

## Forestry Commission Official Statistics Q & A

### Introduction

This guidance provides producers of Official Statistics within the Forestry Commission with key information on Official Statistics. This includes what is covered and what needs to be done to comply with practices required across government.

### What are Official Statistics?

They are a new concept introduced by the Statistics & Registration Service Act 2007 ('the Act'). The Act brings all 'Official Statistics' under the remit of the UK Statistics Authority, and with that, the need to observe the Code of Practice for Official Statistics<sup>1</sup> and the Pre Release Access Order<sup>2</sup>.

Further information is provided on the Defra website at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/evidence/statistics/natstats/srsa07.htm>

The Act became effective from April 2008 and defines Official Statistics as "those statistics produced by a government department or persons acting on behalf of the crown". The purpose of the Act is to increase public trust and confidence in Official Statistics produced by Government Departments and major public bodies. The Act, the Code, and the Order are designed to increase transparency and independence in the way Official Statistics are produced and published.

### This is a very wide definition - what does it mean?

It goes beyond the traditional view of statistics e.g. statistical notices based on survey data. It also applies for example to quantitative data based on administrative and management systems which is used to inform government policies and certainly any data or analysis that is likely to generate media attention and therefore engage public interest and influence policy.

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<sup>1</sup> Code of Practice for Official Statistics <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> The Pre-Release Access to Official Statistics Order 2008 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2008/2998/contents/made>  
The Pre-Release Access to Official Statistics (Scotland) Order 2008 [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2008/399/pdfs/ssi\\_20080399\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2008/399/pdfs/ssi_20080399_en.pdf)  
The Pre-Release Access to Official Statistics (Wales) Order 2009 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2009/2818/contents/made>

The term “Official Statistics” includes several categories of statistics produced by public bodies:

- “National Statistics” – these are a subset of Official Statistics certified as compliant with the Code by the UK Statistics Authority.
- Statistics produced by the GSS and others that are not “National Statistics”.
- Statistics produced by Crown Bodies but are not under the professional management of the GSS.
- Statistics produced by non-Crown Bodies included in secondary legislation<sup>3</sup>.

## Why is this important?

Official Statistics are governed by the Code of Practice for Official Statistics (see footnote 1), published in January 2009, and in particular by much tighter rules on release of statistical information. This includes when statistics can be circulated in advance of release and who can receive them. This is known as “Pre-Release Access” and has legal force through an Order (see footnote 2) made under the Act. Also, all Official Statistics must be released on a pre-announced date.

The principles and practices of the Code are intended to ensure that the range of official statistics meets the needs of users; that the statistics are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and that the statistics are well explained.

## What is the Code of Practice?

The Act created the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA) and empowered it to determine, and assess compliance with, a Code of Practice (‘the Code’) for Official Statistics. The first edition of the Code was published in January 2009

<http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html>

The code has 8 principles as follows:

- Meeting User Needs
- Impartiality and Objectivity
- Integrity
- Sound Methods and Assured Quality
- Confidentiality
- Proportionate Burden
- Resources
- Frankness and Accessibility

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<sup>3</sup> Official Statistics Order 2010 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2010/9780111502358/contents>

Statistics carrying the National Statistics branding are those that have been formally assessed as being fully compliant with the Code or those previously designated as National Statistics which still have to be assessed.

## What are the implications of having my data classified as Official Statistics?

- You should abide by the Code of Practice and, in particular, the Pre-Release Access rules
- You must publish the data on a pre-announced date
- Publication must be before the results are used or quoted

## What are the Pre-Release Access Rules?

To preserve trust in Official Statistics the Pre Release Access to Official Statistics Orders (see footnote 3) set out formal rules to limit access to Official Statistics before publication. The intention is to avoid any perception that the figures have been influenced for policy or political purposes.

- For statistics relating to England or to GB/ UK, access is limited to a strict maximum of **24 hours (actual, not working hours)** before publication, except in exceptional circumstances.
- For statistics relating **solely to Scotland or solely to Wales**, access is limited to a strict maximum of **5 working days** before publication, except in exceptional circumstances.
- Anyone with access to an official statistic prior to release must not disclose its value, or indicate its size or trend.
- The rules apply **only** to first release statistics (or compendia releases that include first releases) **in their final form**.
- Official Statistics which are **not** in their final form do not fall within the scope of the Pre-Release Access rules until they have been finalised, but are covered by the Code of Practice (see below). But in particular please note that the Code requires statistics to be published as soon as they have been finalised and on pre-announced dates. **Any attempt to circumvent the PRA rules by seeking to delay publication is likely to attract the attention of the Cabinet Secretary.**
- Pre-Release Access is only granted to ensure that Ministers, the Director General, country Directors or agency Chief Executives are able to respond or take action **when, or shortly after, the statistic is published.**
- Very restricted number of “eligible persons” allowed. In all cases, access is to be limited to those required to take action at the time of or shortly after publication.
- **Ministerial submissions should take full account of these rules.**

## Who is responsible for applying the Pre-Release Access rules?

It is ultimately the responsibility of the person responsible for an Official Statistic to determine pre-release access to that statistic. However, the Defra Head of Profession for Statistics (Peter Helm) has a central role in interpreting and applying the rules. Advice should be sought from the Forestry Commission Lead Official for Statistics (Sheila Ward) in the first instance. These rules should also (in consultation with the Lead Official for Statistics) be brought to the attention of other Government Departments and Agencies involved in joint projects and external contractors.

## Publication of lists

There is a requirement under the Order to publish, at the same time or prior to release of a given statistic, the job title and organisation of anyone who has been granted pre-release access. Such records are maintained centrally and kept updated on the Forestry Commission website: <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/inf-d-83mfrz>

## How will I know if I produce data which is an Official Statistic?

Please contact Sheila Ward in the first instance when considering whether your dataset falls within the definition of Official Statistics. You may also find it helpful to refer to the decision tree, available at the end of this document.

## Where can I get further advice?

Please contact the Forestry Commission's Lead Official for Statistics in the first instance: Sheila Ward - e-mail [Sheila.ward@forestry.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Sheila.ward@forestry.gsi.gov.uk), tel 0131 314 6475.

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April 2011

## Are Our Figures Official Statistics?

