Welsh Government

Summary of Responses

Review of Environment and Sustainability Statistical Outputs

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Introduction

The Welsh Government's Statistical Directorate collects, analyzes and disseminates data on many aspects of the environment and sustainability in Wales. The environment and sustainability statistics published by the Statistical Directorate are used to monitor progress towards a range of national, local and international targets. The statistics come from a range of sources covering Wales and the UK and enable comparisons to be made with other UK countries and internationally.

Environment and sustainability statistics are a growing area of statistics in Wales, the growth of which has coincided with publication of the Welsh Government's Environment Strategy in 2006. This led to the development of the most high-profile output, the State of the Environment Report which was introduced to monitor progress towards targets in the Environment Strategy. Other areas of development have been quarterly waste statistics (which were previously annual) and the Sustainable Development Indicators booklet.

Having increased the number and frequency of statistical outputs related to environment and sustainability, in May 2011 the Welsh Government commenced a review of these outputs, including a user consultation.

Method

The user consultation was in the form of a questionnaire emailed to a list of users and posted online to the Welsh Statistical Liaison Committee Community of Practice (now known as Knowledge Hub). The purpose of this was to seek users' views on whether the outputs are meeting their data needs, to assess how useful the outputs are and to identify areas for improvement. This report summarises the responses to the questionnaire.

The questionnaire consisted of general questions about environment and sustainability statistics followed by questions on the specific outputs which were optional depending on whether respondents used them or not. The outputs covered were:

- Municipal Waste Management statistics (quarterly and annual)
- Fly-tipping statistics
- The State of the Environment Report (online)
- Sustainable Development Indicators booklet

A common set of questions were asked for each output with some additional ones for waste statistics and the State of the Environment report which dealt with specific issues related to those outputs. Users were also asked for their contact details and whether they could be contacted about their responses to the questionnaire.

Results

There were 17 responses to the questionnaire between 7 June and 28 July 2011. There were 10 from external bodies including local authorities and the Environment Agency, and 7 from within the Welsh Government. A list of respondents is provided in Annex 1.
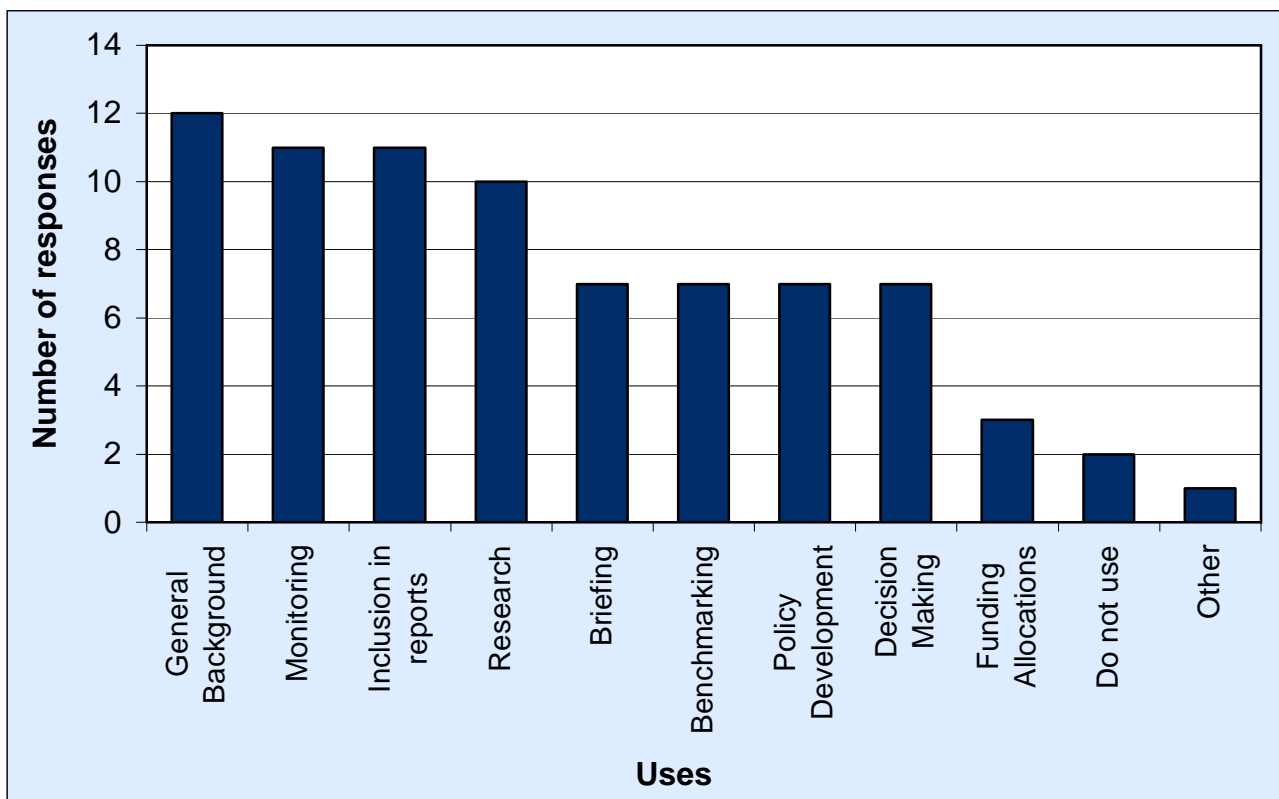
In response to the questions on the specific outputs there were:

- 9 responses from users of Municipal Waste Management statistics
- 6 responses from users of Fly-Tipping statistics
- 7 responses from users of the State of the Environment Report
- 3 responses from users of Sustainable Development Indicators

General Questions

For the question on the purpose for which users use environment and sustainability statistics, respondents were asked to indicate all that applied. The results are shown in Chart 1.

Chart 1: Uses of environment and sustainability statistics, by purpose

The most common uses of environment and sustainability statistical outputs are general background, inclusion in reports, monitoring and research. A lesser number of respondents use the outputs for policy development, decision making, briefing and benchmarking. A couple of respondents do not use environment and sustainability statistics at all.

Respondents were asked to rate the presentation and analysis of environment and sustainability statistical outputs based on how useful they found them. Table 1 shows the percentage of responses for each type of presentation or analysis, based on those who use the outputs (some respondents did not rate every category).

Table 1: Overall ratings for environment statistics by percentage of respondents (1=very useful…5=not useful) (a)

Output	% of Responses by Rating					Total Responses by Category
	Very Useful				Not Useful	
	1	2	3	4	5	
Statistical Releases	46%	46%	8%	0%	0%	13
Data Tables	47%	33%	20%	0%	0%	15
Charts	27%	40%	27%	0%	7%	15
Bullet points / Headlines	36%	36%	29%	0%	0%	14
Commentary	36%	43%	7%	7%	7%	14
Interactive (e.g. StatsWales)	62%	15%	23%	0%	0%	13

(a) Based on total number of responses for each category

Generally the majority of respondents gave the types of presentation and analysis a rating of 1 or 2, indicating they found them useful or very useful. The vast majority (92 per cent) of users rated the usefulness of the statistical releases as 1 or 2, whilst respondents generally found charts the least useful. Whilst a lower combined percentage of respondents gave a rating of 1 or 2 for StatsWales than for statistical releases, 62 per cent of respondents found StatsWales very useful compared to 46 per cent for statistical releases. Of the types of presentation/analysis used within statistical releases, a larger proportion of users gave a rating of 'very useful' to data tables than any other type of presentation/analysis. Furthermore, whilst 79 per cent of users rated commentary as a 1 or 2, both commentary and charts were thought to be not useful by some users.

Whilst a large proportion of users rated StatsWales 'very useful', 23 per cent gave StatsWales a usefulness rating of 3. This may be related to the functionality of StatsWales, as in a comments box provided some users indicated that StatsWales could be improved by making local authority data more accessible in some cases. Other comments provided in this box related to timeliness and the need to be added to mailing lists for some outputs.

In response to a question on environment and sustainability statistics that are currently not published by the Welsh Government, it was suggested that there may be a need to develop indicators about ecosystem health. This is in response to work which is developing on the Welsh Government's 'Natural Environment Framework'.

Municipal Waste Management statistics

Users were asked to rate the Municipal Waste Management statistics based on key criteria used in the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA) assessment of statistics[1]. Table 2 shows the percentage of responses for each category, based on those who use the statistics.

Table 2: Scores for Municipal Waste Management statistics against key criteria by percentage of respondents (1=excellent…5=poor) (a)

Criteria	1	2	3	4	5	Total Responses
Relevance	44%	44%	11%	0%	0%	9
Accessibility	22%	56%	22%	0%	0%	9
Clarity	11%	56%	22%	11%	0%	9
Comparability	33%	44%	22%	0%	0%	9
Timeliness	44%	0%	33%	11%	11%	9

(a) Based on respondents who use the statistics

Municipal Waste Management statistics were rated best for Relevance, with 89 per cent of users rating them as 1 or 2, where 1 is excellent. For Comparability, and Accessibility the results were similar (78 per cent) although slightly better for Comparability. Clarity and Timeliness were rated less well with a wider spread of responses. Timeliness of the statistics was considered good by some and poor by others. In the comments box provided some users also stated that data need to be timelier. In terms of Clarity, user comments highlighted the need for improved metadata within StatsWales and more clarity of the different definitions used in the quarterly and annual outputs.

Users were asked a number of questions on the style and format of waste statistics and confidence in using the statistics based on the quality information provided with them. The majority of users who responded felt that the commentary in the outputs aided understanding, that charts were used in the most effective way, and that they were happy with the level of detail provided in StatsWales tables. Nevertheless, in the comments box provided, suggestions were made relating to the possible inclusion of maps, different types of charts and clearer presentation of the tables in StatsWales.

For municipal waste management statistics additional questions were asked which dealt with specific issues related to the annual and quarterly releases. The first of these asked users to consider a proposal to include a definition of waste products within the annual release which was consistent with that used for quarterly statistics and which is used in the National Strategic Indicators. The majority of users were supportive of this proposal as it would bring the annual statistics in line with the definition used for local government waste targets and thus reduce confusion.

A second question asked for users to agree with a proposal to show rolling 12 month averages in the quarterly waste release instead of comparing the latest quarter with the same quarter in the previous year. Comments provided in response suggested that the proposal would iron out misreporting of waste statistics due to seasonal variations, but the majority of users were not supportive due to the loss of annual comparability. This was particularly the case when looking at year on year improvements when local authorities make changes to collection services. It was suggested that both sets of statistics could be shown instead.

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[1] Details on the key criteria for assessing statistics can be found in Annex 2.

Fly-tipping statistics

Respondents were asked to rate Fly-tipping statistics in the same way as Municipal Waste Management statistics, based on the key criteria used in the UKSA assessment of statistics. Table 3 shows the percentage of responses for each rate category, based on those who use the statistics.

Table 3: Scores for Fly-tipping statistics against key criteria by percentage of respondents (1=excellent…5=poor) (a)

Criteria	1	2	3	4	5	Total Responses
Relevance	67%	33%	0%	0%	0%	6
Accessibility	50%	33%	17%	0%	0%	6
Clarity	67%	17%	17%	0%	0%	6
Comparability	67%	0%	33%	0%	0%	6
Timeliness	50%	17%	17%	0%	17%	6

(a) Based on respondents who use the statistics.

This indicates that Fly-tipping statistics are rated well against all criteria with more than 50 per cent of users rating them as excellent in each case. Generally when looking at the proportion of respondents that gave a rating of 1 or 2, Comparability and Timeliness received the lowest proportions. In fact 17 per cent of users who responded rated Fly-tipping statistics as poor for Timeliness.

In the comments box provided, users indicated that metadata was better than for municipal waste management statistics but that it did not include how the statistics relate to performance indicators. Timeliness of the statistics was highlighted, although pulling forward publication of the most recent release (2010-11) from September to July may go some way to address this (Fly-tipping data are produced for financial years ending in March).

In response to questions on the style and format of fly-tipping statistics and the quality of information provided, the majority of users who responded felt that the commentary provided aided understanding, that charts were used in the most effective way, and that they were happy with the level of detail provided in StatsWales tables. Additional comments also indicated that the StatsWales figures were useful.

State of the Environment (SoE) report

Respondents were asked to rate the SoE report on the same basis as for the other outputs. Table 4 shows the percentage of responses for each rate category, based on those who use the statistics.

Table 4: Scores for the State of the Environment report against key criteria by percentage of respondents (1=excellent…5=poor) (a)

Criteria	1	2	3	4	5	Total Responses
Relevance	43%	43%	14%	0%	0%	7
Accessibility	43%	14%	43%	0%	0%	7
Clarity	29%	43%	14%	14%	0%	7
Comparability	43%	43%	14%	0%	0%	7
Timeliness	29%	43%	29%	0%	0%	7

(a) Based on respondents who use the statistics.

There were mixed views about the State of the Environment report. For all criteria less than 50 per cent rated the output as excellent, although no users rated it as poor. Overall the report was rated better (with more ratings of 1 or 2) for Relevance and Comparability than for Accessibility, Clarity or Timeliness.

A few users gave comments in the box provided, however some of these related to particular indicators rather than the overall report. It was acknowledged that whilst the SoE report may offer the 'best available' in terms of datasets relating to the environment in Wales, there were nevertheless some inconsistencies in the frequency and accuracy of data presented in the report.

In response to questions on the style and format of the SoE report and the quality information provided, again the majority of users who responded felt that the commentary aided understanding, and that charts were used in the most effective way. A slightly smaller proportion of users indicated that they were happy with the level of detail provided in StatsWales tables although some comments suggested that all SoE data should be provided at a local authority level. Other comments indicated that the SoE report is a useful output but also that the format and style of charts could be standardised.

The section on the SoE report included a specific question related to the frequency of the report. This asked users to consider a proposal to update the report annually in July compared to bi-annually in July and December as has been the case up until 2010. The majority of users who responded were supportive of this. Comments provided by users suggested that the publication timetable of some source datasets fitted the deadline for the December update better than for the July one. The proposal would reduce the timeliness of the SoE report and in turn may require additional work from data providers to answer information requests until the latest data for these datasets are included in the July update.

Sustainable Development Indicators

Respondents were asked to rate the Sustainable Development Indicators booklet on the same basis as the other outputs. Table 5 shows the percentage of responses for each rate category based on those who use the statistics.

Table 5: Scores for the State of the Sustainable Development Indicators output against key criteria by percentage of respondents (1=excellent…5=poor) (a)

Criteria	1	2	3	4	5	Total Responses
Relevance	33%	67%	0%	0%	0%	3
Accessibility	33%	67%	0%	0%	0%	3
Clarity	33%	0%	33%	33%	0%	3
Comparability	33%	67%	0%	0%	0%	3
Timeliness	33%	0%	67%	0%	0%	3

(a) Based on respondents who use the statistics

There were mixed views about the Sustainable Development Indicators booklet against all criteria, although no users rated it as 'poor'. However it should be borne in mind that the ratings shown above are based on only 3 responses. Overall, the output is rated better for Relevance, Accessibility and Comparability than for Clarity and Timeliness.

In response to questions on the style and format of the SDI booklet and the quality information provided, all three users who responded felt that the commentary provided aided understanding, that charts were used in the most effective way and that they were happy with the level of detail provided in StatsWales tables. As with the SoE report, in the comments box it was indicated that SDI data would be useful at a local authority level, and that there should be easier access to all three products (statistical release, booklet and StatsWales tables).

Outcomes / Conclusion

The aim of this Review of Environment and Sustainability Outputs is to consider users' experiences and views of environment and sustainability statistics in Wales. The responses received, including detailed comments and suggestions, are being considered with a view to improving the quality of the statistical outputs.

Some action has already been taken to improve the outputs, as detailed below.

Municipal Waste Management statistics
The annual municipal waste management bulletin now includes tables showing recycling figures based on the National Strategic Indicator definition, which is used in the quarterly release, as well as the definition used previously. Additional information has been added to clarify the differences between definitions.

Comments related to the inclusion of both year on year and rolling average figures in the quarterly release led to both being shown in the quarterly releases for Quarter 1 (April-June) 2011-12 onwards. These are available via the following link:

http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/theme/environment/wasterecycle/?lang=en

Fly-tipping statistics
Timeliness has been an issue for the Fly-tipping release. As indicated above, Fly-tipping statistics for 2010-11 were published in July 2011, two months earlier than for the previous year. This has gone some way to address this issue, but may not have been picked up in the user consultation which took place around the same time. The 2010-11 release is available here:

http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/headlines/environment2011/110726/?lang=en

State of the Environment report
Due to limited resources it has been necessary to reduce the frequency of updates to once a year, which was supported by the majority of respondents. We will continue to monitor this and any issues as they arise and discuss with users and providers as appropriate.

Sustainable Development Indicators (SDIs)
The SDI booklet covers data at a Wales level only. Some local authority data is published on StatsWales alongside this where the data is available. This will be reviewed to ensure that where this is available links are provided to improve accessibility in time for the next edition (scheduled for August 2012).

Whilst the environment and sustainability outputs produced by the Welsh Government are rated well for Relevance and Comparability, they are rated less well for Timeliness. The compendium publications (State of the Environment and Sustainable Development Indicators) were also rated less well for Clarity.

The Welsh Government will seek to improve the statistical outputs for environment and sustainability against these criteria, and monitor the impact of any changes to ensure that users' needs are met and that the quality of published information is improved.

Respondents

Organisation
Blaenau Gwent CBC
Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council
Carmarthenshire County Council
Environment Agency
Environment Agency Wales
Pembrokeshire County Council
Vale of Glamorgan Council
Wrexham County Borough Council
Welsh Government

Key criteria used for assessing statistics

Relevance
The degree to which the statistical product meets user needs for both coverage and content.

Accuracy
The closeness between an estimated result and the (unknown) true value.

Timeliness
Timeliness refers to the lapse of time between publication and the period to which the data refer.

Comparability
The degree to which data can be agreed over both time and domain.

Coherence
The degree to which data that are derived from different sources or methods, but which refer to the same phenomenon, are similar.