

The Market Research Society submission in response to the UK Statistics Authority consultation on the Code of Practice

1. About The Market Research Society

With members in more than 70 countries, The Market Research Society (MRS) is the world's largest association serving all those with professional equity in provision or use of market, social and opinion research, and in business intelligence, market analysis, customer insight and consultancy.

MRS has a diverse membership of individuals at all levels of experience and seniority within agencies, consultancies, support services, client-side organisations, the public sector and the academic community.

It also serves MRS Company Partners agencies, suppliers of support services, buyers and end-users – of all types and scale who are committed throughout their organisations to supporting the core MRS values of professionalism, research excellence and business effectiveness.

In consultation with its individual members and Company Partners, MRS supports best practice by setting and enforcing industry standards. The commitment to uphold the MRS Code of Conduct is supported by the Codeline service and a wide range of specialist guidelines.

MRS contributes significantly to the enhancement of skills and knowledge by offering various qualifications and membership grades, as well as training and professional development resources.

2. Introduction

MRS welcomes the possibility offered by the UK Statistics Authority to respond to the consultation on the Code of Practice.

MRS confirms that the contents of this paper are not confidential and can be attributed to MRS.

MRS notes the questions raised by the UK Statistics Authority in paragraph 12 (i) to (vi). MRS has considered these questions when reviewing the Statistics Authority Code of Practice. However, the MRS response has been structured around the principles and responses to the relevant questions have been incorporated into these comments where appropriate.

3. Response to Consultation

General

The UK Statistics Authority should recognise other relevant codes which impact on statistical practitioners responsible for UK statistics. One of the most significant is the MRS Code of Conduct which applies to all those engaged in market, social and opinion research. There are a number of rules which apply to research which should also apply to official statistics. The MRS response contains details of any significant gaps between the rules for research (as detailed in the MRS Code of Conduct) and those for statistics.

The definition of “official statistics” is not clear within the document. Greater clarity is needed in determining the scope of the Statistics Authority Code of Practice, most particularly by the inclusion of a definition of “official statistics”.

Part 1: The Code of Practice for Statistics

Principle 1: Integrity

The first practice under this principle requires that statistical reports are issued separately from any other statement or comment (such as ministerial or policy statements outlined in paragraph 33 of the consultation document) about the figures. Where that statement or report may however contain inaccuracies in regard to the figures, does the principle of integrity require that those statements be corrected, or that a clarifying statement be made by the body responsible for issuing the figures? Or is it sufficient that the statistics are available to allow interested parties to draw their own conclusions about the value or validity of the statements or comments made?

MRS is of the view that the Statistics Authority Code of Practice should contain requirements on the release of government statements relating to statistics. *At a minimum*, the Statistics Authority Code of Practice should contain the three requirements set down in paragraph 35 of the consultation document.

The MRS Code of Conduct places the following requirements on MRS Members and MRS Company Partners where clients wish to make statements or comments on published research findings:

B59 Members must take reasonable steps to check and where necessary amend any Client -prepared materials prior to publication to ensure that the published research results will not be incorrectly or misleadingly reported.

Comment: This means that Members are expected to take reasonable steps to ensure that any press releases include either final report details (including question wording for any questions quoted) or details of where the information can be obtained (e.g. via a website link).

B60 Members must take reasonable steps to ensure that findings from a research project, published by themselves or in their employer's name, are not incorrectly or misleadingly presented.

B61 If Members are aware, or ought reasonably to be aware, that findings from a research project have been incorrectly or misleadingly reported by a Client he/she must at the earliest opportunity:

- ❖ refuse permission for the Client to use their name further in connection with the incorrect or misleading published findings; and*
- ❖ publish in an appropriate forum the relevant technical details of the project to correct any incorrect or misleading reporting.*

MRS recommends that the Statistics Authority Code of Practice contains additional requirements similar to those found in the MRS Code of Conduct.

Principle 5: Communication

The fifth principle requires published information about statistics to be convenient for users and in as much detail as practicable. In addition to this, it is also important that sufficient technical information is released to enable the validity of any published statistical findings to be assessed. It is not so much about the quantity of information that is released rather the quality and whether such information aids understanding and interpretation e.g. the communication of measures of uncertainty for example, probability versus quota samples. Without this information, meaningful interpretation cannot be drawn.

The MRS Code of Conduct places the following requirements on MRS Members and MRS Company Partners when publicly releasing data:

- B49 Members must ensure that research conclusions disseminated by them are clearly and adequately supported by the data.*
- B50 Members must comply with reasonable requests to make available to anyone the technical information necessary to assess the validity of any published findings from a research project.*
- B54 Members must ensure that data tables include sufficient technical information to enable reasonable interpretation of the validity of the results.*
- B55 Members must ensure that reports include sufficient information to enable reasonable interpretation of the validity of the results.*

MRS recommends that the Statistics Authority Code of Practice contains additional requirements similar to those found in the MRS Code of Conduct.

Principle 6: Presenting statistics

The sixth principle requires the style and content of statistical reports to be balanced and impartial. The practices to support this should include an additional requirement to distinguish between statistical findings and facts, and interpretation of these.

The MRS Code of Conduct places the following requirements on MRS Members and MRS Company Partners when interpreting research results:

- B56 Members must ensure that reports and presentations clearly distinguish between facts and interpretation.*
- B57 Members must ensure that when interpreting data they make clear which data they are using to support their interpretation.*

MRS recommends that the Statistics Authority Code of Practice contains additional requirements similar to those found in the MRS Code of Conduct.

Principle 7: Accessibility

The ninth practice under this principle requires that official statistics be deposited with the relevant national archive accompanied by sufficient information to aid their re-use.

The researchers should consider the level of data placed in these archives, in particular data that is at respondent level or that contains such detail that respondents could be identified when combined with information from another accessible source (e.g. data from Companies House). In particular this may conflict with principle 8, confidentiality, noted below.

Principle 8: Confidentiality

This principle uses the word *person* to cover both legal and natural persons. The practices that follow however appear to use the words *person*, *individual* and *respondent* interchangeably and it is not clear as to whether they are intended to share the same meaning.

Additionally in regard to information the following phrases are used:

- information identifying a particular person
- personal information
- data that identify personal information
- confidential data
- information identifying an individual

Again it is not clear as to whether all of these phrases share a common meaning or what differentiates them if they do not. MRS recommends that the Statistics Authority Code of Practice uses consistent language throughout and that key terms are defined to avoid any confusion about scope and interpretation.

In the first practice interpreting confidentiality, the Statistics Authority Code of Practice currently states that all respondents to statistical surveys should be notified if results are to be released which reveals personal information. MRS recommends that this is re-worded to reflect that in addition to notification consent must have been obtained before personal respondent details are publicly revealed (as required by the Data Protection Act 1998).

The MRS Code of Conduct places the following requirements on MRS Members and MRS Company Partners when respecting respondents' rights:

- B8 The anonymity of Respondent s must be preserved unless they have given their informed consent for their details to be revealed or for attributable comments to be passed on.*

Comment: Members must be particularly careful if sample sizes are very small (such as in business and employee research) that they do not inadvertently identify organisations or departments and therefore individuals.

B9 If Respondents have given consent for data to be passed on in a form which allows them to be personally identified, Members must:

- ❖ demonstrate that they have taken all reasonable steps to ensure that it will only be used for the purpose for which it was collected and*
- ❖ fully inform Respondents as to what will be revealed, to whom and for what purpose.*

MRS recommends that the Statistics Authority Code of Practice contains additional requirements similar to those found in the MRS Code of Conduct.

Principle 9: Proportionate Burden

The fifth practice under this principle proposes that existing data sources should be drawn upon as an alternative to new surveys. To facilitate this and, in combination with the third practice under principle 8 (inform respondents of intended use of information and access limitations to that information), the purposes stated at the time of data collection should be broad enough to cover later re-use of the information.

Additionally, the introduction to a statistics project or other explanation provided to respondents should take into account the storage of respondent level data in an archive and access to that archive by researchers from other agencies or departments as well as other authorised parties such as academics.

Principles 10: Adequate resources

The tenth principle sets out the resource requirements required to meet the proposed Statistics Authority Code of Practice. The sixth practice states that staff should be supported with continuing professional development to maintain and extend their statistical knowledge and skills. MRS recommends that such support should include broader research skills in addition to statistical skills as the two activities are so closely linked and research knowledge and skills would be beneficial for statistics practitioners.

Protocol 1: Protocol on release practices



This protocol should recognise earlier consultations, including the outcome of the Cabinet Office consultation on limiting pre-release access to statistics.

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