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Session 3: Understanding and responding to user needs

Understanding user needs – challenges and solutions

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Introduction

The users of official statistics in the United Kingdom are diverse in their interests, backgrounds and levels of statistical knowledge. They span central and local government, academics, business, the voluntary sector, the media and the general public. In fact, it is difficult to think of anyone who is not in some way a user of official statistics. The Royal Statistical Society's Statistics User Forum is an established organisation that aims to represent this wide user community, and develop strategy and policy for its coordination.

The community of producers of official statistics in the UK is the Government Statistical Service (GSS), and is led by the National Statistician. Although the Office for National Statistics (ONS) is the UK's largest statistical producer, there are GSS members in over 150 organisations that produce official statistics, and over 80 per cent of professional government statisticians work outside of the ONS.

This varied and dispersed nature of both the user and producer communities presents challenges for identifying, prioritising and responding to user needs. This paper examines the key challenges, and also covers some of the key initiatives in place to address them.

Challenges and solutions

1) Willingness and skill

A large proportion of GSS members work in policy-making departments, often directly alongside policy colleagues. This has advantages, as the needs of internal, government users are usually well met, and the statisticians are placed at the forefront of policy development and evaluation. However, this often results in less resource being devoted to understanding and meeting the needs of the wide range of users outside of government.

Throughout the GSS, there is evidence to suggest that statisticians are nervous of opening up communication with users, both because of the potential resource required to do so, and because of concerns that it may not be possible to meet users' expectations. In some cases, the understanding of

the use made of statistics is so low that statisticians consider their work to be of little interest to anyone but the users within their departments.

These factors combined can contribute to a lack of willingness among producers to develop an understanding of the full range of users' needs. As a result, there is a perception among users from outside of government that their needs are given low priority, and this is perhaps not unfounded.

This perception has very likely had an effect on users' motivation to express their views to producers. A feeling that their input will not be taken into account, together with a lack of communication from producers on how their input has been used, can leave users disengaged and less willing to make further contributions. In addition, consultations are often lengthy and complex, and are likely only to encourage contributions from a small subset of the user community.

As statisticians are primarily trained to analyse and present data, it is perhaps unsurprising that even when there is the enthusiasm to engage with users, the required knowledge and expertise is often not. Development of skills in researching and responding to the needs of users should be considered a priority in the GSS.

Assessment and compliance

The UK Statistics Authority is an independent body at arm's length from government. It has a statutory function to determine whether official statistics comply with the standards set out in the [Code of Practice for Official Statistics](#), and those that meet these standards are designated as 'National Statistics'. The Code places great emphasis on meeting user needs, and a need for improvement has been identified in the majority of assessments undertaken by the Authority. A requirement to comply with the Code and thereby achieve National Statistics status has proved a strong incentive for producers to make improvements, and progress continues to be made as a result.

Guidance and training

The GSS has collaborated with user groups to produce [guidance](#) on meeting user needs, which gives recommendations for both producers and user groups on how to strengthen partnerships between the GSS and the user community. The emphasis is on making use of a variety of approaches to reach a wider range of users, and a move away from the 'traditional' approach of one-off consultations.

This is supported by the development of a new training package aimed at new entrants to the GSS, which focuses on the communication of statistics and how to identify user needs.

Strategy

The GSS Strategy to 2020 (published in March 2013) places meeting user needs at its heart, and states that there is a need to shift the balance from data collection, to devoting more resource to user support. The ambition is that all data collections and outputs should be underpinned by an understanding of user requirements, and responsive to changing needs.

This requires a cultural shift in the GSS, moving from a passive approach, to being more proactive in understanding user needs. This means taking opportunities to engage with users, such as presenting at and organising events, and developing partnerships with user and interest groups. Also, producers must be open and transparent about how user input has been taken into account, and explain any limitations.

There are already some encouraging examples of the GSS taking a more active approach:

- The Ministry of Justice took a variety of approaches to broaden the reach of their statistical planning consultation, including using social media, writing to over 4,500 stakeholders, and a press notice with quotes from the department's Minister and the National Statistician. This resulted in re-posting of the press notice across more than twenty different blogs, websites

and articles in specialist newsletters. The response was much higher than any previous consultation, with input from a broader range of users. The department gained a deeper insight into user requirements and use them to inform their planning.

- The ONS and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills held an event, ‘The Changing Shape of UK Business’, encapsulating the whole breadth of business statistics with 120 attendees spanning local authorities, academia, industry, government departments and more. It was used to share with users what is known about the structure, content and performance of UK business, and to raise awareness of the importance and coverage of the statistics. It also provided an opportunity to hear about the range of uses to which the statistics are put, and where gaps exist in the provision of data and analysis. This information is being used to inform future plans and priorities for business statistics.

2) Collaboration and coordination

“When I visit departments I see passion, innovation and commitment in spades, yet the fact that much of this lies hidden is a great pity. We must recognise and celebrate our strengths, share our knowledge and successes, and collaborate effectively across the GSS, with our users and with the international community.” *Jil Matheson, National Statistician*

The GSS Strategy places great emphasis on the importance of collaboration, not just between statisticians, but with other professions, the international community and with users. It sets the tone for collaboration becoming the cultural norm in the GSS.

The fact that statisticians are located in such a large number of organisations presents an opportunity, as the different environments can foster innovation in approaches to meeting and responding to user needs. However, although there are some excellent examples of good practice, the reality is that these are usually not widely shared, meaning that innovative and effective approaches to user engagement are not spread as widely or as quickly as they could be. Also, a lack of communication across departments can result in an uncoordinated approach to user engagement, with users sometimes receiving overlapping or duplicate requests.

The need for better collaboration and knowledge sharing does not just apply to producers of statistics. The Royal Statistical Society’s Statistics User Forum is home to a range of user groups focused on specific topics or types of statistics. The Forum has identified a need for better collaboration and coordination across user groups, in particular to help identify cross-cutting issues that affect users with a range of interests.

Furthermore, producers of official statistics should seek to work in partnership with users. There is currently still a great deal of reliance on one-off consultations with little two-way communication, and more needs to be done to develop and sustain a more continuous dialogue.

An online interactive approach

In a report [‘Strengthening User Engagement’](#), the UK Statistics Authority recommended the development of an online network to support communication between users and producers of official statistics. As a result, [StatsUserNet](#) was developed by the Royal Statistical Society, and was launched in 2012. The UK Statistics Authority continues to provide staff support to the RSS for the development and roll-out of the website.

The site is based on ‘communities’, each of which focuses on a particular statistical topic or theme, and has facilities for discussion, blogging, events and sharing of resources. The communities are user-driven, and the user groups in the Statistics User Forum have provided a sound basis for its development. In its first year of operation the site has amassed 1,700 registered members, from central

and local government, academia, business, the voluntary sector, interest/lobby groups and the general public.

- The Prices User Group has seen over 350 discussions posts, with lively debate on proposed changes to inflation measures. This approach allowed the group to develop a coordinated response to the consultations run by the Office for National Statistics.
- GSS statisticians use the site to answer questions raised by the users, ask for feedback, and alert users to new developments.
- By providing a single point of access for all statistical topics, the site has proven effective in removing the barriers between user groups. Users have reported that although they joined the site for a specific purpose, they have subsequently found other topics of interest. As a result, the already-established user groups who have used the site to support their existing activities have seen a surge in their membership.

Coordination

Responsibility for particular statistical topics is often shared by several government departments. User needs are best served if there is coherence across the topic area, both in the outputs produced and how the organisations communicate with users. This requires cross-departmental coordination. To facilitate this, GSS products are organised into ‘themes’, comprising broad domains of statistics such as the economy and transport. Each of these has a supporting ‘Theme Working Group’, which comprises statistical leaders from the relevant departments. The GSS Strategy to 2020 establishes a key role for these groups to work with users to plan and prioritise within their theme.

The Statistics User Forum draws on its member groups to identify strategic issues affecting users. These are communicated to the GSS through regular meetings with the National Statistician and statistical leaders from across the GSS. In 2012, the Forum identified over-cautious use of statistical disclosure control as a barrier to the utility of datasets, and provided evidence of how this has affected users’ ability to make best use of the data collected by government departments. As a result, a working group was set up to address the both the specific examples, and to ensure that appropriate measures are in place GSS-wide.

Building the community

Formal structures and communications tools will not by themselves develop a genuine collaborative spirit in the GSS. Change is most likely to happen when the producers of statistics fully understand the benefits that user input can bring to their products, and it is vital that approaches that work well are widely shared and celebrated.

In October 2012, the National Statistician and the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority established a new central team specifically to create opportunities for development and sharing of good practice across the GSS. The current priorities of the team are improving the communication of statistics, and understanding and responding to user needs. The team has worked closely with departments and users to develop and test approaches, and has put in place initiatives to share good practice GSS-wide:

- The team established a group of influential users of statistics to provide informal feedback on official statistics publications, in particular on how they are communicated. This partnership arrangement has provided valuable insights for producers to make further improvements to the accessibility and relevance of their publications.
- The team has initiated a program of seminars for GSS members to share their experiences and approaches, and has set up a library of resources and examples of good practice in meeting user needs.
- It has developed links between the GSS and the user community. For example, it collaborated with the Royal Statistical Society on an event covering the use of statistics by the voluntary sector. The team has followed this up with influential users in the sector to establish an ongoing user group.

This approach has so far proven effective, as it has the flexibility to deploy its resource to where it is most needed in the GSS, and is well placed to develop links between producer departments, and with the user community.

Conclusions

Recent developments set the scene for reaching, and understanding the needs of, a wider range of users than has previously been possible. With the appropriate governance and coordination in place, and the strategic direction set, it is expected that the coming years will see great advances in user engagement.

The good examples covered in this paper are however currently in a minority, and the GSS and the user community need to work in partnership to ensure that the production of all official statistics places meeting user needs at its core.