Although research was carried out in different countries there were no apparent differences in opinion with respect to information disseminated by the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Executive or the UK Government. However, there were differences with respect to the kinds of examples used to illustrate the themes. These tended to be relevant to the individual with respect to their particular living environment or location, their knowledge or experiences, or that of people they knew. The more highly educated groups tended to intellectualise the subject of statistics, whereas the less highly educated related the discussion more closely to their own personal experiences or that of people they knew.

It is important to note that much of the discussion throughout the groups was based on an impressionistic view of the world of official statistics rather than one grounded in knowledge and understanding of the subject. For example, people were often influenced by what they had read or heard in the media, or the way in which politics and politicians were presented by the media.

As a result of the group exercise, the words participants associated with statistics have been categorised as ‘facts’ and ‘feelings’. Contributions ranged from the common, simple and straightforward, to the unique and more complex.

The associations, collected from the words written on flip charts during the groups and from the transcriptions, are listed below. Both common and rarely mentioned words and phrases are included to show the breadth of knowledge. The lists are not exhaustive and the items in each category are in no particular order.

3.3.1 Factual associations

Most factual associations were said neutrally. Some were general, while others reflected specific issues which were of interest or concern to participants. These associations have been categorised into four themes.

Statistical and methodological terms:

Percentage; graph; table; chart; numbers; mathematics; average; survey; trends; information; measuring.

Subject areas:

Population; unemployment; crime; immigration; health; childhood obesity; education; transport; accidents; spending habits; shares; housing; music charts; sports; gender; minority representation; single parents; class; trade deficit; hospital waiting lists; exam passes; school league tables; homelessness; public spending.

Sources and users of statistics:

Government; politicians; news; media; the workplace; newspaper and journal articles; radio; research; business; Census.

Purposes of statistics:

Evaluation; assessing risk; planning; reports; marketing; disbursement of resources; knowledge; need for houses to be built; research; the Budget.

3.3.2 Feelings about statistics

In contrast, feelings about statistics were more often invested with approval or, more commonly, disapproval.

Curiosity; interesting; useful; helpful; facts; truth; very useful for process control, they actually work; dysfunctional without numbers; riveting, at times; guidance; reductions; simplify; approximate; it reminds me of being a student; lots of paper; opinions; I don't give it much thought; surprise; boring; dodgy; worthless; misunderstanding; questionable; incomprehensible relationships; distraction; confusing; inaccurate; just a number, no justification for it; hard work; very subjective; can be true but misleading; a never ending stream of Top 100 programmes, accountability; they can make good headlines; to underline a point they want to get over; sway opinion; misuse; manipulation; political; false; spin doctors; misleading; twisted; selective; bullshit; dangerous; spin; cop out; overkill; propaganda; lies, damn lies and statistics.

The word association exercise indicated the subjects of interest and concern to people as well as participants' knowledge of statistics. Indeed, some of the main themes which emerged from the research were primarily introduced during this initial stage of the focus groups.

Chapters 4 - 7 will examine in detail many of the themes raised during the word association.

3.4 Developing depth of discussion

The dynamic between focus group participants, who informed, influenced, agreed and disagreed with one another, provided depth to the discussions. The resulting debates and exchanges of views were interesting and lively. Participants generally showed a high degree of engagement in the discussions, regardless of their level of knowledge and awareness of the subject. Although they found it difficult to disentangle statistics from politics. A few participants needed prompting for their contributions, but most were forthcoming. Strong feelings and beliefs were often expressed with passion, while other views given were more detached.

It is important to bear in mind that many of the focus group participants had, at some point in the past, taken part in the ONS Omnibus survey³. Some commented on the fact that they had been impressed with the quality of the ONS interviewers in comparison to previous personal experience of market research. Therefore, they had a benchmark against which they could formulate and validate opinions of survey work, which on the whole members of the general public might not otherwise have.

Regardless of participants' level of education, differences existed in the scope of depth of discussion and clarity of thought. However, a key factor seemed to be an individual's degree of experience with statistics, particularly from education or in the work place. Those with knowledge of the subject often found it easier to express their views compared with those participants for whom statistics did not seem to affect their daily lives.

Within groups, some participants thought more deeply than others, that is, projecting beyond matters only of personal interest and relevance, to more general issues either by hypothesising or conjecturing or by comprehending, responding to and building on what other participants were saying.

In addition to within group, between group differences showed that issues were discussed in more depth and breadth by some groups than by others. Nonetheless, many issues arose repeatedly across groups: similar subjects of interest, similar concerns and similar conclusions reached. There were counter-views on some issues, however while strengths of opinion varied, details were debated, certain overall messages seemed to come across again and again, and broad consensus within and across the groups was apparent.

An important point to note is that for the general public, confidence in statistics was a matter of trust. This was the terminology used by participants during the discussions and hence the terminology used by the researchers through the rest of this report.

³ See Chapter 2. Methodology: 2.3.4 Recruitment Method

Public Trust in Statistics: A Conceptual Model of Trust Determinants

Four determinants of trust were consistently identified across all of the focus groups. These were perceived independence, perceived accuracy, personal knowledge and experience. All of the determinants were used by people to establish an overall level of trust in specific statistics.

$$\text{Level of Trust} = \left(\begin{array}{c} \text{Perceived} \\ \text{independence} \end{array} + \begin{array}{c} \text{Perceived} \\ \text{accuracy} \end{array} \right) + \left(\begin{array}{c} \text{Self validation} \\ \text{using} \\ \text{knowledge} \end{array} + \begin{array}{c} \text{Self validation} \\ \text{using} \\ \text{experience} \end{array} \right)$$

However, the emphasis placed on each, and therefore the balance between the determinants, could vary. For example, more weight was placed on knowledge and personal experience when information about independence and accuracy was not forthcoming.

Alternatively, participants would substitute for perceived independence and accuracy. For example, since they always knew how they had come across a particular statistic, they would focus their judgement of independence and accuracy on the basis of their perception of the presenter rather than the statistic.

Furthermore, the emphasis placed on each determinant also varied depending on the individual assessing the statistics and their individual knowledge and experience.

- i) Where participants were confident in the independence and accuracy of a statistic, and that statistic agreed with their knowledge and experience, then they were more likely to trust it.
- ii) Even where perception of independence and accuracy was low, in the current climate, when the statistic agreed with individual knowledge and experience, then it was likely that the statistic would be trusted.
- iii) Although participants said that they would trust a statistic more if they could be assured of the independence and accuracy determinants, and that this would make them less reliant on knowledge and experience, because of the hypothetical nature of the discussion it was

unclear whether people would indeed then trust the statistic if it was not in accordance with their knowledge or experience.

This conceptual model was developed as a result of the analysis. The determinants are referred to throughout the report. It should be born in mind that the development of the model is still in its infancy, and to-date based on nine focus group discussions. It may not be generalisable to the population and requires further investigation. However, the evidence from the groups supports the basic principles.

4. Public Perception and Use of Statistics

The following chapter describes the public's general understanding of statistics and their use. It sets the scene for the more detailed discussion in the rest of this report.

4.1 Public understanding - what are 'statistics'?

In general, focus group participants easily cited words and phrases that they associated with statistics such as information, research, measuring, representative, trends, numbers, mathematics, percentages, graphs, tables and charts.

Likewise, participants seemed to have an idea as to the context within which statistics would be collected, for example, political, social, business and economic, public opinion, and the subject matter: education, housing, transport, shares, crime, homelessness, budget and public spending, health, environment, shopping habits, TV ratings and music charts.

Those participants in the more highly educated groups, who were more likely to use statistics in their work and everyday life, often gave more precise definitions:

"...it's what you actually count, it's not a picture of the actual thing but it's a bit of a picture that you can visibly account for." [MHE:Manchester]

In contrast, among some of the less highly educated groups, there was a lack of understanding as to what exactly was meant by 'a statistic':

"It's a word used by Government isn't it, statistics?" [LHE:London]

"You are measuring it, so there's a number, you're measuring it, there's no statistic in it." [LHE:London]

Indeed for some, the term ‘statistics’ was thought to be “*just a fancy word*” and participants felt that they could relate more easily to the term “*data*”, “*figures*”, or “*information*”. Based on these discussions there was even one suggestion that the ONS should change its name:

“... if you change your name ... Office of National Statistics, Office of National figures or something, information.” [LHE:London]

4.2 Public understanding of data sources

Participants from both educational attainment groups generally considered the actual source of the data to be members of the public:

“From us isn’t it, the sources of information... the general public I suppose.” [LHE:Wales]

“Even in the NHS you’ve got a number. When you die you’ve got a number. You’re still a statistic.” [MHE:Manchester]

Some reference was made to scientific data collected by environmental agencies or campaign groups such as Greenpeace.

Participants were also aware that statistics were collected in different ways, such as through administrative records or from surveys and censuses:

“Oh I know, I mean they have their ways of taking statistics from that information, I’m not saying it’s necessarily right, but there are actual facts, they’ve got computers full of facts. So they can look at things like how many people have signed on, this many people haven’t.” [LHE:Bristol]

“I mean assuming that the majority of people in the country have filled in the Census form.” [LHE:Scotland]

Although participants were clear that statistics generally came from different sources, there was some confusion over the source of government statistics:

“That’s what I was going to ask, do you [ONS] produce all government statistics or do individual ministries?” [MHE:Wales]

4.3 Public understanding of who uses statistics

Participants understood that statistics were used by a wide range of organisations and individuals for different purposes:

“Government, marketing, the press, media, academic” [LHE:Scotland]

“Well everybody uses statistics to some extent. I mean McDonalds...” [MHE:Wales]

“All sorts of businesses should be interested in statistics because they want to know what the trends of the people are, you know, say types of fashion, trends.” [LHE:Wales]

4.4 Public understanding of types of statistic

Throughout the focus group discussions it became apparent that participants’ understanding of types of statistic was often vague. Participants made a distinction between objective and subjective types. They distinguished between factual (objective) and opinion-based (subjective) information; although the distinctions made in their examples were often confused:

“There’s obviously two types of statistic, there’s a statistic that’s based on fact, like a road accident and there’s a statistic that’s based on a question like, you know, how many pieces of fruit do you have in your diet every day. Now there are two completely different types of statistic...” [LHE:Bristol]

Furthermore, while acknowledging differences in types of statistics, participants did not necessarily recognise their value. Indeed, sometimes statistics were deemed trivial and burdensome; often this was because they were unclear as to their purpose.

“I think one of the problems we have is we all agree I think that statistics are necessary but are we producing too many statistics that are totally trivial, just for the sake of producing statistics?” [MHE:Wales]

“If you ask questions like, you know, what did you do last year and where did you go on holidays last year, or what car did you buy last year, then it’s not really of any relevance is it, because it’s history isn’t it, you know. So it’s not, I can’t see any advantage of knowing statistics of the past.” [LHE:Wales]

4.5 Public understanding of methodology and data quality

There were clear perceptions that data may be prone to error because of the way it was collected and that this would affect the quality of the statistics produced. In particular, although expressed in layman’s terms, reference was made to the perceived accuracy of sampling strategies and question wording, and also about issues of non-response. (Perceived accuracy of data collection is discussed in more detail in chapter 5).

“...you’ve got to have good control over your sample, the figures that you collect, they’ve got to be very well defined as to what, how you categorise things, how you do it, and you’ve got to make sure people are trained to do it properly, accurately, and you’ve got to have some form of control so that they do that.” [MHE:Scotland]

“If they ask the right questions.” [MHE:Wales]

“The Census provides it as long as somebody fills in the forms.” [MHE:Scotland]

“There's very few surveys that are complete in terms of surveyed everyone in the country... things are hidden. You couldn't find all the businesses, because registration might not be up to date. They might have gone bust. All kinds of reasons why presumably you have to sample all the time. Even the Census isn't complete.” [MHE: Manchester]

“So, for example, crime you might know that so many thousand people have been burgled, but you might not know about certain other people that may not have gone forward.” [MHE:Manchester]

Participants' demonstrated a limited use of technical terminology and a lack of knowledge of statistical theory. This was reinforced by the fact that, although they were aware of collection issues, they seemed sometimes confused by the methodology and how to interpret it. In particular the term 'random' was often misunderstood in relation to surveys. As a result of this misunderstanding, participants incorrectly assumed that the quality of the data collected was poor:

“If it [the Census] lost a million people it can't be complete.” [MHE: Manchester]

“Now 80% of people in Cardiff go to the Dog and Duck or something, Well I don't go there, but I know I'll go there next week...” [LWE:Wales]

“...they're random polls aren't they, you know, they're just randomly asking a group of people and you can't judge everybody on just a small group of people...” [LHE:Wales]

“So when you got those we've asked a 1,000 people in the street, I'm convinced, because nobody asks me in the street, so I'm totally convinced that they've gone and picked the person they want.” [MHE: London]

4.6 Relevance to self

Closely related to understanding statistics and recognising their value, participants in several of the groups commented that more notice was taken of statistics if they were directly relevant to them.

Explanations and examples of when participants regarded statistics to be relevant were given in relation to both subject matter and/or geographical perspective.

Subject matter seemed to strike an accord with all the groups. For example, participants generally agreed that more attention was paid to statistics about unemployment, crime and hospital waiting lists as these seemed to be of direct relevance. In contrast, it was less obvious how inflation statistics held any personal relevance, and consequently people tended not to take any notice of them:

“I think people listen to sort of the things that matter to them most. I mean, everyone saw it if you put it on the news, hear all about stuff like the employment, unemployment rate, crime figures, hospital waiting lists, stuff like that Stuff like inflation rate, the majority of the people in the country aren't really going to be affected, well they are going to be affected by it, but they don't think they're going to be.” [LHE Scotland].

“On a personal level, I mean I don't care how many burgers are being consumed in Britain or how many people are in prison; it doesn't really directly affect me.” [MHE:Wales]

“I think that, again as an individual that would be of little use to me but certainly as a parent I would be extremely interested to see how many burgers my son or daughter eats every day...” [MHE:Wales]

From a geographical perspective, participants saw the importance of, and felt more inclined to take an interest in, statistics that were about their own geographical area, feeling that they could relate to statistics closer to home more than national statistics. As such, participants identified with the relevance of regional statistics, but not those addressing issues further afield.

Again, as tends to be the nature of the group dynamic, this issue was addressed in a subsequent exchange of ideas during discussions about the term 'average'. Here, participants stated that they could not personally relate to statistical averages. As one participant in London succinctly puts it, "where's my average?"

For some participants, the issue of relevance was also determined by the emotive weight they assigned to particular statistics. Often, bad feeling was associated with employment figures for example. This was enough to steer participants towards disregarding any relevance the statistics might have for them.

"If you're unemployed you know you're one of the unemployed so it doesn't do you any good to know you're one of a million unemployed does it. You're unemployed so you don't care how the statistics are being arrived at. It doesn't have any affect on you does it. Perhaps makes you a bit more miserable to make you know you're one of a million, but the opposite of it,... it just gets rid of the feel good factor doesn't it?... you don't want to think you're on the bottom of the heap somewhere do you?" [LHE:Manchester]

4.7 Public understanding - what are 'official' statistics?

Having acquired a broad understanding of the general public's comprehension and relevance of statistics (via the focus groups), the moderators guided participants thought process towards considering their beliefs on what made statistics official.

Official statistics were thought to be those produced by any accountable, professional statistical organisation or, at the very least, quality assured by them. These organisations were most commonly associated with public funded bodies (central government, charities and academia),

rather than the private sector. Examples of official statistics included figures on unemployment, crime, the Census, NHS waiting lists, those produced by the Bank of England and “*the tax man*”.

“Official statistics implies that they're government endorsed, maybe, been vetted by the government, before they are released. Maybe to stop bias.”

[MHE: Manchester]

“Or by the Government yes, not produced by a private sector company. Just run by the Government or something, or official body of some sort.”

[MHE: London]

“...research that is done by universities.” [MHE:Scotland]

“...they've got to account for their actions to that person, you see, so it's got to be done right. So that would be official.” [LHE: Wales]

As mentioned in their general understanding of statistics in section 4.4, participants readily made a distinction between types of statistics; official statistics regarded as being based on fact rather than opinion.

“But official statistics as I see them, and obviously they're going to be marriages, births, where they are down in black and white, they are actual things they're not just people's opinions. They're tangible things that you can see.” [LHE:Wales]

“I tend to think of National Statistics as being based on fact.” [MHE, Wales]

“So things that are actual figures like, I consider them to be more official and trust them, things like the number of people living in the country, the number of people who, that are claiming benefit or something, the actual things we can go oh, there's such-such million, this-this-this. There are things then where it say,

coming up before the war, that are just like, oh, 60% of the population support that. And stuff that's say from sample groups, I wouldn't give as much validity to, as something that there may be have got off the Census form."
[LHE:Scotland]

Further explanation revealed that participants believed facts to be more reliable than opinions, which could change from day-to-day, and associated opinion-based research with private sector market research:

"...in social and political statistics, you forget to take in account humanity, a person being the person, somebody keeping their opinions or whatever, radical, racial opinions or whatever, you know, keeping for themselves, you know, keeping another face in public and something else which is in their minds."
[MHE: London]

With respect to the sampling strategy, participants thought that a more rigorous methodology would be applied to official statistics and assumed a standard protocol was applied to the collection of official statistics; as a consequence, they believed the sample would be more robust and complete. Small sample sizes were associated with poor representation and more likely to apply to the methodology used in market research.

"It's got to be really big hasn't it to make it official." [LHE, Wales]

"...like when [named private sector research company] do a poll, their actual sample isn't collected in a regular way because each one that they do is different, choosing different people and probably a different sample." [LHE: Bristol]

"...to be official it's got to be collected in a specific manner." [MHE: London]

“But then things like that as well, like official statistics would like to think that there are somewhere official guidelines as to how statistics are gathered, like you're only allowed to ask one person once, whereas if something's like call in on the TV, well, what if it's a Pop Idol or something, you could phone up as many times as you want, that's not representative.” [LHE: Scotland]

Official statistics were also thought to have some kind of legal status:

“I suppose there's got to be some sort of legal grounding to it, to make it official” [LHE:Bristol]

4.8 Public understanding of why official statistics are needed

Across the groups it was generally acknowledged that official statistics were necessary. The justification for their requirement was articulated by one group as being that a society without statistics would lead to a reduction in social order; this would be because the Government would not know what was happening in society.

The need for official statistics centred around three common sub-themes:

- Decision making
- Monitoring performance and/or society
- Reference

4.8.1 Required for decision making

Groups stated that the need to make decisions based on statistical knowledge was important for the allocation of resources. Many group participants believed that statistics provided a picture of how, where, why and when resources have been used. The Census was considered as part of those statistics; participants saw it as a central source providing knowledge for the allocation of resources. Their understanding was that this knowledge then formed the basis for subsequent

decision making. For example, decisions on targeting and planning of services. The services mentioned included schools, transportation, hospitals and pensions:

“...you’ve got to have some basis figures otherwise you just wouldn’t, you couldn’t plan, you couldn’t do anything. With falling birth rate you couldn’t plan schools, you couldn’t do anything. So, to that extent, statistics are important” [LHE:Scotland].

“...ageing, education, projecting the future. How many people are wanting, needing old age pensions, when, how many children are going to need to be educated and at a certain level. Everything actually. Everything in life.” [MHE Wales].

4.8.2 Required for monitoring

Statistics were also regarded as necessary for monitoring of performance and/or society. Participants recognised how statistics could be utilised to enable comparisons over time thus making it possible to measure change. For example, statistics were regarded as essential for identifying the success or failure of health, education and employment policies.

“People use them [statistics] as a measure of success or failure.” [MHE:Scotland].

In addition, participants perceived the Census as a means of measuring and monitoring population size.

4.8.3 Required for reference

Within groups, statistics were rarely seen as a useful reference aid for members of the public. There was only an occasional mention of the ONS website as a statistical reference source.

It was apparent throughout the groups that although participants identified the need for statistics, this did not necessarily generate an interest or like of them:

“I kind of have a bit of love hate relationship with statistics but they're necessary, they're a necessary evil...actually part of our accountability as well...” [MHE: Manchester].

4.9 Public use of official statistics

Focus group participants perceived statistics as important in private and working life decision making. However, they said that they thought they often used statistics without really realising it:

“So statistics are quite important really, even if we don't read them everyday, but they're still important.” [LHE:London]

“I mean you're probably using them without realising it.” [LHE: London].

4.9.1 Private life decision making

Across the groups, the use of official statistics in private life decision making tended to focus on examples using health and education statistics.

Health was the most prevalent example. Participants talked about using statistics when considering healthy lifestyles, immunisation take-up (MMR), working environments (asbestos) and health care availability (waiting lists). The dominant theme was healthy lifestyles with smoking, and illnesses related to it, being the topics most discussed. Participants felt that the release of statistics on life expectancy and cancers gave people information to make informed decisions:

“Yes exactly, you know, therefore it has to be reported so that people say oh I'd better stop smoking or I'd better give up this or I'd better give up that, so

they can live longer. If you don't look after yourself, you're not going to live long, as simple as that." [LHE: London].

One participant described how they felt you could make healthy lifestyle decisions by averaging the potential effects:

"...statistics show that if they eat Kellogg's Cornflakes, like the statistics telling me, it'll strengthen my heart. If I smoke, it's going to [be bad for health]...so if I have half a bowl of cornflakes and half a packet of cigarettes, it's going to be a medium?" [LHE:London].

Education statistics such as exam results, teaching ability and league tables were said to be used for decision making. For example, some of the groups suggested that league table statistics were often used by parents to make decisions on the best available education for their children.

"...the ones who use statistics nowadays are the young parents that are looking for schools to put the kids in and of course they're using the league tables and all the rest of it" [LHE: Bristol].

4.9.2 Working life decision making

Although not discussed as frequently, the use of official statistics in a work life capacity was evident. Discussions centred on using statistics for planning services and developing company policy. For example, one participant working in the education service described their experience of using statistics to estimate the number of pupils not in school. Others raised the subject of accident rates among young drivers, and how this led to higher insurance premiums, as an example of statistics used to inform company policy:

"It's like getting the statistics for the other end. The young ones isn't it. They can say from a certain age say 18 to 20 there are so many accidents per

thousand of the population and they have to pay more insurance don't they?"
[LHE: Manchester].

4.10 Public access to official statistics

Several of the focus groups introduced the issue of access to official statistics with discussions centred around the following two main themes:

- The difficulty in accessing statistics
- Lack of knowledge as to what statistics were available

4.10.1 Difficulty accessing statistics

Several participants from different groups commented on the general difficulty in accessing official statistics.

"Press seems to be able to get hold of them, politicians seem to be able to get hold of them, but the man on the street can't get access to them. That's the biggest problem." *[LHE: Bristol].*

In one group not only was limited access seen as a problem, but more specifically, reference was made to reduced access, in this particular case, relating to Census data (see section 5.1.5).

4.10.2 Lack of knowledge of available statistics

Participants believed that the Office for National Statistics did not promote the official statistics available to the public. As a direct result, the general public formed opinion based on Government and media releases:

“The thing is that our opinion is required from what the Government has let us see, basically from what has been published on the media for what we’ve got access to.” [MHE:London].

The general consensus emerging from the groups was that ultimately participants wanted to know what statistics were available, and for there to be comprehensive access to all:

“I don’t think there’s any doubt that all the statistical information gathered should be accessible and not certain parts be very accessible and others not so readily accessible. Because as I said earlier one statistic on its own is meaningless.” [MHE:Wales]

5. Public Trust in Official Statistics

The previous chapter describes how preliminary discussions focussed on what ‘statistics’ meant to participants and how they used them. It included their specific understanding of the term ‘official statistics’.

Clarification of the term official statistics enabled the moderators to guide participants towards a more in-depth discussion about their views on whether or not official statistics could be trusted. The researchers hypothesised that trust was the underlying concept influencing public opinion of official statistics, that it was key to gauging confidence and identifying areas for improvement.

The determinants of the conceptual model were recurring elements, often at the heart of the issues emerging from discussions on trust. In particular, trust seemed to be dependent on participants’ perceived independence and perceived accuracy of official statistics, along side a judgement made on personal knowledge and experience. This chapter will focus on the first part of the model. However analysis also revealed clear examples of when participants looked to personal knowledge and experience to form their views when the first part of the model was weak. So how the combined interaction of the determinant parts complement each other and complete the trust model is demonstrated.

5.1 Perceived independence and accuracy of official statistics

Common across all groups was that, in general, participants had less trust in the way statistics were presented to them than in the accuracy of the data themselves. However, they did think that the production process could be influenced at any stage by those with a vested interest in the results.

Since the discussion was about official statistics, which participants associated with Government, participants focussed on Government for much of the time. It was often unclear how participants were defining Government. Generally they were referring to Government politicians but on

occasion participants were using a much wider definition including government departments and occasionally other public organisations.

5.1.1 Trust in the commissioning of official statistics

There seemed to be widespread belief across the groups that it was government politicians who decided what statistics should be collected. Many participants had little faith in the integrity of the politicians in this respect, and were of the opinion that they were working towards their own political goals. They believed that politicians had the power to request statistics be collected for any subject of interest to them for their own political reasons. Meanwhile, other statistics addressing important societal issues, but which were not perceived to be politically advantageous, would be disregarded or not commissioned at all:

“They won’t be commissioned either. If there’s something somebody doesn’t want to find out, nobody’s going to go to the ONS and say, oh, can you tell us how bad our record is on policing?” [MHE: Wales]

The consequence of this was that participants were unable to perceive how official statistics could be independent; if political interference was embedded in the reasons for their collection, participants questioned how official statistics could be trusted.

5.1.2 Trust in the source of the statistics

The need to know the source of the statistics was commonly acknowledged as an important factor in determining both the level of independence and accuracy. Public trust in official statistics was generally perceived to be greater when obtained from sources participants regarded as independent or “*unbiased*”.

“I think it’s just down to, you’ve just got to trust the source of where the information came from, and [if] it’s like you said the source is unbiased and has

got nothing to gain then you can trust it. But... if they can gain benefit from manipulating the figures, then you can't trust it so much." [LHE: Wales]

Participants felt that those employed by the organisations producing official statistics did not have a vested political interest in the results. In other words, the source/producers of official statistics were perceived as independent bodies that could be trusted. For example, one respondent said that they would trust statistics on overcrowding in prisons if they were collected and presented by the prison service themselves. This was because the jobs of those working in the service were not reliant on the statistics produced:

"...but if it was coming from the Prison Service, or, someone like the Prison Service so... those people doing their job and they don't really have anything to lose from releasing this information. I'd tend to believe them whereas if it was a Government spokesperson or whoever was releasing this now, this information, I don't know whether I would believe it as much because they have their, especially now, where it seems like a Government minister resigns any time anything goes wrong at all, you know. They've got their job on the line sort of thing, whereas the spokesman for the prison office doesn't have his job on the line, because he's portraying simple facts." [LHE: Scotland]

However, it is important to bear in mind that this discussion was in relation to overcrowding in prisons. If statistics were released by the prison service that were perceived to be advantageous to the prison service then participants may question their reliability.

The fact that there was often more than one source of official statistics contributed to participants distrust. They felt that the presence of differing sources meant that politicians could choose the statistics that best fitted their political message, and that they found it difficult to judge which statistics were correct:

"The Government uses statistics to show what it wants to show, for example unemployment, they've used all sorts of different measures for employment to

show it's going down and by using different measures that makes it go down, rather than it necessarily going down itself." [MHE Wales]

Some participants found it hard to understand that there could be different official sources producing similar statistics. As far as they were concerned “*you were either employed or unemployed*” and “*in a hospital queue or not in the queue*”. There is “*only one reality*”.

Independence of ONS

There was little knowledge and certainty about the independent status of the ONS, and little understanding of ONS’ relationship to the Government and to other departments and organisations. This was apparent from two general views emerging from the discussions regarding the independence of ONS. The first view was that ONS was independent, even though it was a government department, because the ONS was “*in the business of doing statistics*”. ONS was perceived to be different from policy departments, because it was not “*within government*” but part of the “*mechanism for running the country*”. As such, statistics from such a “*credible source*” were seen as more trustworthy.

"I just believe it's independent from the Government, you get Government funding but you got independent point of view, you are not within the Government." [MHE: London]

"There are some departments I would say would massage figures, government departments. So yes I would give you more credibility than them." [MHE:Wales]

The second view was that the ONS was not independent; that it was influenced by Government, and that statisticians were seen as being “*pawns of the powers that be*”.

"...we still believe that the National Statistics Office is not independent of the government body of the day, it's that simple." [MHE, Wales]

The two opposing views held within the groups often ran in parallel with one another. This is clearly illustrated below, with on the one hand, a strong view that Government routinely influenced statistics in some way, followed immediately with the view that ONS was to a greater or lesser degree independent:

“It’s easy to think of the ONS as some demonic body which is manipulated by the Government but at the end of the day it’s individuals who work there and I think most of them are independent and well intentioned.” [MHE: Wales]

5.1.3 Trust in the presentation of official statistics

Across the groups there was universal distrust of the use of statistics by politicians.

“...it's the way [statistics are] interpreted by politicians and the government in general. That's what people have a problem with - it's the way things are presented and used as arguments.” [MHE:Manchester]

Some commented on the fact that if the politicians could not agree on the statistics presented than how could the general public believe what was being quoted.

“But even when they do argue in the House of Commons, they give different figures and they call each other liars so how are we in the middle supposed to know what’s the truth.” [LHE: Scotland]

Participants acknowledged that the statistics needed to be set in context. However, they felt that the contextual setting was sometimes steered towards the Government’s own advantage. Again, words commonly used by participants in this context were “*manipulation*” and “*spin*”.

There was no variation in distrust across England, Scotland and Wales. Politicians across all three countries were equally seen to influence statistics:

“Yes the Welsh politicians are still politicians, they’re no better than English ones.” [MHE: Wales]

All of the focus groups acknowledged that politicians’ use of percentages versus actual figures were central to how they influenced statistical messages. If a percentage was low but the actual figure appeared high at face value, then it was believed that the politician’s choice of whether to use the percentage or figure was based on the political message that they wanted to give:

“The other thing....it said 12,000 back in work, out of 1.4 million or whatever... That's less than a half a fraction of 1%. Now if they said it's less than half a fraction of 1%....what are you bothering about? But 12,000 is a big number...so they use 12,000.” [MHE:Manchester]

“So they use the figures, not percentage. Now, next time crime went up 39%...not 45,000 more people were mugged, robbed or raped, or whatever... So again, they just use the...the type of presentation varies.” [MHE: Manchester]

Participants said that the fact that politicians rarely quoted the source of their statistics made it difficult for them to determine their trust (based on independence & accuracy) in what was presented. In these instances the public had to rely entirely on their knowledge or experiences.

5.1.4 Trust in the release of official statistics

Distrust in the release of official statistics existed across the focus groups. One reason was that many participants believed not all official statistics were actually released into the public domain:

“How many results don’t we get as well? They’re not going to tell us the ones they don’t want us to hear.” [MHE: Wales]

Groups were of the opinion that the release of official statistics was politically motivated and often associated with trying to hide something. Examples of statistics that the Government tried to hide were statistics that did not support their political messages or policies.

More commonly participants distrusted the timing of the release of official statistics. They believed that the Government used statistics as an aid to divert focus away from scandal, and that choosing the best time to present statistics was highly correlated with what was happening in the political arena:

“...particularly when they're going through a bad patch perhaps with the scandals. They can suddenly come up with figures that the inflation is very low and everyone goes, oh great, you know we're on a roll now we can all afford to buy something and then forgetting about all the scandal and wheeler dealing that's going on.” [LHE:Manchester]

Similarly, they believed that the Government utilised scandal and disaster to bury potentially damaging statistics:

“...when there is some bad news that can't be disguised at the time, they try and bury it in the back of a report or announce it on the day when there'd been a disaster, so no-one takes any notice of it, so...a lot of stuff like that. Politicians...it is a kind of spin culture at the moment, politicians will always find a way of burying the bad news or avoiding the sort of public hysteria.” [MHE:Manchester]

Where statistics were considered 'less favourable', it was believed that they were released at a time when they were less likely to receive scrutiny. This could be during holiday periods:

“Governments release figures when it suits them and they'll roll them back and when people are on holiday they are not listening to the news at all and things like that.” [LHE; Manchester]

Or when other ‘more favourable’ statistics were being released. In this instance crime statistics were given as an example. A number of different crime statistics would be released together. Some of the statistics might be good news, such as falls in “*street crime*” or “*car crime*”; others might be bad, such as a rise in “*violent crime*”.

Some participants thought that certain statistics, supporting political messages, were released prior to an election in order to gain political advantage:

“We have an election coming up in the distance, I think you will see a bias on the statistics you can get.” [MHE: Wales]

“If there’s an election coming up...they’ll release statistics in time. Or they’ll create...they’ll do the ministerial leak...” [MHE:Manchester]

5.1.5 Trust in the accessibility of official statistics

Few were aware that official statistics were accessible by the public, such as being available on the Internet, though many suggested that they should be. Where participants were aware they were still concerned that not all of the information was accessible. A participant in one focus group believed that accessibility of Census data had been reduced when comparing 1991 and 2001 Census data.

“And I’ve used Census quite a bit for different projects and I tried to do a project using 2001 Census which obviously the ONS handles... and there was a new Government programme to put it all on line and make it very accessible, and I actually, I did a pilot study using the 1991 material and I could do what I wanted to do. But at the same point in time using the 2001 I couldn’t. So they tried to make it accessible, but by doing that they actually made it more inaccessible for people to use it. Because they put their money into putting it online rather than publishing reports that’s what it seemed like to me. I had to

contact the Office for National Statistics several times, and asked several different people to help me out, and no one could do it.” [MHE: London]

5.1.6 Trust in the methodology associated with the production of official statistics

Again, consideration was given to the methodology applied to the data collection. Participants were concerned that each stage of the data collection process could be influenced by the political agenda of the time, yet they trusted that those collecting and producing the data were attempting to be impartial. The dominant areas of concern were with: the sampling, definitions and classifications and survey questions.

Survey Sampling

Participants sometimes used sample size as a factor to determine accuracy and consequently the basis for their level of trust.

“Now I can understand that 2,000 people would be a good enough survey to decide which was the most popular breakfast cereal and such like. But I cannot see how on an ethical, social, political issue, they could possibly... I'm worried about the level of these surveys, how widespread, I mean, I would think you would need a 100,000 people surveyed to get a cross section of opinion on most issues, apart from marketing.” [LHE: Scotland]

Definitions and classifications

Participants were distrusting of how certain statistics were defined and classified with the view that they could be in some way manipulated to reflect success in relation to government policy.

The most common example given was unemployment statistics. It was not that participants believed the data were inaccurate, but that historically the definition had been changed to show a

drop in unemployment that did not really exist. They referred to the definitional changes made in the 1980's.

“...is the biggest con of all because of what it doesn't take into consideration. It only takes those who are registered for benefits, it doesn't take perhaps women who want to work...” [LHE: Scotland]

“The government uses statistics to show what it wants to show. For example, unemployment, they've used all sorts of different measures for unemployment to show it's going down and by using different measures that makes it go down, rather than it necessarily going down itself.” [MHE:Wales]

There was a difference in how the public and 'the Government' defined unemployment.

“To me somebody who's unemployed is unemployed, they haven't got a job. To them it's somebody who's claiming benefit.” [LHE: Bristol]

The Retail Price Index (RPI) was occasionally mentioned as an example of how classifications could affect statistics. Some participants believed that the choice of goods for the RPI basket excluded certain items and therefore presented a “false picture”.

[Talking about the retail price index] ... “even that is a bit arbitrary, isn't it, because it's based on, you choose certain things, you choose a shopping basket full of stuff, of goods, it's being somebody's choice what things you include in that. And I think it's things like, I mean, housing isn't included, is it, mortgage rates and things like that are not included, which can give a false picture in some ways.” [LHE: Scotland]

Survey questions

Some participants acknowledged that the wording of questions could influence the answers:

“Surveys are particularly bad. You can ask the question in any way to get the answer you want.” [MHE: Wales]

No specific examples of biased survey questions were given. However, non-survey opinion questions were discussed to illustrate this belief. The European Common Market referendum question was mentioned as an example of a biased opinion question.

“Yes. The trouble with that was that it wasn’t an open and shut question. It wasn’t do you want to join the common market, yes or no, it was do you want to join the common market or do you want to be left out in the cold and have all your taxes doubled and all the rest of it. It was just so weighted against.” [LHE: Bristol]

One subject where it was thought possible to influence the results by the way survey questions were worded was crime. When told that statistics from the British Crime Survey showed a fall in the crime rate, the view was that it was probably the result of how the questions were slanted.

Some participants based their distrust on a lack of independence between the survey funder and the survey organisation. They believed that the commissioner would decide in advance the result they wanted and would influence the design of the question wording accordingly.

“Well that would be politically, could be politically motivated, because obviously they’ve got people working within the central Government saying well if we ask this question in such a way, there’s only one way they can answer that, it’s going to make it look, we can slant things how we want it. And so that would be your given remit, find this out, ask these questions.” [MHE: London]

5.2 Personal knowledge and experience

Where participants were unsure of the independence or accuracy of the statistics they generally relied on personal knowledge or experience, or that of people they knew.

“I think most people will go off their experiences. You know...they will just go off their personal experiences and what their family and friends...you know... Because the thing with statistics is they conflict an awful lot with your own personal lifestyle or experience, so it's very difficult really to believe them...”
[MHE: Manchester].

“Crime and hospitals, if you’ve had your own experience with hospitals and you think hang on a second, that didn’t happen, then it’s the classic dinner table discussion?” [MHE: Wales]

Statistics relating to certain subjects were less trusted by participants. Those mentioned were unemployment, crime, asylum and pension statistics. There was a mixture of opinions regarding health statistics and those produced by local authorities.

Unemployment statistics were not trusted due to concerns about changing definitions and classifications mentioned earlier.

The accuracy of crime statistics was universally distrusted. Most importantly because the direction in which the statistics were reportedly going did not match with their experiences. The quote below is in response to a suggested fall in crime:

“I mean the amount of car crime there is now. Joy riders, especially on my Estate. You can hear the helicopter, always up in the sky. It's every night.”
[LHE:Manchester]

Distrust was also based on conflict between sources (Police reported crime figures and the British Crime Survey) and classifications:

“I think recently there was a crime report came out and the official figures turned out to be different to the actual figures detailed by the police. It’s situations like that can knock people’s confidence in statistics.”
[MHE:Manchester]

Some comments also referred to the fact that certain offences were “no longer designated crimes” and were therefore no longer collected, for example vandalism.

Asylum statistics were not trusted as participants believed that the “goalpost” had been moved. It was clear that there was some misunderstanding between the definition of an ‘asylum seeker’ and an ‘illegal immigrant’. Falling figures about the numbers of asylum seekers, for example, were purported to show the Government’s policies were working. However, many people did not believe the figures were correct, thinking they had been interfered with.

In one of the focus groups pension statistics were illustrated as an example of distrust in accuracy. This distrust was based on knowledge and experience.

“I mean the classic on that one, in my own experience was on pensions, where the amount of money invested in pensions in this country was totally overstated. For those within the business you kind of knew why because transfers from one company to another had been counted as new business. And it was totally overweighted. And yes we’ve seen, you know, put forward by Government as hey, what’s the problem?” [MHE:Scotland]

Health statistics were discussed by all of the focus groups. There were mixed accounts relating to the accuracy. However, opinions of trust and distrust were both based on experience.

Experiences that led to trust in health statistics:

“With regard the hospital lists I think they're good, the statistics for hospitals because I was very pleased with our hospital. I actually have to go and the service I got you can see it's improved visually because I go every month for treatment and I used to go and take a paper and magazine and now I'm lucky if I get to page four or something with the paper and I'm in. So you can see it happening in front of you and they have a target thing on the walls for the nurses and everybody and they are dead keen to do it as well.”
[LHE:Manchester]

“Now in my case I have three people I know quite well who've all had triple by-passes and there was no messing about. They went in and got it done and there was no hanging about two years, something like that.” [MHE:Manchester]

Experiences that led to distrust in NHS waiting lists:

“It all depends on your personal experiences as well, like I personally didn't believe a lot about the hospitals statistics and that kind of thing because I've had personal dealings, bad personal dealings with hospitals and that kind of thing, so. I have got my doubts on things about that...” [LHE: Scotland]

Accounts were also given concerning people having to wait just to get on to a waiting list, which was considered a “*disgusting use of fiddling the statistics*”; and someone being told their operation was cancelled, having been on a waiting list for 11 months and then removed from the list and put on the next year's list.

Performance related statistics from Local Authorities were discussed by some groups. Again, trust in them was based on personal experience.

“...they make an effort, but you know as regarding street cleaning, one time you used to have guys there with a barrow and a brush and a shovel. Now they come round with a high speed sweeper and it just disturbs all the earth and just spreads it all over the pavement and yet statistically they're doing a fantastic job. They're getting through forty streets in a day whereas they only got through two streets in a day before, but I mean is it a good job? No it's not a good job, but statistically they are doing a better job than they've ever done because they are covering more area.” [LHE:Manchester]

6. Official Statistics and the Media

The focus groups revealed that the main public source of information on official statistics seemed to come from the media.

The following is an account of the issue of public trust in the media and media presentation of official statistics as denoted by the focus group participants. In particular the chapter addresses: what modes of media people use to inform themselves, which modes they trust or distrust, what influences that trust or distrust and the resulting consequences, and finally what improvements could be made to media reporting of official statistics to members of the public.

Across the groups, the modes mentioned were television, radio, newspapers, magazines, journals and the Internet. Not surprisingly, television and newspapers were more often cited than others.

As discussed in previous chapters, perceived independence, accuracy and personal knowledge and experience were the key themes emerging from the groups, and are similarly applied here to determine the degree of public trust in the media and their presentation of statistics.

6.1 Varying trust in different modes of media coverage

The groups discussed whether there were some modes that they trusted more than others as media vehicles to present accurate and unbiased statistics; the hypothesis being that if people did not trust a particular mode, then they would not trust the statistics presented by that form of media coverage.

The overriding concern was the impartiality of the media and particularly, the reputation of the press for their political affiliations. In general, television, radio and the Internet were seen as more impartial than the printed press; there was a tendency amongst participants to view these modes in a more favourable light:

“It’s just traditionally TV and radio stations aren’t known for twisting and lying, whereas newspapers are, you know, you go around the world and it’s the same situation that newspapers, for some reason, have just got a reputation.”
[LHE:London]

“ I probably would trust TV news more because it doesn’t seem to be driven by sort of a particular kinds of people that are in the newspapers who are just really pushing their own agenda all the time.”[LHE:Scotland]

“...it’s the news, and I know it’s the same news, but the man reading the news on the radio seems more believable ...” LHE:London]

Not surprisingly, many participants were of the opinion that information printed by the tabloid press was less reliable, and therefore less trustworthy, than information printed by the broadsheets. There was a recognition that newspapers had to meet sales targets, and participants thought the tabloid press were likely to use more sensational, exaggerated, attention grabbing headlines, to achieve their targets.

“...if there’s a robbery, there’s always twice as much been nicked in the Sun.”
[MHE:Manchester]

“The media over exaggerate lots of things anyway don’t they?”[LHE:London]

This sensationalist style of reporting was generally distrusted, and viewed by participants as the kind of media coverage most members of the general public would take with a ‘*pinch of salt*’. Consequently they looked for other ways to verify official statistics.

“Every time you hear statistics come up, a dramatic drop in this, a dramatic drop in that, I say ah that’ll be the day.” [MHE:Scotland]

Dichotomous views were held on whether headline statistics alone were more believable than an in-depth analysis. While some participants were less questioning of headline news bulletins:

“I’m just saying that, I mean news on the TV is more just news, whereas in the newspapers there’s a lot more, you know, comment and analysis because there’s so much more space... I mean... I watch the TV news and I found myself questioning it a lot less and just taking it in.” [LHE:Scotland]

Others felt that, where more time or space could be devoted to an issue, the information given would be more believable; public audiences would have more chance to digest and understand the arguments or the figures being presented:

“Programmes like Panorama for instance where it can be focused on one subject, I think you get a better picture...” [MHE:Wales]

6.2 Formulation of trust

6.2.1 Own beliefs

It became apparent that not only was there varied interpretation and trust in statistics, depending on the mode of media coverage, but even when accessing information from the same mode, different people were likely to have a different opinion or level of trust in the statistics.

Participants felt that people tend to believe information that supports their own beliefs. Indeed, discussion in the groups supported the idea that this could be applicable to the media setting.

“It’s like whether we choose to read the Sun or the Telegraph or whatever, they all present figures in a different way. And you make that decision based on, to a certain extent, your background and beliefs.” [MHE:Scotland]

“... but it’s like we all read the newspapers, we could all read the Times this morning, we could all read the headline news on the front page and we could sit down here and each one of us would have a completely different view on what

the man has said, because we've all got brains, we interpret it as we would like to interpret it or as we think it should be interpreted. And that must happen to statistics, there's no way, you can't get away from it. We all think differently, therefore we all read differently and we all read it differently." [MHE:London]

6.2.2 Data origin

Participants were also concerned about where the data presented by the media actually originated and felt that this information would enable them to determine whether a media report was trustworthy or not:

"Well if you can trust the source of where they get these figures from."
[LHE:Wales]

"They're very inclined just to say and statistics show such and such, but they don't tell you where they came from." [LHE:Bristol]

6.2.3 Media bias

Political affiliation

Whether or not media coverage was influenced, in the participants' opinion, by political bias seemed to be the overriding factor determining trust in media presentation of statistics.

Participants across all of the groups were aware of the political associations for different types of media. Furthermore, they relied on that knowledge when deciding which mode to use to inform themselves, and when judging the reliability of the reporting, including the reporting of statistical information. Consequently, information was not taken at face value; rather the issue of independence was again exemplified as an important concept for determining trust in official statistics:

“I suppose...you have to be aware of the political bias of the newspaper, ...You always have to be aware of the political bias behind, even TV and broadcasting.” [LHE:London]

“So like say I read it in certain newspapers, I would just dismiss it,... other papers which held out as more sort of independent then, I would tend to trust it ...I think most people know sort of which side of the political line newspapers lie on...” [LHE: Scotland]

“Recently ...when I want to, like to find out the news, I'd go to maybe the BBC website because then I'm sure it's presented in a sort of TV way in that they don't have all this politics written into it, but in the same way, it's leaving out all the images, so it's not influencing you through that, so you just get what I would say is just being basic facts.” [LHE:Scotland]

Referred to previously in discussion on government use of official statistics, words such as ‘manipulation’ and ‘spin’ were again used in the media context. However, these emotive terms were used mainly, but not exclusively, to describe reporting in newspapers rather than the broadcast media.

“Yes, that's the spin isn't it.” [LHE:Bristol]

“I think sometimes though government statistics can be misrepresented by the press and the news and quite often what we hear at the end, it might not necessarily have been worded in the same way as was officially given out.” [LHE:Bristol]

Although there was a view that the broadcast media would tend to pitch their reports according to their respective viewing profile.

“I don’t think there’s maybe a political bias between the channels, but I think there is quite possibly a sort of intellectual level, some aiming for a certain group and others are aiming for others. Other channels would be, you know, maybe more in depth.” [MHE:London]

Selective reporting

As a result of this political affiliation, participants believed that the media were selective about the information they presented to support their own political standpoint. Therefore, while they believed the statistics to be accurate, they felt that they were likely to be reported in a misleading way:

*“They print what they want to print, leave out what they don’t want to print.”
[MHE:Wales]*

“I think it’s hard because people believe what they read, well not everyone, but when people do believe what they read, you’re only told what they want you to know, you know, you don’t know what the truth is, you know, you’re just told. The editor reads it and he decides what will be in it and what won’t be. So basically you’re only told what they want you to know.” [LHE:Wales]

*“The statistics themselves are accurate but the way in which they’re presented and used can distort what those statistics are actually telling you.”
[MHE:Scotland]*

Furthermore, participants believed that essential information, placing the statistics in context and enabling them to make an informed judgement as to whether or not a report was biased, was likely to be hidden or omitted.

“...I think the headline was something to the tune of ‘Racist Britain 97% of the population don’t have any friends from an ethnic background’. Then you think,

big statistic, that was it, the headline was the statistic...and you think well hang on a minute, what population of the country is an ethnic minority in the first place and then what percentage of the Welsh population?" [MHE:Wales]

Style of reporting

This underlying political presence, together with a very definite journalistic presentational style, were key confounding factors making the statistics seem sometimes deliberately misleading:

"... if you want somebody to understand figures and information, you present it very slowly, very simply and you probably repeat it once, if not twice. And it should be self evident and you take through slowly. If you want them to give an impression and not really understand it, you throw as many figures as possible, as fast as possible, so they can't really pick up on it..." [MHE:Scotland]

As a consequence of not completely trusting the independence and accuracy of some media coverage, people looked for other ways to validate the results. Knowing that a particular newspaper had a certain bias or reported in a certain style, participants said that they made their own adjustments to the figures presented. Alternatively they would make a judgement based on their own personal experience or that of family or friends. In other words, relying solely on one side of the trust equation.

"Most newspapers you can't believe what the media print, you have to read between the lines and if they say a percentage is this, then I think, well then it's this." [LHE:Wales]

"I don't trust any...really. No. You know....you've your own experiences ...family, friends...I think that's more important to people than these statistics and...you know...the media or the paper. I really do." [MHE:Manchester]

Participants suggested that one way of improving the presentational style would be to take people through the results more slowly:

“My problem was with the style, presentation [referring to TV]... it’s meaningless isn’t it, because you’re given a figure, it’s gone in a few seconds.”
[MHE:London]

“I think health statistics are quite prone to not thinking about other factors and might involve sort of headline about, don’t know, death rates in the west of Scotland, have something about poor lifestyles but forget the fact that they had shipyards and all sorts of what else in the past. There is a legacy from that. From my professional point of view, it’s quite important to take into account other things they might fiddle about with, use statistics at the same time and I think the media are quite bad for grabbing for something that’s interesting and they think will shock, you know, they’ll use language like condition fiasco or failing schools, they’ll go for that and they don’t really beef up the information or back that up by having any sort of reference for you as the reader. And I think people are quite bad for just taking headlines and headline statistics and not really thinking about what else might actually be causing the thing that’s so interesting.” [MHE:Scotland]

6.2.4 Reputation of media organisations/journalists

The reputation of particular media types, or those working for them, was also factored into the media trust issue. Often, participants saw the BBC as being more trustworthy because of its reputation for unbiased, independent reporting:

“...heard a figure say on like a BBC channel or something, then I would tend to trust it a lot more.” [LHE:Scotland]

“BBC I would say are reasonable because they’re a public service broadcaster, the rest are a different lot.” [LHE:Bristol]

However this was not always the case:

“I used to think that the BBC were a sort of independent, but I don’t know so much now because Tony Blair has gone around and he’s put all his old cronies in all the top jobs in everything. He’s done that in the BBC hasn’t he?” [LHE:Bristol]

For some participants it was certain news programmes and journalists who were considered to be more trustworthy, rather than the mode of media coverage per se:

“Well I think he [Martin Bell] was a good journalist and he’s got lots of background, so I think, you know, he knows a lot, he’s got a lot of experience, but he seems to me that he can cut through, see through what’s going on. He’s a principled man and he sees it as it is. He cuts through all the waffle and that’s what I like about him, but basically because he’s actually got a past in that field, so he knows what he’s talking about and he’s not interested either way, it’s just how he sees things.” [LHE:Bristol]

6.2.5 Information overload

For some participants, the sheer volume and variety of statistics presented to them from such a multitude of different media modes was overwhelming in itself. Phone polls, newspaper and magazine surveys, and television programmes such as ‘Family Fortunes’, were mentioned throughout the discussions. Participants recognised that these were “*fun*” items, and made comments such as “*I sometimes wonder if they’ve made them up*”. Nevertheless they had an impact on the general perception of the reliability of statistics presented by the media.

Different modes, or sometimes even the same mode, seemed to present the statistics in different ways at different times, which participants found at best confusing, and at worse meant that they dismissed or trivialised the point being made:

“I was saying you can flick through the radio channels and even on the same station you might get three different figures within a morning.” [LHE:Bristol]

“Well some statistics, they are not right. For example like the immigration statistics, you get five different papers every day, so the Daily Mail, the Sun, the Mirror, Evening Standard and all that, and they never get the right number. So that’s quite funny actually, it’s laughable, it’s a good joke, you go down to work and you say well everybody gets different paper and you sit down and laugh about it, because nobody knows what’s going on with it.” [LHE:London]

6.2.6 Independent monitoring body

At this stage in the discussions, it became clear that some kind of principal body was of paramount importance if the public are to give any value or trust in media statistical reports.

Coupled with the more generally perceived political bias, participants, particularly in the more highly educated groups, felt that statistics reported by the media should be monitored and checked by an independent authoritative body:

“The press can just make up a figure, put in the headline and the chances that anybody is ever going to get back and contradict them ...” [LHE: Scotland]

“It would force the media to be much more careful if they knew they could get pulled up on that in the publication. I don’t see why you couldn’t do that in a fairly short haul way. And maybe, gradually the media would be forced to take more care.” [MHE:Manchester]

“...they monitor themselves, don't they...or they have a body to do it... But perhaps the newspaper should have the same...or the media should have the same thing...for statistics. But, they say lies and damn lies...well, people may well be misled by the lies and damn lies, and therefore they shouldn't be allowed to use statistics in the wrong way. And therefore they should be monitored.”
[MHE:Manchester]

At the very least, participants expressed a wish to be certain that the origin of the statistics could be trusted:

“I think the answer is, they come on television and [say] the statistics office has produced these figures, plonk.” *[MHE:London]*

7. Suggested Improvements: In General and ONS Specific

7.1 Official Statistics: recommendations

Towards the end of each focus group moderators encouraged participants to try and summarise the discussion to give an overall view on trust in official statistics. They were also asked to think of positive ways of improving the presentation of statistics to increase confidence and gain trust.

Participants recognised the importance of official statistics to inform social, economic and public policy. However, the assurance that statistics were accurate and had been presented to them in an unbiased way was important. The following sections reinforce this message.

7.1.1 Quality measures and metadata

A clear message from across the groups was that more supporting information was required giving additional detail about why and how data were collected, by whom and for whom. This way, participants felt the public would be able to judge for themselves whether or not the data commissioner, or indeed the data collector/compiler, had a vested interest in the results. It would allow people to make informed judgements and hopefully counter uncertainty as to whether or not official statistics could be trusted to produce unbiased results.

Participants suggested that providing supportive information such as sample sizes and response rates would be useful; people associated large sample sizes and high response rates with good quality data. However, although strong indications of quality, it was clear from the discussions that these alone would not be sufficient.

Across the groups some participants queried whether the data collected and the statistics they read might be influenced by the way questions are worded; that in some way the questions might bias statistical output. It was suggested that showing the question actually asked would also help people to validate the findings.

“It would be good to actually see what the question was when you get the answer, you know, when you get the statistics, because the wording of the question leads the answer.” [MHE:London]

The researchers believe that people were asking for additional information because: i) they had an interest in the research; and ii) they felt that they could not trust the independence and accuracy of the statistics. The latter, partly because participants found it difficult to disentangle the statistics from the politics.

7.1.2 Independence

As part of ensuring that official statistics are accurate and unbiased participants felt that an independent authority should oversee or quality assure their production and dissemination. (A point aside, none of the groups mentioned the Statistics Commission.) Participants felt such guardianship was necessary at all stages of the data collection operation: commissioning and sponsorship, fieldwork, processing, and dissemination. However, it was recognised that this would be time consuming and add to the overall cost of production:

“Then have an independent auditors of some description, but that would be very difficult, very costly.” [MHE:Scotland]

The concept of having a regulatory body to rubberstamp, or kite mark in effect, the reliability and validity of the statistics was something which came out from all group discussions

“Should not the national, the ONS actually produce the statements of statistics and say this is how you should interpret them, rather than let other organisations come in and take their statistics and interpret them as they do, and then put your stamp of approval?” [MHE:Wales]

Alternatively, an approved independent presenter, with a credible, knowledgeable background in statistics, would suffice.

Either way, participants believed this kind of approval process would lead to a higher perception of trust in the independence and accuracy of the statistics, rather than basing trust solely on personal experience or that of family and friends.

However, there was a belief from some that a government department could not honestly fulfil a regulatory role, since it could not be strictly independent, and ultimately reported to Ministers:

“But you would hope they would maybe like some sort of independent watchdog watching over it all, as opposed to it being the Government watching over it all because then it's the Government watching over it all then it's susceptible to, you know, political use.” [LHE:Scotland]

7.1.3 Code of Practice

Bearing in mind participants wishes that there should be a protector of statistics, it is important to note that most were unaware of any official guidelines on the production of statistics, although they hoped that there were some.

“...would like to think that there are somewhere official guidelines as to how statistics are gathered, like you're only allowed to ask one person once, whereas if something's like call in on the TV, well, what if it's a Pop Idol or something, you could phone up as many times as you want, that's not representative...” [LHE:Scotland]

Therefore it is the opinion of the researchers that the National Statistics Code of Practice, and the protocols that are in place to assure unbiased and accurate data collection, should be publicised. They should also be presented in a more easily digestible form for those without a strong statistical background.

7.1.4 Accessibility/Relevance/Interest

In addition to the accuracy and independence of official statistics, participants declared that the data themselves should be easily available and accessible to ordinary members of the public who may want to find out more about the results.

Part of participant understanding of making statistics more accessible included making them relevant, which in turn would make them more interesting:

“I would present statistics that are more relevant to everyday life...”
[MHE:Manchester]

Presenting regional rather than national statistics based on sub-groups of the population was suggested.

“It's more...if it's in your area, you're more interested, you're more concerned. You know, you're more...oh, I want to listen to this.. If it's just about your area. But when they're generalising the whole country, you seem to not be interested.” *[MHE:Manchester]*

“Don't lump everything together. Try to be specific about one particular area rather than bringing all these other angles into it and then coming up with an average figure.” *[LHE:Manchester]*

7.1.5 Information overload

Coupled with their lack of appeal, participants were bored with constantly being presented with reams of what they considered to be statistics on trivial matters which exacerbated feelings of information overload. They preferred that some focus be given to the type and way in which statistics were presented to them. Some suggested trend data might also be a useful way to provide context and indicate the relevance and importance of information given.

Faced with a large quantity of information, participants expressed a wish for a more explicit definition of when statistics were deemed ‘official statistics’. Since more credibility was given to official statistics, it was suggested that this might be one way of deciphering which to take notice of and trust, and which could be ignored.

7.1.6 Educating the public

Education initiative

Following on from this patent need to better inform the public on what ‘official statistics’ actually are, it became increasingly apparent to researchers that educating the public about statistics in general is necessary:

“Educating children, not so much to learn but to find out how to learn. Educate people to find out how to find out if they want to. Not everybody will be the slightest bit interested but for those who do want to know it would be useful to understand how you can find out.” [MHE:Wales]

Explanatory information about revisions made to statistical output

Participants felt that when announcements are made regarding errors or discrepancies, a simple but thorough explanation is needed to explicate why this is the case. The researchers feel that this should be included as a fundamental part of the education process referenced above. It might help to prevent misunderstanding and the potential for official statistics to be unwittingly negatively portrayed:

“ A fairly large chunk got missed out from this last Census for some technical reasons and that came out afterwards. Anybody who was having to use that Census data for research is probably going to have to be taking account of that. Now I don’t, I’ve heard only just enough to put a question mark but that is a

very very important, and at the end of the day you're only trying to count people but there are some systematic errors got built into this one. Not deliberately, they're cock-ups, from what I can gather but it's affected the data."
[MHE:Wales]

7.2 Suggested improvements specific to ONS

As well as providing an overall view on trust in official statistics, participants were asked to comment specifically on ways ONS could improve.

7.2.1 Raising awareness

There was a strong feeling across and within the groups that the ONS needed a more effective promotion strategy and public awareness programme⁴, which would not only help to publicise the reliability of the statistics the office produces but also educate people in the methodologies associated with their production:

"You need to project yourselves more for people to believe what you're doing."
[LHE:London]

"It's not advertising, ... no advertising, like other Government departments produce leaflets to let you know what's going on, it's that kind of thing, it's promotion rather than advertising isn't it." [LHE:London]

"Probably better promotion from the Statistics Office itself, in terms of media, its own media, made more freely available. I know it's available in libraries and things like that. I don't know if expense is a difficult thing." [MHE:Wales]

⁴ 53% of the general public said that they had heard of the Office for National Statistics before they had been approached to take part in the ONS Omnibus survey. July 2004 Omnibus.

The ONS website

Part of the suggested awareness programme would include improving and promoting accessibility to the ONS website:

“Have a decent website that people could access and do research on because at the moment it’s a nightmare.” [LHE:Bristol]

“Well basically I do trust raw statistics, such as from the ONS. ... I think people in general need to know that they can go back and check sort of the raw statistics, they just hear figures banded about and tend to ignore it. All the information’s there, it’s all up on the Internet, and people just don’t realise it.” [LHE:Wales]

7.3 Quality assurance

It was suggested in one of the groups that the ONS should take ownership of the statistics they produce, commenting when necessary if it is apparent that statistics are being misused:

“Sometimes see in the papers people reviewing their own performance when they’ve made mistakes and commenting on how they can do things better, but you never see the ONS saying, analysing the statistics and commenting, you are using a lot of numbers and figures...justify...Somebody used these numbers and they took them out of context or used them in a particular way. And maybe comments in a non-judgemental way on how they were used.” [MHE:Manchester]

This would help to ensure that the public realises ONS does not condone inappropriate use of official statistics, and will also help to raise awareness of ONS and its role as a valuable provider of official statistics.

Appendix 1



Public Confidence in Official Statistics: Topic Guide

Research Objectives

- **Assess the public's confidence in official statistics**
 - explore hypothesis that there is a lack of confidence in official statistics
 - explore what is trusted/mistrusted and why: quality, relevance, use, integrity of producers
 - disentangle mistrust in official statistics from general mistrust in government
- **Gain understanding of implications and suggested ways of improving**
- **Explore how public confidence can be improved/rebuilt**

1. Introduction

- Introduce self and ONS
- Purpose of group/Client department
- How the group will work
- Tape recording and confidentiality

2. Warm-up

- Name, where from, something about yourself.
- Word association (*write on flipchart*)

3. What are 'official statistics', where do they come from

- What examples of statistics can anyone think of (of any kind)?
- Which of the ones you have mentioned are official?
- What makes them official?
- Where do statistics come from? Who produces/puts out stats?
- How are statistics produced? Who provides info?
- Do you make a distinction between statistics put out by Govt [UK, devolved, local], market research, newspaper surveys, stats produced by orgs like BBC, academics?

4. Who uses official statistics and what for?

- What are statistics used for? (Distinguish primary/official and other/political purposes?)
- Who uses them?
- Are statistics useful to society – are we better off or worse off?

5. Confidence/trust

- Where do you get your news and other information from?
- Which people, professions and organisations in society do you trust? Which don't you trust? (Group consensus?)
- How much do you trust official statistics?
- Has your level of trust changed over time?
- **What is it that is trusted/mistrusted?**
 - Quality/accuracy,
 - relevance/purpose,
 - method/timing of release
 - use made by politicians,
 - presentation by media?
- **Which types of stats are trusted/mistrusted?**
- **When believe them and when not?** Open Q; probe same or different opinions on:
 - Bad news v good news (e.g. compare rise in crime against fall)
 - Personal knowledge/interest v no knowledge/interest

- Press v tv/radio coverage
- Use by media
- Use by politicians
- Independent, expert opinion
- Where does this trust/mistrust come from?
- Trust/mistrust in statistics from trust/mistrust in government/media/govt dept
- Who trust/mistrust to present them?
- Awareness of more than one source of stats on a topic? e.g. BCS, police crime figs
- Government targets / league tables: Which aware of? What think of them?
- What if a mistake is made?

6. Examples for discussion

(Moderator decide if appropriate or necessary)

For each example below, discuss: reaction to; awareness of, belief in, true picture given by; roles played by media coverage, politicians, department responsible. Discuss in light of previous discussion by the group, and with reference to the probes above as appropriate.

- **Crime**
 - Ask everyone to say if they think crime rates are rising or falling; and for reasons.
 - Show newspaper headline “Crime: the truth” (39% fall since 95, BCS). Discuss BCS/HO v police.
- **Unemployment**
 - Play radio tape of Unemployment figures (and show ‘Stress’ headline).
- **Asylum seekers**
 - Show asylum figures video
- **Family spending**
 - Show EFS video
- **Hospital waiting lists**
 - Show ‘Surgery wait time down to 9 months’ headline

7. How to improve/ensure trust/confidence?

- How can trust/confidence be improve/ensured?
- What are the arrangements for producing/releasing stats? What should they be?
 - (relevance/purpose, independence, standards/code of practice, watchdog, single organisation or all departments (in Scotland/Wales?), release timing, revisions)

- How make statistics more interesting/appealing
- How make them more accessible/understandable)

Appendix 2

Sample Composition

Location	London	18
	Manchester	12
	Bristol	6
	Wales	14
	Scotland	20
Education level	Higher	38
	Lower	32
Gender	Male	35
	Female	35
Age	18-30	19
	31-60	35
	61+	16
	Total	70