

# The role and use of official statistics in measuring wellbeing

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## About the author

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Professor Allin's research interest is currently the measurement of national wellbeing, measures that go beyond traditional economic statistics such as GDP to include quality of life and environmental sustainability.

Allin retired from the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) in 2012, following a career as a professional statistician and researcher in a wide range of government economic and social policy departments, including those dealing with the labour market, health and safety, equal opportunities, the national economic accounts, and culture, media and sport. He also managed several programmes and projects concerned with developments to statistical systems, including options for a population register and alternatives to a mid-decade census. His final post was as director of the measuring national wellbeing programme in the ONS.

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## About the What Works Centre for Wellbeing

We are an independent collaborating centre and the aim of our work is to improve wellbeing and reduce misery in the UK. We believe that this is the ultimate goal of effective policy and community action.

By accelerating research and democratising access to wellbeing evidence, we develop and share robust evidence for governments, businesses, communities and people to improve wellbeing across the UK

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## Introduction

We can draw on an increasing range of statistics when we want summary measures of personal wellbeing across a community or country, or if we are interested in broader measures of national wellbeing and progress. These include statistics published by national statistical offices or government ministries, which are designated as official statistics. Is there anything, other than the status of their source, that distinguishes official statistics from non-official statistics, such as those published in academic research reports or by commercial social survey organisations?

In this paper, we discuss the role and attributes of official statistics generally, and specifically in the measurement of personal and national wellbeing, in today's crowded information space. Drawing on the United Nations' fundamental principles for official statistics, we highlight the need to focus on the use and usefulness of official statistics in measuring wellbeing, and on the value of having statistics used by the public, businesses, non-governmental organisations as well as for public policy. We discuss some ways in which both the producers and the users of statistics can help increase the use and usefulness of all statistics needed for the public good.

**Keywords:** national statistical offices (NSOs), fundamental principles, user engagement, gross domestic product (GDP), beyond GDP, system of national accounts (SNA), public statistics.

## Defining official statistics

Perhaps without the realisation that they are official statistics, we will all frequently see official statistics quoted, used, and occasionally no-doubt misused. For example, those that track the level and distribution of unemployment, or show how the prices of the goods and services we buy are changing overall (consumer price inflation). The bottom-line definition of what makes them official statistics is that they are published by a government organisation, either a national statistical office or a government ministry or department.

Nearly every country has a national statistical office or NSO<sup>1</sup>. An NSO may be responsible for all the official statistics of a country, but often it is at the core of a national official statistics system that also embraces statistical work within and published by government departments<sup>2</sup>.

However, there is more to official statistics than that they are produced by particular organisations. Official statistics are intended to serve the public good. This means that official statistics cover a very wide range of topics, with an extensive intended audience. Official statistics are not only produced to be used within government but also by businesses, researchers, voluntary organisations, the media, and the general public. This is captured as the first of the United Nations' fundamental principles for official statistics, covering relevance, impartiality and equal access:

*"Official statistics provide an indispensable element in the information system of a democratic society, serving the government, the economy and the public with data about the economic, demographic, social and environmental situation. To this end, official statistics that meet the test of practical utility are to be compiled and made available on an impartial basis by official statistical agencies to honour citizens' entitlement to public information."*<sup>3</sup>

Integral to this, the fundamental principles also address professional standards and ethics, accountability, and transparency. To put the principles into operation, official statisticians develop and apply technical standards, internationally agreed classifications, and codes of practice. None of these principles and practices are exclusive to official statistics, and official statistical systems do not always operate in ways that fulfil the vision for them<sup>4</sup>.

However, the unique selling points meant to drive official statisticians are to strive to deliver an extensive range of relevant statistics, suitable for a wide spectrum of uses, and to do so inclusively across society. This is to avoid, as Winston Churchill put it, "the utmost confusion [that] is caused when people argue on different statistical data", when he ordered the creation of what became the UK's NSO in the 1940s (Starling and Bradbury, 2020, p2).

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1 See [https://unstats.un.org/home/nso\\_sites/](https://unstats.un.org/home/nso_sites/)

2 The UK has a partially decentralised system, which also includes the statistical offices of the devolved nations, an overall Statistics Authority, reporting to the UK Parliament and the devolved assemblies, and a regulatory body. The UK statistical system can be accessed here: <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/>

3 <https://unece.org/statistics/FPOS>

4 A topical example, concerning price indices, is at <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/jan/22/were-pricing-the-poor-out-of-food-in-the-uk-thats-why-im-launching-my-own-price-index>

## Are official statistics government statistics or public statistics?

This is a crucial question when it comes to meeting the vision of the fundamental principles, that official statistics are for all. The key concept here is of statistics aimed at serving the public good. It is taken as given that government acts in the public interest, so that using statistics in decision-making, policy development, and public service delivery are all in the public good. But, as well as informing government, official statistics should also inform business and planners in all areas, and help citizens make effective decisions in their lives, if the statistics are to serve the public good more expansively. This is also about using statistics in helping to hold government to account: to present the world as it is, rather than as politicians might like to say it is. The totality of all these uses makes official statistics “part of the lifeblood of democratic debate”.<sup>5</sup> It also results in a complex set of user requirements, including requirements that may differ outside of government from those within government.

However, the customs and practices of official statistics systems appear largely to deliver the vision of statistics for the public good in a more limited way, by defining this as ensuring that the statistics they produce should then be for the public good. In other words, official statisticians most readily take on the role of delivering an inventory of specific statistics. It begs the question of what statistics should be in the inventory. This is largely prescribed through international conventions and by meeting the needs of national governments, supplemented by consulting with stakeholders such as central banks and local government. This leaves little resource to meet the needs, say, of those who wish to explore the performance of government using metrics beyond those currently available. There is an innate tendency for official statistics producers to prioritise government users over others, if only because they are part of the machinery of government. There is a long-standing tension between providing statistics for the public good, in the widest sense, and in acting as the government’s statistical service, albeit with extensive dissemination of those statistics.

There are processes and procedures that attempt to even the balance between government and non-government usage. For example, in some quarters it is seen as obvious that government ministers and officials should be appraised, ahead of publication, of what an up-coming release of official statistics in their policy area will show. This is a view particularly held by those with early access.

However, pre-release access runs contrary to the UK Code of Practice for Statistics, because the practice may reduce public confidence in those statistics, and in official statistics more generally. Even if no-one with pre-release access would ever dream of breaking the embargo, there is still the feeling that early sight of the figures confers an advantage. The goal here is for official statistical producers to demonstrate their trustworthiness, in this instance by maintaining and demonstrating equal access. (The Code advises that pre-release access should be “limited to those involved in the production of the statistics and the preparation of their release, and for quality assurance and operational purposes”, with accurate records kept of those who have had pre-release access. See practice T3.3). Pre-release access, under the terms of the Code, has been reduced but still continues.

We will return to the balance between government and non-government usage of official statistics later, when we suggest a change of emphasis from official statistics to public statistics. Before then, let us look at official statistics on wellbeing.

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<sup>5</sup> From the UK Code of Practice for Statistics: <https://code.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/>

## Official statistics on wellbeing

To answer the question, 'How are we doing, UK?', Nancy Hey, director of the What Works Centre for Wellbeing (WWCW)<sup>6</sup>, turns to data on personal subjective wellbeing that the Office for National Statistics has been collecting since 2011/12. As Nancy notes, "This gives us good population-level data on 'how people are doing' across the UK over time"<sup>7</sup>, including through the Covid-19 pandemic. The data are published as statistics by the ONS and, crucially, are gathered by asking people, in representative and robust surveys, to assess their own wellbeing in four general aspects.

The survey questions used to measure personal wellbeing in this way were often referred to as "the ONS4" when they were first used. Now the questions are accepted and promoted as a standard for use across government<sup>8</sup> and are used in many surveys. Moreover, the ONS4 formed a basis for guidance on measuring personal wellbeing published by the OECD in 2013<sup>9</sup>. NSOs had not previously shown much interest in collecting subjective wellbeing data (with a few notable exceptions such as Canada). Asking people to assess their own wellbeing now seems acceptable in official statistics, as indeed it was already across a wide range of academic research and in commercial survey organisations, for example the Gallup World Poll.

There are, on the other hand, long-standing official statistics on many of the things that contribute to the quality of life, or which measure welfare and wellbeing in economic terms. National economic accounts, with the headline measure Gross Domestic Product (GDP), have traditionally taken up much of the bandwidth for the production and discussion of official statistics. Although there have also been long series of social and environmental indicators, interest in these has fluctuated over time.

Taking stock some 15 years ago, Boarini et al (2006) looked at GDP per capita as a proxy measure of wellbeing. They concluded that "measures of GDP per capita and economic growth remain critical for any assessment of well-being but they need to be complemented with measures of other dimensions of well-being to get a comprehensive picture of well-being". These measures could include social indicators, subjective measures, and sustainable development indicators. They could draw on data on living standards and time-use. Individual measures can be combined into composite indicators.

This paper is focussing on the role and use of statistics. For details of available wider measures, and how they are compiled, Allin and Hand (2014, p. 253) collated a long list of methods and measures of national or community wellbeing and progress. This included the OECD's regular *How's Life?* report<sup>10</sup> and its interactive, online Better Life Index (see Annex A below), which now cover forty countries.

The broad sweep of what to cover in wider measures of wellbeing identified by Boarini et al has been reflected and amplified in many subsequent initiatives. A few notable milestones (among many others) on the journey of the development of wider measures are:

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6 <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/>

7 <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/blog/how-are-we-doing-uk-2012-2022/>

8 <https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/policy-store/personal-well-being/>

9 <https://www.oecd.org/statistics/oecd-guidelines-on-measuring-subjective-well-being-9789264191655-en.htm>

10 [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/how-s-life\\_23089679](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/how-s-life_23089679)

- The 2007 Istanbul Declaration<sup>11</sup>, which emphasised the role of NSOs as “key providers of relevant, reliable, timely and comparable data and the indicators required for national and international reporting” of societal progress;
- The 2009 report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (CMEPSP), published in book form as “Mismeasuring Our Lives: Why GDP doesn’t add up” (Stiglitz et al, 2010), with recommendations on measurement, including that “objective and subjective dimensions of well-being are both important” (p15); and
- The UN’s 2015 Agenda<sup>12</sup> requires all countries to compile indicators to track progress towards the agreed sustainable development goals. This also commits all countries to “developing broader measures of progress to complement gross domestic product (GDP)” (paragraph 48).

One failing of all the initiatives is that it seems easier to find out how wellbeing should be measured than why it should be measured, or how the measures are intended to be used. The call for official statistics to have practical utility should spur official statisticians into understanding the user requirements for the statistics to be produced. In a practical guide to developing societal progress indicators (Trewin and Hall, 2010), the OECD Statistics Directorate emphasises the importance of consultation, not only as a specific step in the process but clearly intend it to permeate throughout the development and delivery of official statistics. The guide draws on lessons learned in OECD and in its member states about the pace of collaboration and consultation, and interaction between stakeholders. There is no single, right way of consulting: it comes down to doing as much, as widely, and as continuously as possible.

In practice, official statisticians often rely on a general awareness of emerging demands, including issues like beyond GDP rising up the agendas of international organisations. (The fundamental principles for official statistics discussed earlier include that international cooperation in statistics contributes to the improvement of systems of official statistics in all countries). In the case of wellbeing and wider measures of societal progress, we can all learn by observing countries (such as New Zealand, Wales, Scotland) whose governments have adopted a wellbeing economy approach<sup>13</sup>. In these countries, wellbeing measures were not only developed and published, they are also intended to be integral to the business of government and to assessing the performance of government. They are also envisaged as being taken up by businesses and non-governmental organisations. The requirement for new measures was clear and emerged through government policy decisions. What changes in how progress is perceived and adopted in practice are still to fully emerge.

The story of official wellbeing statistics in the UK (e.g. Allin and Hand, 2014, pp217-235), perhaps also in France, again shows that political interest at a point in time can greatly stimulate the necessary development of new measures. However, even more than in the case of wellbeing economies, the development of new measures is not sufficient for them to be used here. The ONS4 survey questions were introduced as part of a programme to develop measures of national wellbeing for the UK but not necessarily, or at least not immediately, taken into mainstream public policy. The wider, UK national wellbeing measures were selected to reflect what the public had said mattered to them.

However, while the published statistics are available for all to see, they are not presented or used in any active way. How we view wellbeing and progress still seems to be

11 <https://www.oecd.org/newsroom/38883774.pdf>

12 <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

13 See <https://weall.org/>



embedded in GDP thinking – that year-on-year growth in production, consumption, and income is paramount – despite calls to build back better after the pandemic and to pay more attention to the state of the environment and to human input to climate change. This is not a reflection of a lack of official statistics on the wider concerns. Rather, it seems likely to be at least partly associated with their current designation as externalities to GDP, accorded secondary or supplementary status within official statistics, giving the impression that they matter less than GDP.

## Towards more purposeful statistics

There is a reasonable argument that we do need to change the measures before we change our lives, to concentrate more on wellbeing for example. Nicolas Sarkozy established the CMEPSP with the “firm belief: We will not change our behaviour unless we change the ways we measure our economic performance” (Stiglitz et al, 2010, p. 7). The “we” here embraces citizens as well as policy-makers, businesses as well as politicians. It calls for us all to be involved.

As Neil Sheldon highlights in presentations, in his role as chair of the Teaching Statistics Trust<sup>14</sup>: “The purpose of statistics is insight not numbers”.<sup>15</sup> He makes the important point that the study of statistics is “more than just an academic discipline, it is a vital element of citizenship: we all need statistical understanding to make sense of the world around us.” Sheldon observes that “statistical data are routinely misunderstood and misinterpreted in the media”, with most errors arising not from the numbers themselves, but from “the confused and inaccurate language used to comment on them”. This points to the value of official statisticians providing clear insights at the time they publish the numbers.

Moreover, a desire for better statistics perhaps evokes an ideal society based on logic, rationality, and facts: insight leading to decision and action. The reality is, at best, one of evidence-informed – rather than evidence-based – policy options and political decisions. These are at most guided by data, seldom driven by the data. UK Treasury Green Book guidance on how to appraise public policies, programmes and projects nevertheless makes it clear that this should cover “all significant costs and benefits that affect the welfare and wellbeing of the population”, which might call for data on “environmental, cultural, health, social care, justice and security effects”, as well as economic market efficiency<sup>16</sup>. Across society and the economy, there is no Green Book to guide us. The decisions individuals, communities, and businesses reach, including where they concern behaviour change, are rarely based only on the information that is to hand. Beliefs, attitudes, and other factors, also come into play.

When we seek to improve wellbeing by calling on sound evidence, we need to be aware of “the roles played by custom, habit, passion and the imagination” (Rasmussen, 2019, p. 23), even where democracy calls for decisive, transparent, and informed decisions. This does not, of course, dismiss the use of statistics. On the contrary, it provides the context for requiring that the statistics that are used are as relevant, timely, accessible, and trustworthy as possible. Hand (2021, p2) reminds us of the long-standing importance attached to the trustworthiness of official statistics, so that official statistics are trusted when making such decisions.

14 <https://teachingstatisticstrust.org.uk/>

15 <https://events.manchester.ac.uk/event/event:pwg-ky1kf3i9-l026kt>

16 See Section 2.1 in <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-green-book-appraisal-and-evaluation-in-central-government/the-green-book-2020>

There are clear messages here for the producers of statistics, users, and the media, as well as those involved in all aspects of the teaching of statistics or with other aspects of the profession of statistics. For example, we have already referred to GDP. This is probably one of the most widely mentioned of the thousands of official statistics and is at least a three-letter acronym that people will be aware of. GDP is an indispensable concept to economists. So, it is daunting to learn from recent UK research that public understanding about GDP is limited<sup>17</sup>. GDP figures may be reported and debated, but to most people GDP is economic jargon, inaccessible, and disjointed from life as they experience it. One explanation for that is that GDP is an aggregate statistic for the nation.

Calculating GDP per capita may help to scale GDP but it is meaningless as an average. Rather, as with many statistics, we need to look at how the distribution of GDP, say by region or in other ways that relate more to people. And we need to respond to calls to look more widely than just at GDP to cover social value, as recognised in the Green Book.

## The misuse of statistics and statistical literacy

Perhaps we should focus on the media which, in all forms, plays a major role in disseminating numbers and insights. Without this, official statistics on wellbeing would not reach as many people as they do. But just relying on the media is not sufficient. We can note that a US legal interpretation of the role of the press is "to serve the governed" (Allin and Hand, 2020, p. v). However, this went on to say "not the governors", clarifying that, unlike official statistics, the press is not there to serve everyone. Also, while there is a relentless appetite for content and for breaking news, this can be driven by commercial and partisan agendas, rather than to serve the public good.

Fact checkers pay a vital role, whether as part of media organisations or, like Full Fact<sup>18</sup>, operating as "independent fact checkers and campaigners who find, expose and counter the harm" done by bad information. Within the UK official statistics system, another valuable organisation in this regard is the Office for Statistics Regulation<sup>19</sup> (OSR), part of the UK Statistics Authority. One of OSR's statutory functions is to publicly challenge the misuse of statistics, including as part of its range of casework. OSR's latest annual report<sup>20</sup> shows that the authority considered 323 pieces of casework overall during the year 2020/21, nearly three times the number in the previous year (109 cases), driven by concerns during the Covid-19 pandemic about the quality, reliability and trustworthiness of health and care statistics.

The next most common category was concerns about the use/misuse of statistics, which had been the most common category in the previous year (74 cases in 2020/21 and 57 cases in 2019/20). OSR notes "These are often instances where statistics have been used in a way which someone considers potentially misleading, most commonly the use is by a public figure or in a press release from a public body". They are picked up through individuals contacting OSR or through OSR's media and social media monitoring.

In 2020/21, three in five misuse cases considered by OSR came from members of the

<sup>17</sup> Runge, J. and Hudson, N. (2020) Public Understanding of Economics and Economic Statistics, ESCoE Occasional Paper 03, <https://www.escoe.ac.uk/publications/public-understanding-of-economics-and-economic-statistics/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://fullfact.org/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://osr.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://osr.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/annual-review-of-uk-statistics-authority-casework-2020-21/>

public, which touches on the broader issue of statistical literacy. Improving statistical literacy overall, including having the skills and the confidence to find, use, and question statistical information, is beyond the scope of this paper. But it is worth thinking about how we read and react to statistics that we see in news items or on social media. For example, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was recently quoted<sup>21</sup> as saying that "Farm incomes have improved significantly since the UK voted to leave the EU in 2016". No source for this statement of apparent good news is given in the report, or in speeches by the minister along similar lines available on the government website<sup>22</sup>. Searching for official statistics on farm incomes elsewhere on the website<sup>23</sup> leads to the latest statistics on farm business incomes<sup>24</sup>, which show (and they are for England only) a much more complex picture for the trends up and down in average farm income over time. This varies by type of farm. Also, as is often the case for incomes, the average hides a wide divergence across levels of income. And, perhaps not surprisingly, there is no mention of the wellbeing of farmers, or of wider national wellbeing, over the same period.

Adding links to statistical sources when they are quoted would help, but the example above illustrates that care is also needed in presenting, quoting, and reading statistics. Fact checkers may pick up misleading or partial statistics but the thrust of the effort should be about preventing misuse of statistics rather than seeking to correct misuse after it has happened. That calls for institutional and societal incentives to encourage good practice in all its forms.

An important component of good practice is the role of evidence collators and translators. In the case of wellbeing, this role is provided by the WWCW the UK's independent body for wellbeing evidence, policy and practice. WWCW aims to accelerate research and democratise access to wellbeing evidence. It is therefore hoped that the reflections in this paper will strengthen the work WWCW undertakes to improve engagement with the official providers of wellbeing data, statistics and analysis, and support organisations to maintain, use and communicate these statistics. This fits within WWCW's on-going activities to improve the use of wellbeing in research and practice, helping to build bridges between producers and users of wellbeing data.

## Learning from efforts to make sense of the pandemic

Statistics have been much in evidence during the Covid-19 pandemic. David Spiegelhalter and Anthony Masters have been closely involved in the huge efforts "making sense of the pandemic with data". Pointing to the daily appearance of numbers and charts, they note that "Never have we as a society been more bombarded by graphs and statistics" (Spiegelhalter and Masters, 2021, p.2). But quantity does not necessarily equate with overall quality and greater overall illumination, accepting that individual statistical releases and analyses can be of high technical quality. The pandemic has highlighted how official statistics are competing with official administrative data, academic research, and international collections of statistics, as well as those from other sources.

21 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jan/09/farm-subsidy-plan-risks-increasing-the-uks-reliance-on-food-imports>

22 <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-environment-food-rural-affairs>

23 [https://www.gov.uk/search/research-and-statistics?keywords=farm%20incomes&content\\_store\\_document\\_type=all\\_research\\_and\\_statistics&order=relevance](https://www.gov.uk/search/research-and-statistics?keywords=farm%20incomes&content_store_document_type=all_research_and_statistics&order=relevance)

24 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/farm-business-income/farm-business-income-by-type-of-farm-england-202021>

Long before the Covid-19 pandemic, it was clear that official statistics are part of an increasingly complex data ecosystem. The pandemic has highlighted that there is a significant volume of statistics that are relevant to the public good but which are not official statistics. The challenges are to identify all relevant sources, to understand that they are fit for the purposes now envisaged, to access the sources, and to produce a coherent picture drawing on official statistics and on other statistics.

In Annex A we list a selection of the many UK wellbeing statistics published by official and non-official organisations, in order to give a flavour of the range of available sources. We acknowledge this is partial: for example, we have not addressed what we learn about personal wellbeing from wider metrics, especially on physical and mental health. A mapping of all sources of wellbeing statistics could be of value and of interest, not only as a one-stop shop for access to the statistics but also as a resource for research into how wellbeing is being measured. Compiling such a directory would be challenging, as would keeping it up to date. The WWCW website does have an extensive collection of other resources relating to the measurement of wellbeing<sup>25</sup>.

Having a plethora of statistical sources has some obvious advantages, including that new, official, data collections do not need to be created if relevant data, of suitable quality, can be sourced from elsewhere. (There is usually also a need for the flow of data from the existing source to continue over time). MacFeely and Nastava have proposed such an approach to tackle the huge challenges faced in many countries in compiling indicators to assess progress towards the UN's sustainable development goals (SDGs). Their proposal is that official statistics switch to "a mixed business model: one combining the manufacture of official statistics with the franchising of production under license", with accreditation based on the fundamental principles for official statistics (MacFeely and Nastava, 2019, p. 324).

This approach has been identified in several different contexts and it chimes with things that, to some degree, have been happening within official statistics. UK official statisticians are already importing data from other sources (under the Digital Economy Act). ONS has produced a protocol for assessing non-official sources, particularly with a view to accessing a broader range of data sources for measuring UK progress towards the SDGs<sup>26</sup>. OSR generally encourages providers of statistics beyond the official statistics system to take up the Code of Practice<sup>27</sup>. There has also been a suggestion that the value of a "family" of statistics is maximised "when the statistics are brought together so that they shed light on the questions that are important to society" (Laux, 2017). However, these initiatives are generally not proceeding at pace or at the volume required to fully serve the public good.

Allin and Hand (2021) have concluded that the role and focus of official statistics systems should be broadened so that they deliver quality public statistics "that can be used to help get answers to the many urgent questions about society and how we can sustainably improve our lives and livelihoods. National statistical agencies would be at the heart of such systems, perhaps importing more data from other sources, but also providing leadership, and curating and quality assuring sets of statistics drawn from official and other organisations".

25 [https://whatworkswellbeing.org/resources/?\\_sft\\_resource\\_category=measuring-wellbeing](https://whatworkswellbeing.org/resources/?_sft_resource_category=measuring-wellbeing)

26 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/methodologies/uksustainabledevelopmentgoalsuseofnonofficialsources>

27 See OSR's [list of voluntary adopters](#)

## Official statistics and user engagement

Engaging with users and potential users should be at the heart of public statistics. This is not just about occasional trawls for new or changed requirements, or scanning the horizon for emerging issues. Visibility, awareness, relevance can all be tested, and improved where necessary, through active and sustained engagement by NSOs. There are many examples of good practice but, at least in the UK (and we gather elsewhere) there is much room for improvement.

The Statistics User Forum (SUF) contributed evidence<sup>28</sup> on this to an inquiry into the governance of statistics by the UK Parliament's Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) in March 2019. This included observing that engagement has been an aspect of practice that has consistently arisen through OSR's assessments of official statistics against the Code of Practice. Out of the 341 assessment reports to date, 250 assessments (ie almost 3 in 4) included a requirement to improve engagement. The conclusion of PACAC's report opens "We agree with the evidence we received that those producing official statistics do not understand all of today's users and potential users of statistics and how statistics are used", going on to make a number of recommendations to address this<sup>29</sup>.

Recommendations, even from a Parliamentary committee, are not always implemented. The official response<sup>30</sup> in this case promised, among other things, "an ambitious programme of work to improve the statistical system's collective understanding of demands for statistics across the UK". While Covid-19 subsequently meant drastic changes in working arrangements and new priorities for official statistics, a user engagement strategy<sup>31</sup> was launched in February 2021. This sets out a four-year "plan of action for building a more meaningful and sustained dialogue between producers, users and potential users of statistics". User engagement champions are in place in ONS and across the Government Statistical Service (GSS). Advice, guidance and good practice is being collated and shared. Discussions are underway concerning the formation of a national statistics user advisory council. This is not just to raise the profile of official statistics for the public good. For the first time in the UK, this would be a place to discuss and express views on strategic priorities and the relevance of statistical activities in terms of user needs, addressing current work programmes, and scanning the horizon for emerging requirements.

Meanwhile, Allin and Hand (2020, pp.135-137) made six recommendations on user engagement, such as that "all proposals for new measures should be explicit on how they are to be used". These are based on their analysis of the use of statistics in changing the goal from GDP growth to sustainable wellbeing but apply more generally. They added a seventh recommendation specifically to wellbeing, which is that "NSOs already publishing indicators of national wellbeing should take the lead in introducing a single, summary measure of national wellbeing. This has been raised in the UK since at least 2014, as a way of moving debate and discourse about societal progress beyond the established focus on GDP. There are no doubt technical challenges in constructing a single index number, but these should not get in the way of meeting a need for statistics relating to a wider concept of progress than GDP. (Annex A includes examples of non-official indexes).

28 See [here](#)

29 See p54 here <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmpublicadm/1820/1820.pdf>

30 UKSA response to PACAC report on governance of statistics [here](#)

31 <https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/policy-store/user-engagement-strategy-for-statistics-ensuring-official-statistics-meet-societys-need/>

Beyond GDP is a short way of signalling an intention not only to replace GDP as the measure of national wellbeing, and therefore of progress over time, but also an ambition to live life according to some wider measure. GDP sits as the figurehead for the System of National Accounts (SNA). The SNA originated in a 1947 report on national income statistics, with the first international standards for national accounts released in 1953. There were major updates in 1968, 1993 and 2008. The pattern of revisions reflects a balance between adapting to changes in the economy and maintaining comparability in measurement over time. The next revision is now under way as a programme called *Towards the 2025 SNA*. The UN Statistics Division describes this as a multilateral process, mainly involving experts and institutional stakeholders: "The Broad Consultation component of the SNA update constitutes several rounds of interactions with various groups of stakeholders such as compilers [usually NSOs, or else central banks], policymakers, academia, and the private sector"<sup>32</sup>.

Nevertheless, the driving force behind revising SNA is to maintain international statistical standards for the compilation and updating of comparable statistics in support of a large array of national and international public policy needs. What seems less clear is how other users of GDP and other SNA measures, and all parties with an interest in the revision of GDP, are being engaged, either through the UN or through NSOs. ESCoE's programme of work on *National accounts and beyond GDP*<sup>33</sup>, supported by ONS, is clearly designed to provide technical support for revising SNA. ONS's own website gives only a brief summary of the revision process now under way<sup>34</sup>.

ONS appear to recognise that revisions to the definition of GDP and the composition of SNA are relevant to all citizens. Richard Heys, Deputy Director & Deputy Chief Economist at ONS, recently posted that "What we measure affects what we do. If we have the wrong metrics, we will strive for the wrong things" (Heys, 2021). But we need to unpick exactly who is "we" for each of the four times he uses that word. Is it ONS, the national accounts community more widely, governments, or us as citizens and business leaders?

Ehsan Masood (2021, p10) has written that "The SNA process provides a route for all countries, rich and poor, to have an equal stake in deciding how the world's economies should measure what matters". However, he has also observed<sup>35</sup> that the revision process now under way is apparently below the radar of anyone not in the community of national accountants. The challenge to be faced in this revision is more than measuring welfare, as understood by economists, as well as GDP. It is a much bigger challenge than that, and one in which there are many people with a view about what we (as a country) measure and what we (all) do. The UNSD website<sup>36</sup> presents a set of issues to be considered during the revision, including around wellbeing and sustainability, that chime with current concerns over building back better, as well as tackling climate change. However, without more effective engagement with citizens, communities, and businesses, will GDP and the SNA address those concerns any better than at present? Will making explicit the implications of treating GDP growth as the goal itself, by no longer side-lining depletion of natural resources, environmental damage, inequality, wellbeing, lead to behaviour change in citizens and businesses? Perhaps so, we suggest or hope, but only if citizens and businesses are engaged with, and can relate to, the statistics.

32 <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/nationalaccount/Towards2025.asp>

33 <https://www.escoe.ac.uk/programmes/national-accounts-and-beyond-gdp/>

34 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/whatwedo/programmesandprojects/economicstatisticstransformation/systemofnationalaccountsupdate>

35 During a BBC interview at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000ynb8>

36 [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/nationalaccount/Update\\_Issues.asp](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/nationalaccount/Update_Issues.asp)

## Conclusion: Actions as well as statistics

In this paper we have sought to locate official statistics as public statistics, to live up to the vision for them in the UN's fundamental principles. We should see NSOs as serving the public good in the broadest sense, not just as the statistical services of governments. We have discussed potential actions for producers, users, and mediators of official statistics, all of which apply generally. The measurement of wellbeing and of progress – how personal and national wellbeing are changing over time – should be a focus of attention in particular, in light of increasing demands to move beyond GDP as the measure and goal of progress. There are already official and non-official statistics on wellbeing but they have neither the prominence nor the authority of GDP and the SNA. The current revision of SNA provides an opportunity to change that, providing that the national accounts community reaches out to users and potential users, and that users can see benefit in engaging with the revision. Wider engagement on wellbeing would provide impetus and profile to improve user engagement on official statistics overall.

As the UN fundamental principles for official statistics acknowledge, official statistics are but one information system. The statistics that described the extent of the Covid-19 pandemic and helped the responses to it included official statistics alongside other official figures and findings from research studies. The future for official statistics systems, we argue, rests on their ability to help provide the statistics that the public needs by drawing not only on their own data but also on that from other sources. Key to this will be ensuring that the quality of data is fit for the purposes for which it is required.

There are a number of ways in which users, producers, and mediators can play a fuller role in making the statistics system overall work more effectively. Note we say more effectively, not perfectly. Gus O'Donnell, former UK cabinet secretary, has warned for example against waiting for perfect wellbeing statistics before taking action informed by wellbeing measures: "Of course, measurement is hard, but roughly measuring the right concepts is a better way to make policy choices than using more precise measures of the wrong concepts"<sup>37</sup>.

There are undoubtedly some things that NSOs can do better, especially to build on existing good practice for engaging with users and potential users. We also need to consider the demand for statistics and what we might expect of users in terms of statistical literacy, be they politicians, journalists, business, civic leaders or citizens. (And we might find a more appealing phrase for this literacy, such as how to read statistics). The media provide the channels by which most people see official statistics quoted (or not), so media organisations have responsibilities concerning the selection and presentation of statistics. Fact checkers will still be invaluable but political, business and media institutions also have a responsibility to improve the use of statistics by the people within their organisation. Mediators such as the WWCW have a special place and an important role in adding value to the two-way communication of statistics, between producers and users of wellbeing evidence.

It is worth emphasising repeatedly that the value of official statistics is in their usefulness, their "practical utility" as this is put in the fundamental principles. For example, this seems a good way of prioritising unmet demands for statistics, to allow people to make decisions and take action. Official statistics may indeed be nice to have, to act in some totemic way to demonstrate national values, including a culture of basing decisions on sound evidence. The thrust of practical utility is surely most about putting statistics to use,

<sup>37</sup> O'Donnell, G. (2020), Opinion: Mental health: Wellbeing is a good basis for resetting UK government policies Financial Times, 30 Nov 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/e3b356b4-dbcc-42ef-811d-74d649139916>

making a difference, steering and not just tracking progress towards societal goals. That is why the current SNA revision is timely and crucial. It should, if carried out effectively, enable the usage of wider measures of wellbeing and progress to be built into the re-design of GDP and the SNA. We should aim to reach a clearer understanding of how these measures are intended to be used, along with a commitment that they will be used.

There was probably never a golden age when policy-making and public discourse were conducted along rational lines, with due regard to the facts. We have now clearly reached a stage where there is a proliferation of data sources and channels of communication, as well as increasing awareness of wellbeing. We need to work with a more complex understanding of how we make decisions and judgements. Within that, we should recognise the value of using public statistics on personal and national wellbeing that are fit for purpose, are trustworthy, are trusted, and are used.

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# Annex A

## A selection of official and non-official sources to illustrate the range of UK wellbeing statistics\*

### Published in official sources

UK GDP quarterly estimates: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/bulletins/gdpfirstquarterlyestimateuk/octobertodecember2021>

Personal wellbeing in the UK, quarterly estimates: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/personalwellbeingintheukquarterly/april2011tojune2021>

Personal and economic well-being in Great Britain, estimates from multiple sources: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/personalandeconomicwellbeingintheuk/may2021>

Measures of UK national wellbeing dashboard: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/measuresofnationalwellbeingdashboard/2018-09-26>

UK national wellbeing measures - Northern Ireland data: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/ni-summary-statistics/uk-national-wellbeing-measures-northern-ireland-data>

Scottish Government National Performance Framework: <https://nationalperformance.gov.scot/>

Welsh Government national wellbeing indicators: <https://gov.wales/national-wellbeing-indicators>

UK data for the Sustainable Development Goals: <https://sdgdata.gov.uk/>

OECD Better Life Index: <https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/>

### Published in non-official sources

Gross Domestic Wellbeing (GDWe) - an alternative measure of social progress in England: <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/gross-domestic-wellbeing-gdwe-an-alternative-measure-of-social-progress/>

Social Progress Index: <https://www.socialprogress.org/>

Legatum Prosperity Index: <https://li.com/reports/2021-legatum-prosperity-index/>

Thriving Places Index: <https://www.thrivingplacesindex.org/>

The Good Childhood Report: <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/good-childhood>

The role and use of official statistics in measuring wellbeing

OneFamily's best places to live and work in the UK: <https://www.onefamily.com/savings/best-places-live-work-uk/>

The Sunday Times's best places to live: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/best-places-to-live>

Employee Wellbeing Statistics: <https://championhealth.co.uk/blog/employee-wellbeing-statistics/>

Health and Wellbeing at Work Survey: <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/health-well-being-work>

Teacher Wellbeing Index: <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/resources/for-organisations/research/teacher-wellbeing-index/>

\* NB these links are to the latest figures available on 9 March 2022. Check links for any later releases.