



PEER REVIEW REPORT

ON COMPLIANCE WITH THE EUROPEAN STATISTICS CODE OF
PRACTICE AND FURTHER IMPROVEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE
NATIONAL STATISTICAL SYSTEM

Belgium

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Belgium has a long tradition of producing official statistics since the eminent statistician Adolphe Quetelet created the Statistical Bureau in 1826. More recently, several reforms of the State have progressively resulted in the transfer of most State competences from federal to regional levels. As a result, the Belgian statistical system is now composed of a national statistical institute (Statistics Belgium) and other federal and regional producers of official statistics. Statistics Belgium and the regional statistical authorities are on an equal footing. The role of Statistics Belgium is therefore much narrower than that of most national statistical institutes in comparable EU Member States.

A cooperation agreement between the federal Belgian government, the governments of the Regions and Communities, the United College of the Common Community Commission and the College of the French Community Commission was adopted in 2014. The cooperation agreement provided for the creation of the Interfederal Statistical Institute with the aim of strengthening cooperation between the various entities in the development, production and dissemination of official statistics in Belgium. The Interfederal Statistical Institute started its work at the beginning of 2016, coordinates the statistical programmes of the regional and federal statistical authorities and compiles an integrated statistical work programme on a yearly basis. The Interfederal Statistical Institute also publishes an annual report and supports methodological cooperation by hosting working groups between organisations.

Belgium has a very comprehensive statistical law that governs the activities of Statistics Belgium in accordance with the European Statistics Code of Practice (ES CoP). In particular, the Law of 4 July 1962 on public statistics (referred to as the Belgian Statistics Act) sets forth the principles of professional independence, impartiality, objectivity and proportionality. Some articles of the Belgian Statistics Act are also applicable to some other producers of official statistics in Belgium. More specifically, in the cooperation agreement of 15 July 2014, a limited number of articles of the Belgian Statistics Act were declared applicable to the regional statistical authorities. The operation of the regional statistical authorities is mainly determined by own decrees for the Flemish and Walloon Region and ordinance for the Brussels Capital Region. The same applies to the National Account Institute (NAI) since the act of 21 December 1994 on social and miscellaneous provisions only mentions some articles of the Statistical law, which apply to the NAI and its associated institutions.

Furthermore, a Commitment on Confidence in Statistics, signed by the federal government and the governments of the Regions and Communities, formally states that the signatory parties shall ensure the professional independence of the statistical authorities, provide appropriate, sufficient and permanent resources to guarantee the quality and relevance of official statistics, and safeguard the rights of respondents and statistical confidentiality.

Statistics Belgium and participating Other National Authorities developing, producing and disseminating official statistics make extensive use of administrative data to produce statistics according to standardised processes, which has resulted in improved statistics and a reduced burden. Statistics Belgium and some Other National Authorities are also investing in new data sources, such as scanner data, transport data or mobile phone data.

A fundamental strength of the Belgian statistical system is its human capital, which is highly motivated, results oriented and willing to improve further their competences, despite the pressure caused by the reduction in human and budgetary resources in recent years.

Despite the complexity of the Belgian statistical system, with many actors producing statistics at federal, regional and community level, the peer review team considers that the Belgian statistical system has an overall high level of compliance with the European Statistics Code of Practice (ES CoP).

However, the peer review team identified one compliance-relevant recommendation and 12 improvement-related recommendations, grouped under three main headings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I - Strengthening the coordinating role of Statistics Belgium regarding European statistics

Cooperation has improved in recent years under the auspices of the Interfederal Statistical Institute. However, coordination still needs to be strengthened, in particular in the area of quality management, as stressed by the participating Other National Authorities. Statistics Belgium already has a dedicated unit for quality management in charge of developing the quality management system. While respecting the principle of equality of statistical authorities at federal, regional and community levels, the peer review team considers that, given its size, experience and the leading role it plays regarding European statistics, Statistics Belgium should play a more prominent role in strengthening coordination. In that respect, the proposed legislation for amending the Belgium Statistics Act, currently under discussion, which proposes to define Statistics Belgium as the National Statistical Institute within the meaning of Regulation No 223/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2009 relating to European Statistics, should be promoted and adopted.

To comply with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

1. The relevant authorities should amend the Belgian Statistics Act to institutionalise the role of Statistics Belgium as the National Statistical Institute in the coordination of European statistics at national level within the meaning of Regulation No 223/2009 (Compliance-relevant: ES CoP, Indicator 1bis.1)

The Belgian statistical system lacks harmonised approaches to ensure consistency and quality throughout production and the use of guidelines for quality assurance in statistics is non-systematic. There is no national quality policy for the production of European statistics to be followed by all statistical authorities producing them. Therefore, it is recommended that further improvement activities should be planned, coordinated and implemented under the coordination of Statistics Belgium and in close collaboration with the Other National Authorities.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

2. Statistics Belgium should coordinate the production of a quality policy statement and national guidelines to ensure the quality of European Statistics within the Belgian statistical system; their implementation should be systematically monitored and reviewed. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicators 1bis.2, 4.2)

Cooperation among the federal and regional statistical authorities has increased since the establishment of the Interfederal Statistical Institute in 2016.

Furthermore, in relation to the development, production and dissemination of European statistics, participating Other National Authorities expressed the need for exchanges of experience, better information about available data and increased cooperation on quality management. Joint training and, if possible, exchanges of personnel, such as short-term secondments, could help to develop skills as well as to create a common statistical culture within the Belgian statistical system. This should also benefit all Other National Authorities.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

3. Statistics Belgium and Other National Authorities should further enhance their cooperation, by establishing systematic exchanges and training on their respective statistical production, methods and quality standards, and support the development of competences and skills in statistics by encouraging the mobility of statisticians between their organisations. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicator 1bis.3)

II - Enhancing the ability to meet new requirements in a changing data environment

The exploration and use of new data sources, the production of new statistics to meet the growing economic, social and environmental demands, and more detailed and faster monitoring require an initial investment in resources. For example, using big data requires specific IT and statistical methodologies. The new challenges cannot be met effectively with ever decreasing resources, as internal efficiency gains are not sufficient to compensate for the additional resources needed. The peer review team considers that Statistics Belgium and the Other National Authorities should be adequately resourced to maintain the quality of statistical production and to meet emerging statistical needs.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

4. The federal, regional and community authorities should ensure adequate resources for Statistics Belgium, and the Other National Authorities under their responsibility, to address the forthcoming increase in statistical needs and new policy priorities, which involve developing methodologies to use new data sources. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicator 3.1)

Skills, competences and expertise of human resources must be continuously adapted in a changing environment of emerging needs, new sources of information and new technologies. Therefore, Statistics Belgium should enable personal and professional development with adequate training and career management, and encourage mobility across its departments and the departments of the Other National Authorities, to acquire and exchange know-how and develop a harmonised working environment across the Belgian statistical system.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

5. Statistics Belgium and the Other National Authorities should ensure that the skills, competences and expertise of its staff meet its strategic and operational needs, by developing a training system and adequate career management. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicators 3.1, 7.5)

Statistics Belgium makes extensive use of administrative sources to compile statistics. However, although access is granted by the Belgian Statistics Act, Statistics Belgium has to negotiate regular data provision on a case-by-case basis and is not always involved in or informed of planned changes. Therefore, to maintain the quality and continuity of statistics based on these data sources, Statistics Belgium should establish an appropriate institutional environment with access to the data and be informed of any changes.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

6. The federal, regional and community authorities should establish an appropriate institutional environment with administrative and other data holders to be able to exploit the full potential of the data, have access to the data and be informed of any changes. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicators 2.2, 2.4 and 10.3)

Statistics Belgium has neither an IT department nor a dedicated IT budget of its own and relies, as do two of the participating Other National Authorities (Federal Public Service Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy – Energy DG; Federal Public Service - Home Affairs), on a common IT department

of the ministry to which they belong. In particular, they can only express requests for specific software without assurance that their needs will be satisfied. While the general IT support provided to the various statistical services and managed at ministerial or regional levels can provide efficient and cost-effective solutions, the specific IT needs for the development, production and dissemination of European statistics should be taken up to ensure the availability of appropriate tools for the efficient exploitation of data sources.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

7. Statistics Belgium, Federal Public Service Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy – DG Energy, Federal Public Service - Home Affairs and the Flanders Statistics Authority should ensure the availability of appropriate IT tools to enable the full exploitation of the possibilities offered by innovative data sources and privately held data for the development, production and dissemination of official statistics. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicators 3.1, 10.2 and 10.4)

Statistical information security is of high importance. Statistics Belgium has its own information security policy, but it is limited to the processes and tools it manages, in the absence of a contract or formal agreement with the ministerial IT department. A wider policy should be developed in cooperation between Statistics Belgium, the IT department of Federal Public Service Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy and other organisations involved in the development, production and dissemination of European statistics.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

8. Statistics Belgium and Federal Public Service Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy should develop a standardised framework for data security, data protection and confidentiality measures, with clear agreements on the share of responsibilities between related organisations, units and persons. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicator 5.5)

III – Developing user engagement

Access to European statistics on the website of Statistics Belgium is somewhat complicated and incomplete, which leads to an excessive loss of time in searching for the required information. Therefore, it is recommended to create a web portal containing the list of all the European statistics produced within the framework of the Belgian statistical system and a link to their publication. This would improve the visibility of all the European statistics produced and make it easier for users to find them.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

9. Statistics Belgium should enhance the visibility of all European statistics produced within the Belgian statistical system by setting up a well-branded official statistics web portal, including a list of the European statistics and a link to their publication. (Improvement-related: ES COP Indicator 15.2)

Since the last peer review, Statistics Belgium has improved its services and the dissemination of its products. The peer review team considers that Statistics Belgium should further pursue its efforts in that direction and develop a proactive dissemination strategy to better meet the needs of its users. In addition, when releasing statistical results, Statistics Belgium should make them more attractive and accessible to the media and users.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

10. Statistics Belgium should develop a more proactive dissemination strategy to enhance the visibility and attractiveness of its products, in order to meet the needs of different user segments. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicators 11.3, 15.1)

Statistics Belgium announces its publication dates in advance, but the exact publication time is not available, which could translate into a lack of transparency and even impartiality. Major revisions or methodological changes are not signalled in advance to users on the website. Thus, Statistics Belgium should further improve its dissemination practices to standardise the release of statistics.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

11. Statistics Belgium should standardise the release of European statistics. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicators 6.5, 6.6, 13.2)

In addition, not all European statistics are accompanied by the relevant metadata informing on methodology and quality, thus creating difficulties for users. Statistics Belgium should further improve the provision of information related to methodology and quality.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

12. Statistics Belgium should improve its website further to standardise the provision of information related to the methodology and quality of European statistics. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicators 15.1, 15.6 and 15.7)

Ensuring transparency and equal access to information to all users is fundamental to maintain the independence and credibility of the Belgian statistical system. While arrangements for pre-release access to European statistics are usually published on the websites of the national and regional statistical authorities, there is a need to review the pre-release access arrangements and to document them further on the websites of Statistics Belgium and the Other National Authorities.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

13. Statistics Belgium and the Other National Authorities should review their pre-release access arrangements and document them appropriately on their websites, to ensure harmonised adherence to the ES CoP. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicator 6.7)

In the spirit of continuous improvement integral to the European Statistical System, Statistics Belgium will interpret the recommendations formulated in this report into improvement actions for implementation within the national statistical system (NSS).

2. INTRODUCTION

It is recognised that quality is one of the European Statistical System's (ESS) comparative advantages in a world experiencing a growing trend of instant information and new challenges, driven by exceptional circumstances or the continuous need for faster but quality-assured data. The European Statistics Code of Practice (ES CoP) is the cornerstone of the ESS common quality framework, and the ESS statistical authorities have committed themselves to adhere to it.

In this context, it is crucial for the ESS to be equipped with a review mechanism, the peer reviews, supporting with credible evidence this self-commitment to adhere to the ES CoP. The objective of this review mechanism is to enhance the integrity, professional independence and accountability of the ESS statistical authorities. The first round of peer reviews was carried out in 2006-2008, followed by a second round in 2013-2015.

In 2017, the ES CoP was reviewed and extended and now encompasses 16 principles. This revised version of the ES CoP triggered a third round of peer reviews, being carried out in the Member States of the European Union and of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), and Eurostat from 2021 to mid-2023. This round of peer reviews aims at improving the quality and trust in European statistics by assessing the compliance of the ESS with the principles of the revised ES CoP. The peer reviews cover the ESS statistical authorities (Eurostat, the National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) and selected Other National Authorities (ONAs)) developing, producing and disseminating European statistics. The peer reviews will be followed by a period of annual monitoring of the implementation of the improvement actions developed by the NSIs to address the recommendations laid down in the peer review reports.

The third round of peer reviews has the following two objectives:

- To review the compliance/alignment of the ESS with the ES CoP, in order to demonstrate to the ESS and to external stakeholders that the ESS is a system based on the principles of the ES CoP;
- To help NSIs, ONAs and Eurostat in their further improvement and development by indicating future-oriented recommendations; at the same time they should stimulate government authorities to support the implementation of these recommendations.

Each peer review is conducted by a team of four statistical experts (both from inside and outside the ESS). The peer review has four phases: completion of the Self-Assessment Questionnaires (SAQs) by a country; analysis of these SAQs by the peer review team; a country visit by the peer review team; and the preparation of the final report and ensuing recommendations by the peer review team. These recommendations are of two types:

- Compliance-relevant (ensuring compliance/alignment with the ES CoP);
- Improvement-related (less critical/technical supporting improvements).

A combination of an audit-like and a peer review approach is used when assessing the national statistical system (NSS) in the countries to benefit from the positive aspects of both approaches. The audit-like approach requires the provision of documents as evidence, the ownership of the recommendations by the peer review expert team, and the right for the NSIs to express diverging views on the recommendations and to formulate the corresponding improvement actions. Whereas the peer review approach allows for common agreement within the ESS on the methodology, the objectives, scope and implementation arrangements, the focus on improvements and a peer learning process.

Although all principles of the ES CoP will be reviewed for all countries through the SAQ, the peer review experts are free to customise the country visit to concentrate on those principles where more clarification/explanation is needed. However, certain principles such as those concerning professional independence and coordination and cooperation, as well as principles including elements of modernisation, will be assessed during the peer review visit for every member of the ESS.

In addition to these common principles to be addressed for every member of the ESS, the peer review team also placed an emphasis on the institutional environment and the quality of production and outputs. In a context of decreasing resources, adequacy of resources (ES CoP, Principle 3) was scrutinised by the peer review team.

The recent reorganisation of the Belgian statistical system, but also the recommendations of the previous peer review report to improve statistical quality within Statistics Belgium and its products and services to users, led the peer review team to put emphasis on the quality of the statistical production (ES CoP, principle 4), in particular in terms of timeliness and punctuality (ES CoP, principle 13) and accessibility and clarity (ES CoP, principle 15). Measures to assure confidentiality (ES CoP, principle 5) and conditions of pre-release access (ES CoP, principle 6) were also assessed by the peer review team.

Also, although the reports should not be used to compare one country to another, much effort has been made to ensure the harmonisation of the reports and the ensuing recommendations across the countries so that all countries are treated equitably.

The peer review of Eurostat was conducted by the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB).

3. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE NATIONAL STATISTICAL SYSTEM

The Belgian Statistical System and Statistical Law

Belgian official statistics are governed by the Law of 4 July 1962 on public statistics (referred to as the Belgian Statistics Act). This law provides definitions and principles applicable to statistics. It also sets forth the principle of lawfulness and fairness, the principle of finality, the principle of proportionality and the principle of impartiality, objectivity and professional independence. Statistical confidentiality is the subject of a separate article, which guarantees the statistical purpose of the data obtained and prevents their unlawful disclosure. The Belgian Statistics Act empowers Statistics Belgium, by decision of the Minister competent for the National Statistical Institute or of his delegate, the executive power to carry out statistical investigations on the demographic, economic, social, environmental and technological situation of the country or of any of its entities.

Organisation

In January 2014, the Directorate-General of Statistics and Economic Information was renamed by Royal Decree as the Directorate-General of Statistics - Statistics Belgium, to take into account its growing European and international dimension. As the National Statistical Institute (NSI), Statistics Belgium has the responsibility for coordinating all activities at national level for the development, production and dissemination of European Statistics and acts as the contact point for Eurostat on statistical matters.

Over the second part of the 20th century, several reforms of the State progressively resulted in a comprehensive regionalisation through the transfer of most State competences from federal to regional levels. As a result, the Belgian statistical system is composed of federal and regional organisations. The combined effect of the functional and regional decentralisation of statistical production has led to a somewhat complex statistical system in Belgium. Figure 1 below provides an overview of the Belgian statistical system in 2021.

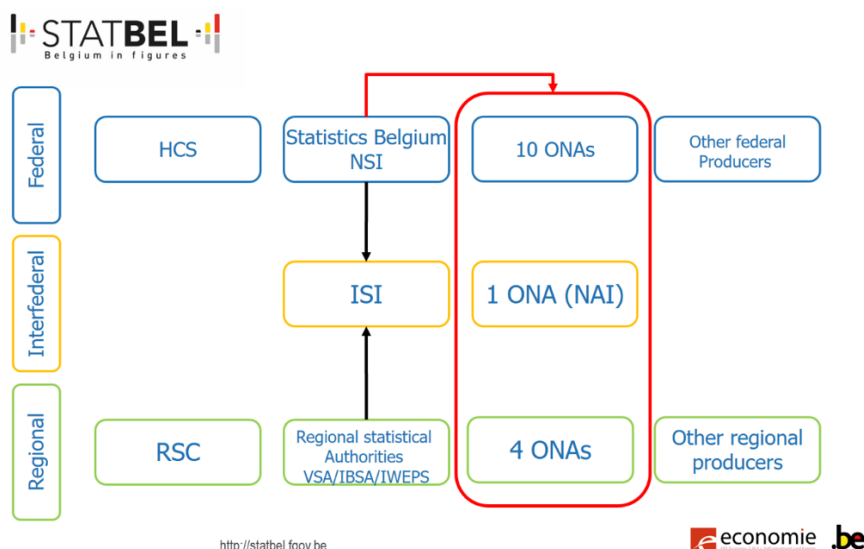


Figure 1: The Belgian Statistical System¹

In the most recent round of general reforms (the sixth reform) of the State, a chapter on official statistics was included, which fundamentally changed the relationship between the federal and regional/community levels with regard to the production of official statistics. A cooperation agreement was adopted on 15 July 2014 between the federal Belgian government, the governments of the Regions and Communities, the United College of the Common Community Commission and the College of the French Community Commission.

Since its inception in January 2016, the Interfederal Statistical Institute has proven its usefulness in avoiding duplication of work among statistical authorities and in facilitating cooperation. For example, four working groups were created: “Data Protection Officers”, “International Positioning”, “Statistical Work Programmes” and “Sustainable Development Goals”. A Service Level Agreement (SLA) is drawn up for the collaborations selected for the integrated statistical programmes. This SLA specifies the objectives pursued and the expected deliverables. However, the ISI has no specific staff, only a secretariat which is provided by Statistics Belgium. It is therefore a forum for cooperation rather than an institution in itself.

Statistical programmes

The cooperation agreement provided for the creation of the Interfederal Statistical Institute (ISI), which was set up on 1 January 2016, with the aim of strengthening cooperation between the various services of the federal state and the federated entities in the development, production and dissemination of official statistics in Belgium. The main objective of the ISI is the coordination of statistical programmes and the drafting of an integrated statistical programme. The Institute can also address methodological recommendations to public bodies, which prepare official statistics. Finally, the ISI and Other National Authorities carry out quality monitoring of the statistical production in accordance with the principles of the European Statistics Code of Practice (ES CoP) and according to the single audit principle.

Coordination of the NSS

¹ HCS: Higher Council for statistics, RSC: Regional Statistical Councils

Statistics Belgium is the National Statistical Institute. It is responsible for coordinating all activities at national level for the development, production and dissemination of European statistics and acts as the contact point for Eurostat on statistical matters.

Advisory bodies

The Higher Council of Statistics (HCS) is an advisory body for the producers of official statistics at federal level that has the right of initiative. The HCS provides advice on statistical policy and statistical work, makes proposals for the production of statistics of general interest and suggestions to unify or improve the statistical work of public services. Due to its right of initiative, it can issue advice to discontinue existing statistical works or to develop and/or start new statistical works if necessary. To this end, the HCS considers the needs of users: the government, sector federations, trade unions, academia and the community in general, and tries to match the supply of statistics with user needs. The HCS is made up of the Director-General of Statistics Belgium, a member by right, and a senior manager of Statistics Belgium registered in a language list other than that of the member by right. It also includes representatives of the academic community and the socio-economic world, representatives of other federal administrations as well as representatives of federated entities.

The regional statistical authorities have their own Advisory Councils relating to the statistical work within their remit.

Appointment of the Director-General

The Director-General of Statistics Belgium is appointed by the federal Minister of Economy for six years and the mandate is renewable.

The recruitment procedure is carried out by the federal administration's selection office (Selor). After a first selection of candidates based on CV, experience and generic management skills, the selected candidates take an oral test including case studies, and an interview. For this oral test, Selor always forms a selection committee made up of experts from various sectors, including persons with a statistical background. Once the most suitable candidates for the job have been selected, Selor proposes a ranked list of candidates to the Federal Public Service (FPS) Economy. An additional interview is conducted by the chairman of the Board of the FPS, who decides on the successful candidate for the position of Director-General. Finally, the chairman proposes the candidate who successfully passed the interview to the Minister to appoint.

Resources

The annual budget of Statistics Belgium amounts to 23 million Euro, of which 20 million Euro are for salaries. Statistics Belgium has 335 staff members, 114 of them at level A, i.e. with an academic qualification. Human and financial resources of Statistics Belgium have been reduced since 2014, by 23% in terms of staff (in full time equivalents) and 9% in terms of budget.

Data access

The Belgian Statistics Act of 4 July 1962 states that “the King may have statistical investigations carried out” (Art. 1 quinquies) and that “The National Statistical Institute may use the individual information gathered from these investigations” (Art. 2). The NSI has a mandate to perform all surveys that are made obligatory by Royal Decree (Art. 16) “As regards inquiries and censuses, modalities are determined by Royal Decree (...). The inquiries prescribed by these Royal Decrees are executed through the NSI.” unless reference is made to Art. 17a of the Decree (when the inquiry is part of the normal practice of another organisation).

Art. 9 of the same law states that “The NSI may compile and maintain databases on the basis of the data it collects during its investigations and of data from administrative files. To this end, the NSI has access, under the conditions determined pursuant to Art. 17 quater, §2, to the data held by all public authorities”.

As stipulated in the Belgian Statistics Act of 1962, all official statistics have to respect the principle of proportionality: priority has to be given to secondary data collection (Art. 1.bis). Public administrations are obliged to grant access to the data in their possession (including identification numbers) free of charge (Art. 24bis of The Belgian Statistics Act) without prejudice to specific legislative provisions that govern communication of confidential information. When access is granted, the access should be free of charge, except for very specific cases. Title 4 of the Belgian Privacy Law of 30 July 2018 also provides for the reuse of administrative data for statistical purposes. The Belgian Statistics Act, however, does not apply to regional governments.

To get administrative data, a bilateral agreement is always needed between Statistics Belgium and the administration concerned. In practice, most new administrative data transfers must be negotiated leading to a protocol, which describes the purpose, the data, the technical and organisational measures and the conditions by which data can be communicated to third parties.

Statistics Belgium can have access to other data, including privately held data, on a voluntary basis. Such data transfers must be negotiated and can be the subject of a long process. Once access is granted, an agreement is signed between the data holders and Statistics Belgium.

Relations with users/dissemination of statistical products and services

The figures produced by Statistics Belgium are disseminated in a user-friendly manner on its website as the main communication instrument. The be.STAT application, which allows users to create customised tables from the online database, is an important part of it. In addition, the Open Data portal promotes the re-use of statistics. Various applications are also available on the website, such as "Discover your municipality", a rent calculator and an index search. In 2020, a COVID-19 page was added. In the same year, a page called “Statbel DataLab” was added, which groups statistical outputs in beta version (experimental statistics). Statistics for primary school pupils are presented and available on the "Statbel Junior" website. Finally, Statistics Belgium also uses communication tools such as press releases, newsletters and social media.

Other National Authorities participating in this peer review

For the peer review, Statistics Belgium selected 4 out of 15 Other National Authorities (ONAs) based on a balance between the importance of producing European statistics and the Belgian statistical system. The selected ONAs were:

- National Accounts Institute (NAI)
- Federal Public Service Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy – DG Energy
- Federal Public Service Home Affairs
- Vlaamse Statistische Autoriteit/Flanders Statistics Authority

The National Accounts Institute (NAI) is a public body at interfederal level. Three institutions, namely the National Bank of Belgium (NBB), the Federal Planning Bureau (FPB) and Statistics Belgium are responsible for the production of European statistics within the NAI. The NBB is responsible for compiling national accounts, financial accounts, public finance statistics and foreign trade statistics, while the FPB compiles input/output tables and environmental satellite accounts. Statistics Belgium compiles most of the data needed to produce European statistics.

The Federal Public Service Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy – DG Energy is responsible for producing, inter alia, European energy statistics. The unit responsible for the production of energy statistics is composed of nine staff members, half of them with a university degree. It conducts surveys among enterprises (monthly, bi-annually and annually) and uses administrative data from private organisations (electricity and gas transport systems, operators, etc.) and other federal or regional public organisations.

The Federal Public Service - Home Affairs produces, inter alia, European migration statistics.

The Flanders Statistics Authority is one of the regional statistical authorities and is in charge of tourism satellite accounts for Belgium. It was created in 2016, like the other regional statistical authorities (Wallonia and Brussels regions). It coordinates a network of 57 public bodies for the development, production and dissemination of Flemish official statistics. It is composed of 35 staff members. The Flanders Statistics Authority is part of the Department of Chancellery and Foreign Affairs.

4. PROGRESS/ADVANCEMENT IN THE LAST 5 YEARS

The Belgian statistical system has recorded significant progress in recent years, with an impact on the efficiency and quality of its current and future work. The biggest long-term impact relates to developments in the decentralised Belgian statistical system, but also in work planning, quality management, personnel management and dissemination of statistics.

Belgian statistical system and work programmes

The Interfederal Statistical Institute (ISI), foreseen in the Cooperation Agreement of 15 July 2014, started its work at the beginning of 2016. The ISI coordinates the statistical programmes of the regional and federal statistical authorities and compiles an integrated statistical work programme and report on a yearly basis. These are published on the ISI website, also used for sharing related information about the ISI. Procedures for annual programmes have also been reviewed and improved over the years. It can be concluded that the ISI has become a central platform for the Belgian statistical system to prepare integrated plans, communicate information between organisations and discuss common issues, as needed. However, the ISI has no specific staff, only a secretariat which is provided by Statistics Belgium. It is therefore a forum for cooperation rather than an institution in itself.

User needs

Statistics Belgium has developed and tested a procedure for the prioritisation of outputs and its implementation is planned to be regular and systematic, both for outputs and processes. Also, annual meetings with stakeholders have become a standard practice for Statistics Belgium since 2015, covering topics such as the administrative burden, timeliness, accuracy, and user expectations and needs in general.

Discussion on the mandate, composition and working arrangements of the Higher Council on Statistics has also taken place. New members and a new Presidency were appointed at the end of 2018. At the beginning of 2019, Statistics Belgium initiated a process aimed at modifying the work arrangements within the Council. This work is still ongoing, but some progress has been made and work will continue towards the main aim – to get more effective input from users and fulfil user needs to the extent possible. One related positive practice from Statistics Belgium is the increase of in-depth analyses, based on already existing data and user expectations. Internal working groups have been set up and several new initiatives have become a standard and regular practice in recent years.

Quality management

A dedicated unit for quality management was set up in Statistics Belgium in July 2015. The unit is mainly in charge of developing the quality management system. Currently there are descriptions of inputs and outputs for the production of statistics. The model to describe processes has been developed and tested and the results are usable. Guidelines and quality standards are also developed and harmonised to some extent – work on these is still ongoing. Several additional initiatives have been launched in Statistics Belgium, such as guidelines for the review of statistical processes and outputs, use of the ARIS software programme for Business Process Model description, and annual internal survey-based evaluation of the quality of processes and products.

It must be noted that the quality unit also produces quality indicators for all statistics, validates final results before publication, monitors and updates metadata and, finally, develops and monitors the statistical programme of Statistics Belgium.

Skilled personnel

Statistics Belgium has increased the proportion of highly skilled staff from 26% to 36% or, in absolute numbers, from 106 to 119 in the last five years. Annual proposals for staffing are made to the FPS Economy and decisions are taken according to budget limitations. Based on the above-mentioned results, it can be concluded that an increase in level A staff (i.e. with a university degree) has become a good practice in Statistics Belgium. For personal development, there is also a centralised training management tool used in FPS Economy, and internal mobility is promoted within Statistics Belgium.

Cooperation

Additionally, the personnel of Statistics Belgium have been cooperating more actively with the regional statistical offices and academia on methodological issues. New statistical cooperation fields have been identified and previous fields have been updated or reorganised according to needs. The cooperation with the Royal Belgian Statistical Society was also strengthened. The ISI has supported methodological cooperation in working groups between organisations (e.g. Indicators on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Data Protection Officers). Similar methodological working groups have also been organised under the umbrella of the High Council of Statistics (e.g. platform workers, teleworkers, SILC/LFS). Cooperation has been active at international level with other NSIs and international organisations as well.

Visual identity and digital presence

Statistics Belgium has improved the look of its products and service channels remarkably over the last few years. First, there is a new website and logo in use since the beginning of 2018, both clearly stating the organisation's full professional independence, but also attracting (potential) users with an optimised, yet smart and focused use of space.

Statistics Belgium has developed tools that allow users to easily obtain information; it promotes the knowledge of statistics among the public, has created solutions for the calculation of rent or for obtaining information on the area where they live, and has created an educational website for children and their teachers (StatBel Junior). Publications have been restyled, more user-friendly visualisations displayed on the website and open data files are made available on a regular basis. Furthermore, the above-mentioned visual approaches are actively used on its social media pages.

5. COMPLIANCE WITH THE CODE OF PRACTICE AND FUTURE ORIENTATION

5.1 STRENGTHS OF THE NATIONAL STATISTICAL INSTITUTE (NSI) AND THE PARTICIPATING OTHER NATIONAL AUTHORITIES (ONAs) IN RELATION TO THEIR COMPLIANCE WITH THE CODE OF PRACTICE

Strong legal basis

Belgium has a comprehensive statistical law (the Belgian Statistics Act), which governs the activities of Statistics Belgium, in line with the ES CoP. Some articles of the Belgian Statistics Act are also applicable to some of the other producers of official statistics in Belgium.

An important agreement for the Belgian statistical system is the Commitment on Confidence in Statistics. With this commitment, the federal government and the governments of the Regions and Communities formally commit themselves to ensure that the statistical authorities carry out their missions in accordance with the ES CoP, ensure respect for a number of fundamental principles and the high quality of official statistics. In particular, it means that they shall ensure the professional independence of statistical authorities, provide appropriate, sufficient and permanent resources to guarantee the quality and relevance of official statistics, ensure that the statistical authorities have access to administrative data to reduce the overall response burden, and safeguard the rights of respondents and statistical confidentiality.

Effective cooperation in a complex environment

Cooperation between the parties in the Belgian statistical system is effective and takes place in a good and constructive spirit, for example in the areas of data protection, international positioning and Sustainable Development Goals. The complex multi-actor environment is reactive and converges effectively into an annual statistical programme (Indicators 1bis.3, 11.1 and 11.2).

Motivated and flexible staff

A fundamental strength of the Belgian statistical system is its human capital. Despite reduced human and budgetary resources over the past few years, all the participants in the peer review from Statistics Belgium and the participating ONAs were well informed, highly motivated, results oriented, willing to improve further their domain of work and flexible to undertake new tasks.

The qualities of its staff have enabled Statistics Belgium to deal effectively with new requirements and urgencies during the difficult period of COVID-19. Good cooperation with colleagues across institutions, knowledge sharing and a high level of professionalism have facilitated exchanges with other statistical organisations.

The output of Statistics Belgium has increased by 42% since 2014, also covering a significant number of weekly releases. Statistics Belgium has shifted to more permanent employment status for new recruits, thus privileging stability in its workforce. While lacking highly qualified staff, one third of the posts require higher qualifications and the human resource policy is striving to upgrade competences and skills further through internal training and participation in the European Statistical Training Programme (ESTP) for its employees. Internal lunch-time presentations keep the staff informed on good practices and innovations (ES CoP, Indicators 3.1 and 7.6).

Good integration of new staff, supportive management and a positive working environment

New staff consider Statistics Belgium an attractive workplace in which they can develop. While the recruitment process in Statistics Belgium is very long, the profiles of the staff are well adapted to their tasks. The working environment also allows for a quick integration of new recruits, the hierarchy is supportive, working conditions are appreciated, training (including on IT) is adequate and the organisational culture values quality and specialisation. Young statisticians feel that their potential is well used and are motivated to stay in the job for many years. Statistics Belgium also promotes working conditions ensuring a good work life balance (ES CoP, Indicators 3.1 and 7.6).

Systematic and trustworthy data protection at operational level

The protection of confidentiality is regulated by the Belgian Statistics Act. At operational level in Statistics Belgium, a multi-disciplinary team, composed of lawyers, statisticians, IT experts, the Data Protection Officer (DPO) and representatives from statistical domains, ensures data protection and microdata anonymisation or pseudonymisation. Communication of secure data is based on protocols and takes place via secure channels. High-level encryption is used for providing anonymised data to researchers. Statistics Belgium has put in place internal measures to protect the security and integrity of statistical data (ES CoP, Principle 5).

The participating ONAs also demonstrated a strong commitment to confidentiality and well-established procedures to protect data privacy.

Good level of service praised by the media

The statistical data and services provided by Statistics Belgium to the media are highly appreciated. The press office is performing very well, anticipates the needs of users, communicates clearly, uses modern communication channels and tools, is very responsive towards users and provides tailor-made services to the media. Statistics Belgium is held in high esteem by the media and is considered the reference for official statistics (ES CoP, Indicators 15.1, 15.2 and 15.3).

Extensive use of administrative data

Statistics Belgium and participating ONAs widely use administrative data to produce statistics, such as fiscal data, scanner data, the national population register and health data. The use of administrative data has led to improved statistics and burden reduction, but their provision is not mandatory and could be strengthened (ES CoP, Indicators 2.2, 8.8 and 9.4).

Good use of new data sources and sharing of open data

Statistics Belgium is developing statistics based on new data sources, such as the consumer price index, based on a high share of scanner data. The use of web-scraping is being investigated for job vacancy indicators. Other applications cover the development of statistics on transport of goods by road complemented by toll data, and mobility statistics combining register and traffic information. Statistics Belgium's investment in new data sources has already produced tangible results and further experimental statistics are on the way. The approach used and the attitude towards innovative ways of developing, producing and disseminating official statistics and open data were considered sound by the peer review team (ES CoP, Principle 2, Indicators 10.3 and 15.2).

Innovative practices

The peer review team identified innovative practices that are noteworthy and possibly applicable in some way in other national settings. The peer review team would like to highlight the following important initiatives:

- Developing the use of privately held data sources by building partnerships (transport data, scanner data);
- Production and release of experimental statistics. For example, in order to analyse the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Statistics Belgium has been publishing provisional quarterly estimates of Belgian population travel in its Datalab since July 2020. A year later, the experimental results have been validated and quarterly results can now be used as official statistics starting from the reference period first quarter 2021;
- Developing dissemination tools targeting specific user groups, such as StatBel Junior.

5.2 ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.2.1 Strengthening the coordination role of Statistics Belgium regarding European statistics

The leading role of Statistics Belgium regarding European statistics is recognised by the ONAs that were interviewed during the peer review. Statistics Belgium prepares, with relevant ONAs, all the dossiers for the European Statistical System Committee (ESSC), the directors' groups and for most Eurostat working groups and task forces. A similar coordination is also foreseen for other international meetings (OECD, UNSC, UNECE, etc.).

The Belgian statistical system is complex, with institutions at federal, regional and community level. Therefore, it is essential to maintain a high level of public confidence and visibility of the Belgian statistical system. The interviewed ONAs requested increased support from Statistics Belgium in areas such as quality management, methodology or dissemination, given its experience but also its size and role in the Belgian statistical system. While the ISI has focused on the coordination of statistical programmes and has provided a platform for effective cooperation, no national guidelines are available to ensure quality in the development, production and dissemination of European statistics within the national statistical system, as requested by the ES CoP.

The peer review team formed the opinion that the coordination of European statistics produced in Belgium should be strengthened. While respecting the principle of equality of statistical authorities at federal, regional and community levels, Statistics Belgium should play a more prominent role in strengthening coordination, as defined in Regulation No 223/2009. A legislative proposal amending the Belgium Statistics Act is currently under discussion, proposing to include a definition of the NSI with the following wording: "National Statistical Institute: the Directorate-General of Statistics – Statistics Belgium, within the meaning of Article 1(7) of the Royal Decree of 20 November 2003 establishing the name and the powers of the directorates-general of the Federal Public Service Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy and the national statistical authority, within the meaning of Regulation No 223/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2009 relating to European Statistics".

The peer review team considers that this addition will strengthen the recognition of Statistics Belgium as the NSI within the meaning of Regulation No 223/2009.

To comply with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

R1. The relevant authorities should amend the Belgian Statistics Act to institutionalise the role of Statistics Belgium as the National Statistical Institute in the coordination of European statistics at national level within the meaning of Regulation No 223/2009. (Compliance-relevant: ES CoP, Indicator 1bis.1)

The Belgian statistical system lacks harmonised approaches to ensure consistency and quality throughout production. Legislative documents and agreements include general principles for quality management and assurance, but there is no dedicated and formulated quality policy for the entire value chain of statistical production in place, which could be followed by all statistical authorities in the Belgian statistical system.

Due to this lack of central quality policy and coordination, the development, management and use of national guidelines for quality assurance in statistics is non-systematic. Existing guidelines differ in the level of detail and structure of content. Therefore, their coherent implementation by the statistical authorities as well as by different domains is only partially ensured.

As far as the validation of the output is concerned, good practices have been applied. Nevertheless, validation is limited due to the lack of national guidelines and their implementation. The interviewed ONAs stressed the need for a formal quality management system, including quality guidelines and supporting frameworks, to systematically review and report on their statistical processes and outputs. All of them requested increased support from Statistics Belgium in the area of quality, given its experience, but also its size and role in the Belgian statistical system.

Therefore, it is recommended that further improvement activities should be planned, coordinated and implemented under the coordination of Statistics Belgium and in close collaboration with the ONAs to ensure more systematic and comprehensive quality assurance in the Belgian statistical system.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

R2. Statistics Belgium should coordinate the production of a quality policy statement and national guidelines to ensure the quality of European Statistics within the Belgian statistical system; their implementation should be systematically monitored and reviewed. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicators 1bis.2, 4.2)

As mentioned above, cooperation among federal and regional statistical authorities has increased since the establishment of the ISI in 2016. Four working groups on data protection, international positioning, programming and SDGs have worked continuously since 2016.

Furthermore, in relation to the production of European statistics, the ONAs participating in the peer review expressed the need for increased cooperation. For example, some ONAs would benefit from the experience of others in improved access to European Union (EU) grants; better information about available data could lead to greater use for other statistical productions; and increased cooperation on quality management is needed. Access to the business register, which is built and maintained by Statistics Belgium, should also be facilitated for ONAs who need it for statistical purposes.

Human resources across the Belgian statistical system are diverse in terms of skills and experience. For example, the Statistics Unit of FPS Home Affairs has recruited since 2010 to reach a current staff of 10. Only half of the 9 members of staff of the Statistics Unit of FPS Economy - Directorate-General of Energy have university degrees. The Flanders Statistics Authority was created in 2016 and has 35 Full Time Equivalents (FTEs) to deal with 57 producers of statistics. Statistics Belgium employs 334 staff, out of whom only 119 have university degrees (category A). Therefore, cooperation among Statistics Belgium and all the ONAs is key to developing skills and competences. Joint training on transversal subjects (quality, methodology, classifications, etc.), but also, if possible, staff exchanges, such as short-term secondments, could help to develop skills as well as to create a common statistical culture in the complex organisation of the Belgian statistical system.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

R3. Statistics Belgium and Other National Authorities should further enhance their cooperation, by establishing systematic exchanges and training on their respective statistical production, methods and quality standards, and support the development of competences and skills in statistics by encouraging the mobility of statisticians between their organisations. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicator 1bis.3)

5.2.2 Enhancing the ability to meet new requirements in a changing data environment

Human and financial resources of Statistics Belgium have been reduced since 2014, by 23% in terms of staff FTEs and 9% in terms of budget. At the same time, statistical output has increased and is facing additional challenges from economic, social, geopolitical and environmental developments, which require more detailed and timely monitoring. Increased statistical output of ONAs producing energy, migration and economic statistics is also observed. Exploring and using new data sources, such as privately held data, to replace traditional data collection methods and produce new statistics requires an initial investment in resources. The statistical output increased by 42% between 2014 to 2021, doubling Statistics Belgium's output per FTE. New challenges, however, will not be met effectively with continuously shrinking resources. The peer review team considers that federal, regional and community authorities should ensure adequate resources for Statistics Belgium and the ONAs to enable them to maintain the quality of statistical production and meet emerging statistical needs.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

R4. The federal, regional and community authorities should ensure adequate resources for Statistics Belgium, and the Other National Authorities under their responsibility, to address the forthcoming increase in statistical needs and new policy priorities, that will involve developing methodologies to use new data sources. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicator 3.1)

The production of statistics is evolving in a continuously changing environment, market complexity is increasing and new sources of information are emerging. The tools and possibilities for collecting data are also multiplying, and there is a pressing need for automation and the use of new technologies for a more effective production of statistics with less of a burden on respondents. The skills, competences and expertise of human resources must therefore also be continuously adapted to this changing environment. The peer review team considers that the mobility of personnel, in particular in the early stage of their career, could be enhanced and accompanied by more structured training, to develop a good understanding of the statistical authority's mission. Statistics Belgium should enable personal and professional development with an adequate training programme and career management, by promoting and valuing even further the acquisition of new expertise and encouraging mobility across its departments and, if possible, the departments of the ONAs, to acquire and exchange know-how and develop a well-balanced working environment across the Belgian statistical system.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

R5. Statistics Belgium and the Other National Authorities should ensure that the skills, competences and expertise of its staff meet its strategic and operational needs, by developing a training system and adequate career management. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicators 3.1, 7.5)

The use of administrative data has gained prominence in recent years; it avoids having to ask respondents for data that is already available in the public administration and thus reduces the burden on respondents. In addition, in the last decade there has been a rapid growth in the capacity of companies to collect and process market data. The use of this data is relevant for public administration and leads to more and better information about society, which in the end results in improved decision-making processes and, ultimately, in a better service to citizens. In this sense, the Belgian Statistical Act allows access to administrative data (Art. 24bis) and prioritises the secondary data collection method over the primary (Art. 1bis). At regional level, there are bilateral agreements that allow the use of administrative data.

Moreover, Statistics Belgium participates in meetings on privately held data to explain the importance of the use of these data sources and has even signed some agreements, for example with the Tax Administration, for their use.

However, and despite the fact that Statistics Belgium uses around 25 administrative sources to compile statistics, the peer review team considers that Statistics Belgium should establish an appropriate institutional environment to exploit their full potential, have access to the data and be informed of any changes. This will maintain the quality and continuity of statistics based on these data sources, improve access to the data and ensure their use to the fullest.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

R6. The federal, regional and community authorities should establish an appropriate institutional environment with administrative and other data holders to be able to exploit the full potential of the data, have access to the data and be informed of any changes. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicators 2.2, 2.4 and 10.3)

The increasing role of information technology (IT) in improving the quality of statistical production with the use of modern and fit-for-purpose tools, is of particular relevance for the exploitation of the potential of new data sources and communication possibilities. Multiplying and rapidly changing data dissemination channels also offer new possibilities in reaching users and fighting fake news.

All the directorates of FPS Economy rely on a common IT department, including Statistics Belgium which has no IT department and no dedicated IT budget of its own. Parts of the IT infrastructure used by Statistics Belgium are systematically shared with other directorates. Statistics Belgium does not have a systematic view on the contracts signed by the IT department, nor can Statistics Belgium take decisions on its own IT tools. For example, statistical software is rather specific and access to new sources of data, such as big data, require a specific IT environment and tools. Statistical institutions should have the ability to determine what best fits their needs.

The peer review team considers that the general IT support provided to the various statistical services and managed at ministerial or regional level can provide efficient and cost-effective solutions. However, the specific IT needs for the development, production and dissemination of European statistics should be taken into consideration to ensure the availability of appropriate tools for the efficient exploitation of data sources.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

R7. Statistics Belgium, Federal Public Service Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy – DG Energy, Federal Public Service - Home Affairs and the Flanders Statistics Authority should ensure the availability of appropriate IT tools to enable the full exploitation of the possibilities offered by innovative data sources and privately held data for the development, production and dissemination of official statistics. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicators 3.1, 10.2 and 10.4)

Although Statistics Belgium is one of the directorates of FPS Economy, it has its own information security policy. This policy is currently limited to the processes and tools that are managed by Statistics Belgium. Furthermore, there is no contract or formal agreement between Statistics Belgium and the IT department of FPS Economy. Regarding information security, there is no policy for the processes and tools that are managed at FPS level.

Therefore, it is recommended that the current situation and risks should be carefully audited, and a wider policy should be prepared in cooperation between Statistics Belgium and the IT department of FPS Economy and other statistical authorities involved in the production of European statistics. Further

improvement activities and measures should be planned, coordinated and implemented to ensure more systematic and comprehensive data security, data protection and confidentiality in the Belgian statistical system.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

R8. Statistics Belgium and Federal Public Service Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy should develop a standardised framework for data security, data protection and confidentiality measures, with clear agreements on the share of responsibilities between related organisations, units and persons. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicator 5.5)

5.2.3 Developing user engagement

The Statistics Belgium website provides a link to some of the producers of official statistics in Belgium, via a quite lengthy path: “About StatBel”, then “Our partners”, then “Statistics portal”, then “Statistical organisations in Belgium”. The peer review team noted that the list does not include all the ONAs.

To find out which European statistics are produced within the Belgian statistical system, it is necessary to consult the web pages of each of the ONAs, which requires users to know which statistics are produced by whom and leads to an excessive loss of time in searching for the required information. Therefore, the peer review team considers that the creation of a web portal containing the list of all the European statistics produced within the framework of the Belgian statistical system and a link to their publication would improve the visibility of all the European statistics produced, making it easier for users to find them.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

R9. Statistics Belgium should enhance the visibility of all European statistics produced within the Belgian statistical system by setting up a well-branded official statistics web portal, including a list of the European statistics and a link to their publication. (Improvement-related: ES COP Indicator 15.2)

Since the last peer review, Statistics Belgium has developed its own website, apart from the FPS Economy website, and has developed its dissemination policy. Recently, the press office started to create *personas*, to represent the different types of users who might use the products and services offered by Statistics Belgium. This allows segments of users to be identified and a dissemination strategy adapted to the different categories to be developed. While acknowledging the improvements achieved in recent years, the peer review team considers that Statistics Belgium should further pursue its efforts in that direction and develop a proactive dissemination strategy to better meet the needs of its different categories of users. Such strategy should also include more detailed user satisfaction surveys on their respective statistical production and services, along with a systematic analysis and publication of results and planning of improvement actions. In addition, Statistics Belgium should release its statistical output in a more user-friendly way, e.g. using storytelling to make it more accessible to the media and users.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

R10. Statistics Belgium should develop a more proactive dissemination strategy to enhance the visibility and attractivity of its products, in order to meet the needs of different user segments. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicators 11.3, 15.1)

Statistics Belgium announces its publication dates in advance through a release calendar that is available on its website. The calendar states the date of publication, the theme of the publication and the reference period for the statistics that will be released, but the exact publication time is not available, which could translate into a lack of transparency and even impartiality.

On the other hand, when major revisions or methodological changes are made to existing statistics, these are not notified to users in advance on the website, which may result in users being unprepared for changes, delaying their work, leading to misinterpretations of the new data and increasing the number of questions to the producers of statistics.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

R11. Statistics Belgium should standardise the release of European statistics. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicators 6.5, 6.6, 13.2)

Although for some European statistics there is information on the methodology used and on quality, not all statistics have such information, which makes it difficult for users to know the methodology and quality of the produced statistics. The peer review team considers that Statistics Belgium should provide systematic information related to methodology and quality.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

R12. Statistics Belgium should improve its website further to standardise the provision of information related to the methodology and quality of European statistics. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicators 15.1, 15.6 and 15.7)

Ensuring transparency and equal access to information for all users is fundamental to maintain the independence and credibility of the NSS. In that regard, transparency of pre-release access to non-European statistics is also desirable to preserve the credibility of the Belgian statistical system as an integral part of the European statistical system. While arrangements for pre-release access to European statistics are usually published on the websites of the national and regional statistical authorities, the peer review team identified the need to review the pre-release access arrangements and to document them further on the websites of Statistics Belgium and ONAs.

To improve beyond compliance with the ES CoP, the peer review team recommends:

R13. Statistics Belgium and Other National Authorities should review their pre-release access arrangements and document them appropriately on their websites, to ensure harmonised adherence to the ES CoP. (Improvement-related: ES CoP, Indicator 6.7)

5.3 VIEWS OF THE NSI, AS THE NATIONAL COORDINATOR OF THE NSS AND THE PEER REVIEW, ON THOSE RECOMMENDATIONS WHERE THEY DIVERGE FROM PEER REVIEW EXPERTS' ASSESSMENT

None

ANNEX A – AGENDA OF THE VISIT

Timing	Topic	Participants
DAY 1		
09:00-09:45	Preparatory meeting with the national coordination desk and, possibly, other national participants in the visit	<u>PR expert team:</u> All <u>The NSI:</u> Head of International Strategy and Coordination Attaché of International Strategy and Coordination
09:45-10:00	Welcome and introduction of the programme, adopting the agenda and organisational matters	<u>PR expert team:</u> All <u>The NSI:</u> Director-General a.i. Head of Coordination and Dissemination Head of International Strategy and Coordination
10:00-11:00	Presentation of the National Statistical System	<u>PR expert team:</u> All <u>The NSI:</u> Director-General a.i. Head of Coordination and Dissemination Head of International Strategy and Coordination <u>The regional statistical authorities:</u> Senior Advisor Flanders Statistics Authority Head of territorial statistics and population IBSA General Administrator IWEPS
11:00-11:15	Coffee break	

11:15-12:45	Coordination and cooperation (ES CoP principle 1bis)	<u>PR expert team:</u> All <u>The NSI:</u> Head of International Strategy and Coordination Head of Coordination and Diffusion Spokeswoman Legal Advisor Head of Territorial Statistics
12:45-13:45	Lunch	
13:45-15:15	Professional independence and the Law on Official Statistics and related legislation (ES CoP principles 1, 2, 5 and 6)	<u>PR expert team:</u> All <u>The NSI:</u> Head of Coordination and Dissemination Legal Advisor Head of International Strategy and Coordination Spokeswoman Data Protection Officer
15:15-15:30	Coffee break	
15:30-17:00	Quality (organisational structure, tools, monitoring) (Es CoP principles 4 and 11 to 15)	<u>PR expert team:</u> All <u>The NSI:</u> Head of Coordination and Dissemination Spokeswoman Communication and Dissemination department Head of International Strategy and Coordination Head of Methodology department
17:00-18:00	Peer review expert team discussion	

Timing	Topic	Participants
DAY 2		
09:00-10:15	Programming, planning and resources (ES CoP principles 1, 3, 9 and 10)	<u>PR expert team:</u> All <u>The NSI:</u> Head of Coordination and Dissemination Director-General a.i. Head of International Strategy and Coordination Data Protection Officer
10:15-10:30	Coffee break	
10:30-12:00	Dissemination and confidentiality (ES CoP principles 5, 6 and 15)	<u>PR expert team:</u> All <u>The NSI:</u> Data Protection Officer Legal Advisor Head of Data warehouse Department Spokeswoman Head of Methodology department Head of International Strategy and Coordination Advisor of Communication and Dissemination department Attaché of Communication and Dissemination department
12:00-13:00	Lunch	
13:00- 14:45	Methodology, data collection, data processing and administrative data (ES CoP principles 2, 7 and 8)	<u>PR expert team:</u> All <u>The NSI:</u> Head of Methodology department

		<p>Data Protection Officer</p> <p>Head of International Strategy and Coordination</p> <p>Head of Census</p> <p>Head of Administrative Data Sources section for Enterprises</p> <p>Head of Business Statistics</p> <p>Head of Social Statistics</p> <p>Head of Territorial Statistics</p> <p>Head of Coordination and Dissemination</p>
14:45-15:45	Meeting with junior staff (staff with 2-5 years' experience in the NSI)	<p><u>PR expert team:</u></p> <p>All</p> <p><u>The NSI:</u></p> <p>Statistician of Consumer Price Index</p> <p>Legal Advisor</p> <p>Statistician of Demographic Statistics</p> <p>Statistician of Data warehouse Department</p> <p>Translator</p>
15:45-16:00	Coffee break	
16.00-17:00	Progress and plans for the future (progress over the past 5 years and NSIs plans for the future).	<p><u>PR expert team:</u></p> <p>All</p> <p><u>The NSI:</u></p> <p>Director-General a.i.</p> <p>Head of Coordination and Dissemination</p> <p>Head of International Strategy and Coordination</p> <p>Data Protection Officer</p> <p>Spokeswoman</p> <p>Head of Business Statistics</p>
17:00-18:00	Peer review expert team discussion	

Timing	Topic	Participants
DAY 3		
09:00 - 09:30	General opening session with all the other national authorities producing European Statistics that are taking part in the peer review	<p><u>PR expert team:</u></p> <p>All</p> <p><u>The NSI:</u></p> <p>Head of International Strategy and Coordination</p> <p>Attaché International Strategy and Coordination</p> <p><u>The ONAs:</u></p> <p>Head of unit Monitoring of Energy FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy - Energy DG</p> <p>Head of Statistics Department National Bank of Belgium</p> <p>Advisor Federal Planning Bureau</p> <p>Head of Statistics Unit FPS Home Affairs</p> <p>Senior Advisor Flanders Statistics Authority</p> <p>Chief Statistician Flanders Statistics Authority</p> <p>Head of data management Flanders Statistics Authority</p> <p>Statistician in charge of some statistics on the enforcement of immigration legislation FPS Home Affairs</p> <p>Statistician in charge of statistics on international protection and vulnerable populations FPS Home Affairs</p> <p>5 Attachés Energy Statistics FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy - Energy DG</p> <p>Advisor Energy Statistics FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy - Energy DG</p> <p>Senior expert national and regional accounts and business cycle National Bank of Belgium</p>

09:30-11:00	Meeting with 1st Other National Authority: Vlaamse Statistische Autoriteit/Flanders Statistics Authority	<u>PR expert team:</u> All <u>The NSI:</u> Head of International Strategy and Coordination <u>1st ONA:</u> Chief Statistician Senior Advisor Head of data management
11:00-11:15	Coffee break	
11:15-12:45	Meeting with 2nd Other National Authority: FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy - Energy DG	<u>PR expert team:</u> All <u>The NSI:</u> Head of International Strategy and Coordination <u>2nd ONA:</u> Head of unit - Monitoring of Energy 5 attachés Energy Statistics Advisor Energy Statistics
12:45-13:45	Lunch	
13:45-15:15	Meeting with 3rd Other National Authority: FPS of Home Affaires	<u>PR expert team:</u> All <u>The NSI:</u> Head of International Strategy and Coordination <u>3rd ONA:</u> Head of Statistics Unit Statistician in charge of statistics on international protection and vulnerable populations Statistician in charge of some statistics on the enforcement of immigration legislation

15:15-15:30	Coffee break	
15:30-17:00	Meeting with 4th Other National Authority: National Accounts Institute	<p><u>PR expert team:</u></p> <p>All</p> <p><u>The NSI:</u></p> <p>Head of International Strategy and Coordination</p> <p>Attaché of International Strategy and Coordination</p> <p><u>4th ONA:</u></p> <p>Head of Statistics Department in National Bank of Belgium</p> <p>Senior expert of national and regional accounts and business cycle National Bank of Belgium</p> <p>Advisor of Federal Planning Bureau</p>
17:00-18:00	Peer review expert team discussion	
Timing	Topic	Participants
DAY 4		
09:00 - 09:30	General closing session with all the Other National Authorities producing European Statistics that are taking part in the peer review	<p><u>PR expert team:</u></p> <p>All</p> <p><u>The NSI:</u></p> <p>Head of International Strategy and Coordination</p> <p>Attaché International Strategy and Coordination</p> <p><u>The ONAs:</u></p> <p>Head of unit - Monitoring of Energy FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy – Energy DG</p> <p>Head of Statistics Department National Bank of Belgium</p> <p>Advisor Federal Planning Bureau</p>

		<p>Head of Statistics Unit FPS Home Affairs</p> <p>Senior Advisor Flanders Statistics Authority</p> <p>Chief Statistician Flanders Statistics Authority</p> <p>Head of data management Flanders Statistics Authority</p> <p>Statistician in charge of some statistics on the enforcement of immigration legislation FPS Home Affairs</p> <p>Statistician in charge of statistics on international protection and vulnerable populations FPS Home Affairs</p> <p>Senior expert national and regional accounts and business cycle National Bank of Belgium</p>
09:30-11:00	Meeting with main data providers	<p><u>PR expert team:</u></p> <p>All</p> <p><u>The NSI:</u></p> <p>Head of International Strategy and Coordination</p> <p><u>Main data providers:</u></p> <p>Managing Director Crossroad Bank for Enterprises FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy</p> <p>Chief analyst FPS Social Security</p> <p>Analyst FPS Social Security</p>
11:00-11:15	Coffee break	
11:15-12:00	Meeting with providers of new data sources	<p><u>PR expert team:</u></p> <p>All</p> <p><u>The NSI:</u></p> <p>Head of Business Statistics</p> <p>Data Protection Officer</p> <p>Head of Territorial Statistics</p> <p>Head of International Strategy and Coordination</p>

12:00-13:00	Meeting with main users - media	<u>PR expert team:</u> All <u>The NSI:</u> Head of International Strategy and Coordination <u>Media:</u> Journalist VRT news Journalist Het Nieuwsblad Journalist Knack Journalist RTBF Journalist Le Soir
13:00-14:00	Lunch	
14:00-15:00	Meeting with main users - Ministries and other public/private institutions (including central bank as a user)	<u>PR expert team:</u> All <u>The NSI:</u> Head of International Strategy and Coordination <u>Ministries and other public/private institutions:</u> 2 Economists National Bank of Belgium Advisor Prices and Markets FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy Attaché business cycle and sector developments FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy Attaché data analysis FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy Epidemiologist Sciensano Secretary general Conseil Central de l'économie
15:00-16:00	Meeting with main users - business associations and federations and trade unions, as well as representatives of a committee of users (if any)	<u>PR expert team:</u> All <u>The NSI:</u>

		<p>Head of International Strategy and Coordination</p> <p><u>Business associations and federations and trade unions and representatives of a committee of users:</u></p> <p>Data manager Essencia</p> <p>Advisor research section ABVV-FGTB</p> <p>Advisor research section ACLVB</p> <p>Deputy advisor competence centre digital economy and innovation Federation of Enterprises in Belgium</p> <p>Advisor Insurance Technical Studies Assuralia</p>
16:00-16:15	Coffee break	
16:15-17:15	Meeting with main users - scientific community + Higher Council of Statistics	<p><u>PR expert team:</u></p> <p>All</p> <p><u>Scientific community:</u></p> <p>Professor - Centre for sociological research Catholic University of Leuven</p> <p>Research associate - Free University of Brussels - President of the Higher Council of Statistics</p> <p><u>The NSI:</u></p> <p>Head of International Strategy and Coordination</p> <p>Secretary of Higher Council of Statistics</p> <p>Legal Advisor</p>
17:15-18:15	Peer review expert team discussion	
Timing	Topic	Participants
DAY 5		
09:00-10:30	Peer review expert team discussion	
10:30-10:45	Coffee break	

10:45-11:45	Clarifications, remaining or additional issues and focus areas	<u>PR expert team:</u> All <u>The NSI:</u> Head of International Strategy and Coordination Attaché of International Strategy and Coordination Head of Business Statistics
11:45- 12:45	Meeting with senior management of the ONAs	<u>PR expert team:</u> All <u>The NSI:</u> Head of International Strategy and Coordination <u>ONAs:</u> Director-General a.i. FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy - Energy DG Head of unit - Monitoring of Energy FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy - Energy DG Advisor general FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy - Energy DG President of the Board of Directors FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy and President of the National Account Institute Head of Statistics Department National Bank of Belgium Advisor Federal Planning Bureau Commissioner a.i. Federal Planning Bureau Head of Statistics Unit FPS Home Affairs Senior Advisor Flanders Statistics Authority Chief Statistician Flanders Statistics Authority Head of data management Flanders Statistics Authority

		Senior expert national and regional accounts and business cycle National Bank of Belgium
12:45-13:45	Lunch	
13:45- 15:15	Meeting with senior management of the NSI	<u>PR expert team:</u> All <u>The NSI:</u> Director-General a.i. Head of Coordination and Dissemination Spokeswoman Head of Business Statistics Data Protection Officer Head of International Strategy and Coordination

ANNEX B – LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Statistics Belgium	Director-General a.i.
	Head of Coordination and Dissemination
	Spokeswoman
	Legal Advisor
	Data Protection Officer
	Advisor Communication and Dissemination department
	Attaché Communication and dissemination
	Head of Methodology department
	Head of Datawarehouse department
	Head of Census
	Head of Business Statistics
	Head of Social Statistics
	Head of Territorial and Demographic Statistics
	Head of Administrative Data Sources section for Enterprises
	Statistician Consumer Price Index
	Statistician, demographic statistics
	Translator
	Statistician, Datawarehouse
	Secretary of Higher Council of Statistics
	Attaché of International Strategy and Coordination
	Head of International Strategy and Coordination

Flanders Statistics Authority	Chief Statistician
	Senior Advisor
	Head of data and methods
FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy - Energy DG	Director-General a.i.
	Head of unit Monitoring of Energy
	Advisor general Monitoring of Energy and Electricity system
	Attaché Energy Statistics
	Attaché Energy Statistics
	Attaché Energy Statistics
	Advisor Energy Statistics
	Attaché Energy Statistics
	Attaché Energy Statistics
FPS Home Affairs	Head of Statistics Unit
	Statistician in charge of statistics on international protection and vulnerable populations
	Statistician in charge of some statistics on the enforcement of immigration legislation
FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy + National Account Institute	President of the Board of Directors + President of National Account Institute
National Bank of Belgium	Head of Statistics department
	Senior expert national and regional accounts and business cycle
	Economist
	Economist
Institut Wallon de l'évaluation, de la prospective et de la statistique	General administrator

Institut Bruxellois de Statistique et d'Analyse	Head of territorial statistics and population
FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy - Economic Analyses and international Economy	Advisor Prices and Markets
	Attaché business cycle and sector developments
FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy - ICT and Crossroad Bank for Enterprises	Managing director Crossroad Bank for Enterprises
FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy - SME Policy	Attaché data analysis
FPS Social Security	Chief analyst
	Analyst
Federal Planning Bureau	Advisor
	Commissioner a.i.
ABVV-FGTB	Advisor research section
ACLVB	Advisor research section
Assuralia	Advisor Insurance Technical Studies
Catholic University of Leuven	Professor Centre for Sociological Research
Conseil centrale de l'économie	Secretary-General
Essenscia	Data manager
Federation of Enterprises in Belgium	Deputy advisor competence centre digital economy and innovation
Free University of Brussels + Higher Council of Statistics (HCS)	Research Associate + President of HCS
Het Nieuwsblad	Journalist
Knack	Journalist
Le Soir	Journalist