

## Ensuring policy relevance and promoting the use of SEEA Central Framework: UK Experience

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Over the past 15 years, the UK has developed its Environmental Accounts. Much of this development has been driven by, or in collaboration with, the development of European legislation. The UK Government has launched a range of strategies that have an environment focus, including the Clean Growth Strategy<sup>2</sup>, the Industrial Strategy<sup>3</sup>, which lists Clean Growth as one of four 'Grand Challenges', and the 25 Year Environment Plan<sup>4</sup>. These are new environmental policies which, at the same time as the UK's decision to leave the European Union, provide a unique opportunity for Office for National Statistics (ONS) to reflect on the statistics published and their dissemination. This has resulted in a period of stakeholder engagement, to raise awareness of available data and its potential uses, and to ensure development and presentation of the UK Environmental Accounts best suit user needs.

This short paper presents some of the ways in which the ONS Environmental Accounts team has gone about increasing awareness of the Environmental Accounts, thereby promoting their use. It will also discuss findings of stakeholder engagement and how this has shaped development.

### **Engagement**

A series of engagement activities were undertaken, such as introductory meetings with stakeholders and attending and presenting at conferences. The aim was to build links, find out what users are interested in and how the Environmental Accounts can best be utilised. As a direct result of this engagement:

- A member of the ONS Environmental Accounts team now sits on the UK National Inventory Steering Committee. This allows us to understand and influence potential changes to the inventory at an early stage, and to raise awareness of the Environmental Accounts.
- ONS is now a member of a working group on waste and resources statistics, led by Defra, the UK environment ministry<sup>5</sup>. This has enabled ONS to better understand how material flow accounts are used and provides an opportunity to inform users of MFAs of developments and data issues. It has also resulted in ONS reviewing its production of raw material equivalents estimates, to ensure the UK has a coherent approach and doesn't mislead users.

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<sup>1</sup> Office for National Statistics, United Kingdom

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/clean-growth-strategy>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/the-uks-industrial-strategy>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan>

<sup>5</sup> While waste accounts are part of the CEEA, in the UK the responsibility for these sits with Defra, the UK Environment Ministry, and not the ONS Environmental Accounts team.

- ONS became involved in, and now leads, a project scoping the development of a materials database.

### **Increasing responsiveness and relevance**

Traditionally, the Environmental Accounts have been released in an annual publication, bringing together all data produced under the central framework. A conscious decision was made to raise awareness of the data through other avenues throughout the year, increasing the responsiveness and relevance of the Environmental Accounts. Examples include:

- **Publishing articles in response to policy announcements** For example, the UK government announced plans to [end the sale of petrol and diesel cars by 2040](#). In response to this the ONS Environmental Accounts team, in collaboration with the ONS Wellbeing team, published an article titled '[Are we ready to switch to electric cars?](#)'. The article was published within 3 weeks and included data on revenue from environmental taxes.
- **Using social media to engage with relevant communities** We regularly use Twitter and other social media outlets to raise awareness of our Environmental Accounts data. For example:
  - tweeting data from our air accounts on [zero emissions day](#)
  - publishing a slide share '[8 facts about the environment](#)' using data from both the Environmental Accounts and Natural Capital Accounts on world environment day. The slide share has had almost 1,000 views
  - highlighting the uniqueness of the Environmental Accounts by tweeting about emissions from international shipping when the International Maritime Organisation's environment committee were meeting in London to agree on how to reduce GHG emissions from international shipping
- **Publishing data quickly** This year, within three days of the release of general government annual expenditure data, broken down by function, we had published a table on Government Environmental Protection Expenditure (EPE). To raise awareness of the data, we published a simple [tweet](#) stating the overall government EPE figure and the proportion of total government spending. We were then able to send the table to our stakeholders. This took limited resource, and allowed us to release data quickly. A fuller explanation of environmental protection expenditure was included in our annual publication.

### **Utilising more widely distributed statistics**

In November 2017 the Sustainable Development Goals and Environmental Accounts teams in ONS worked on a joint slide share, '[Renewable Energy in the UK](#)'. This focussed on one of the indicators under Goal 7 (affordable and clean energy) and looked at pollution in the context of renewable energy. Slideshares are meant to be short and simple, introducing the audience to new facts, rather than detailed analysis. This was a great success. The slideshare has been viewed over 5,000 times and is one of the most viewed slideshares ONS has produced.

### **Taking a flexible approach**

From meetings with stakeholders it has become evident that the Environmental Accounts cannot meet all of users' needs. In response to demands of policy departments, ONS runs the [Low Carbon and Renewable Energy Economy survey](#), which gathers data on turnover, employment, imports, exports, acquisitions and disposals in the low carbon economy. However, widening the statistics undertaken by the team complements the Environmental Accounts, rather than acting in direct competition with the Environmental Accounts. For example, ONS is currently exploring how the data from this survey can be used in the UK's Environmental Goods and Services Sector estimates.

### **Next steps**

Activity over the last year has helped provide a better understanding of the interests of stakeholders, of how the Environmental Accounts can add value to policy development and evaluation and how they are best presented. Plans are still underway but known areas for development are listed below.

**Regional data** – Whether the data are available regionally is one of the most frequently asked questions when we release the Environmental Accounts. We are exploring the possibility of releasing air and energy accounts at Devolved Administration level (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland).

**Timeliness** – To make data more relevant it is necessary to increase timeliness. We are looking at ways in which we can reduce the time between compilation and publication, as well as methodology such as nowcasting.

**Simpler presentation** – Traditionally we have published a detailed Environmental Accounts bulletin once a year. Recent experience has shown that our data are more widely viewed if they are released in short segments, so we are reviewing our publication strategy. While there is still a place for a bulletin, its frequency or content may need to be amended.

**Exploiting the interconnectedness of the accounts** – Analysis has tended to focus on individual areas of the accounts, even within the annual bulletin. We are keen to explore the relationship between the accounts and are intending to publish articles that use several parts of the accounts to answer questions, and change our main bulletin to emphasise the relationship between the accounts.

It would be interesting to understand whether other countries have undertaken a similar period of engagement, and the resulting findings. We are keen to learn from others how they best ensure policy relevance of the SEEA, and how they promote its use.