Irish Statistical System Code of Practice (ISSCoP) Coordination and Certification of Other National Authorities (ONA's) across the Irish Statistical System

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Abstract

The Central Statistics Office (CSO) is mandated under EU Regulation 223/09 with the coordination of Official Statistics compiled by Other National Authorities (ONA's) who operate within the Irish Statistical system. These statistics play an essential part in creating an informed society and are indispensable for making evidence-based policy decisions.

In line with the framework, the CSO developed a set of quality guidelines under ISSCoP (Irish Statistical System Code of Practice) in 2013 which are a subset of the ESSCoP (European Statistics Code of Practice) principles.

While some progress has been made to date, the recent 2022 Peer review process recommended that the ONA's certification process should move to a unified benchmark by aligning the ISSCoP process more closely to ESSCoP. Following these recommendations, the CSO has recently provided dedicated staff resources to review and strengthen the ISSCoP certification and coordination roles by working with other producers across the Irish statistical system (ISS) to support quality improvement across the national statistical system.

This paper will describe the steps taken by the CSO in order to successfully develop and implement a quality support service across the Irish Statistical System. It will outline the current state of play by discussing the existing framework in place for the ISSCoP process, the level of engagement by the ONA's, the challenges experienced in moving to the ESSCoP process and the progress made to date.

It will also set out how the certification and quality coordinator team are promoting and providing guidance to the ONA's on advancing the ISSCoP certification on the national code of practice (Irish Statistical System Code of Practice (ISSCoP)) while also setting out how quality is assured and monitored by the coordinator. Finally, the paper will also detail the progress made to date in building effective relationships with the ONA's and the challenges and opportunities that have been encountered to date.

Introduction:

The Irish Statistical System (ISS)

The Irish Statistical System (ISS) consists of those parts of the public sector involved in the collection, processing, compilation and dissemination of Official Statistics. In Ireland, Official Statistics are produced by the Central Statistics Office (CSO), Other National Authorities (ONA's), which are responsible for European statistics, as well as a range of other compilers of Official Statistics not classified as ONA's (government departments, agencies and state bodies, and other public authorities).

CSO also has a formal coordination role to play across the Irish Statistical System (ISS) under Section 10 of the Statistics Act (1993). Article 5 (1) of Regulation 223/2009 on European Statistics also enshrines this coordination role for National Statistical Authorities in European Statistical law.

 Statistics production in general, and production of European Statistics in particular, are highly centralised, with European statistics accounting for almost 80% of outputs. There are also 13 Other National Authorities (ONA's), which produce specific European statistics.

Official Statistics in Ireland have weathered the economic storm and have stood up to scrutiny. Today those statistics enjoy a high level of trust. The Code of Practice for the Irish Statistical System (Central Statistics Office, 2013b) is designed to safeguard that trust into the future by enshrining the core principles of independence, objectivity, integrity, and confidentiality. The code represents an important milestone in the development of the Irish Statistical System and moves it towards a more logical and structured system.

Emergence of ISSCoP Certification:

In November 2011, the plan 'Public Service Reform' was published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform which outlined how customer services and public sector efficiency was to be improved and tasked the CSO with developing a Code of Practice for the Irish Statistical System (ISSCoP).

This certification covers the relevant processes and systems involved in the collection, compilation and dissemination of Official Statistics. The aim of the code is to provide a set of guidelines or rules that

are designed to synchronise standards across all Official Statistics in Ireland and not just those published by CSO. This code is consistent with but is a subset of the European Statistics Code of Practice (ESSCoP) (European Commission. Statistical Office of the European Union, 2018), reflecting the current maturity and absorptive capacity of the Irish Statistical System. While ESSCoP consists of sixteen principles relating to issues such as institutional aspects, statistical processes and statistical outputs and it applies to all compilers of European Statistics, ISSCoP assesses quality based on 5 core principles.

ISSCoP applies to the compilation of Official national Statistics produced in Ireland. The principles chosen for the ISSCoP are those deemed most relevant from an Irish Statistical System (ISS) perspective. However, as the ISS evolves and matures over time so too will the ISSCoP in order to fully align to ESSCoP.

ISSCoP Principles

1. Professional independence
2. Timeliness and punctuality
3. Accessibility and clarity
4. Commitment to Quality
5. Confidentiality

Challenges:

To date, there has been a poor uptake on the certification process. As part of a recent feedback session. stakeholders informed us that the process was too cumbersome, bureaucratic and was too resource intensive. While there have been 27 bodies involved in the process since it has been introduced, only 8 have received certification. The Peer Review by Elmeskov et al. (2022) recommended more engagement was required to increase certification for further organisations. The National Statistics Board (NSB) also stated its Strategic Priorities 2021-2026 the CSO should implement a programme to advance the adoption of ISSCoP across the ISS and that Public Sector Bodies producing official statistics should aspire to the ISSCoP.

CSO's Response to the Challenges:

In response to the Peer Review to support quality improvement across the ISSCoP Certification process, the CSO introduced a dedicated team to work with producers across the system. A quality coordinator and ISSCoP certification coordinator joined the Quality Management Support & Assurance (QMSA) team in January 2024. These coordinator roles are interlinked and work collaboratively. Their overall aim is to increase the number of bodies engaging with ISSCoP Certification.

The quality coordinator provides a range of services to the ISS to provide support and advice to improve quality across the system. The ISSCoP coordinator collaborates closely with the quality coordinator to provide guidance, support services along with templates and sample documentation for certification requirements. These services are support driven and assist those engaging in the ISSCoP certification process. An increased level of communication and engagement with the Quality Coordinator and the ISSCoP Coordinator in CSO Ireland will aid in increasing the number of bodies looking to achieve ISSCoP certification each year.

Current Situation:

Since commencing in their roles in January 2024, the dedicated team have increased engagement with the wider ISS to promote and increase knowledge regarding the certification process. An external Audit Group have also been engaged to review and possibly streamline the process. An in-person Workshop was organised and recently held at the CSO where all past and future participants were invited to submit feedback on the current process for ISSCoP Certification and were also asked for their observations on proposed improvements to the process.

ISSCoP Coordination & Certification across the ISS is now a continuous activity for the Quality Management Support & Assurance (QMSA) unit who now have responsibility for ISSCoP Certification. The Directorate has led the programme of increasing statistical expertise in Government departments through the placement of Statisticians and Senior Statisticians on secondment from the CSO (IGSS). This programme has grown from 9 staff on secondment at the start of 2017 to 45 in May 2024.

ISSCoP Principle's - Requirements

Key Principle	Requirement
1. Professional Independence	• Release Calendar • Dissemination and Revisions Policy • Process Maps • Process Documentation • Public documentation covering methodology (for example, methodology document / background notes / survey information / quality report / metadata) • Statistical coordinator
2. Timeliness and Punctuality	• Release Calendar
3. Accessibility and Clarity	• Dissemination and Revisions Policy • Standard statistical outputs and products are made available to everyone free of charge in an accessible format. The outputs are also available in a machine-readable format (e.g., csv). • Public documentation covering methodology (for example, methodology document / background notes / survey information / quality report / metadata)
4. Commitment to Quality	• Quality Commitment or Statement • Process Maps • Process Documentation • Procedures are in place to monitor quality • Public documentation covering methodology (for example, methodology document / background notes / survey information / quality report / metadata) • Statistical coordinator
5. Confidentiality	• Confidentiality Statement (covering Statistical Disclosure Control) • Information security policy or similar document • If access is given to external users to statistical microdata, protocols are in place

Quality Supports provided to the ISS

While the quality supports being requested by producers varies depending on the size of the government department and agency, there are a number of core supports being provided which are common across all statistical producers. These include:

1. **Inclusion on the National Statistical Work Plan**

The 2022 European Peer Review Report recommended that the CSO should present a consolidated work program for the ISS to create greater transparency and a basis for system-wide prioritisation. The Statistical Work Plan (Central Statistics Office, 2024b) outlines the statistical outputs for the year ahead, and the legislative underpinning for each product, distinguishing between Irish official (national) and European statistics. For the first time, in 2023, CSO included statistics being produced by the wider system in their Statistical Work Plan (SWP). It includes products from Other National Authorities (ONA's) developing, producing, and disseminating European statistics as well as other producers of Irish Official Statistics. The plan provides visibility to the statistics being produced around the system and highlights the continued innovation taking place in response to user needs.

The 2024 SWP was published in early February and included almost 200 products from 26 Departments/Authorities. It is a live document which allows the Quality Coordinator to add products for the ISS at any stage during the year. The SWP can be used as a release calendar for the wider system as this facility may not be available on the websites of their own Departments/Authorities. A release calendar is a requirement for the *Professional Independence*, and *Timeliness and Punctuality* principles of ISSCoP. Through continued engagement and communication with the ISS, the Quality Coordinator plans to continually increase the number of products and organisations included in the SWP year on year.

2. Provision of data hosting on CSO.ie in an open data format (PX Stat)

There has been an increased demand for data hosting for ISS data on the CSO website. Some organisations do not have the facility to host open data which they transmit to Eurostat on their own websites. PX Stat (Central Statistics Office, 2024a) is the open data source platform designed for both internal and external users of the CSO. It offers a comprehensive solution for hosting and accessing data, empowering users with valuable insights. It allows End-Users to run extensive searches, filter and pivot results, export results to different formats, create interactive charts, visualise data with interactive geo-maps and share results with others.

The CSO currently hosts published data from 16 Departments/Authorities on our PX Stat system on the CSO website. Principle 3 of ISSCoP, *Accessibility and Clarity*, requires that the organisation's data is available in machine readable formats eg. CSV. The standard statistical outputs and products on PX Stat are made available to everyone free of charge in an accessible format, including CSV.

In an Irish context many users see the CSO as the sole provider of Official Statistics. However, both the Official and European Statistics are compiled by a wide range of public authorities. These data sources continue to be of growing importance for users, there is an increased awareness and focus on these statistics. Hosting data on PX Stat improves the promotion and accessibility of statistical outputs for users.

Since the beginning of 2024, the Quality Coordinator has become the point of contact for organisations interested in hosting their data on PX Stat. This is the most in demand service from the coordinator. Interactive meetings, both in person and online, helps the coordinator to understand the unique needs

of each group. Fostering this collaborative approach has helped to streamline the process and improve time efficiencies in getting the data loaded onto the system. Several organisations have also increased the volume of table's they are hosting on the system. The system has the dual benefit of allowing the organisation to maintain and control their own updates while ensuring the CSO has regulatory control, ensuring full compliance with revisions policy. It is the intention that this service provided by the Quality Coordinator will raise awareness of PX Stat and the number of organisations hosting their data on the system will continue to grow.

3. Metadata and Quality Reports

A key requirement of producers of Official Statistics is the need to provide users with information about the quality of the statistics. Good quality reporting should give the user a clear understanding of the strengths and limitations of the statistical output. Provision of good metadata and informative quality reporting is critical to enable users understand and appropriately utilise the data.

The CSO recommends that data disseminated by the ISS should be accompanied by appropriate metadata and quality reports that are consistent with the SIMS quality reporting standard. Improving metadata supports makes it easier to link and integrate data. Because of this, the Quality Coordinator has been consulting with organisations regarding the creation of a methodology section for the ISS on the CSO website. The relevant PX Stat tables would then be linked to the organisation's area of the website.

4. Quality Management Framework including Process Mapping and Documentation

The CSO Quality Management Framework (QMF) (Central Statistics Office, 2018b) is an extensive and long-term programme introduced to ensure that the statistical production standards applied in the CSO achieve the highest standards of quality and efficiency. While each organisation producing Official Statistics is responsible for managing the quality of their statistical processes and outputs, the Quality Coordinator provides tools and supports to enhance and standardise the process.

The QMF demands high quality, comprehensive and up to date documentation of statistical processes and systems for the ISS. This commitment involves dedicating time and resources to producing and maintaining high quality end-to-end survey documentation, including process maps aligned to the GSBPM (Central Statistics Office, 2018a). The quality coordinator provides a process mapping service for the ISS producing Official Statistics. The map provides an overview of the processes – setting out

who and what is involved (people/resources), and the timing and sequencing of the main activities in the process. The coordinator organises an in-person meeting with producers, which is extremely beneficial from an engagement and relationship building perspective. The mapping session has the dual benefit of documenting the legacy of knowledge embedded in the organisation and gives the CSO a detailed understanding of the process when using the organisation's data in the future. It also beneficial for the ISSCoP certification. Process Mapping is a requirement for the *Professional Independence* and *Commitment to Quality* principles of ISSCoP.

Conclusion:

It is still early days, but engagement has been positive between the CSO Quality team and producers across the ISS with many new working relationships being established. There has been a marked increase in the number of enquiries from organisations expressing interest in ISSCoP Certification. Consequently, the demand for the various Quality Coordinator supports eg. Data hosting and Process Mapping has also increased.

Both Coordinators will continue to work closely together with plans for future improvements including:

- Implementation of the Peer review recommendations in aligning ISSCoP to the full ESSCoP principles.
- Create a methodology area containing Metadata and Quality Reports for Public Sector Bodies on the CSO website.
- Create a Public Sector Bodies Information Hub on the CSO website using data being hosted on PX Stat.
- Review and improve the current ISSCoP process including the introduction of an element of re-certification.
- Develop and promote a suite of quality supporting documentation including an ISS Quality Assurance Framework, an ISSCoP FAQ document for the wider statistical system and summary documentation to promote and increase engagement on ISSCoP certification.
- Update the ISSCoP website (Central Statistics Office, 2013a) to improve accessibility and design from a user's perspective.

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