

RSS-OSR Report from Roundtable on User Engagement and the Code of Practice

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1 Background

The Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) and the Royal Statistical Society (RSS) convened this roundtable to explore what effective user engagement looks like in practice across the UK statistical system. The session brought together regulators, producers, users of statistics, and external engagement specialists, reflecting a shared recognition that meaningful user engagement is essential not only for the quality and relevance of official statistics but also for public confidence and trust in how statistics are produced and used.

The refreshed Code of Practice for Statistics places stronger emphasis on engaging widely with users, understanding how statistics are used in practice, and ensuring that producers can demonstrate how user perspectives shape decisions. The Code is, rightly, not prescriptive about what this user engagement should involve – the goal of this session was to facilitate a constructive conversation that drew on best practice in user engagement that could form the basis of guidance for statistics producers on what good user engagement looks like.

The objectives of the discussion were to:

- Identify what good user engagement looks like in practice, drawing on insights from within and beyond the statistical system.



- Explore the key challenges that make engagement difficult for both users and producers.
- Reflect on how the principles of the Code of Practice can be applied more consistently and effectively.

We asked four external contributors to share examples of effective engagement approaches from adjacent fields, including participatory data governance, lived experience engagement, collaborative communication design, and strategies for countering misinformation.

2 Key recommendations

There are three key areas that were identified in the course of discussion.

1. The importance of a genuinely relational and participatory model of user engagement

The system should move beyond transactional consultations to create **ongoing, trust-based relationships** with users and communities affected by statistics. This includes:

- Adopting participatory approaches that give users and affected groups meaningful influence over analysis, interpretation and communication.
- Embedding lived experience early in the design process to ensure outputs reflect real-world context.
- Using trusted intermediaries to reach communities producers cannot access directly and to support engagement in contested or sensitive areas.

2. Strengthening transparency, communication and the “feedback loop” can build trust

Users consistently reported uncertainty about whether their input is heard or acted upon. This could be addressed by:

- Communicating clearly how user insight has influenced decisions, including being explicit about what has *not* been adopted and why – this might mean a prioritised “waiting list” for unmet need.
- Using strategic communication methods (clearer framing, accessible formats and pre-emptive communication/pre-bunking) to reduce misinterpretation and counter misinformation.
- Improving clarity around who users should speak to, simplifying routes into engagement and avoiding “ping-pong” referrals.



3. Consistent, system-wide engagement standards under the Code of Practice can improve the system

To support more effective, user-centred statistical production, the statistical system should develop clearer, more consistent expectations for engagement aligned with the Code. This includes:

- Establishing shared principles and minimum standards for engagement that producers can interpret proportionately within their own contexts.
- Encouraging producers to adopt structured approaches to understanding user needs, documenting engagement activities, and demonstrating how user insight informs decisions.
- Supporting more coherent and predictable engagement pathways, so users experience greater consistency across producers and avoid fragmented or duplicative interactions.
- Ensuring the Code’s emphasis on user engagement is reflected not only in guidance but in practice: including planning, design, communication, and continuous improvement.

3 Overview of suggestions and discussion points

3.1 Examples of Good Practice

Participatory Data Governance and Building an Ecosystem of Trust (Jeni Tennison, Connected by Data)

Jeni drew on her work in data governance and public involvement to illustrate how engagement can be broadened beyond traditional “users” to include anyone affected by the production or use of statistics. Her experience working with grassroots groups and with OSR on public involvement highlights a growing recognition that people who are the subjects of data, or who experience consequences from how data is used, should have a meaningful say in its governance.

She described a shift away from traditional, one-directional approaches such as consultations and surveys, which can feel extractive and increasingly vulnerable to superficial or automated responses, towards more reciprocal, participatory models. These approaches foreground relationship-building, shared purpose and trust. Jeni emphasised the idea of an “ecosystem of trust”: trustworthiness is not enough unless people actually *feel* trust. This often requires intermediaries who are already embedded within communities and able to mediate conversations in ways that official bodies cannot.



Key points to draw from this discussion include:

- The people affected by statistics should be treated as legitimate participants, not only end-users of outputs.
- Engagement should be relational, ongoing and participatory rather than limited to one-off consultations.
- Intermediaries are essential for building trust and reaching communities not already engaged.
- Trustworthiness must translate into lived trust; engagement processes need to demonstrate this.

Embedding Lived Experience to Avoid Harm and Improve Interpretation (Shayda Kashef, ADR UK)

Shayda presented a case study from her work embedding lived experience into analytical projects. She described engagement with 68 people to understand how they interpreted “public good” in the context of statistical research, and how these conversations highlighted concerns about harm, misinterpretation and miscommunication – especially among groups most affected by the statistics being produced.

She offered a detailed example involving linked administrative data on ethnicity. Because ethnicity is inconsistently recorded across public-sector systems, researchers planned a study showing discrepancies in ethnicity classification and how these might relate to justice or education outcomes. When the research team engaged directly with a focus group drawn from the communities concerned, participants warned that—even with caveats—the findings could reinforce harmful narratives about their communities. This feedback prompted the researchers to change direction: the final report focused solely on data discrepancies rather than drawing conclusions about outcomes it was not designed to measure.

This case demonstrated how lived-experience engagement can prevent unintentional harm, improve the fairness and accuracy of outputs, and support more responsible communication. Key lessons to learn from this case study include:

- Lived experience is vital to understanding how statistics may be interpreted or misused.

- Engagement can prevent harm by identifying risks before publication.
- Users most affected by statistics can raise issues analysts have not considered.
- Transparent communication and willingness to adapt research strengthens credibility.

Co-Designing Statistical Communication with the Public (Emily Jesper-Mir, Wellcome Trust)

Emily shared work from the Engagement Lab and Sense About Science, illustrating how co-design with public participants can transform how statistics are communicated. She described a project involving the communication of risk adjustments in annual audits of children’s heart surgery units. Historically, these outputs were published as PDFs using technical modelling, and a hospital had once been closed because its results appeared to fall outside an expected range.

To reduce the risk of misunderstanding and to support informed decision-making by parents, clinicians and policymakers, the team brought parents into the design process. Working alongside statisticians and a web designer, they developed new animations and charts in real time, exposing drafts to scrutiny by those directly affected. This collaborative approach led to clearer, context-sensitive communication, including reframing mortality statistics in terms of survival—still accurate, but more intuitive and less alarming for families.

The new visualisations were later adopted by the audit body as standard practice and shared annually, including through platforms like Mumsnet, increasing reach, accessibility and public agency in understanding the data. Key lessons from this example include:

- Co-design with affected users improves clarity, relevance and accessibility of statistical communication.
- Early engagement prevents misinterpretation and reduces unnecessary alarm.
- Changing framing (eg, mortality → survival) can retain accuracy while improving comprehension.
- Embedding public insight into design can lead to system-wide adoption of improved practices.

Navigating Misinformation and Using Pre-Bunking to Support Understanding (Rachel Coldicutt, Careful Industries)



Rachel drew on foresight and strategic communication work to highlight the challenges posed by AI-generated content, misinformation and an increasingly fragmented information environment. She emphasised that people often believe they have the tools and knowledge to evaluate information, yet may be operating from fundamentally incorrect assumptions. This is especially true in the online environment, where there is no single canonical source and people are receiving filtered news tailored to their perspective.

She argued that traditional fact-checking is too slow: by the time corrections appear, misinformation has likely already taken hold. Instead, producers need to identify “transformational facts”. These are the key pieces of information that, if understood early, help build public understanding – it is important to identify these early on and communicate them proactively through pre-bunking techniques. This requires understanding who the most influential audiences are, how they communicate, and what information is likely to reach them effectively.

She positioned this approach as a natural extension of the participatory, relational trust-building highlighted earlier: engagement is no longer enough on its own. In an environment where attention is dispersed and information channels are personalised, producers must think strategically about communication, clarity and amplification. The key points from this discussion include:

- Misinformation requires proactive, not reactive, communication strategies.
- Pre-bunking can prevent misunderstandings before they take root.
- Engagement must be paired with strategic communication in a fragmented information landscape.
- Identify “transformational facts” and communicate them clearly to priority audiences.

3.2 Overview of Discussion Points

The group drew on the presentation of these examples in discussion of five questions:

1. What are the main challenges in engaging with stats producers from a user perspective?
2. What would be helpful from a producer perspective?
3. What does good user engagement look like from a user-perspective?

4. When do users want to engage with the statistical system as a whole? When with individual producers?
5. What needs to happen to put this into practice?

The following themes emerged in the discussion.

Challenges in current engagement practice

Participants identified a series of challenges in user engagement compared with previous years. Issues raised included:

- Diminishing participation in some established volunteer-led user networks.
- Resource constraints for volunteer-led user groups.
- Lack of administrative support to maintain engagement structures.
- Difficulty attracting a diverse range of users beyond familiar voices.

Finding and reaching all users

A challenge from the perspective of producers was around the identification of users. There are engaged users for which there are existing mechanisms for engagement – but it would also be helpful to find users who are:

- Not formally part of existing networks.
- Affected by statistics but unaware of opportunities to engage.
- Engaged in sector-specific discussions (eg, child poverty, health inequalities) rather than on statistical platforms.

Participants stressed the need to go to where users already are, rather than expecting them to come to producers.

Engaging constructively

Several contributors noted that constructive engagement can be challenging. Especially in a context where:

- Engagement is becoming more divisive, mirroring wider society – in contested spaces this can be challenging.
- There is an increased prevalence of misinformation and AI-generated content.
- Some users can be angry about developments – making constructive dialogue difficult and raising issues about producers involving more junior staff in user engagement.

This was identified as another area where there might be a role for trusted intermediaries (whether learned societies or organisations like Connected by Data) to help producers and users navigate these conversations constructively.

Timing and focus of engagement

Discussion recognised the importance of:

- Engaging users at the point they are actively using data – not just when producers initiate consultations.
- Differentiating system-wide engagement needs (eg, methods, classifications, major data reforms) from producer-specific engagement.
- Understanding scope of users' interests: some users are only interested in system-wide issues when they relate directly to cross-UK or cross-departmental coherence.

Transparency, feedback loops, and rebuilding trust

Users frequently experience:

- Uncertainty about how their feedback is used.
- Difficulty identifying who to speak to within organisations.
- Limited visibility of the impact of their input.

Participants emphasised the need to close the loop consistently and transparently, including explaining why certain suggestions may not be adopted.

ONS representatives acknowledged a trust deficit and described ongoing efforts to rebuild trust through openness, humility, and improved dialogue.

The role of intermediaries and inclusive approaches

There was wide recognition that there may be a role for trusted intermediaries – this might mean community groups, membership bodies, specialist organisations. This was repeatedly raised and seen as helpful in:

- Reaching under-represented voices and sectors.
- Translating technical content into accessible formats.
- Navigating difficult topics to enable constructive conversations in contested areas.

Participants suggested building a network of trusted intermediaries for the statistical system to be called on when appropriate.

Supporting producers: capability and confidence

Producers highlighted:

- The difficulty of managing polarised engagement environments.
- The need for training in user engagement methods, confidence-building, and peer support.
- Productivity improvements to enable more focus on substantive engagement.

There may be space here for a best-practice library to share approaches, case studies, and tools across the system.

System-level vision

Contributors emphasised:

- The importance of understanding and communicating the societal value of statistics to engage the public and newer users.
- The opportunity for the ONS to demonstrate its impact (eg, census value, improved decision-making).
- The need for a coherent system-wide engagement strategy that aligns with the refreshed Code of Practice, delivers accessible and effective processes and practices and makes best use of existing infrastructure (especially the ONS website and StatsUserNetwork).

It was seen as important to have a system-level view to ensure consistency of engagement across the statistical areas.

4 RSS reflection on the discussion

The RSS has recently set out our perspective on user engagement in [UK Official Statistics – A New Partnership Between Producers and Users](#) – and it was encouraging to hear that many of the themes that we highlighted there aligned with the perspectives of the wider group. In this paper, and in our wider public statistics campaign, we emphasise the importance of statistics producers moving away from a system of episodic engagement towards a more structured and sustained partnership across the system.

A central theme of the roundtable (the need for relational, ongoing, participatory engagement) aligns closely with the principles set out in the refreshed Code of Practice for Statistics, which places greater emphasis on understanding and responding to user needs throughout the production process. This aligns with our call for user engagement to be mainstreamed within every producer team: knowing who key users are, how statistics are used in practice, and where unmet needs sit is essential if official statistics are to serve the public good.

A recurring theme in the discussion was the importance of trusted intermediaries. This is something that has also come through strongly in our work on [poverty data gaps with the Centre for Public Data and Joseph Rowntree Foundation Insight Infrastructure team](#). This project identified persistent challenges with discoverability, navigation and access for civil society organisations, and both producers and users have highlighted the potential value of a “middle layer” – which could help users find the right data, interpret documentation, and enable constructive solution-focused dialogue

between users and producers. There is potentially a role for membership societies to play here in enabling these conversations and synthesising the views of the community – we are (obviously) interested in how the RSS might usefully fill this role, but other membership societies may have roles to play in the areas of statistics relevant to their members. The RSS and other membership organisations are well-placed to convene users and producers and maintain ongoing relationships between user and producer communities.

The roundtable also underscored the persistent difficulties users face in understanding what is being produced and how it might change, what will be produced, and what will not. The RSS has consistently argued that a prioritised “waiting list” of user need would be beneficial – it would enable users to both see that their need had been captured and to give a sense of how it was being treated. This transparency should enable more productive conversations between users and producers. This came through in the roundtable discussion as participants pointed to a need for greater transparency and a clearer feedback loop. This type of comment also came through at the UK Statistics Assembly, where users spoke of uncertainty about whether their input influenced decisions and a desire for a more open account of prioritisation.

Finally, we discussed how users engage not just with individual producers but with the statistical system as a whole. Our view is that a clear, navigable engagement infrastructure is essential for users beyond government policy-makers: especially those in civil society, local government, and business, who often face the highest barriers.

The RSS has identified four priorities as particularly important to take forward across the system:

1. **Develop a shared view about the breadth of contribution and value that official statistics offers.** We would like to see the UKSA work at pace towards working with users to develop a shared, detailed and dynamic understanding of the ways in which official statistics are used and of their value to society (governments, businesses, citizens). Agreeing this shared story is important for supporting producers to better evolve products and services and to emphasise the importance of official statistics in a democratic society.
2. **Establish a clear and accessible engagement infrastructure.** The roundtable highlighted widespread confusion about where users should go, which groups have what remit, and how engagement routes fit together. Existing structures (including NSEUAC and the GSS theme-based groups) provide a foundation, but clearer signposting and a coherent “map” of

user-engagement pathways would make the system far easier to navigate. Predictable, visible structures help build trust and ensure that a wider and more diverse set of users can participate. It is important that this infrastructure is developed with users and clearly communicated to them.

3. **Increase transparency about statistical plans and unmet needs.** Participants repeatedly emphasised the need for clarity about what the system is producing and where gaps remain. A published programme of official statistics, accompanied by a regularly updated (prioritised) list of user-requested developments not yet taken forward, would fill this gap and help close the feedback loop that both the roundtable and the Assembly highlighted as central to maintaining trust.
4. **Support participatory engagement through trusted intermediaries.** Many users (eg, smaller organisations, charities and community groups) do not have the time, expertise or confidence to navigate complex data landscapes or to sustain repeated bilateral conversations with producers. The roundtable’s emphasis on the role of intermediaries, combined with our findings from the poverty data gaps project, suggests that the system should engage with and support a “middle layer” that can convene, translate and mediate when appropriate. Membership organisations such as the RSS are well-placed to support this function, given their ability to maintain long-term relationships, synthesise member perspectives, and host productive dialogue between users and producers.

Addressing these priorities would provide a foundation to enable engagement to become more consistent, more transparent, and more relational. The opportunity created by the refreshed Code provides a timely opportunity to drive these changes.

5 OSR reflections

We agree with the RSS’s reflections. They are consistent with the vision of the Code of Practice for Statistics, which places users at the heart of statistical production.

We would place emphasis in particular on one theme from the Round Table. The four speakers outlined in section 3 all set out the importance of engaging with publics. This offers a broader conception of users than the expert and knowledgeable users that inevitably occupy the attention of statistics producers.

We would draw out two insights from these contributions:



- Engaging with the broadest possible range of audiences is an important and often-neglected part of the overall engagement approach taken by statistics producers
- This form of engagement is best conducted in a spirit of openness and humility. These qualities should also inform the way producers engage with all their users, including experts and organisations with a close interest in the subject matter. There is a risk that producers engage with these known groups in a style that involves broadcasting the producer’s messages. Openness and humility offer a better approach to engagement to all users.

6 Appendix – roundtable attendee list

Name	Organisation
Ed Humpherson	Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR)
Rob Kent-Smith	Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR)
Penny Babb	Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR)
Sarah Cumbers (staff)	Royal Statistical Society (RSS)
Jonathan Everett (staff)	Royal Statistical Society (RSS)
Tom Walters (staff)	Royal Statistical Society (RSS)
Paul Allin	Royal Statistical Society (RSS)
David Caplan	RSS Public Statistics Advisory Group
Jia Shao	RSS Public Statistics Advisory Group
Jill Leyland	RSS Public Statistics Advisory Group
Hira Naveed	RSS Official Statistics Section
Tej Nathwani	RSS Official Statistics Section
Ben Humberstone	RSS Public Statistics Advisory Group; Official Statistics Section
Deana Leadbeter	Forum of Statistics User Groups
Peter Gordon	Forum of Statistics User Groups



Sarah Moore	Office for National Statistics (ONS)
Imogen Burford	Office for National Statistics (ONS)
Sarah Southerton	Office for National Statistics (ONS)
Mary Gregory	Office for National Statistics (ONS)
James Benford	Office for National Statistics (ONS)
Neil Townsend	Office for National Statistics (ONS)
Andrea Prophet	Government Statistical Service (GSS)
Lucy Vickers	Government Statistical Service (GSS)
Steve Ellerd-Elliott	Government Statistical Service (GSS)
Jeni Tennison	Connected by Data
Shayda Kashef	ADR UK
Emily Jesper-Mir	Wellcome
Rachel Coldicutt	Careful Industries

