

MEASURING UP

HOW GOOD ARE THE GOVERNMENT'S
DATA SYSTEMS FOR MONITORING PERFORMANCE
AGAINST PUBLIC SERVICE AGREEMENTS?

JUNE 2010

Comprehensive Spending Review 2007 covering the period 2008-2011

Review of the data systems for Public Service Agreement 17 led by the Department for Work and Pensions:

'Tackle poverty and promote greater independence and well-being in later life'

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Summary

Introduction

1. This report summarises the results of our examination of the data systems used by the Government in 2009 to monitor and report on progress against Public Service Agreement (PSA) 17 - Tackle poverty and promote greater independence and well-being in later life.

The PSA and the Departments

2. PSAs are at the centre of the Government's performance measurement system. PSAs are usually three year agreements, set during the spending review process and negotiated between Departments and the Treasury. They set the objectives for the priority areas of Government's work.
3. This PSA is led by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP, the Department). Each PSA has a Senior Responsible Officer who is responsible for maintaining a sound system of control across Departmental boundaries that supports the achievement of the PSA. The underlying data systems are an important element in this framework of control.
4. The most recent public statement provided by the Department on progress against this PSA at the time this review was carried out was in its 2009 Departmental Report.

The purpose and scope of this review

5. The Government invited the Comptroller and Auditor General to validate the data systems used by Government to monitor and report its performance. During the period September 2009 to November 2009, the National Audit Office (NAO) carried out an examination of the data systems for all the indicators used to report performance against this PSA. This involved a detailed review of the processes and controls governing:
 - the match between the indicators selected to measure performance and the PSA - the indicators should address all key elements of performance referred to in the PSA;
 - the match between indicators and their data systems - the data system should produce data that allows the Department to accurately measure the relevant element of performance;

- for each indicator, the selection, collection, processing and analysis of data - control procedures should mitigate all known significant risks to data reliability. In addition, system processes and controls should be adequately documented to support consistent application over time; and
 - the reporting of results - outturn data should be presented fairly for all key aspects of performance referred to. Any significant limitations should be disclosed and the implications for interpreting progress explained.
6. Our conclusions are summarised in the form of traffic lights (see figure 1). The ratings are based on the extent to which the Department has:
- (i) put in place and operated internal controls over the data systems that are effective and proportionate to the risks involved; and
 - (ii) explained clearly any limitations in the quality of its data systems to Parliament and the public.
7. The remaining sections of this report provide an overview of the results of our assessment, followed by a brief description of the findings and conclusions for each individual data system. Our assessment does not provide a conclusion on the accuracy of the outturn figures included in the Department’s public performance statements. This is because the existence of sound data systems reduces, but does not eliminate, the possibility of error in reported data.

Figure 1: Key to traffic light ratings

Rating	Description
GREEN (Fit for purpose)	The data system is fit for the purpose of measuring and reporting performance against the indicator.
GREEN (Disclosure)	The data system is appropriate for the indicator and the Department has explained fully the implications of limitations that cannot be cost-effectively controlled.
AMBER (Systems)	Broadly appropriate, but needs strengthening to ensure that remaining risks are adequately controlled.
AMBER (Disclosure)	Broadly appropriate, but includes limitations that cannot be cost-effectively controlled; the Department should explain the implications of these.
RED (Not fit for purpose)	The data system is not fit for the purpose of measuring and reporting performance against the indicator.
RED (Not established)	The Department has not yet put in place a system to measure performance against the indicator.

Overview

8. The aim of this PSA is to tackle poverty and promote greater independence and well-being in later life. The PSA seeks to raise healthy life expectancy, improve older people's satisfaction with their home and neighbourhood, and support them to live independently.
9. This PSA is supported by five indicators, which are detailed in figure 2 below. For this PSA we have concluded that the indicators selected to measure progress are consistent with the scope of the PSA and afford a reasonable view of progress.
10. The validity of indicators 17.1 and 17.2 are deemed to be fit for purpose.
11. The validity of indicators 17.3 and 17.4 are deemed to be broadly appropriate, but contain limitations which cannot be cost-effectively controlled. The main limitation is the time lag between the period being reported against and the availability of data relating to this period. The Department should explain the reasons why the delay occurs within its performance reports.
12. In addition, with regard to indicator 17.4, further work was still required at the time of this review to ensure that the new survey being used is adequate for the reporting requirements of this indicator. Plans were in place to ascertain applicability. The time lag in obtaining the data for publication also limits its usefulness in measuring performance within the Spending Review period. However, by the time that this indicator is used to assess performance over the CSR07 period, two further data sets will have been collected covering the period to 2009/10.
13. The validity of indicator 17.5 is deemed to be broadly appropriate but contains limitations which cannot be cost-effectively controlled. Whilst it is acknowledged that the indicator uses an established data source, there are nevertheless weaknesses in the data stream used. However, having considered the possible solutions to these issues, the Department does not believe it would be cost-effective to correct them. The Department should explain these limitations within its performance reports. The Measurement Annex for this indicator has been reviewed and updated and was awaiting Prime Minister's Delivery Unit and HM Treasury approval at the time of the data validation exercise.
14. Further information can be found in the "findings and conclusions for individual data systems" section of this report.
15. Figure 2 summarises our assessment of the data systems.

Figure 2: Summary of assessments for indicator data systems

No	Indicator	Rating
17.1	The employment rate of those aged 50-69 and difference between this and the overall employment rate	GREEN (Fit for purpose)
17.2	The percentage of pensioners in low income	GREEN (Fit for purpose)
17.3	Healthy life expectancy at age 65	AMBER (Disclosure)
17.4	The proportion of people over 65 who are satisfied with their home and their neighbourhood	AMBER (Disclosure)
17.5	The extent to which people over 65 receive the support they need to live independently at home	AMBER (Disclosure)

Findings

16. The Department has integrated the indicators within this PSA into its operational and performance management activities, for instance by integrating them into its business plan and performance reports. The Department has in place satisfactory processes and controls designed to ensure the effective operation of business critical IT systems, including those used to collect, analyse and present performance information in respect of its PSAs. The Department's Information Technology Director General is responsible for ensuring sound departmental IT controls are established.
17. The Department's Finance Director General has Board level responsibility for data quality. However, issues of data quality are considered at many different levels within the Department, for example, the Department has a separate Information Directorate, which is responsible for the Department's overall strategy on data quality and statistical sampling as well as providing information and training on compliance with the National Statistics framework and good practice for data quality in general to its analysts.
18. The Department's Corporate Risk Management Team within its Risk Assurance Division coordinates departmental risk management. The Department's Directors General and Programme Boards are responsible for risk management on individual PSA indicators, and data quality risks are normally managed at this level. However, data quality risks can be escalated to the Departmental Board's Risk Register for discussion through the Department's Management Board and the Departmental Audit Committee.

19. The Department undertakes internal performance monitoring and reporting through its Policy and Performance team, with analysis being completed in respect of performance against its PSAs and the underlying indicators, including the preparation of detailed reports setting out progress in key areas of activity, current performance against the relevant indicators, significant risks to performance and further action to be taken in order to mitigate the risks identified and to further the achievement of the Department's objectives. The information provided for the performance reports is received via the Department's PSA Senior Responsible Officers and their respective Policy Leads and Lead Analysts. Performance is reported externally twice a year in the Department's Autumn Performance Report and its Departmental Report.

20. Our main conclusions and recommendations on the Department's overall arrangements with respect to the PSA and the indicators that it encompasses are as follows:

- The Department's governance arrangements in respect of its PSAs are satisfactory. The responsibilities for its PSA indicators and data quality have been clearly assigned and the Department has processes in place to monitor and report performance against those indicators, with sufficient regard given to data quality in respect of PSA indicators.
- The Department has agreed Measurement Annexes for all of its PSA indicators, with the exception of 17.5 which was being reviewed at the time of our audit, and is now approved setting out the definition of the indicator and the data sources to be used.
- The Department does not in all cases have detailed written procedure notes in place where data is received from other government bodies, explaining how the information is received, analysed for reasonableness and used to measure and report performance against the relevant indicator. However, the Department considers, and we acknowledge, that these processes are relatively simple and therefore the lack of procedure notes does not constitute a particular risk to data quality. Nevertheless, the Department could improve its processes by compiling such written procedure notes.
- Where deficiencies in systems are present, appropriate disclosures should be made by the Department together with the effect this has on reported data. Where these findings have implications for individual indicators, we detail them in the next section of this report.

- The Department is currently putting in place the arrangements necessary to implement the new Code of Practice for Official Statistics published by the UK Statistics Authority in January 2009. At the time of writing this report an updated statement of compliance with the principles and protocols had not been issued.

Assessment of indicator set

21. In undertaking the validation we reviewed the documentation associated with the PSA, including the Delivery Agreement, and considered whether the indicators selected to measure progress were consistent with the scope of this PSA. The PSA areas are interlinked, income affects health and health affects the ability to maintain independent living. We conclude that the PSA is wide ranging and the indicators selected afford a reasonable view of progress.

Findings and conclusions for individual data systems

22. The following sections summarise the results of the NAO's examination of each data system.

Indicator 17.1: The employment rate of those aged 50-69 and difference between this and the overall employment rate

Conclusion: GREEN (Fit for purpose)

23. We have concluded that the data system underlying this indicator is fit for the purpose of measuring and reporting performance against the indicator.

Characteristics of the data system

24. Performance against the indicator is calculated using quarterly data provided by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) through the Labour Force Survey (LFS). Some analysis is required to calculate the employment rate for the 50-69 age group, and to compare it to the overall employment rate. Quarter two data is used to measure performance as the data is subject to seasonal fluctuations (e.g. due to employment rates during holiday periods).

25. The Department maintain their own dedicated LFS team which acts as a liaison point between the ONS and the client teams within the Department who use the data for analysis and reporting.

26. Employment rates are calculated for both the 50-69 age group, and the 16 to state retirement age group. Employment is indicated by paid employment in the week

before the survey, or a number of other carefully defined activities such as unpaid employment in a family business.

Findings

27. The LFS is produced by the ONS, which makes the data available to the Department at respondent level. This allows the Department's Extending Working Lives team to extract the data relevant to 50-69 year olds and calculate the employment rate for this age group for the quarter. The overall employment rate is also calculated, to allow the difference between the 50-69 employment rate and the overall employment rate to be calculated.
28. The data is also used by the LFS team within the Department to calculate the indicator independently of its Extending Working Lives team. The results are compared, and re-calculated as necessary by both teams to provide assurance that the values produced and reported are accurate. After this comparison has been undertaken the performance against the indicator is published.
29. This indicator has been calculated for several years by the Department. The Department has in place a specific team which receives and owns the LFS data for the whole Department. The team performs quality assurance checks, including trend analysis, completeness checks and file integrity checks on all data received through the LFS before it is released to the individual analysts responsible for processing and reporting throughout the Department.
30. Our review of the Autumn Performance Report 2008 and the Departmental Report 2009 found that the indicator is reported in a clear fashion, showing the employment rate and difference to the overall employment rate for each quarter. The baseline of quarter two 2007/08 was reported in both documents. The quarter two 2008/09 data has yet to be published in this form, so progress against the overall PSA has yet to be reported.
31. To assist the reader of the reports, the Department should disclose that the data used in calculating the indicator is seasonal and therefore comparisons between different quarters in the same year are not valid. Current reporting does refer to the fact that the data is seasonal and unadjusted but does not, however, explicitly mention the quarter 2 comparison.

Indicator 17.2: The percentage of pensioners in low income

Conclusion: GREEN (Fit for purpose)

32. We have concluded that the data system underlying this indicator is fit for the purpose of measuring and reporting performance against the indicator.

Characteristics of the data system

33. The indicator is calculated using data obtained from the Family Resources Survey (FRS). The FRS fieldwork is jointly carried out by the ONS and the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) using a questionnaire designed and sponsored by the Department. NatCen is responsible for updating the questionnaire annually, with the questionnaire changes specified by the Department after consultation with key stakeholders. The data is collated and subject to quality assurance procedures by the ONS, before being released to the Department's own dedicated FRS team.
34. The FRS team is responsible for much of the data processing and data cleansing. The team also manages the release of data sets and access to the data sets for client teams within DWP.
35. The Department's own Households Below Average Income (HBAI) team is the client. The team uses the FRS data to calculate the income levels for the population as a whole, and this is used to set the income levels against which pensioner income is reported. The calculations are also performed by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, using its own separate methodology. These are then reconciled with the figures produced by the HBAI team, agreeing the figures to the pence and the person, to ensure that the accuracy of the figures reported. The income statistics from the HBAI were subject to a National Statistics Quality Review in 2004. As the main source of HBAI data, the review focused heavily on the FRS. No significant changes have been made to the data systems since this review took place other than addressing the recommendations made within the report.

Findings

36. The FRS excludes those pensioners living in residential care homes. Whilst it is difficult to define household income for such people, initial analysis undertaken by the Department indicates that this will not impact on the trend data reported. This is because the proportion of pensioners living in residential care homes is a relatively small proportion compared with those in private households and therefore the Department does not consider it would be cost-effective to undertake additional surveys. This omission has not been reported in the 2009 Departmental Report or the 2008 Autumn Performance Report.
37. Our review of the Department's Autumn Performance Report 2008 and the Departmental Report 2009 found that reporting also does not refer to the inherent limitations of sampling such as the omission of people in residential care. There is also no reference to the accuracy of the data reported; for example, confidence levels are not disclosed for the data series, which can explain to the reader of the reports whether the trends in reported data are statistically significant.

38. Our review demonstrated that the principles of the Code of Practice for National Statistics had been met in respect of this indicator, however, at the time of our fieldwork, the Department was in the process of preparing its statement of compliance.
39. As with all indicators which source data from the FRS, there is a significant (approximately 12 month) time lag between the period when data is collected and when it is reported.

Indicator 17.3: Healthy life expectancy at age 65

Conclusion: AMBER (Disclosure)

40. We have concluded that the data system underlying this indicator is broadly appropriate, but includes limitations that cannot be cost-effectively controlled; the Department should explain the limitations of these.

Characteristics of the data system

41. The indicator measures healthy life expectancy at 65. Life expectancy at 65 has been increasing strongly but the number of years spent in good health is increasing at a slower rate; the Government's aim is to increase the number of years spent in good health from age 65 onwards. The Department for Communities and Local Government's (CLG's) Place Survey also collects data relevant to the PSA, although this is used to measure local performance and is not reported against the PSA in the Departmental Report or Autumn Performance Report.
42. Standard questions are included in the General Household Survey (GHS), which includes a self assessment on the condition of individuals' health and illness. Specific questions are asked, such as 'do you consider yourself to be in good health/fair health?' etc. In addition specific data on long term illnesses is collected. This data is applied to actuarial forecasts of life expectancy at 65, which are published in the ONS Health Statistics Quarterly. These data sets together estimate how many years will be spent in good health.
43. The information from the GHS is used to produce national performance against the indicator and is used in reporting in DWP's Autumn Performance Report, Departmental Report and Business Plan. The CLG Place Survey, which includes similar questions to the GHS, is used to report performance at a local level internally within the Department. It is available as a method of reviewing the results of the GHS for reasonableness, along with those from other data sources such as the Health Survey for England. For the purpose of PSA 17 reporting, only the GHS is relevant.

44. The GHS is carried out annually, and has been produced since 1971. The survey is supported by guidance issued by the ONS on sample design and response, sampling errors and weighting. The survey covers approximately 13,000 households, for which the survey sample is selected using the Royal Mail's Postcode Address File (PAF).
45. This PAF contains the addresses for approximately 27 million private households in the UK which receive fewer than 50 items of mail per day. The PAF of 'small users' is a recognised method of selecting a random sample. The survey is undertaken using the recognised survey technique of Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing for face to face interviews and Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing for telephone interviews.
46. Checks on data quality are undertaken by the ONS as the information is produced. Healthy life expectancies are reported annually through the ONS Health Statistics Quarterly, at which point they are used by DWP to measure progress against the indicator. The Department carries out reasonableness checks of the data, in particular, is the data in line with previous years and is it in line with expectations. Healthy life expectancies are published two years after the GHS data has been collected, due to the time needed by the ONS to combine the data with life expectancy data and carry out the necessary quality assurance processes.

Findings

47. One limitation of the data stream used to measure progress against this indicator is the time lag between the period being measured and the point at which performance data for this period becomes available from the ONS. The baseline has been set at 2005-07 but the data for this period was not expected to be received by the Department until early 2010 and was therefore not reported in the Departmental Report 2009. The delay arises for a number of reasons. Firstly, the indicator is reported as a rolling three year average, meaning that the data collection required for 2006 was not completed until 2007. The GHS data for 2005-2007 is then subject to processing and data quality measures within the ONS which can take around one year. Following this, the self-reported health data needs to be combined with life expectancy figures which are not available until slightly later.
48. The combination of these data streams to arrive at the performance against the indicator involves a complex process which takes further time to complete. The results are then released by the ONS to the Department, where minimal processing of data is undertaken.
49. The Department was aware of this limitation when deciding to use this data stream from the ONS, but there appeared to be no alternative option available. The GHS is

an established survey and has data available going back a number of years. Despite the fact that the data available within any Spending Review period will be of limited use in assessing performance within that period, the indicator was determined as an important indicator to measure over a longer period of time.

50. Since there appears to be no alternative measure for this indicator, we recommend that the Department discloses within its performance reports the reasons for the time lag between the period being measured and the data being published, and explain why no alternative measures, which might report performance more quickly, are feasible.
51. The Measurement Annex in place at the time of this review referred to the CLG's Place Survey as the source data set. The GHS is actually used to measure national performance against this indicator. At the time of our review the Department was in the process of updating the Measurement Annex to correct this inaccuracy and agreeing the procedure for publishing the revised version of the Annex. The revised Measurement Annex was published on 6 January 2010.
52. The Department has undertaken an assessment of the risks in using ONS produced information, and has concluded that the risk is low. This assessment, however, is not formalised. The Department could improve its processes by compiling written procedure notes, explaining how the information is received, analysed for reasonableness and used to measure and report performance against the indicator. However, it is acknowledged that these processes are relatively simple and so the lack of procedure notes does not constitute a particular risk to data quality.

Indicator 17.4: The proportion of people over 65 who are satisfied with their home and their neighbourhood

Conclusion: AMBER (Disclosure)

53. We have concluded that the data system underlying this indicator is broadly appropriate, but includes limitations that cannot be cost-effectively controlled; the Department should explain the limitations of these.

Characteristics of the data system

54. Performance against this indicator is determined by a simple calculation undertaken by the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) using data published in the English Housing Survey (EHS). This is a new survey that is not yet a National Statistic. Previously the data was sourced from the survey of English Housing which was a National Statistic; this has been amalgamated with the English House Condition Survey, which was not a National Statistic, to create

the EHS. Accreditation for the new survey as a National Statistic is being sought for 2010.

55. The data used for the indicator is a response to two specific questions from those respondents aged over 65:

- Are you satisfied with your home?; and
- Are you satisfied with your neighbourhood?

56. Responses are easy to categorise which allow a simple analysis and calculation of the data.

Findings

57. The indicator has been calculated for several years using data from the EHS and English House Condition Survey, having been an indicator in previous Comprehensive Spending Review periods. The Department has discussed the move to a new survey with the CLG and the risk log monitors risks associated with the survey and potential quality issues which may arise. Although our review indicates that these procedures are considered robust, and initial verbal discussions had been undertaken about the consistency of questions, further work was still to be undertaken to ensure comparability. Subsequent to our review, the Department has received written confirmation from CLG that they should be able to provide consistent information and the Department intends to do further additional analysis once the data is available to ensure that it is still accurate.

58. The indicator does not currently set out how progress is to be monitored against this indicator. At the time of this review the baseline had been published, but no subsequent data was available to measure progress against the indicator. The time lag in obtaining the data for publication limits its usefulness in measuring performance within the Spending Review period. The indicator measures the proportion of people aged over 65 who are satisfied with their home and their neighbourhood.

59. The Department could perform its own independent calculation of performance against the indicator, since it is provided with the underlying data to allow this to be done. However, it is recognised that the calculation is simple and that this does not necessarily represent a weakness in the data system. The Department also does not have written procedure notes in place explaining how the information is received and analysed.

Indicator 17.5: The extent to which people over 65 receive the support they need to live independently at home

Conclusion: AMBER (Disclosure)

60. We have concluded that the data system underlying this indicator is broadly appropriate, but includes limitations that cannot be cost-effectively controlled; the Department should explained the limitations of these. This indicator is led by the Department of Health.

Characteristics of the data system

61. The indicator measures the extent to which people over 65 receive the support they need to live independently at home. Data is collected through the Office for National Statistics' Omnibus Survey.

62. A standard question is included in the Omnibus Survey as follows:

“In your opinion, are older people in your local area able to get the services and support they need, to continue to live at home for as long as they want to? (This could include help or support from public, private or voluntary services or from family, friends and the wider community)”.

63. Data is collected from the Omnibus Survey on a quarterly basis, giving details of the percentage of respondents answering yes, no or don't know. The survey has been produced since 1990. The survey is supported by guidance issued by the ONS on sample design and response, sampling errors and weighting and grossing.

64. The survey sample is based on the Royal Mail's PAF of 'small users', which is a recognised method of selecting a sample. The PAF contains the addresses for approximately 27 million private households in the UK which receive fewer than 50 items of mail per day. Each month 67 postal sectors are selected and within each sector, 30 addresses are chosen randomly giving a final sample of 2,010 addresses each month.

65. The survey is undertaken using the recognised survey technique of Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing for face to face interviews. The survey interviews are conducted using Blaise (a computer-assisted survey design and processing system) questionnaire programming tool on a laptop. On completion of the survey the data is cleaned, weighted, analysed and tabulated by the ONS research team.

66. Survey results are published on a quarterly basis. This information is used to report national performance against the indicator in the Department's Autumn Performance Report, its Departmental Report and Business Plan.

Findings

67. This is a new indicator and associated data system. The first data collected to assess performance against the indicator related to April 2009. The Departmental Report 2009 did not contain any performance data but simply described the data system which would be used in the future. Subsequent to our review, the Department published the first set of performance data in its Autumn Performance Report in December 2009.
68. The indicator is measured using a survey question which is inevitably perception-based rather than an objective measure. This has been disclosed in the Departmental Report 2009. However, it could lead respondents of the survey who do not have contact with older people in their community to assert a view nevertheless. This may mean that the reported data from the survey does not match up with reality. In November 2009, the Department has sought to address this by restricting the question in the survey to those who have personal experience of the support services (specifically, whether they, or a friend or family member has received support to live independently) and the baseline data has taken this into account.
69. A recognised limitation of the data stream is that the Omnibus Survey covers only private households and not individuals in residential care. For this particular measure, the views of people who are living in residential care homes would be particularly relevant, as they are more likely to be people who did not have sufficient support to live independently. They might also be less likely to have friends or family members who would answer the survey knowing about their circumstances. However, having considered this issue, the Department has determined that it would not be cost-effective to undertake additional surveys.
70. A Measurement Annex is in place for the indicator; however the Annex in place at the time of this review referred to the CLG Place Survey as being the data source, when in fact the Omnibus Survey is the data source reported on in the Departmental Report. This inaccuracy has now been corrected in a revised Measurement Annex.
71. The Department has undertaken an assessment of the risks using ONS produced information and has concluded that the risk is low. This assessment, however, is not formalised. The Department could improve its processes by compiling written procedure notes, explaining how the information is received and used to measure and report performance against the indicator. However, it is acknowledged that these processes are relatively simple and so the lack of procedure notes does not constitute a particular risk to data quality.

72. Reporting on this indicator in the Department's 2008 Autumn Performance Report and its 2009 Departmental Report does not include references to the data system in use, its potential limitations or the overall data quality.