



The Value of Economic Statistics: Follow-up Report

Manuel Tong, Johnny Runge and Sylaja Srinivasan

ESCoE Technical Report TR-22

August 2023

ISSN 2515-4664

TECHNICAL REPORT

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Abstract

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Keywords: value of official statistics, economic statistics, monetary value, public goods

JEL classification: E01, H40

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Published by:
Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence
King's College London
Strand
London
WC2R 2LS
United Kingdom
www.escoe.ac.uk

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Acknowledgments

This research has been funded by the Office for National Statistics as part of the research programme of the Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence (ESCoE). The authors are grateful for the thoughts of many colleagues at the ESCoE and the Office for National Statistics on this work. We are also grateful to survey, interview and focus group participants for devoting their time to the research.

Executive summary

This project was commissioned by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), as a follow-up to a similar study conducted in 2017-18. Using surveys and qualitative research with users of ONS economic statistics, the principal aim of both reports was to provide indicative evidence on the value of ONS economic statistics, and to explore the potential of areas of investigation recommended by the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Taskforce relating to how official statistics are valued, including in monetary terms. The issues addressed by the research included how economic statistics are accessed and used, the extent to which they meet users' needs, and how their value might be conceptualised and measured. In addition, this follow-up report assesses any impact of the changes introduced by the ONS in the intervening period.

Methodology

The research consisted of a survey, interviews and focus groups, all conducted online. The survey was carried out between 26 October 2021 and 4 January 2022 and was completed by 124 respondents. We followed a non-probability sampling method, aimed at maximising the number of respondents across a range of user groups, rather than ensuring representativeness to the wider user population or within subgroups. As such, the analysis in this report does not claim to make any generalisations to the wider population of ONS economic statistics users or any subgroup analysis, since numbers are too small to be reliable. Rather, in conjunction with the interview and focus group findings, our analysis identifies and discusses common themes.

Online interviews involving 25 people and online focus groups involving a total of 8 people were carried out between November 2021 and February 2022. Participants included survey respondents and additional identified users. This stage of the research, like the survey, provides further insight into a range and diversity of views and experiences of high-level, regular users of ONS economic statistics. As such, the findings may not necessarily reflect the views of the wider population who are less frequent users and access these statistics for different purposes. The findings should be considered within the context of these strengths and limitations.

Summary of findings

User satisfaction with ONS economic statistics has improved in the last four years, according to our research with users. The most prominent example given was ONS' successful response to the Covid-19 pandemic that met users' demands. We also found a perceived improvement in timeliness, due to the recent focus on faster indicators and administrative data. Generally, users believed that ONS is travelling in the right direction.

Users placed a high value on ONS economic statistics, and described them as important, and often essential, to their work. The value was grounded in the accuracy and reliability of the statistics, a similar finding to the baseline report. Overall, there was a high level of trust and confidence in ONS economic statistics. However, much as participants in our study in 2017-18, participants in the current study said that accessibility of ONS economic statistics could be improved, especially when it comes to the navigation of the website and search function.

A high-level summary of the findings from the survey and qualitative research is provided below.

(a) Survey findings

Use of ONS economic statistics

The survey respondents made regular use of ONS economic statistics for research areas like GDP, employment or inflation; most of them, on a very frequent basis, either daily or weekly, similarly to

the baseline survey. ONS economic statistics were overwhelmingly viewed as very important for users' work in general, as well as for research, reports and publications.

Satisfaction with ONS economic statistics

Users' satisfaction in 2021 was high across all areas of ONS economic statistics, and also larger than in 2017 across most areas of ONS economic statistics¹.

When people were asked directly whether ONS economic statistics have become better or worse during the last 4 years, a substantial proportion of survey respondents perceived an improvement in ONS economic statistics, especially in terms of the ability of these to meet their needs, data timeliness and presentation.

Survey respondents' demand for faster economic indicators increased markedly during the pandemic, and respondents expected this demand to remain at a high, though slightly lower, level afterwards. However, most users expected ONS to keep conventional economic data as a priority alongside the faster economic indicators.

The value of ONS economic statistics

Most survey respondents reported that ONS economic statistics were important to their work, and that it would have a severe or major impact if they were unable to use ONS economic statistics. Awareness among users of how ONS economic statistics had helped inform their organisations' decision-making processes had declined compared to 2017.

(b) Qualitative findings

The interview and focus group data were analysed alongside open-ended survey responses, to explore users' views and experiences on a range of different indicators as well as identifying potential areas of improvement.

Satisfaction with ONS economic statistics

Accuracy and breadth were highlighted as two particular strengths of ONS economic statistics. Respondents expressed a high level of trust and confidence in ONS economic statistics.

Building on the survey results, most respondents also provided highly positive feedback on the timeliness of ONS economic statistics. In particular, they highlighted the introduction of faster indicators during the pandemic and the increased focus on administrative datasets that had improved timeliness. Some noted that regional statistics, such as regional GVA or employment figures, lagged behind, but that they appreciated the reasons for this.

Many respondents pointed out that accessibility of ONS economic statistics could be improved so they were easier to find. Similar to the survey findings, respondents explained that it was still "difficult to navigate the ONS website" and that the search function could be improved. Many of the issues are already known by the ONS, and projects are currently in progress looking to understand and address any issues and challenges with the ONS website.

Respondents were generally positive about the presentation of ONS economic statistics, describing these as "well-written" and "easy to understand". A key theme, similar to the baseline study, was that respondents disagreed on the balance between simply presenting the data and providing a "commentary"/"interpretation" alongside the figures.

¹ The statistics explored were: industry and business statistics, international trade and balance of payments, public sector finance, productivity, inflation and price indices, GDP and national accounts, regional and local economic statistics and employment, wages and the labour market, and faster economic indicators in response to Covid.

Responses were mixed on how ONS economic statistics informed the levelling up agenda. Some appreciated ONS efforts and improvements in this area, acknowledging more regional statistics had been developed. However, there were also many suggestions for improvements to regional data so they could inform the levelling up agenda more effectively, including by providing more granular regional and local statistics and more timely regional statistics. Some respondents highlighted that the increasing use of administrative data was a welcome development that addressed granularity and timeliness at the same time, and those respondents would like these efforts to continue.

Almost all interview and focus group participants said their satisfaction with ONS economic statistics had improved in the last four years since the baseline study. Some people recognised that ONS had produced a lot more releases than usual during the pandemic, to meet the demand by users. Some of these respondents said it would be important to increase the budgets and staff resources of the ONS, so they could maintain this level of publications and releases, without potentially becoming overstretched and leading to delays or lower quality in other important outputs and innovations.

Value of ONS economic statistics

To provide indicative information about the monetary value of ONS economic statistics, similar to the baseline study, participants were asked a stated preference question about their 'willingness to pay' for ONS economic statistics in a hypothetical market situation. Almost all participants said it was a very difficult question, and rarely provided a number. Most thought it was interesting and a worthwhile exercise to explore the value of official statistics, but simply did not know where to start. We also identified a lot of reluctance in answering the question, with participants noting that paying for economics statistics was not as far-fetched as, say, paying for a reduction in pollution. Some respondents said they were aware of the methodology behind this approach that was used in other fields, including the limitations and uncertainties in providing a monetary estimate, and said they would be sceptical of any potential results coming out of this type of exercise.

Those who did provide responses tended to say it would be a very high amount, because it was "integral" to what they did as a team and organisation. Respondents explained that the outputs that were based on ONS economic statistics informed policymaking and other decisions, as well as providing context and background knowledge.

Similar to the baseline study, respondents found it helpful to think about the value of official economic statistics, by imagining what would happen in the absence of ONS economic statistics, either for their organisation or for society as a whole. Respondents said decisions in their organisation would then be based on "hunches" or they would need to assemble the statistics they needed themselves. This would either be through internal data gathering or administrative data, or by paying for alternative, non-official sources of economic statistics. While it was said to be difficult to predict the exact difference in quality and cost-effectiveness in this counter-factual world with no official ONS economic statistics, there was broad agreement among interview participants that the data would indeed be less cost-effective and less reliable.

Many respondents made the point that even if the alternative sources, in theory, were as good as the ONS economic statistics, they would still not be as valuable. The value of ONS economic statistics was partly based on the trust in the ONS as an organisation, and the confidence in their impartiality and the high quality and reliability of their statistics. Interview participants said that alternative data sources, which they often used, were only valuable because they could compare them with official ONS economic statistics. In this way, alternative commercial data sources were often described as "complementary to ONS economic statistics" rather than something that could meaningfully replace them. Overall, participants described ONS economic statistics as a pure public good, which was seen as invaluable to their work.

Section 1: Introduction

This project was commissioned by the ONS, as a follow-up to a similar study conducted four years ago². Using surveys and qualitative research, the principal aim of both reports was to provide indicative evidence on the value of ONS economic statistics to users, and to explore the potential of areas of investigation recommended by the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Taskforce relating to how official statistics are valued, including in monetary terms.³ The issues addressed by the research included how economic statistics are accessed and used, the extent to which they meet users' needs, and how their value might be conceptualised and measured. In addition, this follow-up report assesses any changes since the baseline, seeking to establish any impact of the changes introduced by the ONS in the intervening period.

The statistics of interest to the research are those of the ONS economic statistics series. These can be grouped as follows:

- Industry and business statistics
- International trade and balance of payments
- Public sector finance
- Productivity
- Inflation and price indices
- GDP and national accounts
- Regional and local economic statistics
- Employment, wages and labour market
- Faster indicators in response to Covid

Research methods

Two research methods were used: an online survey of users of economic statistics, as well as qualitative research through online interviews and online focus groups with survey respondents and additional users. More details are provided below.

Survey research: purpose, response and limitations

The survey was designed to capture the main characteristics of ONS economic statistics users, in terms of purpose, frequency of use, and main research areas of interest. It also aimed to assess users' degree of satisfaction with the service provided by ONS, the impact of that service on their work and how valuable this information is to users. Part of this survey is based on the survey questions recommended by the UNECE to measure the value of economic statistics.

Since this survey is a follow-up on a baseline survey conducted in 2017, some questions from that wave were repeated in the current questionnaire to attempt to evaluate potential changes in users' views over time. Additionally, this survey includes questions that explicitly asked users whether ONS has improved or worsened its performance regarding certain aspects of economic statistics, relative to 2017.

The context dominated by the Covid-19 shock made it necessary to consider these circumstances in this survey. Hence, we also evaluated users' interest in faster economic indicators, relative to conventional economic data, considering their demand before and during the pandemic, as well as their expected demand afterwards.

Moreover, in this survey we were interested in retrieving economic statistics users' testimonies based on their own experience working with ONS data. For that purpose, a larger number of open-

² Rolfe, H., Runge, J. & Srinivasan, S. (2020): [The value of economic statistics: baseline report](#).

³ <https://www.unece.org/statistics/statstos/task-force-on-the-value-of-official-statistics.html>

ended questions was added into the questionnaire compared to 2017. In addition to the open-ended questions considered in the baseline survey, we specifically asked users: what ONS should do to inform their work that it currently does not; the extent to which ONS meet new sources of demand (Covid-19, beyond GDP, the levelling-up agenda, etc.); and their views on what has improved or worsened regarding ONS economic statistics in the last four years. Users were also consulted about the main benefits from this information and how valuable it is to them, as well as other sources of economic statistics they look at. The survey questionnaire design can be found in Appendix 2.

Like in 2017, this survey does not intend to be representative of all ONS economic statistics users. We followed a non-probability sampling method aimed at maximising the number of respondents across a range of users groups, rather than ensuring representativeness of the wider user population or within subgroups. Hence, the results and testimonies presented in this report should be regarded as the view of a particular group of intensive users with considerable experience of using ONS economic statistics. As such, the following analysis does not claim to make any generalisations to the wider population of ONS economic statistics users or any subgroup analysis, since numbers are too small to be reliable. Rather, in conjunction with the focus group findings, our analysis will identify and discuss common themes.

In order to collect users' responses, we applied a strategy to approach different types of potential respondents. The initial contact was on the 26 October, targeting those 2017 respondents willing to participate in the new survey, as well as users from ESCoE and NIESR emailing lists. The survey was subsequently advertised in the ESCoE newsletter and forwarded to different organisations, in particular ONS itself to distribute through their networks. The invitation was also circulated on Twitter and to the team members' personal contacts. The survey closed on 4 January 2022.

One major caveat to this 2021 survey is the number of participants. We could only collect a total of 131 responses, just slightly above 50% of the 254 responses initially gathered in the 2017 survey. Elimination of partial and duplicate answers led to a final sample of 124 users, about 57% of the 2017 final sample of 218 respondents.

Another issue to consider is the small number of 2017 respondents who participated again in the new survey. This hampered a more direct evaluation of how their views regarding ONS economic statistics evolved over time. Indeed, only 13 out of 124 respondents participated in the baseline survey. Despite the issues reported, results from the survey and the testimonies of responding users indicate that our sample comprises a group of regular and high-level users, whose insights are helpful to inform ONS on areas for potential improvement. Moreover, the demographic distribution of this sample is very similar to that in 2017, as described in detail in Appendix 3.

Qualitative research: interviews and focus groups

Similar to the baseline study, the qualitative research explored in more detail the needs, expectations and satisfaction in service provision among users of official economic statistics, as well as how they value official economic statistics, including how their outputs and decision-making are affected by statistics. More specifically, we explored participants' use of economic statistics, how they accessed these, their views on scope, quality and usability, as well as importance and impact related to their work and decision-making. We also asked how ONS economic statistics meet new sources of demand for official statistics, such as the levelling up agenda, net zero, beyond GDP, and Covid-19. A semi-structured topic guide was used in all interviews and focus groups and is included in Appendix 2.

Compared to the baseline report, the qualitative research was done online rather than face-to-face, and primarily as one-to-one interviews rather than focus groups. The current pandemic situation with restrictions on travel necessitated the use of virtual interaction in the interviews and focus

groups. Also, while focus groups allowed for research participants to react to and discuss each other's comments, the interview format allowed for more detailed exploration of each user's experiences and views, including more details about their outputs and how it might have affected decision-making and policies. In any case, in contrast to the survey, consistency is not crucial as we do not compare the qualitative findings between each wave of the research. The main aim of the qualitative research is to provide more detailed insights as a complement to the survey findings.

Interview participants were recruited through inviting survey respondents who had agreed to be contacted for a follow-up interview. We carried out a total of 25 online interviews, lasting around 45 minutes each. In addition, we carried out two additional 1-hour online focus groups with 8 participants from two specific organisations. In total, we spoke to 33 participants. This was less than the 49 participants we spoke to in the 2017 baseline study, however as described above we gathered more detailed insights from participants in the current study. Overall, we have more data (in terms of hours of recording and pages of transcripts) than the baseline study.

The interviews and focus groups were transcribed and analysed through a framework approach, to identify common themes. Due to its qualitative nature, the value of the qualitative findings is its ability to provide insight into a broad range of views and experiences of users of ONS economic statistics. Therefore, while the research shows the range and diversity of views and experiences, they may not necessarily reflect the views of the wider population. In particular, it should be recognised that participants were generally high level and very frequent users of ONS economic statistics. The findings should be considered within the context of the study strengths and limitations.

Structure of the report

We have described the background to the research and methods used in this section (Section 1). This is followed by the following sections:

- **Section 2** describes the characteristics of the survey respondents, including their use of ONS economic statistics.
- **Section 3** describes survey, interview and focus group respondents' views about ONS economic statistics and their suggestions for areas of improvement.
- **Section 4** explores the question of the how the value of economic statistics might be explored and measured, based on survey, interview and focus group findings.
- **Section 5** identifies some key points and draws some conclusions.

Section 2: Survey sample and use of ONS economic statistics

Demographics of survey respondents

The characteristics of the respondents in the 2021 and 2017 surveys, in terms of age, gender, sector/industry, job title and education level are broadly similar (see Appendix 3). In particular, similar to the baseline, our sample is around 70% male, there is a high proportion of highly educated users with masters and doctoral degrees, and most respondents work in academia, central or local government, public organisations and private businesses.

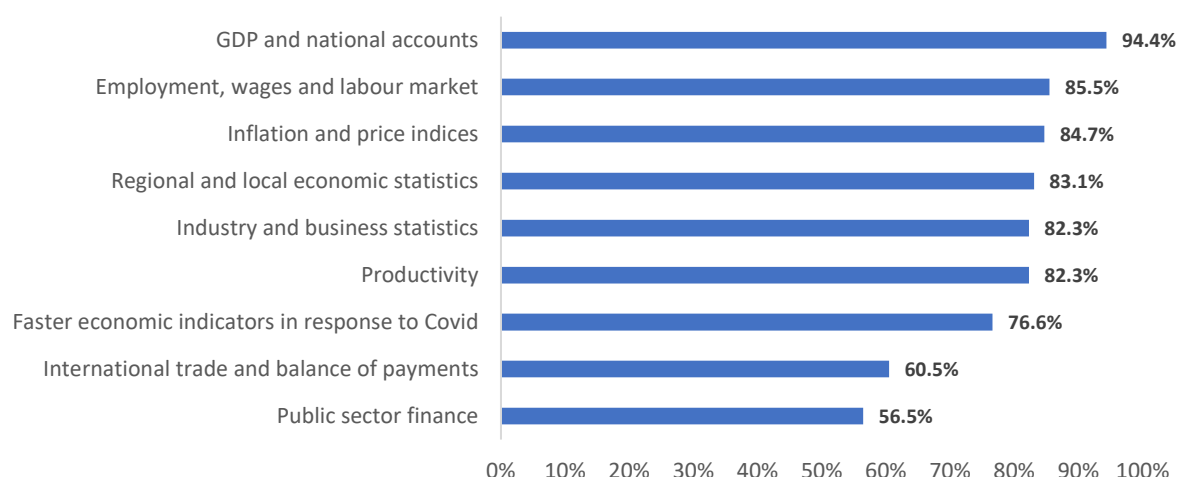
Use of ONS economic statistics among survey respondents

Figure 1 shows that GDP and national accounts are clearly the most frequently used among survey respondents, followed by areas like employment, inflation, regional and local economic statistics, among others. For this 2021 survey, we additionally enquired about the use of faster economic indicators in response to Covid, which are found to be used by over three quarters of respondents.

When asked about the frequency with which respondents used ONS economic statistics, as shown in Figure 2, almost 35% of respondents reported a weekly use, whereas over a quarter said they used them daily. Respondents could pick one frequency of use. These results confirm that our 2021 sample is mostly composed by frequent users (over 60%) of ONS economic statistics. That proportion was 56% in the 2017 survey. Overall, it is clear that the 2021 survey, similarly and even more so than the baseline in 2017, provides insights into the views and experiences of regular, rather than occasional, users of ONS economic statistics.

Participants also indicated their main purposes for which they use ONS economic statistics and how important these statistics are for those purposes. Figure 3 shows that over 90% of respondents used ONS economic statistics for work in general, research, reports and publications. Besides, nearly three quarters of respondents reported use for personal interest and to understand Covid-relates issues. Conversely, up to a quarter of respondents use ONS statistics for service planning, negotiations or legislative work. It is worth noting that for most purposes, more than a half of respondents judge ONS statistics as either essential or important.⁴

Figure 1. Use of ONS economic statistics 2021



⁴ Figure 3 shows only the responses of participants who use ONS economic statistics for each purpose listed. For instance, 96% of respondents use ONS economic statistics for work in general, whereas the remaining 4% do not use them for that purpose. For further information, see Figure A6 in Appendix 4.

Figure 2. Usual frequency of use of ONS economic statistics

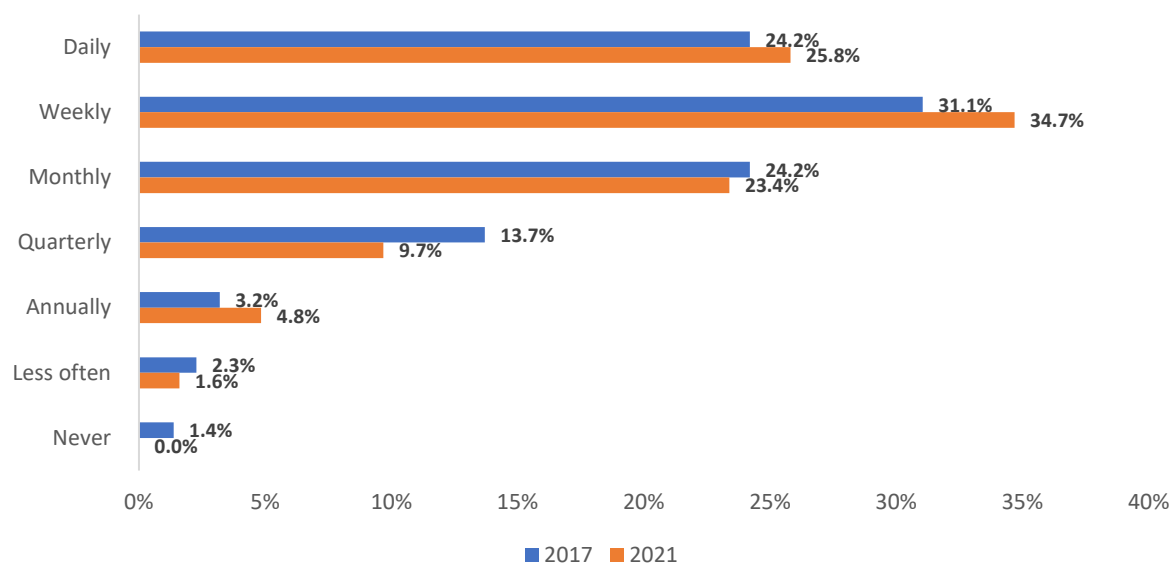


Figure 3. Purposes for using ONS economic statistics and importance



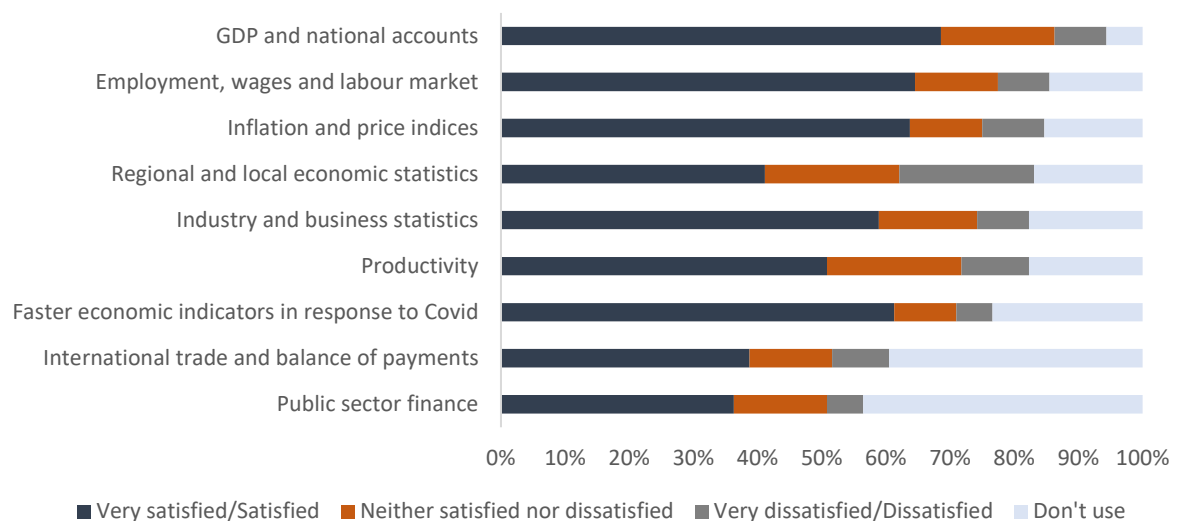
Section 3: Satisfaction and improving ONS economic statistics

Survey findings

Survey respondents were asked about their degree of satisfaction with respect to the research areas mentioned earlier for which they use ONS economic statistics. Figure 4 shows that there is a uniform, high level of satisfaction across most of those areas. Indeed, over 60% of users surveyed report being either very satisfied or satisfied with nearly all areas of ONS economic statistics. The only exception is regional and local economic statistics, with just 49.5% of satisfaction. That area also bears the largest level of dissatisfaction (25.2% of responding users).⁵

Overall, the 2021 survey exhibits a larger satisfaction degree than the 2017 survey, where the minimum level of approval was 46.6% for international trade and balance of payments. Satisfaction with industry and business statistics, for instance, rose from 65.1% in 2017 to 71.6% in 2021. Moreover, in international trade and balance of payments, satisfaction grew from 46.6% to 64% between surveys.

Figure 4. Satisfaction with specific areas of economic statistics

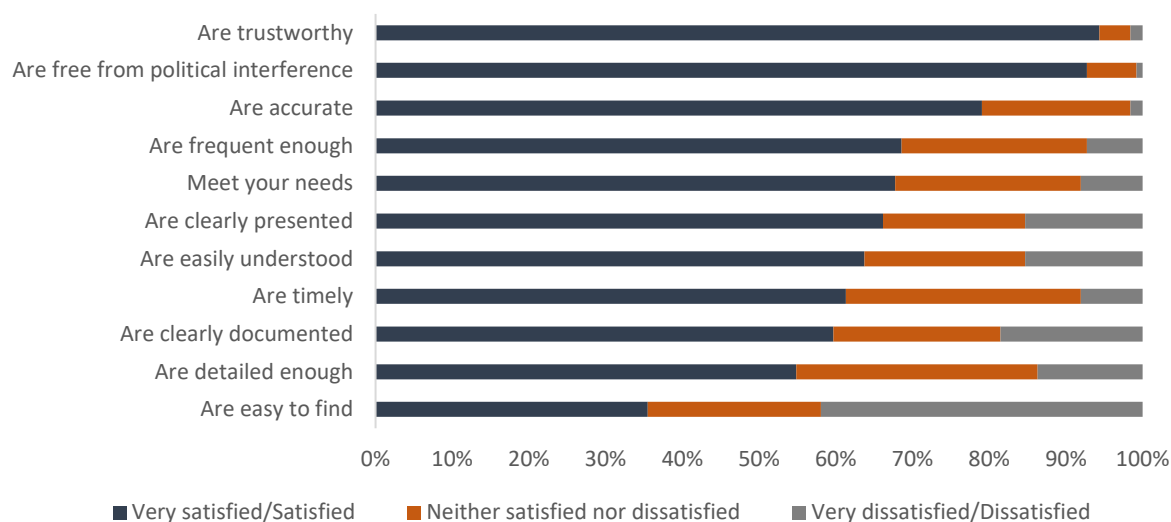


Respondents were also consulted on their satisfaction regarding certain aspects of ONS economic statistics, listed in Figure 5. More than a half of respondents declare to be satisfied with almost all the aspects referred to. Trustworthiness and political independence are the two aspects with the largest degree of satisfaction (nearly 95%). Accuracy comes in third with 79% of respondents reporting that they are satisfied or very satisfied with this aspect of ONS economic statistics. Respondents were least satisfied with the easiness of finding statistics, with just 35.5% reporting they were satisfied and 42% reporting that they were dissatisfied.⁶ This finding implies no improvement in this aspect of ONS economic statistics since the 2017 survey, which also showed a 42% level of disapproval. In contrast, respondents were more satisfied with most other aspects of ONS economic statistics in 2021 than in 2017. Indeed, the number of respondents reporting satisfaction with the trustworthiness and political independence of ONS economic statistics increased by six and seven percentage points, respectively, between 2017 and 2021.

⁵ For further information, see Figure A7 in Appendix 4.

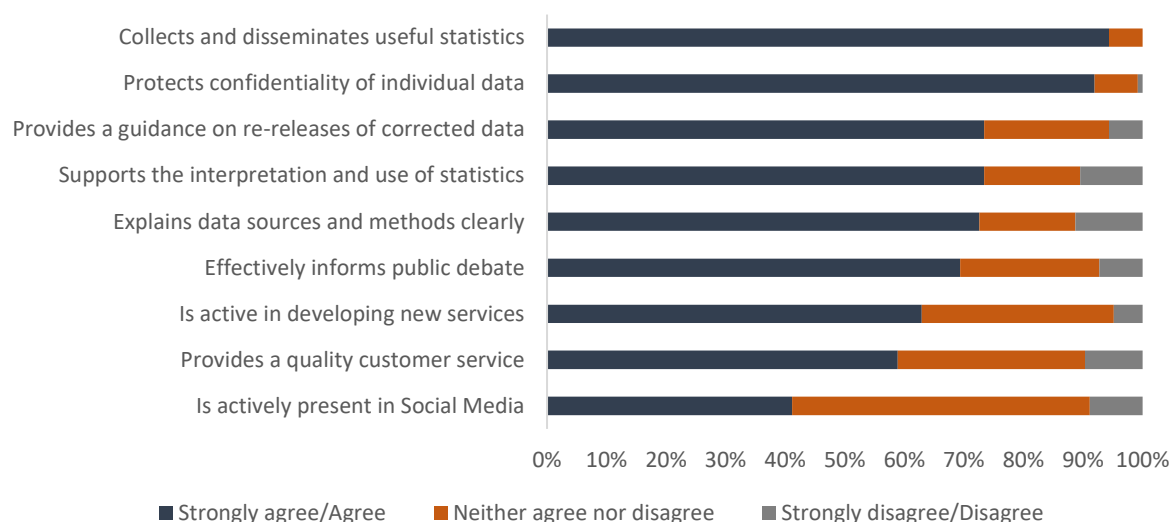
⁶ For further information, see Figure A8 in Appendix 4.

Figure 5. Satisfaction with some aspects of ONS economic statistics



Subsequently, respondents were given some statements related to characteristics of the ONS, listed in Figure 6, to which they informed whether they agreed or disagreed. 64.5% of respondents strongly agree that ONS makes sufficient efforts to protect confidentiality of individual data (see Appendix 4). However, it is the usefulness of statistics the characteristic most respondents agree with (94.3%). All other statements received approval from more than half of respondents, except the statement on ONS being actively present in social media. Only 41.1% of respondents agree with that.⁷ However, this level of agreement is higher than in the 2017 survey (35.9%). Indeed, there was an overall increase in respondents' agreement with all statements in 2021, relative to the previous survey.

Figure 6. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the ONS...

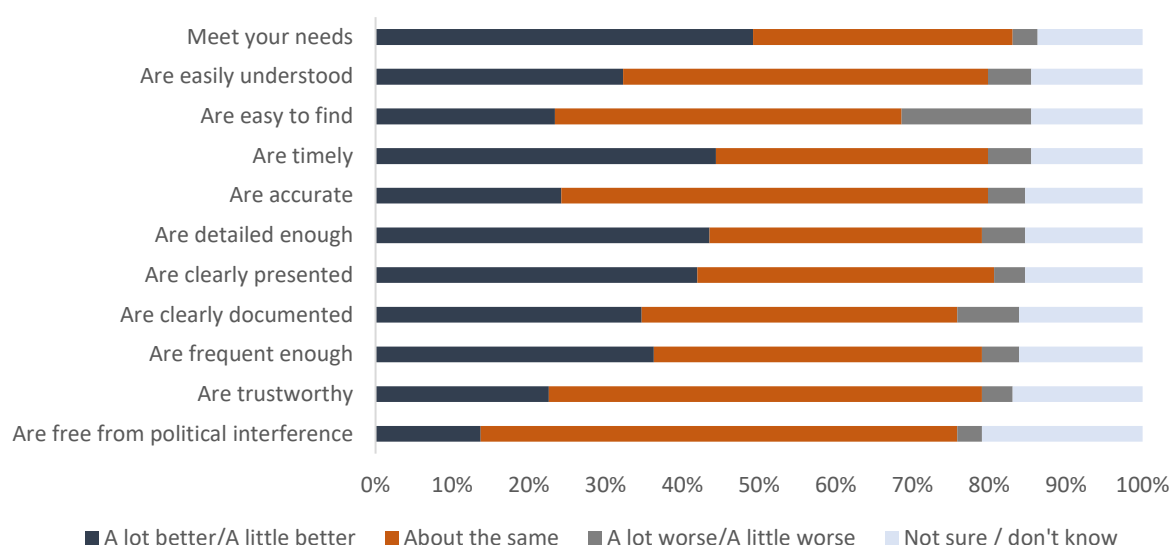


In this follow-up survey, we were interested in getting a picture of how users' satisfaction has improved or worsened in the last four years (since the baseline survey in July 2017). As can be seen in

⁷ For further information, see Figure A9 in Appendix 4.

Figure 7, for a sizeable share of respondents, most of these aspects have not changed so much since 2017, such as freedom from political interference (62.1%), trustworthiness (56.5%) and accuracy (55.6%). These all scored very highly in terms of user satisfaction in both the 2017 and 2021 survey. On the other hand, almost half of users surveyed have perceived an improvement in other characteristics: meeting their needs (49.2%), timeliness (45.4%) and clarity in presentation (42%). Overall, all indicators have seen net positive changes. The only indicator which shows a notable split in views among survey responses is whether ONS economic statistics have become better or worse in terms of being easy to find. 17% of respondents thought ONS is now doing worse while 23.4% thought it is now better.⁸

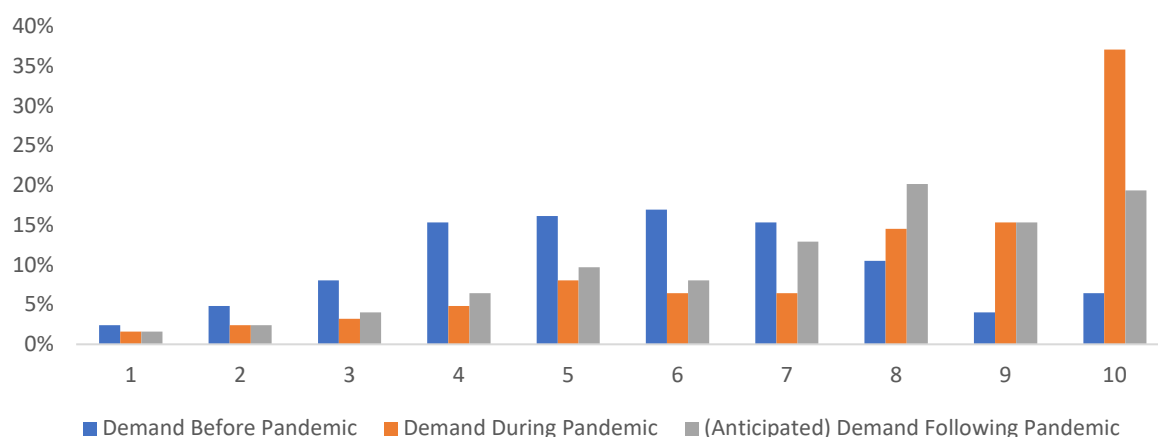
Figure 7. To what extent do you think ONS economic statistics have become better or worse during the last 4 years (since July 2017) on the following indicators?



The current context dominated by the Covid-19 crisis has led the ONS to prioritise the development and diffusion of faster economic indicators. However, it is also pertinent to know whether users value that initiative by assessing their demand for these indicators. Thus, we asked them to evaluate their demand for faster economic indicators before and during the pandemic, along with estimating their anticipated demand after the pandemic, rating them on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being low and 10 being high. Figure 8 presents the outcome of this exercise. Dynamics are clearly different across stages of the pandemic. Prior to the crisis, there was a moderate demand for faster economic indicators, scoring between 4 and 7. When the pandemic hit, the demand got to a peak of 10 points for 37.1% of respondents, with around 15% marking their demand between 8 and 9. After the pandemic, most respondents expect their demand for faster economic indicators to remain high, but less than during the crisis, with around 20% rating it at 8, followed by 10, 9 and 7.

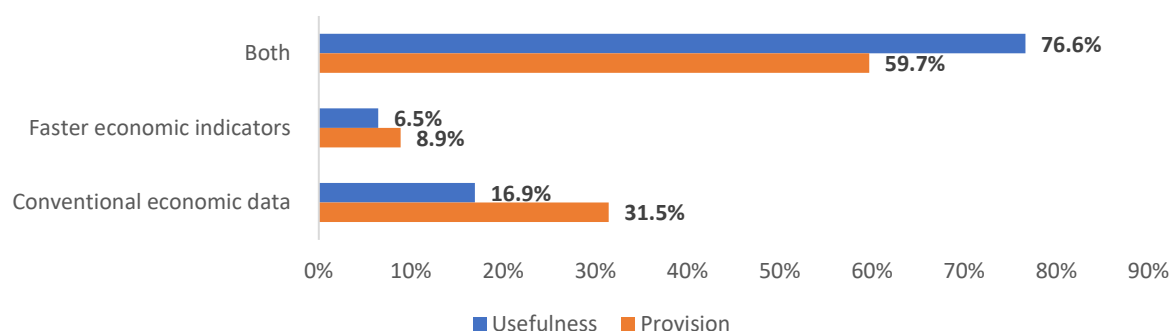
⁸ For further information, see Figure A10 in Appendix 4.

Figure 8. How would you rate your demand for faster economic indicators before the pandemic, during the pandemic, and what would you anticipate your demand being after the pandemic? (on a scale from 1-10, with 1 being low and 10 being high).



As a complement to the previous question, users were asked about their view of the usefulness of faster economic indicators, relative to conventional economic data, as well as how necessary they consider those faster indicators to be provided, again compared to conventional data. Figure 9 summarises the outcome of those questions, and the picture is clear. Most respondents reckon that both types of indicators are equally useful (76.6%) and necessary to be provided (59.7%). However, it is worth noting that a larger number of respondents consider conventional economic data more useful (16.9%) and more necessary to provide (31.5%) than faster economic indicators.

Figure 9. Usefulness and provision of faster economic indicators and more conventional economic data supplied by ONS



Open-ended survey responses and qualitative research findings

In the survey, we asked the following six open-ended questions:

- What do you think the ONS is doing well regarding economic statistics? (88 responses)
- What do you think the ONS could do better regarding economic statistics? (97 responses)
- What should the ONS do, regarding economic statistics, to inform your work that it does not currently do? (78 responses)
- To what extent do you think ONS economic statistics meet new sources of demand, such as the levelling up agenda, net zero, beyond GDP and Covid-19? (52 responses)

- Please provide general or specific comments about what you think has become better or worse about ONS economic statistics during the last 4 years (since July 2017) (82 responses)
- Finally, what, if anything else, would you like to say about ONS' economic statistics? (32 responses)

Similarly, in the interviews and focus groups, we asked a range of questions related to people's experiences of using ONS economic statistics, including in relation to quality, accuracy, level of detail, documentation, presentation, timeliness, frequency, trust, gaps, as well as how statistics met new sources of demand such as the levelling up agenda, net zero, beyond GDP and Covid-19.

The findings, both from the survey and qualitative research, from these questions are analysed and presented below according to theme.

Accuracy

A large number of survey and interview respondents said ONS produced "high quality", "reliable" and "gold standard" data on the UK economy. Some pointed out that ONS economic statistics were collected and produced to a "rigorous" and "reliable" methodology, with "stringent quality assurance processes". Some respondents also praised the ONS for continuously developing new estimates based on newly available data, and that they were always "moving in the right direction" of the never-ending task of achieving complete accuracy. This led respondents to express a high level of trust and confidence in the statistics. Generally, it should be highlighted that the survey and interview respondents – as the previous survey responses show – are highly satisfied users, and highly value ONS economic statistics. But they are also highly engaged users, and were keen to provide feedback for areas that could be improved.

The only negative responses on accuracy included some respondents who noted their concerns about the Labour Force Survey (LFS), especially post-Covid.

Breadth

ONS economic statistics were praised by a large number of survey and interview respondents for its breadth and coverage. Respondents said ONS economic statistics comprised a "wide range of data", and the range was described as "impressive".

Timeliness

Almost all survey responses in relation to timeliness were positive. Both survey and interview respondents commented that the ONS generally produced timely statistics on a regular basis. It was also highlighted that the increasing focus on administrative statistics provided a good complement to the conventional statistics in terms of timeliness. A common example was the use of HMRC payroll estimates and DWP Claimant Count data as a complement to Labour Force Survey figures.

In terms of specific statistical releases, there were some comments from survey and interview respondents on the improvements in timeliness for the National Accounts and outputs statistics, while some noted that regional GVA figures lagged behind for a couple of years. The latter respondents said it would be useful for regional analysis if it was published more frequently, but some "appreciated that it's a very in-depth process".

Finally, some participants simply said their work did not require very timely statistics, and that other factors, such as granularity and accuracy, were more important for their user needs.

ONS as a source

Many survey and interview respondents said that the stature of the ONS as an organisation contributed to the value of their economic statistics. The ONS was invariably described as an

“official”, “recognised” and “authoritative source” with a “strong reputation” and a “high level of integrity”. Respondents also emphasised that the ONS’ neutrality was important.

Accessibility

Some respondents highlighted that ONS economic statistics were “publicly available” and “free” to use which made them essential to their work. However, generally – and similarly to the baseline survey and focus groups – the survey and interview/focus group responses included a large number of suggestions that the accessibility to economic data could be improved, and that ONS economic statistics should be “easier to find”. Many of the issues are already known by the ONS, and projects are currently in progress to understand and address the challenges. While some respondents said there had been improvements in recent years, and some said it was better than many other national statistics institutes, it was relatively common that respondents, even experienced users, described menus as “unclear”, and respondents often had to use Google.

Some regular users said they did find it “relatively straightforward” and “easy” to navigate the website, but fully recognised this was because they were very regular users. They had developed ways to overcome any potential obstacles, such as keeping bookmarks and saving the four-digit code for regular sources and releases. Some highlighted that it was a big improvement that they were now able to find the right dataset with the four-digit code, which had not always been the case. These regular users, however, often said that they found it much more difficult to access data that they only looked at occasionally.

Some respondents said some spreadsheets needed reformatting so they were “machine readable”, and so they could easily be used in software like R and Stata. In this regard, some participants working in larger organisations had increasingly started to build tools internally to get data off the ONS website, including pulling stuff from API and passing all the data to their local service analysts. However, this process was described as difficult.

Some respondents highlighted NOMIS as a great resource for accessing labour market statistics, and important for their work. Those respondents generally described it as fairly easy to access and navigate, but some said it would still be great to attend online training on using NOMIS. They said they were self-taught, and that it had taken some time to learn how to use it, and that APIs were not always intuitive. Some participants said they wished all ONS economic statistics would be available through the platform.

A number of participants said it was really good that data sources were made available through the Secure Research Service (SRS), and that it was accessible across different locations, including the opportunity to get access from home. This was described as “really valuable” for their work and hoped it would continue beyond the pandemic.

Some respondents also argued it would help accessibility if ONS developed a single, or several, dashboards. This could be for “high profile indicators” or for faster, real-time indicators. Similarly, some respondents said there should be a “homepage” or “summary page” for each concept, with a layered overview of all economic statistics in that area. Some users mentioned the way Eurostat presented their statistics in a tree, and others the NOMIS profile page. Some said this would be particularly helpful in the current environment, with a notable increase in outputs. Participants recognised, and applauded, the proliferation in ONS outputs and releases, but some said it had required them to spend some time to get familiar with what was available.

Another recommendation was to make sure that similar data series are well connected on the website. It was highlighted by some respondents that it was very useful that you could always access the most recent release at the top of the screen on the website. However, others noted that when there was a small break in a release, or a change of name, there should be better signposting and links between the releases on the website.

Due to the difficulties in finding and accessing statistics on the ONS website, many respondents said they had often emailed the main contact listed on the ONS website. While it would be easier to be able to find the required information themselves, these participants said they were pleased about how quickly those contacts came back, and that they usually gave them the information they required, and pointed them in the right direction.

Other recommendations included:

- standardising outputs across releases;
- improving the API access;
- introducing a query function;
- provide opportunity to retrieve all longer time series of data;
- make sure ONS quotes on the labour market release are consistent with data in the spreadsheets. At the moment, ONS quote changes based on unrounded data, which are not always similar to ones you get from calculating changes in the LFS spreadsheets using unrounded figures.

Participants were usually alerted to ONS economic statistics by keeping track of the release calendar, or through receiving email alerts. Those who worked on areas related to specific economic statistics, such as labour market or GDP statistics, said they knew the key release dates.

Presentation

Participants were positive on presentational issues, and generally praised statistical releases, bulletins and reports for being “well-written”, “well explained” and “easy to understand”.

A key theme, similar to the baseline study, was that respondents disagreed on the balance between simply presenting the data and providing a “commentary”/ “interpretation” alongside the figures. On the one hand, some respondents welcomed the use of economic commentary and analysis from the ONS, some recognising and valuing that the ONS seemed to have done more in this area in recent years. Some respondents said they found it useful to have this type of analysis from the ONS as a trusted, independent source. Some respondents who worked in regional organisations said they often replicated the commentary for their local level, and found it useful to get inspiration for how ONS had presented the narrative on a national level.

Other respondents said they thought ONS provided too much commentary and their role was only to describe the data and the methodology behind it. There were also respondents who argued that, due to ONS’ strong and important commitment to impartiality and objectivity, there were simply limits to how much they could say.

Other users, particularly academics and very regular users, simply said they did not tend to look at the publication reports themselves. They went “straight to the data series”.

Some other comments and suggestions for improvement included:

- use more advanced communication tools to disseminate statistical information,
- provide a comprehensive overview of each subject area that is “easily understandable, with standardised descriptions”. The respondent suggested these should include the historical data, incorporating the work of ESCoE in this area.
- Increase the number of ONS statisticians who are active and responsive on social media, and ready to explain themselves.

Documentation

Many survey and interview responses commented on documentation of ONS economic statistics. Some respondents were satisfied with this aspect, describing the documentation as “useful”, with some saying the ONS “provided sufficient explanation of the methodologies to produce statistics”.

However, most respondents provided suggestions for how ONS could improve documentation. Many of these simply called for “more documentation” and “more metadata” than what was currently available, including “more guidance on what a statistic measures”.. Others focused on the clarity of the documentation, recommending “clearer definitions in data spreadsheets”, “clearer explanations of methods”, “using user-friendly language”. Some respondents highlighted this was especially necessary for users less familiar with the data. Building on their comments on accessibility, some respondents also said it was sometimes hard to find the documentation on the website, and that they simply ended up emailing the ONS contact on the main page.

Several survey and interview respondents highlighted specifically that National Accounts statistics needed an improvement in terms of documentation. This included providing better explanations of which numbers represented what, and explanations of some of the concepts.

In addition, some respondents commented that there should be a “manual”, a “standard, standing description”, “layered explainers” or a “full methodology” underlying the national accounts and other data series.

Other specific comments included:

- improving the documentation of survey data;
- documentation of historical information, such as changes to methodology, can sometimes be difficult to find;
- any survey-based data should say exactly what the question is;
- provide base year in spreadsheet on real GDP

Among both survey and interview respondents, there were some discussions about the communication of uncertainty and confidence intervals. Some said this was a particular strength of the ONS, with some highlighting transparency around revisions and routinely publishing revision triangles. Some respondents also mentioned that the ONS should communicate more clearly the limitations to confidence in the statistics. One participant, for instance, recommended to stop publishing Local Authority data from the Annual Population Survey, when confidence intervals were too wide.

Meeting new sources of demand

The survey asked an open-ended question about to what extent ONS economic statistics met new sources of demand, such as the levelling up agenda, net zero, beyond GDP and Covid. The same question was asked in interviews and focus groups. Some responses assessed the ability to meet new sources of demand broadly. These were mixed. Some were positive, describing the ONS efforts as “good”, “reasonable” and “very well”.

Many respondents, however, focused on the fact that this was still ongoing, and recognised that it is a difficult area, and that in some cases it is difficult to know exactly what is required. These responses focused on the progress and that the ONS was generally moving in the “right direction”. Some highlighted that the ONS had become more “adaptable”, “responsive” and “reactive” in recent years.

They emphasised that much more work needed to be done. This included the provision of many more alternative data sources. Only a few respondents commenting broadly on ONS performance in responding to new sources of demand were negative. Other respondents highlighted that many more alternative data sources were still needed.

The sections below will explore the comments of survey respondents in relation to the specific areas, specifically Covid, levelling-up, beyond GDP, and net zero.

Responding to Covid

A large number of survey and interview respondents praised the ONS for its timely and successful response to the pandemic. Some recognised that the pandemic had posed a huge challenge to measuring the economy, but felt the ONS had responded well, especially by bringing in new surveys and data sources, including new experimental and innovative statistics as well as valuable faster indicators.

Especially the Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS) was often highlighted as a success story. Some said it was useful that they could add tailored questions relatively quickly.

Some respondents highlighted how these data sources had played a key role in understanding the state of the economy during the Covid crisis, and how it had informed decisions.

Some survey and interview respondents also highlighted that it was important for the ONS to continue this work. A few respondents, for instance, said data series such as the BICS should continue beyond the pandemic and become a regular snapshot of what businesses experience. Some respondents also said it was important for the ONS to learn from and build on their successes during Covid, where they had done things quickly.

Generally, survey respondents commented positively on improvements in the timeliness of ONS economic statistics, saying they appreciated the priority given to this area in recent years. Some responses suggested that this priority on faster indicators and timeliness should be maintained.

There were very few negative responses in relation to ONS' Covid response.

Informing the levelling up agenda

There were also many, but mixed, comments about the ability of ONS economic statistics to inform the levelling up agenda. Many survey and interview respondents highlighted the importance of providing more granular regional, sub-regional and local data. Some respondents appreciated the efforts by the ONS in this area, and acknowledged that more regional statistics had been developed, that there had been "huge advances in local data presentation", and that regional data was "improving".

However, there were also many comments suggesting improvements to regional data, so it could inform the levelling up agenda more effectively. This included broad calls to provide "better granular regional, sub-regional and local statistics", to provide "more regional cross-tabulations", "more regional analysis", "provide more regional indexes", and to "develop bottom-up economic statistics to allow for disaggregated local economic statistics". Some respondents noted said more datasets should go down to Local Authority level, and when they did, those datasets were not always easy to find.

Some respondents highlighted that the increasing use of administrative data was a welcome development for the levelling up agenda, because it provided more granular and more timely estimates. Some respondents noted that granular local statistics ideally would be published faster, for instance the local GVA, the employment data in the Annual Population Survey, and productivity data. Some respondents said they wished the new faster indicators such as BICS included more detailed regional data and said this would be useful for a levelling up perspective, but recognised why this was hard to achieve. This meant they often used the administrative data to provide timely information on regional matters.

Some respondents also discussed the fact that regional statistics were less accurate than national statistics, especially the further down you went in geographies and NUTS levels. While some were worried that some users always took the data at face value, most said this was “the nature of the game” and it was fine as long as the ONS emphasised the limitations in clear health warnings. Some respondents said it was preferable to have less accurate local data than having no data at all. Sometimes, they could triangulate the data with other non-official data, including their own data, to give the full picture and assess accuracy.

Other more specific comments relating to local and regional statistics included:

- “More regional analysis - particularly where national data for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are presented which are each smaller than many English regions”;
- “Improve and increase the amount of local data - the subnational focus on English regions is not helpful”;
- “Estimates of regional output from different data sources are inconsistent”.
- Develop more granular productivity estimates;
- “the recent work in regional nowcasting” is an excellent example “of applying sophisticated techniques for official statistics.”
- Improve statistics related to travel-to-work areas and commuting patterns.

Beyond GDP

There were much fewer comments on how ONS economic statistics met the demand for beyond GDP, compared to Covid and levelling up. Those who did comment on beyond GDP were mixed in their responses.

Generally, survey and interview respondents thought the ONS had done a lot of interesting work in this area, including by introducing a broader range of indicators on wellbeing and welfare. Some highlighted the measures on life satisfaction, happiness, anxiety and feeling that life is worthwhile. Some respondents said the work on intangibles was great, and others that the work on missing capitals was useful. Other respondents provided suggestions for how the ONS could progress work in this area.

Informing the net zero agenda

Similar to the section on beyond GDP, there were much fewer comments on net zero, compared to Covid and levelling up. Those who responded generally said much more needed to be done. Some interview respondents noted that the net zero agenda was new to most people, and there was a “need to have a consensus about how you measure net zero in a consistent way”, including among businesses. Some of the suggestions were:

- “present data on climate change in a more coherent manner”;
- refine SIC and SOC codes so they can reflect modern businesses, including around net zero and energy;

Sectoral statistics

A theme that was brought up by a large number of survey and interview respondents was the importance of providing more disaggregated statistics by sectors, for more datasets. For instance, one respondent commented that more detailed industry level data, such as 3 or 4-digit SIC codes, would make it possible to analyse industrial composition effects across the economy. The responses also included comments on improving the SIC codes, including producing estimates for specific industries that were not currently captured well. Examples among survey respondents were the creative industries and the charity sector.

Distributional analysis

A number of respondents also highlighted that it was becoming more important to provide more demographic breakdowns, to understand differential impacts across society better and to inform the inclusion agenda. As such, they suggested that the ONS provided more distributional information, such as on income and wealth, and more distribution analysis.

Historical data

There were a small number of comments on historical data and time series. These all called for improvements to historical series and the provision of more time series data.

Administrative data

A few respondents applauded the current efforts to use more administrative data, and also suggested that the ONS should make even more extensive use of, and provide better access to, administrative data, especially statistics from government bodies, such as HMRC.

Engagement with users

Generally, respondents praised ONS staff and statisticians for engaging well with users. They were described as “supremely helpful”, “friendly and professional”, “very responsive”, “deeply knowledgeable”, “good at taking on feedback”.

More specifically, a couple of respondents noted that the ONS had engaged well with government departments when developing new measures, especially during the pandemic. These argued the ONS had become more proactive in reaching out to them in recent years, especially in terms of regularly meeting and discussing what statistics users needed. In contrast, another respondent thought ONS needed to collaborate more with universities. There were some responses praising the ONS for responding “quickly” and “helpfully” to email queries. They thought it was particularly helpful that they were able to contact the statistician for specific releases. A couple of respondents said they often saw ONS statisticians at conferences and that it was great to see them engage with relevant academic debate on economic measurement, including through ESCoE.

Finally, a lot of respondents also applauded this study, arguing that it was great that the ONS engaged with their users in this way, and hoped that their responses would be helpful in providing feedback.

Changes in the last 4 years

Almost all interview participants said that ONS economic statistics had improved in the last 4.5 years, since July 2017 when we did the baseline survey. Some said there had been a lot of small, incremental improvements, and provided specific examples.

Many argued that the direction of travel was important, and agreed that the ONS was travelling in the right direction. Some respondents, who recognised that the ONS had responded to the needs of users during the pandemic by producing more publications, said it would be important to increase the resources of the ONS, so they could maintain this level of publications and releases, without becoming overstretched and potentially leading to delays or lower quality in other important outputs and innovations.

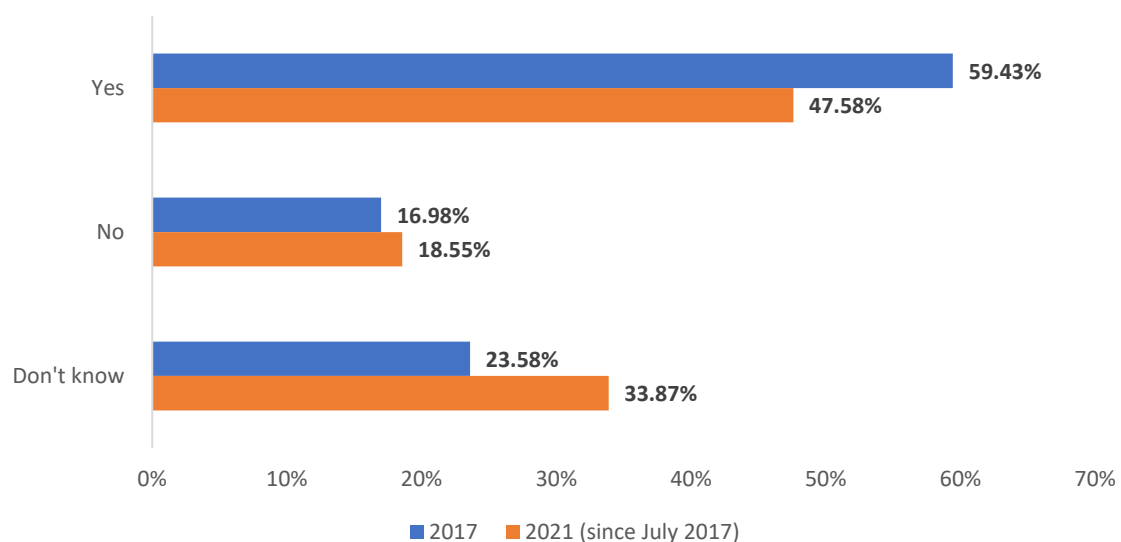
Section 4: The impact and value of ONS economic statistics

Survey findings

This stage of the survey aimed to go into details of the impact ONS economic statistics has on users' work, research and decision-making processes, along with the value given by users, expressed in how much they depend on these statistics, the benefits perceived from them and how important they are relative to alternative sources of data.

Participants were firstly consulted if they were aware that ONS economic statistics and services have helped inform any decisions or policies made by them or their organisations. That question was also asked in the 2017 baseline survey. Figure 10 compares the aggregate results from both waves. Even though almost 50% of respondents in 2021 claimed they were aware of that ONS role, the share is lower than in the 2017 wave, when nearly 60% answered yes to that question. Over a third of 2021 respondents admitted they were not able to answer to the question, compared to the 23.58% obtained in 2017. Figure 10 might indicate a decline in the level of awareness by respondents of the ONS role regarding policy decisions.

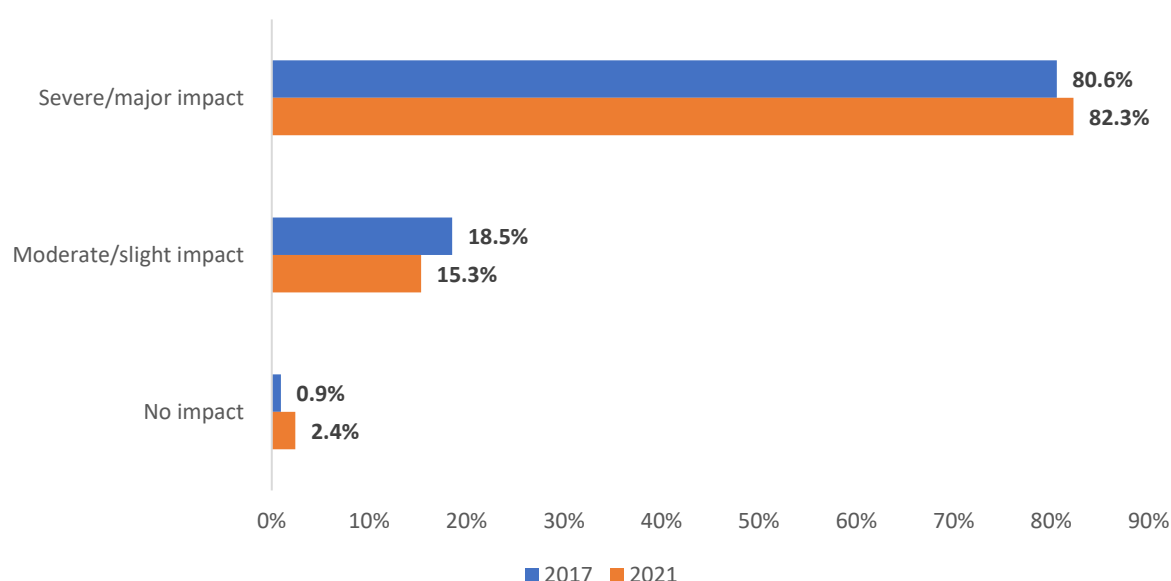
Figure 10. Are you aware that ONS economic statistics and services have helped inform any decisions or policies made by you (or by your organization)?



Findings from Figure 10 and users' testimonies give a hint on how much they value ONS economic statistics as a tool for policy or business decisions. We move one step forward by asking about the impact of a potential inability to use that data. Figure 11 presents the aggregate results from that question, which was also asked in the 2017 survey. Comparing both waves, the distribution of responses is very similar. 82.3% of respondents in 2021 consider that not being able to use ONS economic statistics would have a severe or major impact on their work, compared to 80.5% in 2017.⁹

⁹ For further information, see Figure A11 in Appendix 4.

Figure 11. What impact would it have on your work if you were not able to use ONS economic statistics?



Open-ended survey responses

This section also included a set of open-ended questions, to explore the value of ONS economic statistics.

- What do you think are the most important outcomes and benefits resulting from using ONS economic statistics? Please provide examples. (74 responses)
- Are you aware that ONS economic statistics and services have helped inform any decisions or policies made by you (or by your organization) over the last four years (since July 2017)? Can you please provide some brief examples? (36 responses)
- What makes ONS economic statistics valuable to you? (85 responses)
- Apart from ONS economic statistics, do you use any other economic statistics? What makes them valuable to you, compared to ONS economic statistics? (81 responses)

The open-ended responses by survey participants are analysed below by theme.

Polymaking and decision-making

A recurrent feature raised by respondents was the usefulness of ONS economic statistics to inform policymaking discussions and decisions.

Another common example was how ONS economic statistics had informed decisions during the pandemic. Covid statistics, including BICS data, had been used to understand the impact of the pandemic on the economy and in specific sectors and local areas. Survey respondents gave examples that it had helped: inform government Covid policy, including furlough and isolation payments; developing criteria for distributing Covid grants to local businesses; and regional responses to the pandemic such as the design of regional economic recovery strategies.

Several respondents also highlighted that ONS economic statistics helped them understand issues in the local economy.

In addition to policy-making, survey respondents also gave examples of how ONS economic statistics informed decision-making in other organisations, for instance commercial decisions, strategic

planning and pricing or remuneration decisions in private organisations, as well as decisions in different sectors.

Ultimately, respondents sometimes argued that better information should lead to better decisions, both among governments and businesses, which should result in better outcomes, including for the public and people's wellbeing.

Context and information

Another main theme among survey responses was that ONS economic statistics provided the background knowledge and context about the state of the UK economy. This meant that policymakers and organisations had an “accurate picture of the UK economy”, and understood shocks such as the pandemic and Brexit, but also longer-term trends. This provided context not only for policymakers and decision-makers in business, but also for the wider public. ONS economic statistics were highlighted by some survey respondents as “vital for public debate”.

Interview and focus group research

During the interviews and focus groups, research participants were also asked a number of more direct questions to explore the value of ONS economic statistics (see Appendix 2). We asked users about their outputs that used ONS economic statistics, how important ONS economic statistics were to those outputs, and about the impact of the outputs, including whether and how it affected decisions of different stakeholders. We also asked questions directly related to the monetary value of ONS economic statistics, including through a stated preference (Willingness to Pay) question, a revealed preference question, and broader questions about the monetary value of ONS economic statistics. The findings are presented thematically below.

The monetary value of ONS economic statistics

Similar to the baseline report, we explored a ‘stated preference’ approach, by asking a ‘Willingness to Pay’ question in the interviews and focus groups:

‘In a hypothetical market situation, how much do you think your organisation would be prepared to pay as a maximum annual subscription to have access to ONS economic statistics?’

Almost all participants said this was a very difficult question, and they rarely provided a number.

While many participants thought it was interesting and a worthwhile exercise to explore the value of official statistics, we also identified a lot of resistance, or reluctance, in answering even a hypothetical question about a potential subscription fee for a public good like ONS economic statistics. These views echoed those from the baseline study, where participants noted that paying for economic statistics was not as far-fetched as, say, paying for a reduction in pollution.

Respondents were often well aware of the methodology behind stated preference approaches, including how they were used in other fields. In most cases, this knowledge led them to be sceptical of any potential results coming out of this type of exercise in this particular field. At the same time, interview participants said they understood why there would be a drive to place a monetary value on economic statistics.

The interview participants who provided more specific answers to the question tended to say that it would be a high amount, because it was so “integral” to what they did.

Some participants, especially those in smaller organisations, said their organisation would not realistically be able to afford a subscription fee for any data sources which made it difficult to provide an answer. They emphasised that the value of ONS statistics to them far outweighed their ability to pay for these.

Finally, some participants spoke in broader terms about the monetary value of ONS economic statistics, including by explaining why ONS economic statistics are a public good.

Policy-making and decisions

Similar to the open-ended survey responses, the two main themes among interview participants were that outputs that were based on ONS economic statistics informed policymaking and other decisions as well as providing context and background knowledge for decision-makers and the public.

Some respondents said it would be difficult to point to the introduction of a particular policy and attribute it to their research using ONS economic statistics. They produced briefings, reports and analyses using ONS economic statistics, and often presented this to internal and external stakeholders. Sometimes this simply provided senior officials with background knowledge and context for decisions, and at other times the influence was more direct when raising knowledge of particular issues or by assessing or modelling specific policies or decisions.

At other times, interview participants gave more direct examples of policy impact, for instance when researchers contributed to the work of Commissions or worked directly with government departments or other bodies to inform policy or other decisions.

Reliability

Similar to the baseline study, interview participants found it helpful to think about the value of official economic statistics, by imagining what would happen in the absence of ONS economic statistics, either for their organisation or for society as a whole. Most of those we spoke with described themselves as reliant on ONS economic statistics. Interview participants described ONS economic statistics as the “bedrock” and “core” of their work, which was often “important” and “critical” to their organisation.

Generally, interview participants noted that, if ONS economic statistics were not available, their organisations would either make decisions based on “hunches”, or they would need to assemble the statistics they needed themselves. This would either be through internal data gathering or administrative data, or by paying for alternative, non-official sources of economic statistics. While it was said to be difficult to predict the exact difference in quality and cost-effectiveness in this counter-factual world with no official ONS economic statistics, there was broad agreement among interview participants that the data would indeed be less cost-effective and less reliable.

Some participants, especially those working in smaller organisations with smaller budgets such as third-sector organisations, charities or research institutes, also made the point it would simply not be possible for them to create or pay for non-official sources of economic statistics. Those participants sometimes said their organisation did not have any formal powers, but they thought they performed an important role by influencing policy, and the best and only way to do that was through data and evidence.

Trust

Similarly, as highlighted previously in the report, interview participants said the value of ONS economic statistics was partly based on the trust in the ONS as an organisation, and the confidence in the impartiality and the high quality of the statistics. Interview participants described the ONS in the same ways as survey respondents had done: as a “trusted source”, “independent and impartial”, and as a “recognised and responsible authority”.

Official sources are adding value to alternative data sources

When thinking about the prospect of having to rely on alternative non-official data sources, many interview participants made the point that those sources were only valuable because they could compare them with official ONS economic statistics, providing another example of the high value of ONS economic statistics. In this way, alternative commercial data sources were often described as “complementary to ONS economic statistics” rather than something that could meaningfully replace them. Overall, when consulted about alternative economic statistics sources, survey and interview respondents collectively provided examples of using a large variety of alternative data sources in addition to ONS economic statistics. Most often, these complemented ONS economic statistics, and at other times were used to fill in gaps. The purposes were:

- to make comparisons between the UK and other countries. These was achieved through using international data sources, such as data from other NSIs, Eurostat, OECD, IMF, World Bank, etc.
- to find data on a more user-friendly and accessible platform. These included Eurostat, OECD
- to provide more timely statistics. These included financial market data, RPIs, Google mobility data, and transactions data)
- to provide more disaggregated statistics and more granularity. Examples were FAME, EMSI; trade flow data from UN COMTRADE which was also available faster than ONS trade statistics; BEIS statistics that provided better sector breakdowns; private sector analysis of vacancies that had better regional breakdowns; and private sector analyses of Companies House registrations which had more company-specific information.
- to provide better API access, for instance through Bloomberg.
- to complement ONS data or fill in gaps. Examples were data from government departments, such as the DfE skills survey, BEIS small business survey, HMRC data on furlough, as well as private sector and business surveys that provided more breath or depth to a topic.
- to provide better representation of sectors, for instance using statistics prepared by industry trade bodies where ONS SIC codes did not represent industries well (e.g. music industry) or for smaller industries where official statistics samples were small (e.g. fishing and agriculture).

Other data sources that were used included: FRED, economic forecasts by commercial organisations, Costar, Working Futures, Burning Glass, CFS database, Google mobility data, and PMIs.

Breadth and depth

Similar to the open-ended survey responses, ONS economic statistics were frequently described as more “comprehensive” than any other data sources. Participants said commercial statistics were often only valuable for a certain time period or for a specific project, while the value of ONS economic statistics was partly based on the “sheer breadth and depth of what is available”.

Conclusion

The survey and qualitative research conducted as part of this study found that ONS economic statistics are regarded as essential by regular and expert users of economic statistics, similar to the baseline study. The report findings show that the value of official economic statistics is very high to users, most likely far exceeding the cost of providing the statistics. For many users that we spoke to, ONS economic statistics were invaluable to their work and instrumental in informing policy decisions. The statistics also provided value to commercial data sources that respondents used, as they provided a reliable and trusted benchmark.

Furthermore, according to our research with users, their satisfaction with ONS economic statistics has improved in the last four years. In particular, ONS' response to the pandemic was highlighted, including the improvement in timely data due to the focus on faster indicators and administrative data. However, like the baseline, users said that accessibility of ONS economic statistics could be improved, especially when it comes to the navigation of the website and search function.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Survey design

Based on recommendations in UNECE Taskforce report. This included suggestions for survey questions for organisations to test. <https://www.unece.org/statistics/statstos/task-force-on-the-value-of-official-statistics.html>

Economic Statistics User Survey by ESCoE

Welcome to the Economic Statistics User Survey, conducted as part of the research programme of the Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence (ESCoE) and funded by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

This survey will explore your experiences of using and accessing ONS economic statistics. The findings will help **inform ONS plans to improve economic statistics**.

Please be assured that your responses will only be used for research purposes and any personal information will be treated in confidence. The privacy notice can be found [here](#).

Please answer in **your own capacity as a professional or personal user** rather than on behalf of your whole organisation.

We appreciate you taking the time to participate in this survey. There are 19 questions (plus a few questions about you). It should take about **5-10 minutes to complete overall**. The survey works best on a PC.

We would be grateful if you could complete the survey by 3 January 2021. If you have any difficulties with completing the survey or have any questions about the project, please contact x.

Q1. As a user, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the following areas of ONS economic statistics? (very satisfied; satisfied; neither satisfied nor dissatisfied; dissatisfied, very dissatisfied; don't use).

- Industry and business statistics
- International trade and balance of payments
- Public sector finance
- Productivity
- Inflation and price indices
- GDP and national accounts
- Regional and local economic statistics
- Employment, wages and labour market
- Faster economic indicators in response to Covid, e.g. Business Impact of Covid Survey

Q2. How frequently do you usually use ONS economic statistics?

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Quarterly
- Annually
- Less often

- Never

Q3. For which purposes do you use ONS economic statistics, and how important are they for those purposes?

(essential; important; background information; of minor importance; do not use for this purpose)

- Work in general
- Business or market analysis
- Education
- Legislative work
- Media use
- Modelling or forecasting
- Negotiations
- Personal interest
- Policy formulation/monitoring/evaluation
- Regional analysis
- Reports or publications
- Research
- Reuse in other products
- Service planning
- Understanding Covid-related issues

Q4. Thinking about the ONS economic statistics you use, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the extent to which they...?

(very satisfied; satisfied; neither satisfied nor dissatisfied; dissatisfied, very dissatisfied).

- Are trustworthy
- Are free from political interference
- Meet your needs
- Are accurate
- Are detailed enough
- Are clearly documented
- Are easily understood
- Are clearly presented
- Are easy to find
- Are timely
- Are frequent enough

Q5. Thinking about ONS economic statistics, to what extent do you agree or disagree that the ONS?

(strongly agree; agree; neither agree nor disagree; disagree; strongly disagree)

- Protects confidentiality of individual data
- Collects and disseminates useful statistics
- Explains data sources and methods clearly
- Provides a guidance on re-releases of corrected data
- Supports the interpretation and use of statistics
- Effectively informs public debate
- Provides a quality customer service
- Is active in developing new services
- Is actively present in social media

Q6. Are you aware that ONS economic statistics and services have helped inform any decisions or policies made by you (or by your organization) over the last four years (since July 2017)?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know/NA

[If yes]: can you please provide some brief examples?

Q7. What impact would it have on your work if you were not able to use ONS economic statistics?

- Severe impact
- Major impact
- Moderate impact
- Slight impact
- No impact

Q8. What do you think the ONS is doing well regarding economic statistics?

Q9. What do you think the ONS could do better regarding economic statistics?

Q10. What should the ONS do, regarding economic statistics, to inform your work that it does not currently do?

Q11. What do you think are the most important outcomes and benefits resulting from using ONS economic statistics? Please provide examples.

Q12. What makes ONS economic statistics valuable to you?

Q13. Apart from ONS economic statistics, do you use any other economic statistics? What makes them valuable to you, compared to ONS economic statistics?

Q14. To what extent do you think ONS economic statistics meet new sources of demand, such as the levelling up agenda, net zero, beyond GDP and Covid-19?

Q15. To what extent do you think ONS economic statistics have become better or worse during the last 4 years (since July 2017) on the following indicators?

(a lot better; a little better; about the same; a little worse; a lot worse; not sure/don't know)

- Are trustworthy
- Are free from political interference
- Meet your needs
- Are accurate
- Are detailed enough
- Are clearly documented
- Are easily understood
- Are clearly presented
- Are easy to find
- Are timely
- Are frequent enough

Q16. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being low and 10 being high, how would you rate your demand for faster economic indicators before the pandemic, during the pandemic, and what would you anticipate your demand being after the pandemic?

- Demand before the pandemic
- Demand during the pandemic

- (Anticipated) demand following the pandemic

Q17. What best describes your opinion on the usefulness of faster economic indicators and more conventional economic data supplied by ONS? Choose one of the following:

- The two are mutually beneficial
- Faster economic indicators are more useful
- Conventional economic data are more useful

Q18. What best describes your opinion on the provision of faster economic indicators and more conventional economic data supplied by ONS? Choose one of the following:

- ONS should give equal focus to both faster economic indicators and conventional economic data
- ONS should give more focus to faster economic indicators
- ONS should give more focus to conventional economic data

Q19. Please provide general or specific comments about what you think has become better or worse about ONS economic statistics during the last 4 years (since July 2017).

Q20. Age group

- Under 25 years old
- 25-34 years old
- 35-44 years old
- 45-54 years old
- 55-64 years old
- 65 years or older

Q21. Gender

- Female
- Male
- Other
- Prefer not to say

Q22. Sector / industry

- Academia or research
- Local or regional government
- Central government department
- Public organisation
- Journalist/ media
- Voluntary and charity
- Political party or organisation
- Private business
- Private user
- Trade association
- Other

Q23. Job title or role

- Intern / Entry level
- Analyst / Associate
- Manager

- Director / CEO / Owner
- Academic
- Other

Q24. In which country do you work?

- United Kingdom
- Another country

Q25. Highest level of education

- Doctoral degree
- Master's degree
- Degree
- Higher qualification below degree level
- A-level
- GCSE
- Other

Q26. Please provide your name and organisation, so we can compare responses with those from 4 years ago. (this information will be deleted as soon as we have matched responses)

Q27. ESCoE are organising a series of online discussions this autumn to discuss the use of economic statistics in more detail. We are very interested in your views. Please indicate whether you would like to take part in a virtual discussion and if you are willing to potentially be recontacted to take part in a further follow-up survey within the next five years.

- I agree to be contacted to take part in a virtual roundtable
- I agree to be contacted for a follow-up survey

Q28. Finally, what, if anything else, would you like to say about ONS' economic statistics?

Appendix 2: Discussion guide for interviews and focus groups

Thanks a lot for agreeing to take part in this interview. We are undertaking interviews and focus group research with a variety of stakeholders, from regular to less regular users. The purpose of the interviews is to explore the experiences of different users of ONS economic statistics, whether and how it is valuable to users and to society, and help inform ONS' plans to improve economic statistics, and findings will be published. The research is undertaken as part of the research programme of the Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence (ESCoE), and funded by the ONS. Our discussion will last up to 45 minutes. All participating individuals and organisations will be anonymised in the final report. Your individual responses will not be shared with the ONS or any other organisation. In the final report, we may use quotations attributable to a description of organisation type. Any and all information gathered will be for the identified research purpose only. Seek permission to audio record and outline data protection information. Recordings and transcripts will not be passed onto any third party. Data will be stored safely and securely, separately from identifying information.

Section 1: About them and their use of ONS economic statistics

1. Job title / role and affiliated organisations
2. Main responsibilities
3. What makes ONS economic statistics valuable to you?
4. What economic statistics and outputs do you use from the ONS? *(prompt for main uses; other uses and purposes)*
5. Apart from the ones already mentioned, are there any other ONS economic statistics that you use, and for what? *(use list of economic statistics as a prompt)*
 - *Industry and business statistics*
 - *International trade and balance of payments*
 - *Public sector finance*
 - *Productivity*
 - *Inflation and price indices*
 - *GDP and national accounts*
 - *Regional and local economic statistics*
 - *Employment, wages and labour market*
 - *Faster economic indicators in response to Covid, e.g. Business Impact of Covid Survey*
6. Do you use ONS economic statistics to meet any particular requirements and demands? *(prompt such as analysing or informing the levelling up agenda, net zero, beyond GDP or Covid-19? (prompt for how).*
7. Apart from ONS economic statistics, do you use any other economic statistics? *(prompt for why they use these, do they pay for other statistics, and how they compare to ONS statistics)*

Section 2: Accessing ONS economic statistics

8. How do you usually access ONS economic statistics? *(prompt whether they access directly through ONS website, bulletins, direct download, bespoke etc., or indirectly through analysis by colleagues, media, researchers, think tanks etc.).*
9. Are you alerted to the publication of ONS economic statistics? How? *(prompt for how it could be improved)*
10. How easy/hard do you find it to access the statistics? Why? *(prompt for how it could be improved)*

Section 3: The statistics: scope, quality and usability

11. How well do ONS economic statistics meet your needs? *(prompt: how could they be improved to meet your needs better?)*
12. How would you describe the quality of ONS economic statistics?

- *Prompt for their views on accuracy, level of detail, how documented, is it easily understood, is it presented clearly enough, is it timely enough for needs, frequency, do they trust the statistics, political independence, are there gaps.*
13. What do you think the ONS does well regarding economic statistics?
14. What do you think the ONS could do better regarding economic statistics?

Section 4: Outputs and decision-making

15. How important would you say ONS economic statistics is to your work? Why?
16. What are the main outputs and decisions that result from your use of ONS economic statistics? *(prompt them to talk through specific examples, if possible)*
17. Who are the end users of these outputs? Does anyone make decisions based on your use of ONS economic statistics? How? *(prompt for themselves, ministers, politicians, policymakers, academics, journalists, think tanks, third sector, public).*
18. To what extent are ONS economic statistics valuable to these outputs/decisions and to your work in general?
- Would it be possible without ONS economic statistics?
 - If you didn't have access to ONS economic statistics, what would those outputs/decisions look like? Would they be worse/better/same as a result?
 - What alternative data sources would you use?
 - How do you think that would affect your organisation or the end user, in terms of outputs, decisions and outcomes?
19. What do you personally think is the value of ONS economic statistics? To what extent do you think it brings value to the UK as a country and society? Why/how?

Section 6: Monetary value of ONS economic statistics

20. Let's discuss how we could potentially place a monetary value on ONS economic statistics. This is purely a hypothetical exercise. ONS economic statistics are a public good, free at the point of delivery, and there are no plans at all to make this commercial, but there is a drive (especially driven by a UN Taskforce on official statistics) to understand how important or valuable official statistics are to users and to society, especially in the context of an increase in alternative data sources and funding constraints among governments. So I would like to put forward some purely hypothetical questions: So, in a hypothetical market situation, how much do you think your organisation would be prepared to pay as a maximum annual subscription to have access to ONS economic statistics? (for them as employee, for organisation)
21. Does your organisation have any subscriptions to other data sources? Do you know how much you pay for those, and how does their importance compare to ONS economic statistics for your work? *(prompt for which ones they would be most ready to give up)*
22. How much do you think your organisation would consider to be an acceptable minimum compensation in return for you, as an employee, to give up access to ONS economic statistics? *(if they can't answer with a number, emphasise that's fine, but encourage them to talk about what factors they would consider)*
23. Do you have any other comments on the endeavour to place a monetary value on ONS economic statistics? Do you have any other ideas how to do it?

Section 7: Last 4 years & Future Development

24. To what extent do you think ONS economic statistics have become better or worse during the last 4 years, since July 2017? Why? How? How do you think ONS economic statistics could be improved in the future? (In terms of quality, scope, and usability?; to influence decisions and public debate?; In terms of outputs and dissemination?)

Appendix 3: Demographics of 2021 survey sample, compared to 2017 baseline sample

Figure A1. Age group

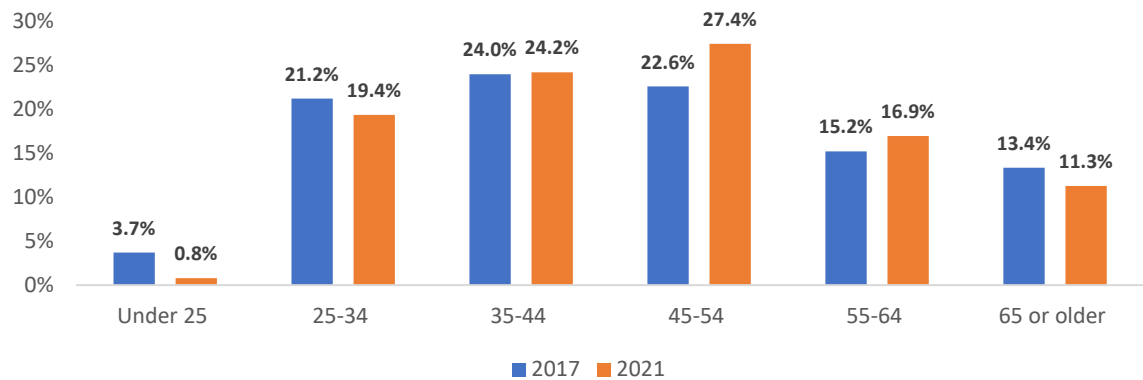


Figure A2. Gender

Note: "Other" and "Prefer not to say" were not answer options in 2017

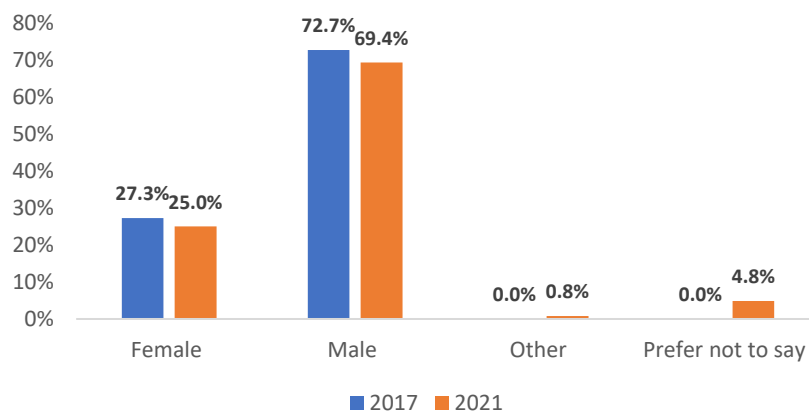


Figure A3. Sector/industry

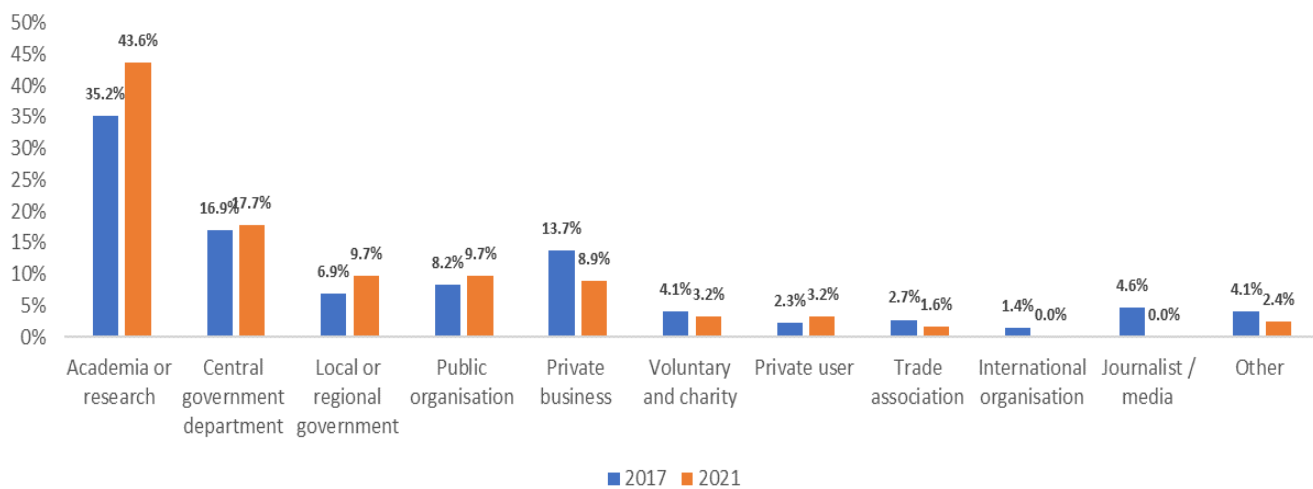


Figure A4. Job title or role

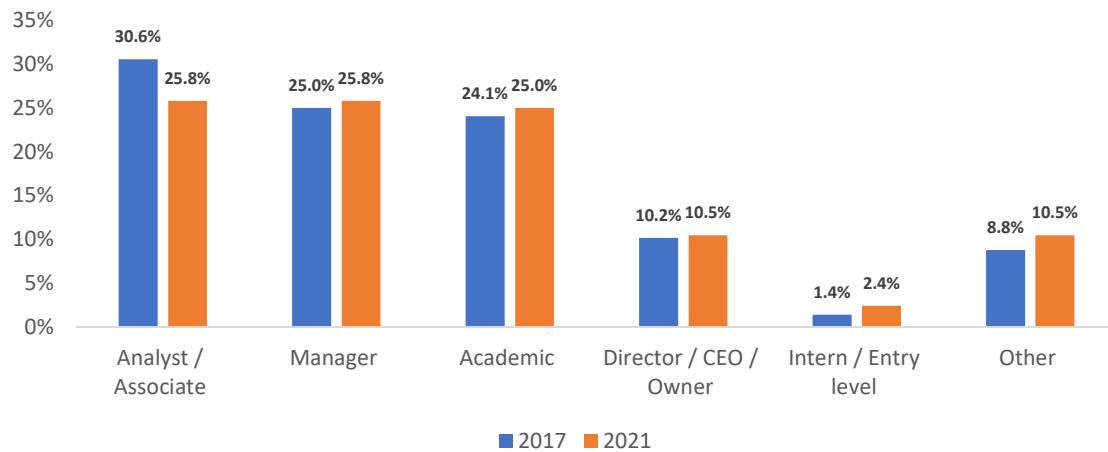


Figure A5. Highest level of education

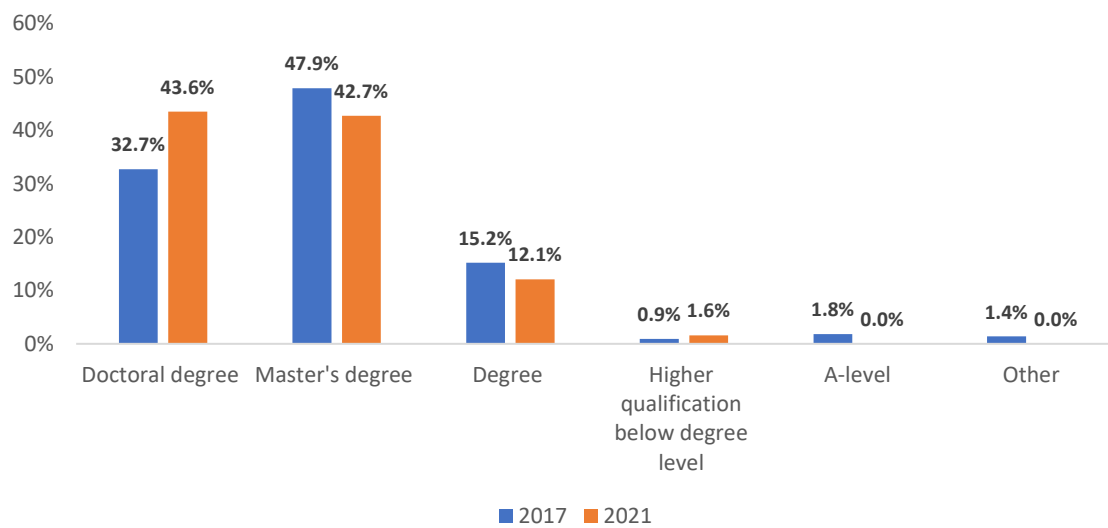


Figure A6. Purposes for using ONS economic statistics and importance



Figure A7. Satisfaction with specific areas of economic statistics

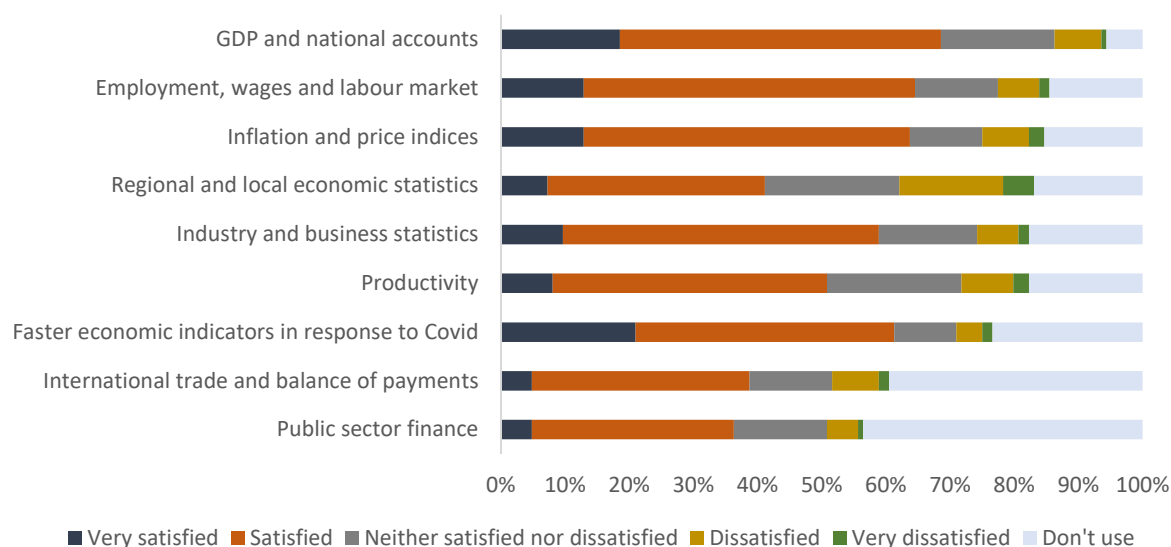


Figure A8. Satisfaction with some aspects of ONS economic statistics

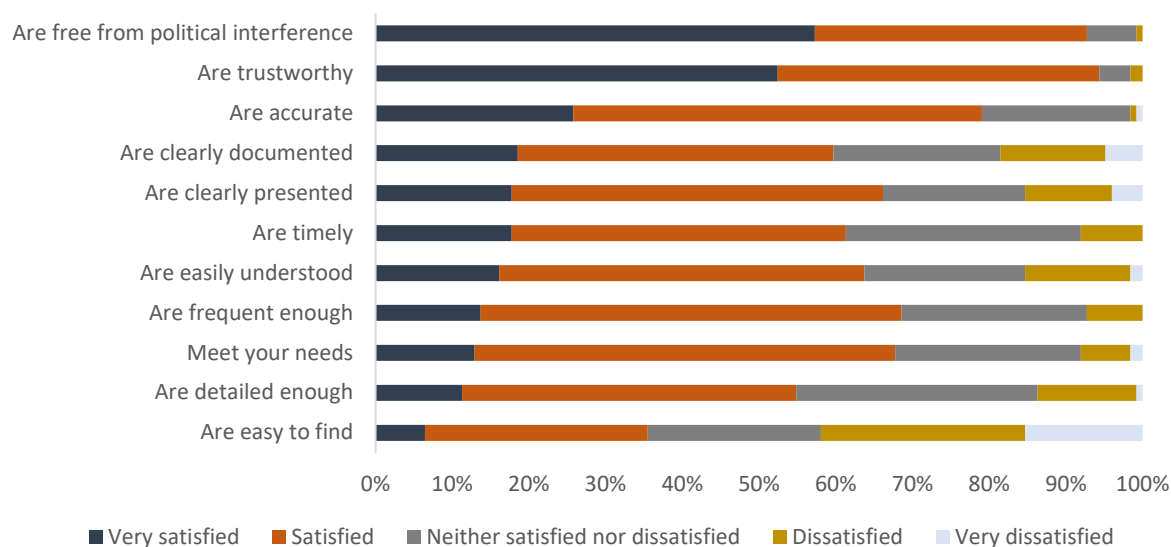


Figure A9. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the ONS...

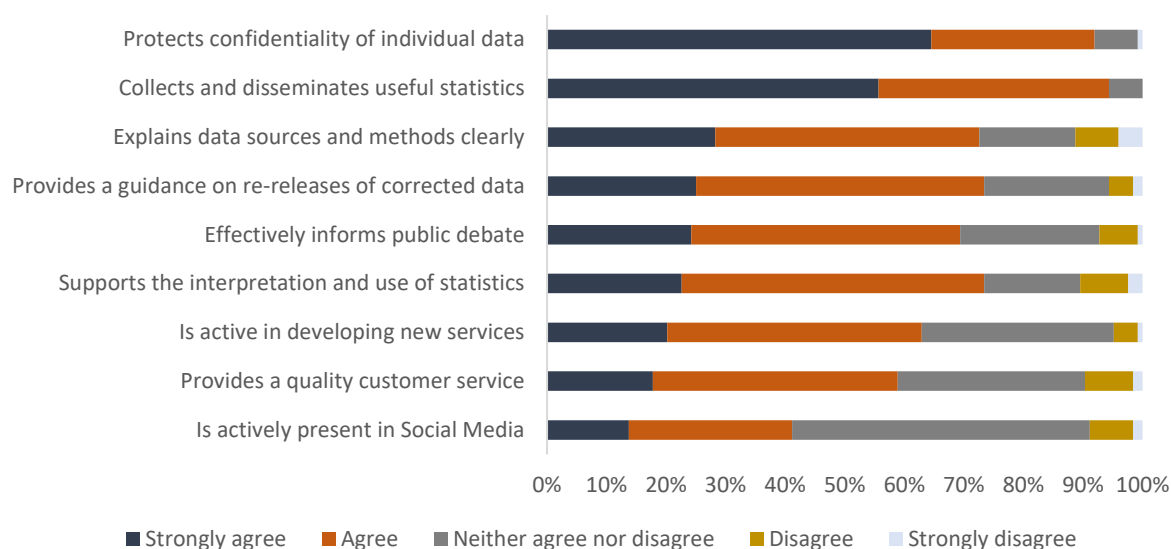


Figure A10. To what extent do you think ONS economic statistics have become better or worse during the last 4 years (since July 2017) on the following indicators?

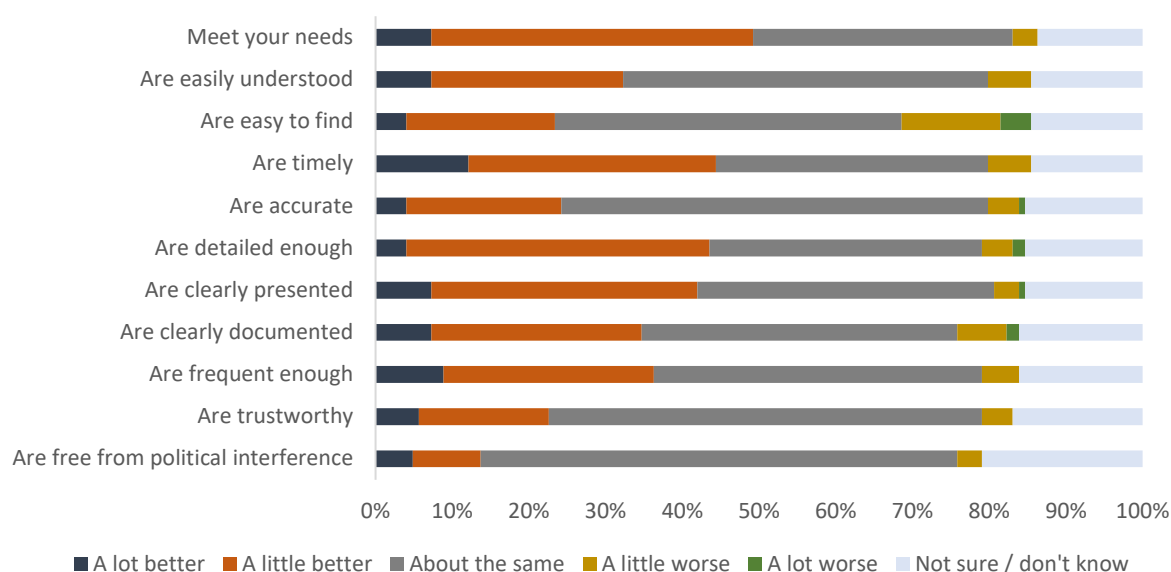


Figure A11. What impact would it have on your work if you were not able to use ONS economic statistics?

