

Statistical bulletin

# Personal well-being in the UK: 2015 to 2016

Personal well-being findings from the Annual Population Survey (APS), with analysis by country, region and individual characteristics.



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# 1. Main points

Since 2011, we have asked personal well-being questions to adults in the UK, to better understand how they feel about their lives. This report presents headline results from the fifth year of data collection, covering the financial year ending March 2016, together with how things have changed over the 5 years. It finds that:

- there has been no improvement in ratings of happiness, anxiety and feeling that things in life are worthwhile over the 1 year period between the years ending March 2015 and 2016
- reported personal well-being has improved across each of the measures over the 5 year period between the years ending March 2012 and 2016
- those living in London reported lower average ratings of life satisfaction, anxiety and feeling things in life are worthwhile compared with UK overall
- people in Northern Ireland continue to give higher average ratings of personal well-being for all measures except anxiety, when compared with the other UK countries
- although women reported higher life satisfaction and worthwhile levels when compared with men, they also reported higher levels of anxiety

## 2. Statistician's quote

"Life satisfaction has increased over the past year, which is what one might expect given the improvements seen in the economy and record high employment during that period. However, what is more surprising is that there is no change over the same time in people's happiness, anxiety and feeling that what they do in life is worthwhile. This is the first time we haven't seen year-on-year improvements in these particular measures since we began collecting the data in 2011."

Abbie Self, Director of Well-being, Inequalities, Sustainability and Environment, ONS

## 3. Background information

After extensive public consultation we identified 10 aspects (or domains) that people said mattered to their well-being. These include: personal well-being, our relationships, our health, the economy, and the environment. The [National well-being wheel of measures](#) reports on indicators for all of these and has done since 2012.

When collected over time, personal well-being data can provide an indication of how the well-being of a nation is changing. We began measuring personal well-being in April 2011. Since then, the Annual Population Survey (APS) has included 4 questions which are used to monitor personal well-being in the UK. These questions allow people to make an assessment of their lives overall, as well as providing an indication of their day-to-day emotions.

## 4. Things you need to know

The 4 personal well-being questions are:

- overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?
- overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?
- overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?
- overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?

People are asked to respond on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is “not at all” and 10 is “completely”.

Every year since 2011, a large sample of UK adults aged 16 and over has answered these questions. We produce estimates of the mean ratings for all 4 personal well-being questions, as well as their distributions, using the thresholds that can be found in [background note 1](#).

Personal well-being data will now be included within the main Annual Population Survey (APS) dataset rather than being released as a separate dataset. As a result of this, it has been necessary to revise the personal well-being series. For more information see [Impact of transition to Annual Population Survey dataset](#).

Information about the quality, including strengths and limitations, of the estimates published in this release, can be found in the [Quality and Methodology Information \(QMI\)](#).

## 5. Personal well-being growth slows for first time

Average ratings across the 4 measures of personal well-being in financial year ending 2016 were:

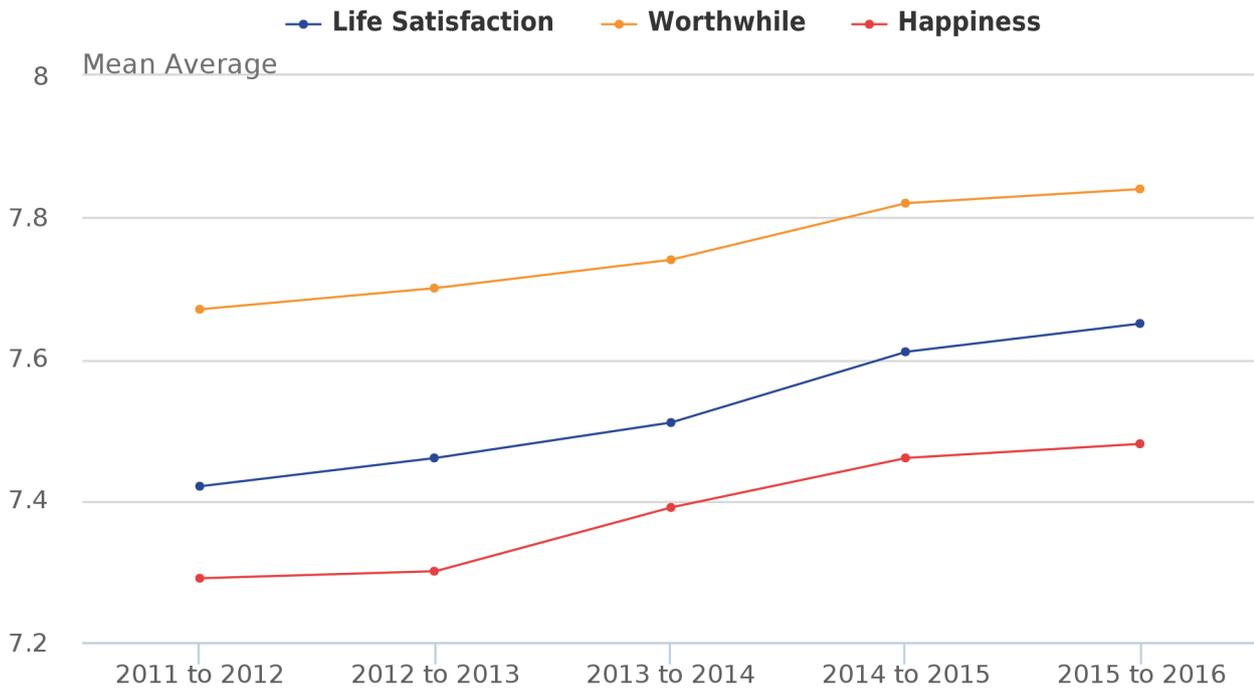
- 7.7 out of 10 for life satisfaction
- 7.8 out of 10 for feeling that what you do in life is worthwhile
- 7.5 out of 10 for happiness yesterday
- 2.9 out of 10 for anxiety yesterday

Reported personal well-being had improved every year since the financial year ending 2012, when data were first collected; however, the financial year ending 2016 sees the first instance where there has not been an annual improvement across all of the measures.

Average ratings of feeling that things done in life are worthwhile, happiness and anxiety in the UK have not improved when comparing the financial years ending 2015 and 2016, but all have increased since the financial year ending 2012 (Figure 1a and 1b). Life satisfaction is the only measure of personal well-being which has increased in the UK when comparing the financial years ending 2015 and 2016.

Figure 1a: Average personal well-being ratings, financial years ending 2012 to 2016

UK

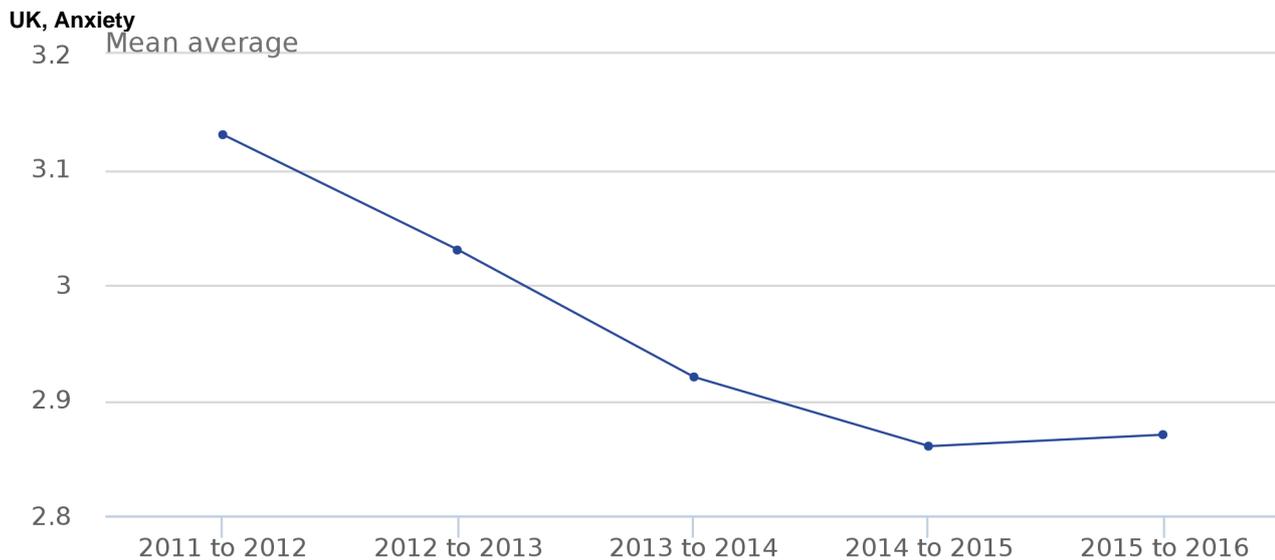


Source: Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Chart axis does not start at 0.
2. 2011 to 2012 was the first year of data collection.
3. Adults aged 16 and over were asked: "Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?" "Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?" "Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?" Where 0 is "not at all" and 10 is "completely".

**Figure 1b: Average personal well-being ratings, financial years ending 2012 to 2016**



Source: Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Chart axis does not start at 0.
2. 2011 to 2012 was the first year of data collection.
3. Adults aged 16 and over were asked: "Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?" Where 0 is "not at all" and 10 is "completely".

In [previous research](#) we identified people's self-reported health as the most important factor associated with personal well-being, followed by their work situation and then their relationship status. We monitor and report against a set of 41 headline measures of national well-being including these, to provide a [snapshot of life in the UK](#). Assessments of how these have changed might go some way towards explaining the trends we have observed in personal well-being.

Things which have got better include (UK, unless stated otherwise):

- real household disposable income and individuals' perceptions of their financial situation have both improved over the period personal well-being has been collected
- the employment rate for those aged 16 to 64 in the 3 months to March 2016, was at its highest levels since comparable records began in 1971
- the number of crimes against the person fell between years ending March 2014 and 2015 in England and Wales
- a growing proportion of the English population claimed to visit the natural environment once a week or more between 2009 to 2010 and 2014 to 2015

And things which have deteriorated in the UK (unless stated otherwise):

- fewer people were satisfied with their health in the year ending March 2014 compared with a year earlier and since the year ending March 2011
- fewer households in England reported they were very or fairly satisfied with their accommodation in the year ending March 2014 compared with a year earlier and since the year ending March 2011

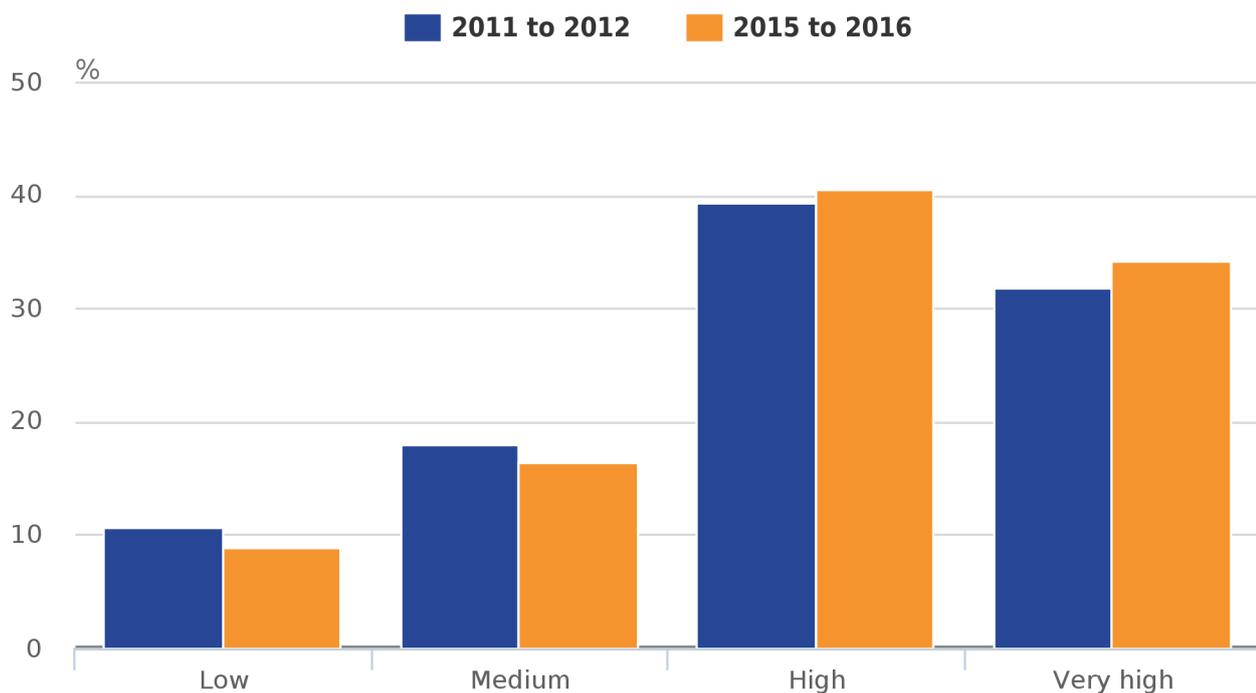
It is also possible the lack of improvement in 3 of the 4 personal well-being measures this year could be associated with the uncertainties surrounding governance, the economy and global security. For example, during the period covered by these data the UK has had a general election and the build up to an EU referendum. In addition, there has been a refugee crisis and numerous terror attacks around the world.

## 6. Fewer report lowest levels of happiness

It is also important for us to assess the distribution of well-being, not least to identify whether inequalities exist. Improvements in personal well-being ratings across the 5-year period have been characterised, in part, by a reduction in those reporting the lowest levels and an increase in those reporting the highest levels of personal well-being. When we consider ratings of happiness, the proportion of people in the UK reporting the lowest levels (0 to 4 out of 10) has fallen from 10.7% to 8.8% over the 5 year period (Figure 2). The proportion reporting very high levels of happiness (9 or 10 out of 10) increased from 31.9% to 34.3% between the same periods.

**Figure 2: Proportions reporting low, medium, high and very high happiness, financial years ending 2012 and 2016**

UK



Source: Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics

Notes:

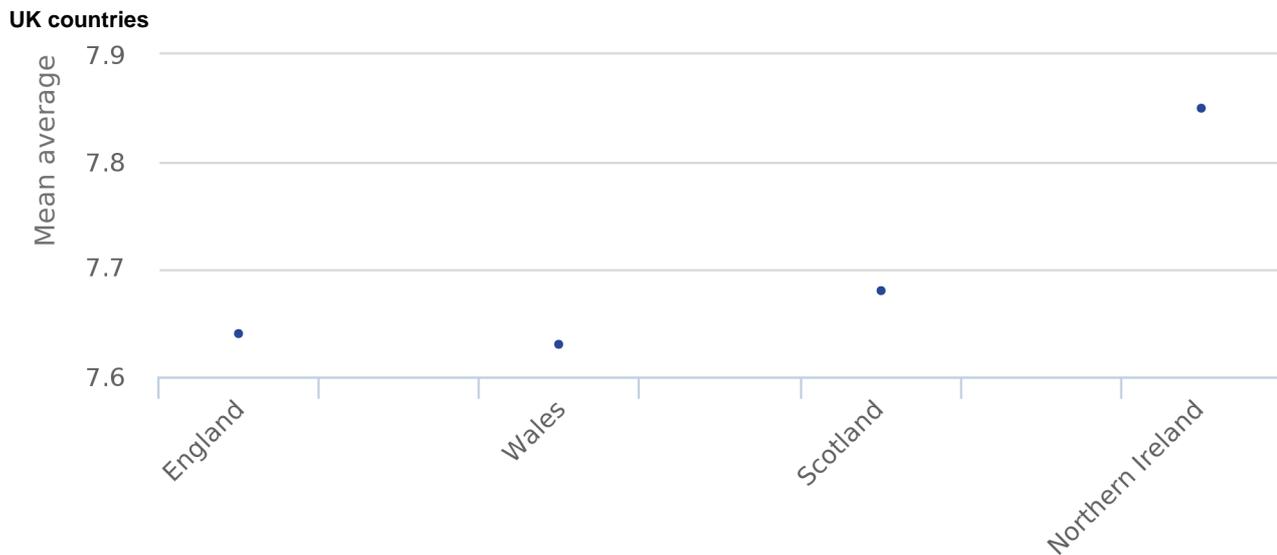
1. The “Low” category includes those responding 0 – 4 out of 10. The “Medium” category includes those responding 5 – 6 out of 10. The “High” category includes those responding 7 – 8 out of 10. The “Very High” category includes those responding 9 – 10 out of 10.
2. Question: Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday? Where 0 is "not at all happy" and 10 is "completely happy".

## 7. Personal well-being ratings continue to be highest in Northern Ireland

People living in Northern Ireland reported higher average ratings of life satisfaction, feeling that things they do in life are worthwhile and happiness when compared with other countries in the UK, and the UK as a whole (Figure 3). This has consistently been the case since the financial year ending 2013. There is no difference in the average personal well-being ratings between those living in England, Wales and Scotland in financial year ending 2016; nor between any of the countries for ratings of anxiety.

Northern Ireland also had the largest absolute increase in average ratings of life satisfaction of the UK countries (7.5 to 7.9) between the financial years ending 2012 and 2016.

**Figure 3: Average Life Satisfaction ratings, financial year ending 2016**



Source: Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Chart axis does not start at 0.
2. Question: Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? Where 0 is 'not at all satisfied' and 10 is 'completely satisfied'.

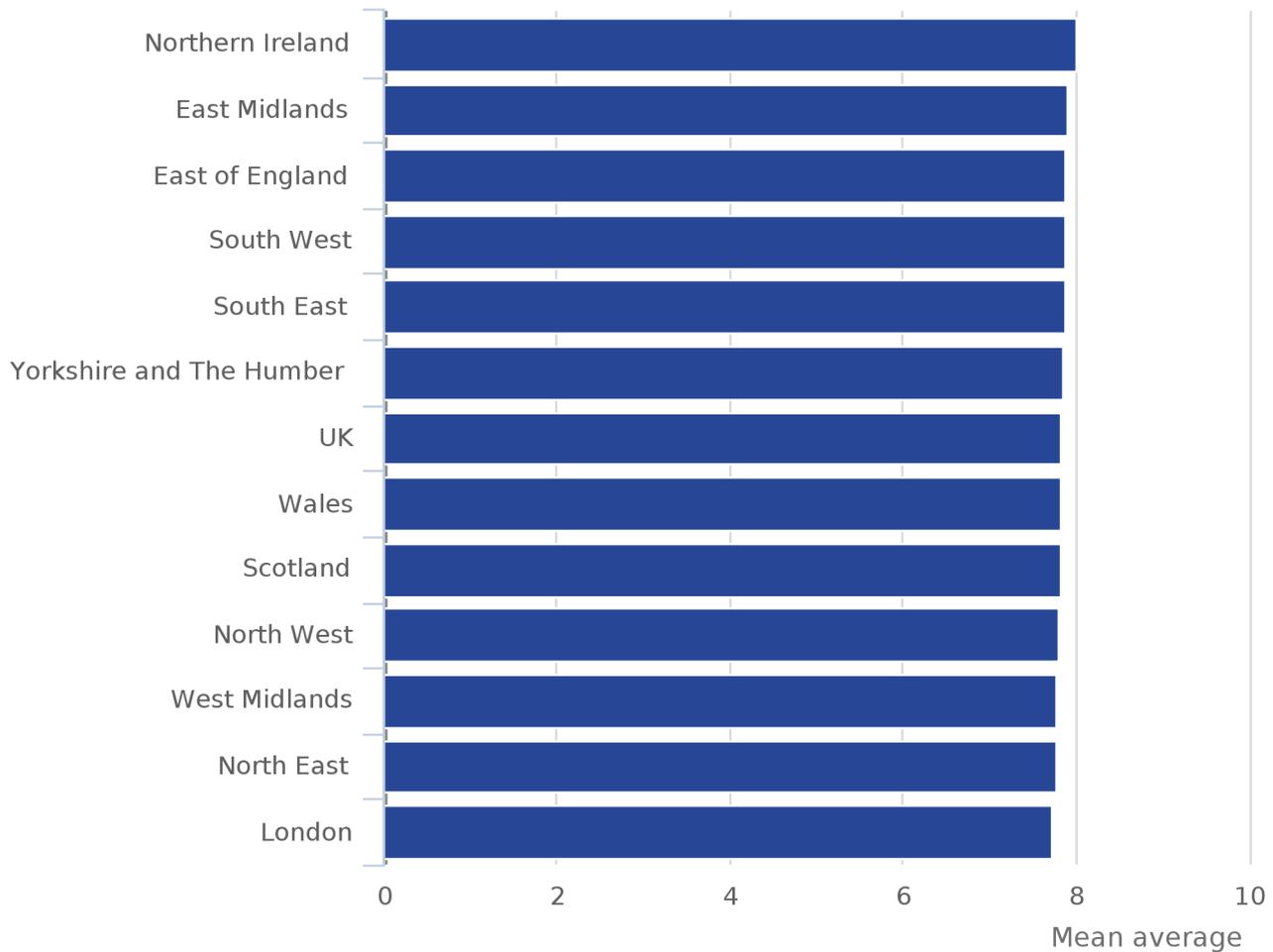
In a recent article exploring [Social Capital](#) in the UK, people living in Northern Ireland reported the highest levels for feelings of belonging to their neighbourhood and that people around them were willing to help others. This sense of social cohesion and community may be factors which contribute to the higher levels of personal well-being over the last 4 years in Northern Ireland. However, more in-depth research is required to understand the causal links between personal well-being and other factors in Northern Ireland.

## 8. People in London reported lower worthwhile ratings than UK overall

People living in London reported a lower average sense that things they do in life are worthwhile when compared with the UK overall (Figure 4). Conversely, those living in Northern Ireland or the English regions of the East Midlands, the East and the South West reported higher average ratings than the UK overall.

**Figure 4: Average worthwhile ratings, financial year ending 2016**

English regions, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland



Source: Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Question: Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile? Where 0 is "not at all worthwhile" and 10 is "completely worthwhile".

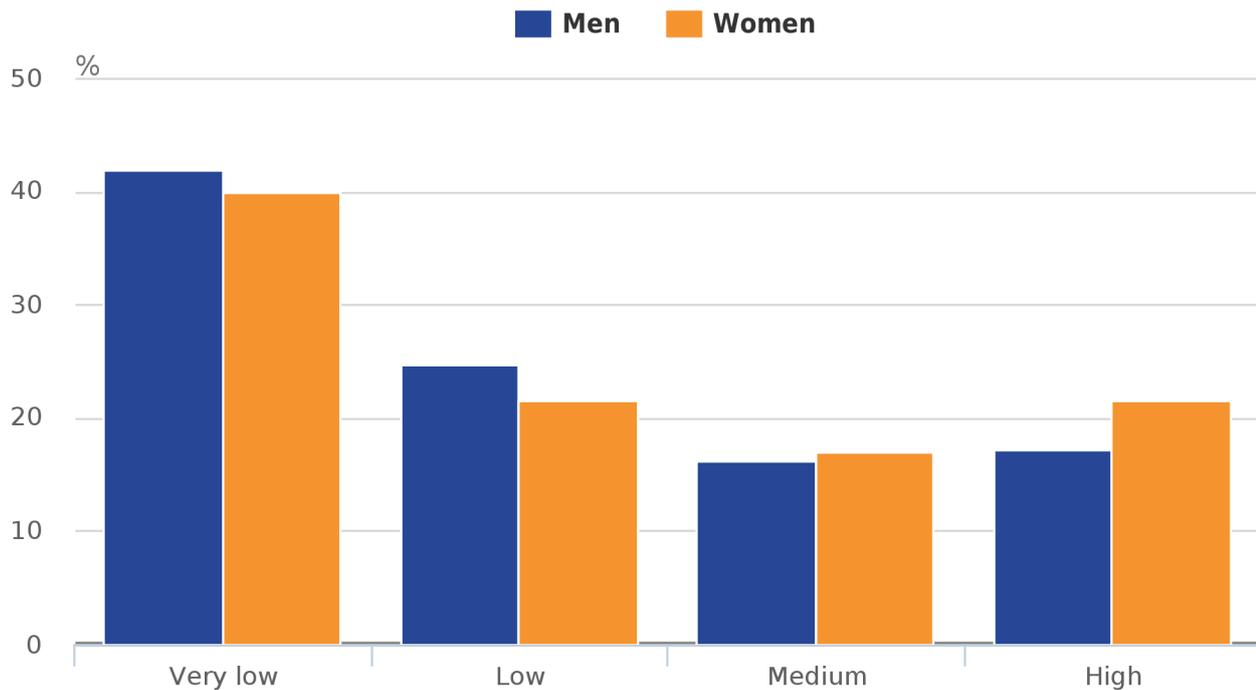
Some of the regional variations might be related to [previous research](#) which has shown that generally those people in rural areas give higher average ratings of personal well-being than those living in urban areas. Not only did Northern Ireland have the highest ratings of life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness, it also had the lowest proportion of urban areas of all regions. Conversely London, which is predominantly urban, had lower life satisfaction, worthwhile and anxiety ratings compared with the UK overall.

## 9. Women more likely to report high anxiety than men

Women reported higher life satisfaction and worthwhile levels when compared with men in the financial year ending 2016. However, they also reported higher levels of anxiety, which might be the consequence of a number of factors, such as women being more socially connected and involved than men (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Proportions reporting very low, low, medium and high anxiety by sex, financial year ending 2016**

UK



Source: Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics

Notes:

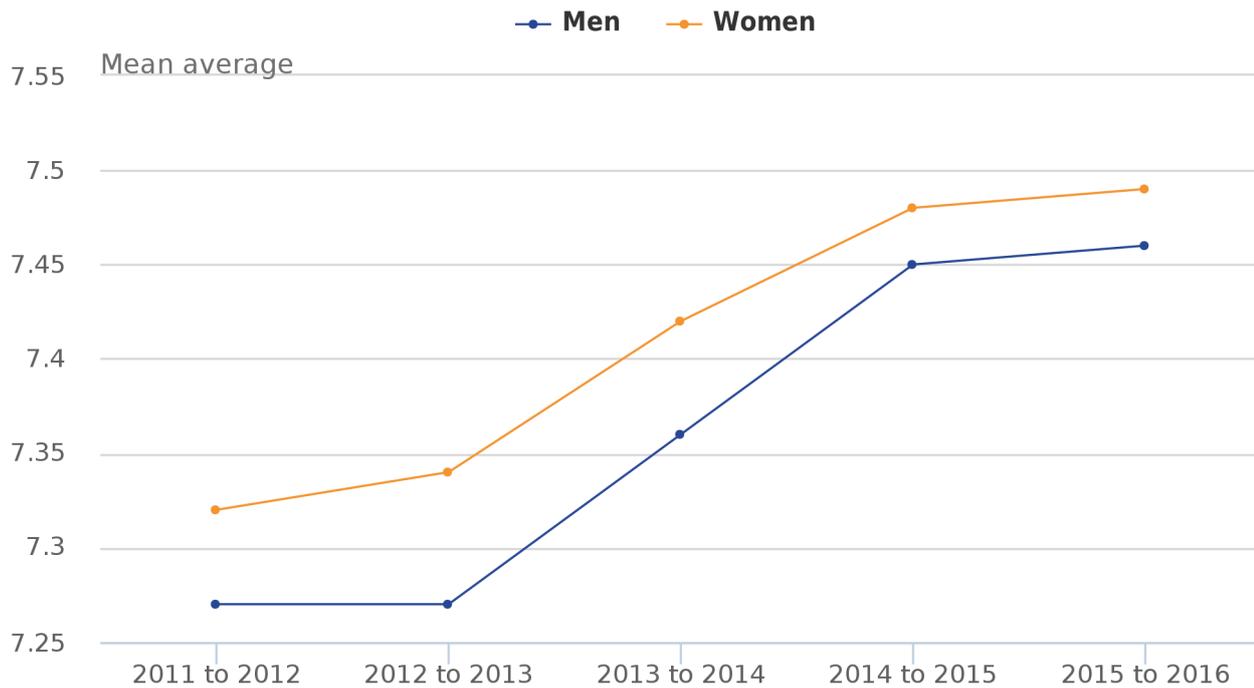
1. The “Very Low” category includes those responding 0 – 1 out of 10. The “Low” category includes those responding 2 – 3 out of 10. The “Medium” category includes those responding 4 – 5 out of 10. The “High” category includes those responding 6 – 10 out of 10.
2. Question: Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday? Where 0 is "not at all anxious" and 10 is "completely anxious".

## 10. The gap between men and women's happiness ratings is closing

Although the differences were small, in financial year ending 2012 there was a statistically significant difference in happiness ratings between the sexes, with women reporting higher “happy yesterday” levels (Figure 6). By financial year ending 2016, there was no longer a difference between the happiness ratings of men and women. There was also no increase in average ratings of happiness for men or women between financial years ending 2015 and 2016.

**Figure 6: Average happiness ratings by sex, financial years ending 2012 to 2016**

UK



Source: Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. The axis does not start at 0.
2. 2011 to 2012 was the first year of data collection.
3. Question: Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday? Where 0 is "not at all happy" and 10 is "completely happy".

## 11. Impact of transition to Annual Population Survey dataset

This publication represents the first time that personal well-being estimates have been included on the main Annual Population Survey (APS) dataset. Prior to this, they were included on a bespoke APS personal well-being dataset.

The following note presents the results of sensitivity testing, to compare estimates generated between the existing and new dataset. Overall, this analysis has identified the impact on the series to be minimal.

Although the personal well-being questions have been included on the APS since 2011, the structure of the bespoke dataset followed that of the Integrated Household Survey (IHS), of which APS was the largest component. The transition has meant we have re-based the entire back series of personal well-being to ensure a consistent time series from the establishment of personal well-being in 2011.

So what will the main differences be?

## **Single dataset**

From July 2016 onwards there will no longer be a separate Annual Population Survey Personal Well-being dataset. Personal well-being variables will instead be held on the main APS dataset, providing a richer dataset for analysis.

## **New weight**

A new non-proxy weight will replace the existing well-being weight to better align it to the standard APS weight.

## **Timeliness**

We will aim to publish headline estimates more quickly. For example, those for the financial year ending 2016 have been published 3 months earlier than last year.

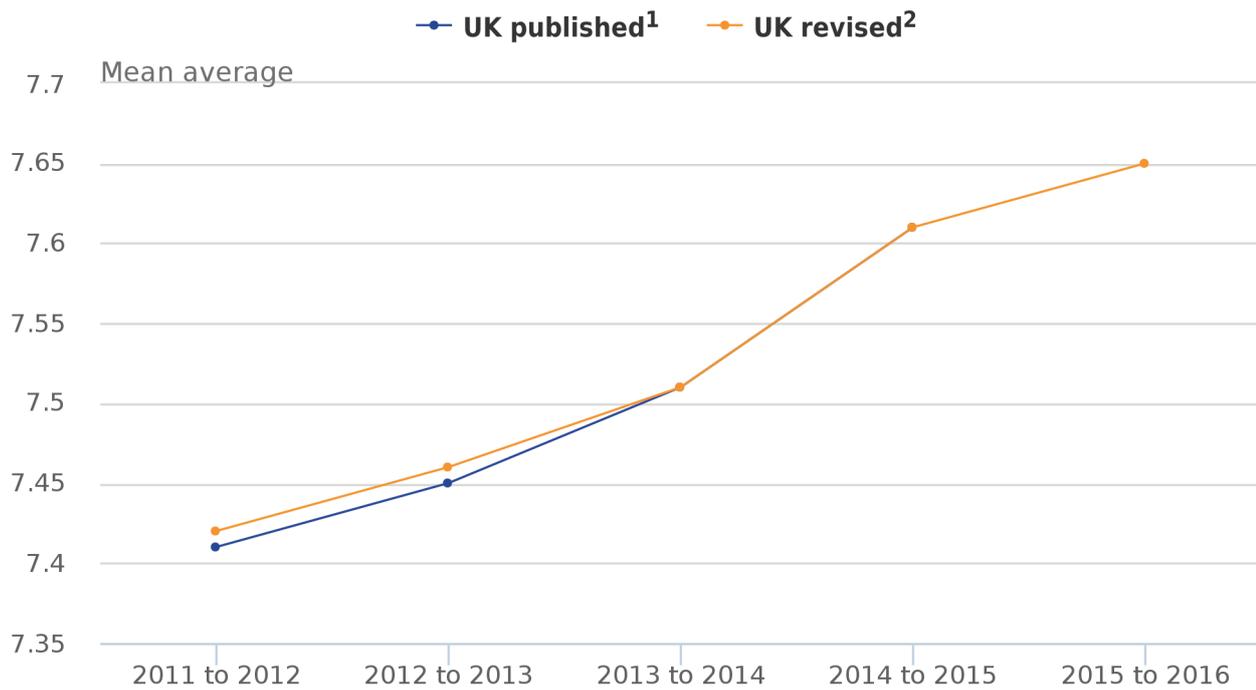
## **Re-weighting**

As part of this transition, personal well-being estimates will now go through the regular APS re-weighting timetable. Re-weighting can also impact on the estimates; for the series published in this release the estimates for the financial year ending 2012 have been weighted to 2012 mid-year population estimates (MYPEs), and the estimates relating to the financial years ending 2013 through to 2016 have been weighted to the 2014 MYPEs.

Figures 7a, 7b, 7c and 7d present comparisons between the revised and existing estimates of personal well-being in the UK. Across each of the four measures, differences between the existing and revised methodology are minimal; no statistically significant differences were observed.

**Figure 7a: Comparison between published and revised estimates of life satisfaction, financial years ending 2012 to 2016**

UK



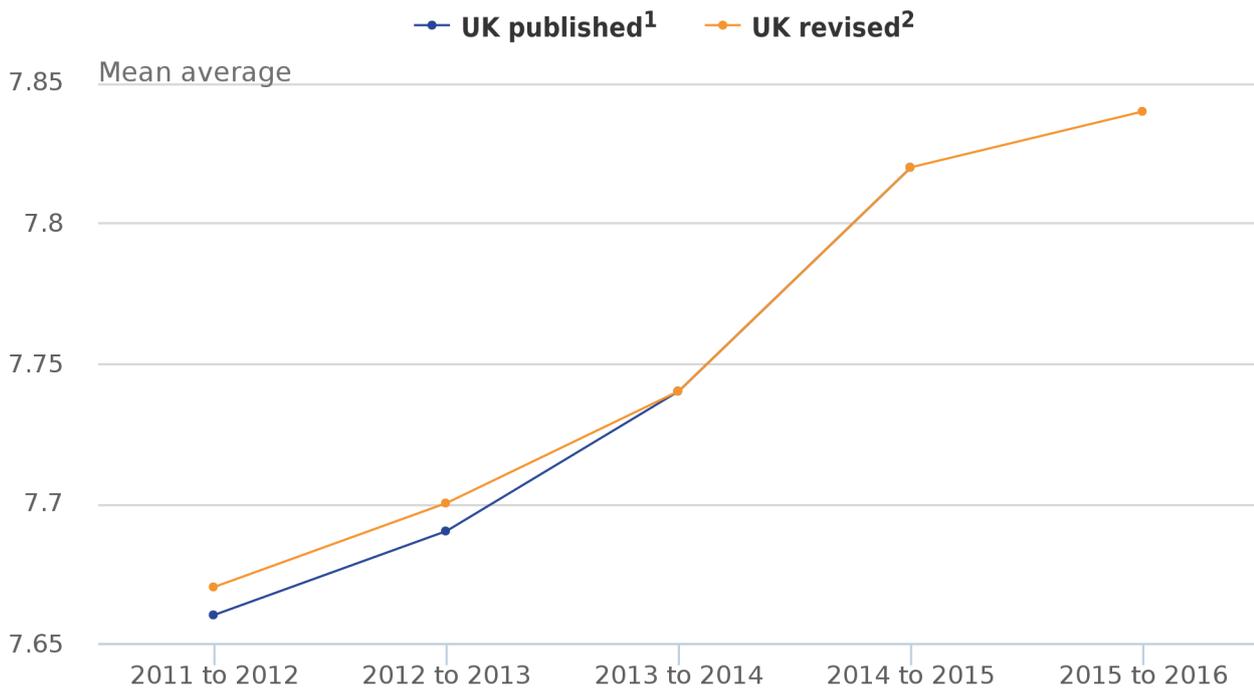
Source: Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Source: Personal Well-being Annual Population Survey dataset;
2. Source: Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics
3. Estimates of personal well-being from the "Personal Well-being Annual Population Survey dataset" are not available for 2015 to 2016 onwards, as the personal well-being questions have been added to the main Annual Population Survey dataset.
4. The axis does not start at 0.
5. 2011 to 2012 was the first year of data collection.
6. Question: Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? Where 0 is "not at all satisfied" and 10 is "completely satisfied".

**Figure 7b: Comparison between published and revised estimates of worthwhile, financial years ending 2012 to 2016**

UK



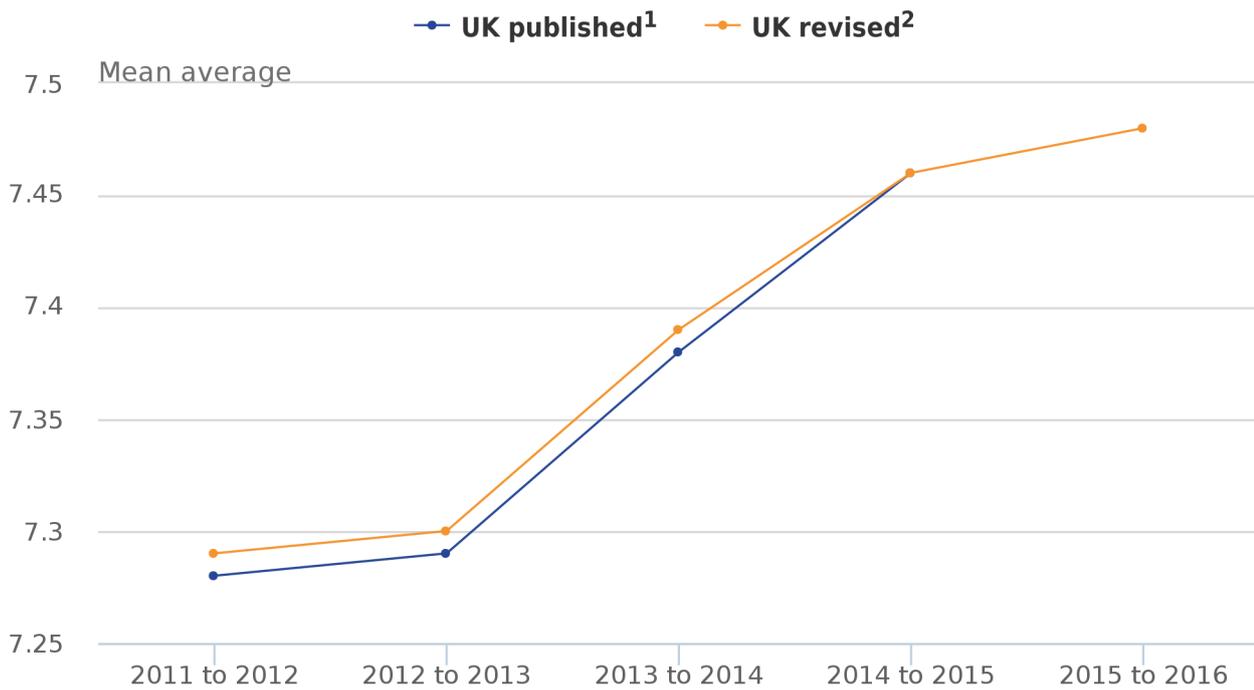
Source: Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics

**Notes:**

1. Source: Personal Well-being Annual Population Survey dataset;
2. Source: Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics
3. Estimates of personal well-being from the "Personal Well-being Annual Population Survey dataset" are not available for 2015 to 2016 onwards, as the personal well-being questions have been added to the main Annual Population Survey dataset.
4. The axis does not start at 0.
5. 2011 to 2012 was the first year of data collection.
6. Question: Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile? Where 0 is "not at all worthwhile" and 10 is "completely worthwhile".

**Figure 7c: Comparison between published and revised estimates of happiness, financial years ending 2012 to 2016**

UK



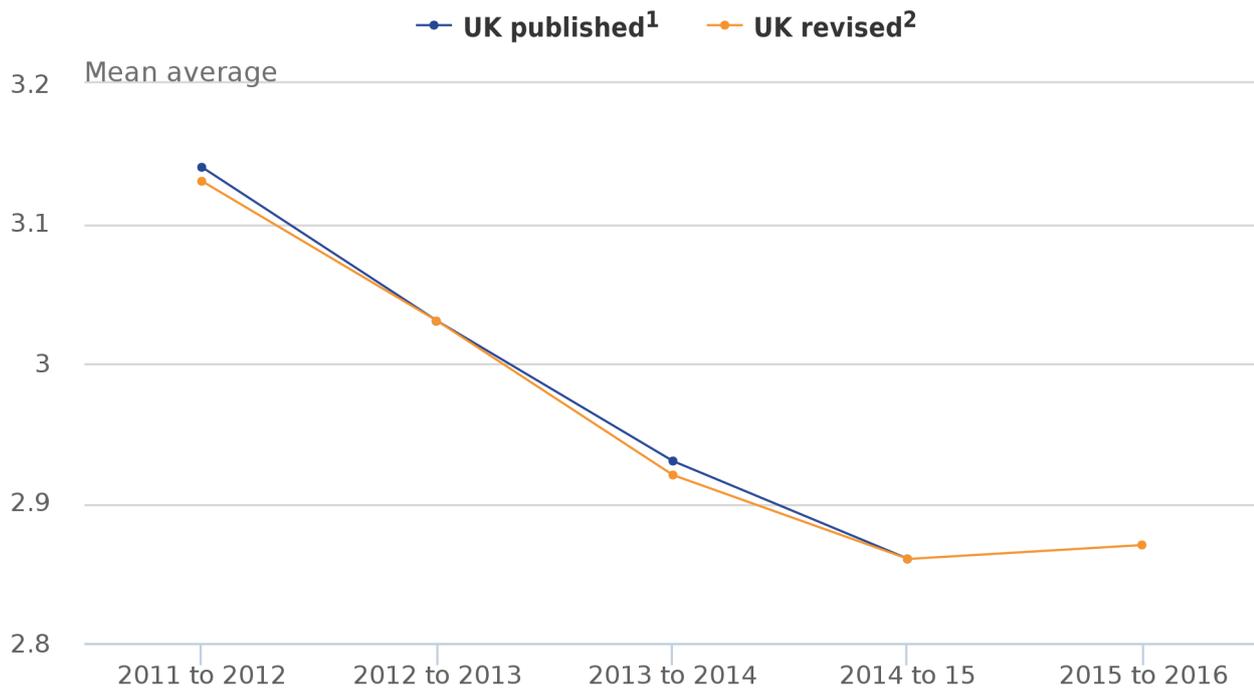
Source: Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Source: Personal Well-being Annual Population Survey dataset;
2. Source: Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics
3. Estimates of personal well-being from the "Personal Well-being Annual Population Survey dataset" are not available for 2015 to 2016 onwards, as the personal well-being questions have been added to the main Annual Population Survey dataset.
4. The axis does not start at 0.
5. 2011 to 2012 was the first year of data collection.
6. Question: Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday? Where 0 is "not at all happy" and 10 is "completely happy".

**Figure 7d: Comparison between published and revised estimates of anxiety, financial years ending 2012 to 2016**

UK



Source: Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Source: Personal Well-being Annual Population Survey dataset;
2. Source: Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics
3. Estimates of personal well-being from the "Personal Well-being Annual Population Survey dataset" are not available for 2015 to 2016 onwards, as the personal well-being questions have been added to the main Annual Population Survey dataset.
4. The axis does not start at 0.
5. 2011 to 2012 was the first year of data collection.
6. Question: Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday? Where 0 is "not at all anxious" and 10 is "completely anxious".

The impact of this change has been assessed over the published time-series at a UK level and also by country, region, gender, age, health and employment status. For the mean average estimates, this impact has caused less than a 0.1 point difference across areas assessed. For thresholds, the impact has been less than 1 percentage point for the majority of scenarios assessed.

## 12. What has changed in this publication?

1. Improvements have been made to this bulletin and its contents, to provide a more concise summary of the main statistics. We still cover findings broken down by country, region and selected individual characteristics but have streamlined the commentary to focus only on the headline messages.
2. To improve timeliness, this release contains only UK and regional level estimates. We will be publishing estimates broken down to local authority level in autumn 2016.

- Reference tables have been improved and now provide the entire time series in a single sheet to make comparisons easier.

We welcome feedback on these changes. Please contact the Quality of Life team ( [QualityOfLife@ons.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:QualityOfLife@ons.gsi.gov.uk)) with any comments or suggestions, including your views on improvements we might make.

## 13. Related ONS publications

[Measuring national well-being: Life in the UK: 2016](#)

[Measuring national Well-being: At what age is Personal Well-being the highest?](#)

[Measuring National Well-being, What matters most to Personal Well-being?](#)

[Economic Well-being: Quarter 1 Jan to Mar 2016](#)

[Social capital across the UK: 2011 to 2012](#)

## 14. Background notes

- Labelling of thresholds

**Table 1: Labelling of thresholds**

Life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness scores		Anxiety scores	
Response on a 10 point scale	Label	Response on a 10 point scale	Label
0 - 4	Low	0 - 1	Very low
5 – 6	Medium	2 - 3	Low
7 – 8	High	4 - 5	Medium
9 - 10	Very high	6 - 10	High

Source: Office for National Statistics

- In this bulletin only those differences deemed as statistically significant are mentioned in the text. Statistical significance has been calculated on the basis of both hypothesis testing at the 95% level and non-overlapping confidence intervals. Non-overlapping confidence intervals provide a conservative estimate of statistical significance but may result in estimates which are statistically significantly different to one another being assessed as not. Both confidence intervals and p-values can be obtained from the [quality information reference tables](#)
- The UK Statistics Authority has designated these statistics as [National Statistics](#), in accordance with the [Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007](#) and signifying compliance with the [Code of Practice for Official Statistics](#).

Designation can be broadly interpreted to mean that the statistics:

- meet identified user needs
- are well explained and readily accessible
- are produced according to sound methods
- are managed impartially and objectively in the public interest.

Once statistics have been designated as National Statistics it is a statutory requirement that the Code of Practice shall continue to be observed.