European Statistical System Peer Reviews

Third round: 2021-2023

Overall methodology

for the

third round of peer reviews

Endorsed by the ESS Committee in May 2020

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This document describes the overall methodology for the third round of peer reviews in the European Statistical System (ESS). It includes the objectives of the peer reviews, the scope, including the involvement of other national authorities developing, producing and disseminating European statistics (ONAs), and the approach, already agreed upon by the ESS Committee in its meeting in October 2019. It further includes a description of the implementation arrangements such as the selection procedure for the ONAs to participate in the peer reviews, the self-assessment phase, the composition of the peer review expert teams, the peer review visits, the peer review reports and the harmonisation of recommendations, as well as the procedure to develop improvement actions. The document also includes a short description of possible communication activities; more details are included into a separate document on the communication strategy for the third round of peer reviews.

1. Objectives

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

- To review the compliance/alignment of the ESS with the European statistics Code of Practice (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 National Statistical Institutes (NSIs), other national authorities (ONAs) developing, producing and disseminating European statistics, and Eurostat to further improve and develop the national statistical systems (NSS)/Eurostat by indicating future-oriented recommendations; at the same time they should stimulate government authorities to support the implementation of these recommendations.

Both objectives target internal and external (to the ESS) stakeholders; they have therefore an internal and external dimension. The internal dimension covers the review of compliance/alignment with the ES CoP, progress achieved since the second round of peer reviews and improvements inside the NSIs, Eurostat and the ESS/NSS, something that is inherent to the ESS, and can be achieved by the ESS on its own. The external dimension covers in the broadest sense all external stakeholders' active involvement in the implementation of the peer review recommendations and the related improvement actions. It is thus, more difficult to achieve as it reaches beyond the authority of the NSIs and Eurostat to mainly government bodies. The external dimension is hoped to be enhanced with the help of an extensive communication campaign.

2. Scope

The third round of peer reviews will:

- Cover the 16 principles of the ES CoP;

- Differentiate the focus/emphasis of assessing the principles between the self-assessment phase and the peer review visit, depending on the institutional set-up and specific situation of each NSS. While in the self-assessment phase all principles will be assessed as they are equally important, the peer review expert team will have the possibility to decide, for each country, on which principles it will focus during the peer review visit. The basis for the decision will be the following criteria: a) potentially problematic areas identified in the self-assessment questionnaires (SAQs), b) areas identified to be in need for improvements in the second round of peer reviews and c) improvement actions from the second round of peer reviews experiencing difficulties in implementation. The principles on professional independence (P1) and coordination and cooperation (P1bis) as well as principles including elements of modernisation (e.g. principles 2, 4, 7, 8, 15) will be in any circumstance assessed for every member of the ESS;

- Identify advancement and progress of the NSS/Eurostat in complying/aligning with the principles of the ES CoP, compared to the second round of peer reviews;

- Cover the NSS, meaning the NSI and selected ONAs. The NSIs having a coordination role in the national statistical system will decide which ONAs are selected for the self-assessment phase and invited for the peer review visit, based on commonly agreed ESS criteria for the selection of the ONAs. The NSIs will accompany their selection of ONAs with a short explanatory note to be sent to Eurostat. The criteria for selection include:

    - Importance for European statistics, measured by a percentage threshold of producing European statistics,

    - Importance for European statistics, measured by its significance,

    - Degree of compliance with the ES CoP by an ONA,

    - Importance of an ONA from the perspective of the NSI;

- Endeavour to identify elements/recommendations to be addressed to the ESS in general that will contribute to an enhanced partnership in the ESS;

- Not aim to assess the quality of specific statistical products, because other mechanisms exist to assess compliance with the applicable legislation for every statistical product.

3. Approach

A combination of an audit-like and a peer reviewing approach will be used to benefit from the positive aspects of both approaches.

The following elements from an audit-like approach will be applied:

- Involvement of external experts to guarantee the credibility and objectivity of the peer reviews;
- The provision of documents as evidence for statements;
- The ownership of the recommendations by the peer review expert team;
- The right for the NSIs/Eurostat to express diverging views on the recommendations for improvement as formulated by the peer review expert team; diverging views will be published together with the peer review report, in an annex;
- The responsibility of the NSI/Eurostat to formulate the improvement actions to address the recommendations in the peer review report.

The following elements of a peer review approach will be used:

- Common agreement within the ESS on the methodology of the peer reviews, including the objectives, scope and implementation arrangements;
- Participation of experts from the NSIs (peers) in the peer review expert teams, including from among the senior management of the NSIs;
- Peer learning through the involvement of experts from the NSIs;
- Focus on improvements as an objective of the reviews.

Means to apply the correct balance between the two approaches will be discussed with the peer review experts during their training, scheduled in advance of the start of the third round of ESS peer reviews.

4. Implementation arrangements

The implementation of the ESS peer reviews is supported by a contractor, identified through an open procurement procedure. The contractor is responsible for engaging and supporting the peer review experts, for the logistics of the peer reviews, for providing well-formatted and language-checked reports and for organising the training and workshops for the peer review experts and national peer review coordinators from the NSIs.

The implementation arrangements describe the following elements of the peer reviews:

- The procedure for the selection of the ONAs to participate in the peer review;
- The self-assessment phase;
- The composition and selection of the peer review expert teams;
- The organisation and modalities of the peer review visits;
- The arrangements for the peer review reports and the recommendations;
- The procedure to develop the improvement actions to address the recommendations from the peer review expert team and their monitoring.

4.1. Procedure for the selection of the ONAs

With the launch of the peer reviews in the ESS, Eurostat will ask the NSIs to start the procedure to select between three to six ONAs, which will participate in the peer review in a given country. The exact number of the participating ONAs will be handled in a flexible way and can also be below the minimum of three ONAs or slightly above the maximum of six ONAs. The decision on the final number of selected ONAs is in the authority of the NSI and is subject to the national set-up and discretion.

The proposed procedure for selecting the ONAs in Annex I of this document contains more details and suggestions for the NSIs on how to decide on the ONAs, which should participate in the peer review. It needs to be highlighted that the final decision on the selection is in the authority of the NSI and the operationalised criteria proposed in the document constitute a guidance for the NSIs only. The four criteria (1) Importance for European statistics, measured by a percentage threshold of producing European statistics, 2) Importance for European statistics, measured by its significance, 3) Degree of compliance with the ES CoP by an ONA, 4) Importance of an ONA from the perspective of the NSI) can be used individually or in combination and be measured by qualitative and/or quantitative metrics. More details can be found in Annex I of this document.

Once the selection procedure has been finalised, the NSI will send an explanatory note to Eurostat:

- Informing Eurostat about the ONAs selected to participate in the peer review;
- Providing an explanation about the selection process and the application of the criteria as well as a justification for the selected ONAs;
- Providing additional explanations if the number of selected ONA is below three or above six.

This note should be sent to Eurostat approximately 6-7 months before the peer review visit takes place.

Once selected for participation in the peer review, the ONAs will be asked to fill in a SAQ, will participate in the dedicated meeting(s) during the peer review visit, will receive recommendations from the peer review expert team and will have to develop improvement actions to address these recommendations, in close cooperation with the NSI as the national coordinator.

4.2. Self-assessment phase

There will be a self-assessment questionnaire (SAQ) for the NSIs/Eurostat and another one for the ONAs. For Eurostat, the self-assessment questionnaire for the NSIs will be used by the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB) as a basis to adjust it to the specific situation of Eurostat (e.g. for principle 1.bis). The SAQs are available in WORD and have to be sent in pdf; NSIs and ONAs should pay attention to the provision of concise information in the SAQs. Documents and material gathered in the second round of peer reviews, if still relevant, will be used to ease the burden on the NSIs.

4.2.1. Self-assessment questionnaire for the NSIs and Eurostat

The SAQ for the NSIs and Eurostat has been streamlined and shortened compared to the version used during the second round of peer reviews in order to ease burden on the NSIs/Eurostat. It is organised in three main sections, one for each area of the ES CoP: institutional environment, statistical processes and statistical output. Within each section, sub-sections correspond to each of the 16 principles and include the relative indicators. The self-assessment questionnaire is included in Annex II and is built in the following way:

i. Standard questions on indicators in each principle:

   For each indicator in each principle of the ES CoP, there are two standard questions: one on how the indicator is implemented and another one on what is the self-appraisal of the degree of implementation of the indicator.

ii. Additional questions on the level of the principle:

   For a number of principles, there are additional questions, which look for forward-looking/ innovative practices for the entire principle, for a broader view on the principle and for inspirations for a possible revision of the ES CoP. Answers to these questions will not be considered to assess compliance with the ES CoP.

iii. SWOT questions on the level of the principle:

For each principle, there are four questions on the strengths and weaknesses (internal factors), as well as threats/challenges and opportunities (external factors), covering the entire principle.

Part of the answers to the question on the strengths may be used to collect forward-looking/innovative practices and to produce an ESS report on these practices, as decided by the ESS Committee in its meeting in October 2019.

iv. Summarising questions on the level of the ES CoP area:

For each of the three areas, there are reviewing and summarising questions on the progress made by the NSI/Eurostat in the last 5 years in the given area as well as existing and possible future action plans, and proposals for enhancing the ESS partnership in the area.

v. Questions on the impact of Covid-19

At the very end of the questionnaire, some questions are added in relation to the Covid-19 situation. The answers will serve to identify lessons learnt, innovative practices in responding to the crisis and new statistical output with a view to integrate some of these into regular production. The questions are not related to any specific principle of the ES CoP and therefore, optional because they will not be used to assess compliance with the ES CoP.

The answers to the questions on how the indicator is implemented should be based on the respondents' professional judgment and experiences; in addition, inspiration can be found in the respective methods and tools of the ESS Quality Assurance Framework (QAF), version 2.0. The related methods and tools are linked to each indicator of the questionnaire in a hyperlink format. The QAF has the role of a reference document in this peer review process, but not that of a benchmark.

In accordance with the audit-like approach of the ESS peer reviews, NSIs/Eurostat are asked to provide evidence for the answers. The following documents have to be submitted with the SAQ for NSI/Eurostat (see for more details in Annex I of the "Guide for the NSIs/ONAs participating in the peer review"):

- The "core" documents as described in the "Guide for the NSIs/ONAs participating in the peer review";
- Documents supporting the answers in the SAQ:
    - if they are publicly available, links can be provided (e.g. web pages, etc);

- if they are internal documents, they can be listed with their titles/names in English. If the peer review experts need (some of) the internal documents, they have to request them from the NSI two months before the peer review visit. The NSI will have one month to send either the translated document or to prepare a summary of the content of the document in English and send them to the peer review experts one month before the peer review takes place.

4.2.2. Self-assessment questionnaire for the ONAs

The SAQ for the ONAs is organised in three main sections, one for each area of the ES CoP: institutional environment, statistical processes and statistical output. Within each section, sub-sections correspond to each of the 16 principles and list the relevant indicators, for information. The self- assessment questionnaire is included in Annex III and is built in the following way:

i. Standard questions on each principle

For each principle, there are two questions: one on how the principle is implemented, based on the indicators listed and another one on what is the self-appraisal of the degree of implementation of the principle.

ii. Questions on the strengths and weakness on the level of the ES CoP area

For each area, there are reviewing and summarising questions on the strengths and weaknesses of the ONA.

Part of the answers to the question on the strengths may be used to collect forward-looking/innovative practices and to produce an ESS report on these practices, as decided by the ESSC in its meeting in October 2019.

iii. Questions on future plans at the level of the ES CoP area

For each of the three areas there are questions on existing and possible future action plans in the given area.

For principle 1bis on Coordination and cooperation, questions ask for the assessment on how the coordination and cooperation aspects are implemented in the National Statistical System (NSS) and the ESS from the perspective of the ONA – based on the analysis of the respective indicators of the ES CoP.

In accordance with the audit-like approach of the ESS peer reviews, the ONA is asked to provide evidence for the answers. The following documents have to be submitted with the SAQ for ONAs (see for more details in Annex I in the “Guide for the NSIs/ONAs participating in the peer review”):

- The “core” documents as described in the “Guide for the NSIs/ONAs participating in the peer review”;
- Documents supporting the answers in the questionnaire:
  - if they are publicly available, links can be provided (e.g. web pages, etc);
  - if they are internal documents and /or documents in national language only, they can be listed with their titles/names in English. If peer review experts need (some of) the internal documents, they have to request them from the ONA two months before the peer review visit. The ONA will have one month to send either the translated document or to prepare a summary of the content of the document in English and send them to the peer review experts one month before the peer review takes place.

If documents to support the answers in the SAQ do not exist, the ONA is encouraged to find another way of providing evidence for the statement/answers to the questions.

4.2.3. Treatment of the SAQs

The SAQs will be addressed to the NSI and the participating ONAs of each country and to Eurostat; the NSI needs to make sure that the SAQ is filled in by the participating ONAs.

The filled-in SAQs of the NSI and the ONAs participating in the peer review will be shared with the respective peer review expert team only (in Eurostat it will only be received by the person that is part of the peer review expert team and the Task Force on peer reviews and quality for documentation purposes).

The SAQs as attached in annexes II and III are sent out to all NSIs (primarily for information purposes) after the endorsement of the full package of the methodology for the third round of peer reviews, at the time of launching the third round of peer reviews. The filled in SAQs have to be sent to the central coordination desk of the contractor implementing the peer reviews, which will verify the completeness of the information and in turn send them to the peer review expert team, and the Eurostat Task Force on peer reviews and quality three months before the peer review visit will take place in the given country.

4.3. The composition and selection of the peer review expert teams

The peer review expert team will consist of four experts, including at least one external expert and one expert from Eurostat. The composition of the peer review expert team will provide for a balanced combination of competencies, knowledge and skills. The following requirements need to be met by the combined experience, knowledge and skills of the four experts constituting one peer review expert team:

- Senior management experience in an NSI/ONA;

- Knowledge about the set-up and functioning of an NSS;
- Knowledge of strategic developments in statistics at national/EU/international levels;
- Knowledge about recent developments in the ESS;
- Expertise in statistics and modernisation activities;
- Active involvement in ESS related activities.

Taking into account the above-mentioned requirements, the composition of a peer review expert team will look as follows:

- One (current or recent) senior manager from an NSI, who will be the chair (lead expert) of the peer review expert team and will ensure that the knowledge about the NSS and ESS is represented in the peer review expert team;
- One external (to the ESS) expert, whose presence will ensure the credibility and independence of the peer review process but who will need to possess some of the knowledge mentioned above and be acquainted with the functioning of the ESS;
- One expert from an NSI (or another external expert depending on the experience and knowledge), meeting some of the requirements mentioned above;
- One expert from Eurostat, meeting some of the requirements mentioned above, who will be an equal member of the peer review expert team. In addition, the Eurostat expert will facilitate the work of the peer review expert team, support the application of the methodology for the peer reviews, support the harmonisation of the recommendations and accompany the peer review process in the given country.

With the support of a contractor, a pool of experts to be engaged as peer review experts is created. In July/August 2020, both the contractor and all NSIs were requested to nominate experts, who meet (some of) the requirements set out in the methodology for peer reviews. The NSIs may propose experts from their own NSI, or from ONAs or even external experts. Retired experts can potentially be proposed if they still actively contribute to latest ESS developments. From the proposed list of experts and based on the requirements for the experts set out in the methodology, Eurostat will select a maximum number of 20-25 experts. Eurostat will furthermore form seven to eight peer review expert teams (with four experts in each team, three of them selected in this procedure and one from Eurostat selected by Eurostat) and nominate the chair of each peer review expert team. The chairs of the peer review expert teams is selected based on their experience, skills and background. This selection procedure is finalised in November 2020. Some experts are kept on a reserve list, in case of nominated experts withdrawing from the assignment. The once nominated peer review expert teams remains stable - to the extent possible - for the entire duration of the peer review process; hence each peer review expert team implements in average four peer reviews.

Training of the peer review experts on the methodology and report writing is essential to achieve a better harmonisation of the reports and the recommendations. Therefore, once the experts and the respective teams are selected, the company, under the strict guidance of Eurostat and based on the peer review methodology approved by the ESS Committee, organises training for them. The participation as trainers of some of the national peer review coordinators and members of the ESS Task Force on peer reviews is envisaged to provide the NSI perspective on the peer review process. The training covers the methodology of the peer reviews, the drafting of recommendations and reports with an emphasis on harmonising recommendations, auditing skills and other aspects of the peer review process. A separate training for the national peer review coordinators is also organised to train them on the methodology and the implementation arrangements.

The peer review of Eurostat is conducted by the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB), based on its mandate, using a similar approach but with the self-assessment questionnaire and methodology adjusted to the specifics of Eurostat. It is envisaged that two representatives from NSIs of the EU Member States participate in the peer review of Eurostat as observers. The selection of the NSIs is arranged by the Partnership Group.

4.4. The organisation and modalities of the peer review visits

In November 2020 Eurostat officially launches the third round of peer reviews by publishing the SAQs and the guides for the NSIs/ONAs and peer review experts on Eurostat's website. Eurostat sends letters to the NSIs asking for the nomination of a national peer review coordinator and contact information, for the nomination of a responsible and contact person for all communication issues on the peer reviews as well as reminding the NSIs to start the selection procedure for the ONAs to be involved in the peer review.

Peer review visits will last four to five working days, depending on the specific situation in a country and on set-up of the NSS; it may take five days in a more decentralised NSS. The duration of the visit should be agreed between the chair of the peer review expert team and the NSI/Eurostat sufficiently in advance but at the latest when the agenda of the peer review visit is being discussed and agreed upon.

The exact dates of the peer review visits are agreed on the basis of a consultation process between Eurostat and the NSIs. NSIs are contacted to identify some suitable weeks/dates for the peer review visit to take place in their country, taking into account constraints such as dates of the population and agriculture census, Council Presidencies, international meetings and others. Taking also other elements into account such as the availability of peer review experts, especially those from NSIs, the dates for the peer review visit to each country are agreed in late 2020 with all EU Member States and EFTA countries.

The peer review in a country will officially start – 6-7 months before the agreed date - with a letter announcing the peer review visit and confirming the exact dates of the peer review visit. The letter will also inform about the need to send the filled-in SAQs as well as the core and supporting documents and request the information about the ONAs selected to participate in the peer review of the country. The latter information and a corresponding explanatory note about the selection procedure of the ONAs and its results have to be sent to Eurostat around 6-7 months before the peer review takes place.

The filled-in SAQs (for the NSI and the ONAs participating in the peer review) and relevant documents (core documents and evidence for statements/answers in the SAQs) should be sent to the central coordination desk of the contractor, which in turn sends them to the peer review expert team, and the Eurostat Task Force on peer reviews and quality, three months before the start of the peer review visit. This provides sufficient time to review the documents, to request additional information and explanations, and – based on their review – to discuss and agree on the specific agenda for the peer review visit.

The chair of the peer review expert team (lead expert) holds video/telephone conferences with the peer review expert team approximately 10 weeks before the peer review visit. They are used to discuss roles of the experts in the visit, answers to the SAQs and potential issues to be raised during the visit and hence to be included into the agenda for the peer review visit. On the basis of this discussion/consultation the chair (lead expert) proposes main elements for a draft agenda (e.g. which issues need to be discussed during the peer review visit, how much time needs to be devoted to them, etc.) and then agree with the NSI national peer review coordinator on them, 8 weeks before the visit. The detailed agenda is finalised by the NSI 2-3 weeks before the visit; it includes meetings inside the NSI and with the ONAs participating in the peer review, meetings with different stakeholders such as users, media, business associations, the research community, government users, ESGAB-like bodies (if they exist) and others.

The peer review expert team meets in the evening of the day before the peer review visit to the NSI starts, to review the agenda and agree on the specific roles of team members for each day of the peer review visit and on questions to ask. In the evening of every day the peer review expert team meets and summarises the results of the day's discussions with a view to prepare the list of recommendations. A complete list of draft recommendations is prepared by the chair of the peer review expert team, in close consultation with the team, in the evening before the last day of the visit. The draft recommendations are presented by the chair (lead expert) to the senior management of the NSI in a meeting on the last day of the peer review visit. Representatives of participating ONAs may participate in this final meeting, if considered useful and necessary by the NSI.

This meeting is used to discuss and exchange opinions on the proposed recommendations with a view to reach a common understanding of the content of the recommendations and the underlying issues / reasons for proposing them. The meeting can be used for clarifying misunderstandings but the list of recommendations remains in the ownership of the peer review expert team. It is transmitted in writing to the senior management of the NSI one week after the peer review visit at the latest.

4.5. The arrangements for the peer review reports and recommendations

The peer review report follows a standard structure:

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1. Executive summary

The summary should explicitly highlight and briefly describe the strengths (positive messages) about the NSS and list the recommendations, which will refer to the opportunities for improvement identified during the peer review. For the latter, the report should highlight especially professional independence (ES CoP Principle 1) and coordination and cooperation (ES CoP Principle 1.bis) as well as the principles including elements of modernisation (i.e. ES CoP Principles 2, 4, 7, 8, 15). The reasons for including a recommendation should be described briefly. Finally, a standard positive message should be included at the end of the summary explaining that the NSI will produce an action plan to address the recommendations for improvement.

2. Introduction

The introduction should explain the peer review process and methodology and include explanations on why the focus on principles of the ES CoP may differ across reports and countries (standard text to be used for all the peer review reports). In addition, there will be a description on what principles the peer review for the given country focuses (to be drafted by the peer review team) including an explanation for the reasons.

3. Brief description of the national statistical system/Eurostat (max 2,5 pages)

The brief description of the NSS/Eurostat should cover legislation, organisation, appointment procedures for the head of the NSI/Eurostat, statistical programmes, resources, coordination of the NSS (including at least a 0.5 page text on the ONAs invited in the peer review visit), data access, relations with users/dissemination of statistical products and services.

4. Progress/advancement in the last 5 years (max 1-2 pages)

This description should be based on the implementation of the improvement actions after the second round of peer reviews, the answers from the SAQs and discussions during the peer review visit.

5. Compliance with the ES CoP and future orientation

5.1. Strengths of Eurostat/the NSI and the participating ONAs in relation to their compliance with the ES CoP

This section is meant to describe those aspects and elements where Eurostat/the NSI and the participating ONAs show high standards and where no problems/issues are detected. The strengths should be grouped around identified broad issues/themes, with a reference to the principle(s) and indicator(s) concerned. Strengths could also be a good/innovative practice.

Strengths regarding the principles of professional independence, coordination and cooperation and those including elements of modernisation (e.g. principles 2, 4, 7, 8, 15) should be highlighted in this section. Future-oriented projects and activities that are not necessarily linked to the ES CoP should also be highlighted in this chapter. The text should cover Eurostat/the NSI and the participating ONAs being visible and named. The structure of the section should be flexible, i.e. it should be adapted depending on the outcome of the review.

5.2. Issues and recommendations

This section should describe in further detail the issues where improvements are needed. The recommendations of the peer review team should be split into fundamental/important to ensure compliance/alignment with the ES CoP (compliance-relevant), and less critical/technical supporting improvements (improvement related). In addition, they should be future-oriented and grouped around identified broad issues/themes, with a reference to the principle(s) and indicator(s).

Both types of recommendations should cover Eurostat/the NSI and the participating ONAs being visible and named, in particular if recommendations are addressed to them. In case the recommendations are addressed to other stakeholders/actors than Eurostat/the NSI and the participating ONAs, this will be clearly spelled out in the report.

The text should also lead the reader of the report to understand the recommendations as included into the executive summary. Recommendations in the executive summary and in the report should be the same. While in the executive summary the reasons for including such a recommendation will be described briefly, the main report should provide sufficiently detailed explanations on why the recommendations were issued by the peer review expert team. The formulation of each recommendation should clearly identify the rationale to what is behind it and frame the potential future action(s).

The structure of the section is flexible, i.e. it could be adapted depending on the outcome of the review.

5.3. Views of the NSIs as the national coordinator of the NSS/the peer review on those recommendations where they diverge from peer review experts' assessment.

Annex A: Programme of the visit

Annex B. List of participants (to be decided by each country but in view of the GDPR it may be advisable to mention only names of people whose names are published in the organizational chart of the authorities, all other people are mentioned with the function and the name of the authority only).

The recommendations included into the report as well as the reports themselves need not to be strictly comparable across countries as such (because the intention of the peer reviews is not to compare among countries) but should be harmonised in terms of scope, magnitude, number and content, as much as possible.

For the recommendations, several measures are applied to achieve an increased harmonisation of recommendations.

- A document on the possible formulation of possible issues and recommendations linked to them as well as distinguishing between fundamental/important (compliance-relevant) and less critical (improvement related) recommendations is available to make experts aware of the possible scope, magnitude and content of potential recommendations. During the training of the experts, they are made aware that the document suggests merely formulations for issues and recommendations and is to be understood as a guiding document; the attention of the experts is drawn to the fact that they should not use the document as a menu from which they can easily choose issues and recommendations.

- Thorough training of the experts is provided on drafting the reports and the recommendations before the peer review visits commence, with a focus on formulating recommendations in such a way that the NSI is able to define suitable improvement actions.

- In case the recommendations are addressed to other stakeholders/actors than the NSI/Eurostat, this is clearly spelled out in the report (and one measure to encourage other authorities to take on board these recommendations is a reinforced communication campaign on the peer reviews and the value of European/official statistics).

- The Eurostat expert in the peer review expert team supports the other experts in the team in formulating more harmonised recommendations already during the peer review visit based on his/her knowledge of how recommendations were drafted in other peer review reports.

- At given times during the peer review process in 2022 (e.g. after 8 peer review reports were finalised), the available reports and recommendations are reviewed by a group of people (editorial board), which could be chosen from among the members of the ESS Task Force on peer reviews, in order to provide additional input for harmonisation.

- Finally, continuous training of the experts on drafting reports and recommendations is implemented and workshops are organised on exchanging experiences during the entire peer review process.

The following timelines apply for drafting, commenting and approving the peer review report:

Activity	Actor	Timeline
Drafting the peer review report	Expert team	4 weeks after the visit
Formatting and language checking	Company	2 days
Commenting and checking factual correctness of the report, setting out diverging views on recommendations	NSI	4 weeks
Commenting and further harmonising recommendations (to the extent possible)	Eurostat	2 weeks
Integrating comments	Expert team	1 week
Final formatting and language checking	Company	2 days
Approval of the report	NSI, Eurostat	2 weeks

The final agreement on the content of the report between the peer review expert team, Eurostat and the NSI is to be reached through consultation.

While commenting the report, the NSI/Eurostat as well as the ONAs, coordinated by the NSI, can issue a diverging view on recommendations, that it deems to be impossible/very difficult to implement but the diverging views need to be reasoned and well justified. When the report is finally approved, the final peer review report, including an annex containing the diverging views, will be published on both Eurostat's and the NSI websites.

4.6. Improvement actions

4.6.1. Procedure for defining improvement actions

The procedure for defining improvement actions offers the possibility of involving other stakeholders. The term “stakeholders” can cover the NSI, the ONAs, the government, the parliament, a supervising authority, data providers and/or others which may be an owner of/be responsible for the implementation of an improvement action. A contractor should not be regarded as a stakeholder. If the fulfilment of an improvement action depends on more stakeholders than the NSI or ONA(s), the NSI or the ONA can decide to sub-divide a general improvement action into smaller improvement actions (sub-actions) reflecting the responsibility/ies per stakeholder. However, this possibility does not oblige the NSI or ONAs to involve other stakeholders in the improvement actions, especially if it would deteriorate their relationship with this particular stakeholder.

1. The NSIs shall define improvement actions, if relevant, in cooperation with the ONA(s) and in consultation with other stakeholders. The improvement actions shall:
   - be based on the recommendations in the final peer review reports;
   - be SMART;
   - contain a realistic deadline for putting the improvement actions in place. The timeline for implementing improvement actions depends on many elements, such as the external environment, complexity of the action, actors involved, etc. Therefore, there is no rule specific to this. The latest deadline for implementing the improvement actions is set at the end of 2027.
   - indicate the responsibility of the improvement action (entirely in the remit of the NSI, of the ONAs, other stakeholders ….).

   It is possible that the fulfilment of an improvement action depends on more stakeholders and could remain open because the stakeholder(s) do(es) not or cannot fulfil its/their part in the action. To show progress made by all the different stakeholders and/or where the blocking part of the improvement action is situated, the improvement action involving more stakeholders could consist of:

   1. the general improvement action reflecting the final goal of the action;

   2. and several sub- actions for improvement - reflecting the responsibility/ies per stakeholder.

2. The NSIs sends improvement action(s) to Eurostat within 8 weeks from the reception of the final report. Eurostat can comment on the defined improvement actions and timeline, and, if necessary, indicate amendments within 3 weeks from the reception of the improvement actions. These amendments shall be agreed by the NSI. Once the improvement actions are agreed between the NSI and Eurostat, they will be published on Eurostat's website alongside with the peer review report as well as on the NSI's website.

4.6.2. Monitoring of the improvement actions

Annually, starting in January 2024 and until the end of 2027, the NSIs shall report on the progress of implementation achieved by the end of the previous year. In case of delays, the NSIs, possibly with the input from ONA(s) and/or other stakeholders, shall explain reasons and set out an adjusted timeline for the action/s concerned. New improvement actions might be proposed by the NSIs, but to a limited extent, possibly with the input from ONA(s) and/or other stakeholders.

Eurostat shall produce an annual progress report to the ESS Committee and ESGAB, which describes the progress achieved in the implementation of improvement actions, the list of pending issues, the delays, the reasons for the delays and an agreed timeline for addressing these. This progress report is produced usually 3 months after the end of the reference period. It is a summary from the information produced by the countries and includes verification by the countries before being presented to the meeting of the ESS Committee.

5. Communication

Continuous and targeted internal and external communication about the objectives of the peer reviews, the process and its results is of utmost importance to ensure acceptance of the results by the NSI/Eurostat, the ONAs and the relevant government authorities and for receiving support for the implementation of those recommendations that are beyond the responsibility of the NSI.

5.1. Internal communication in the NSS

The internal NSS communication has to be organised by NSIs targeting staff inside the NSIs, ONAs and decision-makers in the country. In preparing for the peer review, the already ongoing communication on the ES CoP should be reinforced by an active promotion campaign inside the NSIs/Eurostat and vis-à-vis ONAs to make their staff understand the ES CoP, its meaning and impact on their daily work. This could be done by organising internal workshops, presentations, publishing articles on the Intranet, creating a specific section on the Intranet for the peer review, etc.

Communication should continue throughout the entire peer review process. Filling in the SAQ, gathering of the relevant documentation and organisation of the peer review visit should be a collective exercise to involve as many staff as feasible/suitable and to inform them about the process. Junior staff should be informed in particular about the purpose of the peer review to prepare it for the specific meeting with the peer review expert team. This continuous communication on the peer review process will also serve the declared purpose of the peer review to encourage internal reflection and improvements.

After the finalisation of the peer review report, staff should be informed about the report through presentations and the Intranet and be – to the extent possible - involved in / informed about the design and discussions on the improvement actions.

A somewhat lighter communication approach, but with similar content, has to be applied to the participating ONAs to prepare them for their involvement in the peer review and, after the finalisation of the peer review report, provide them with feedback on the peer review results and follow-up.

5.2. External communication

External communication on the peer review process should be used to take a broader perspective and to:

- Promote the value of European statistics and raise awareness among certain target groups;

- Demonstrate the commitment of the ESS to the principles of the CoP;
- Demonstrate the importance of peer reviews in maintaining the quality, trustworthiness and usefulness of official statistics in Europe.

A professional communication company, selected through a procurement procedure, was asked to design a communication strategy with the objectives outlined above and to design the communication material for the campaign based on the strategy. The communication strategy to be approved by the ESS Committee, guides all external communication activities around the third round of peer reviews.

6. Time table for the third round of peer reviews

Based on the agreement to launch the third round of peer reviews in 2021 with the peer review of Eurostat, followed by the peer reviews of the EU Member States and EFTA countries in 2021-2023, the following time schedule is applied in the peer review process:

No	Activity	Timeline
1	Official launch of the third round of peer reviews through official letters and the publication of the full methodology package on Eurostat's website	October 2020
2	Agreement on the dates for the peer review visits to all countries and defining a timetable for the visits	November/December 2020
3	Preliminary agreement with the NSIs on the exact timing of the peer reviews in each EU Member State and EFTA country	December 2020
4	Training of peer review experts and NSI national peer review coordinators	January 2021
5	Workshop for the communication officers of the NSIs on communication on the peer reviews	January 2021
6	Peer review of Eurostat, starting with the filling in of the SAQ and ending with the agreed peer review report	October 2020 – November 2021
7	Peer reviews EU Member States and EFTA countries	May 2021 - April 2023
8	Report on the main findings and lessons learnt from the third round of peer reviews	End 2023

For an individual peer review of a given country the following timeline is planned:

Figure 1: Timeline for Peer Reviews

	ESTAT	NSI	ONA	Contractor	PR Team
June 2020: ESTAT contacts NSIs on a preferred date for the peer review visit	X	X			
July 2020: Eurostat prepares timeline of peer review visits to adjust the overall schedule for decision	X				
July/August/September 2020: start of the selection procedure for experts	X	X		X	
September/October 2020: ESTAT publishes SAQs+Guides, informs NSIs about start of PR process, asks NSIs to nominate national peer review coordinator +communication responsible, asks NSIs to prepare ONA selection	X	X			
October/November 2020: ESTAT sends SAQs and guides with annexes to national peer review coordinator, provides contact information	X	X			
October/November 2020: selection of experts, teams and chairs	X				
November 2020: Contractor + ESTAT fix 2-3 dates for PR visit in each country	X			X	
November/December 2020: ESTAT+Contractor+PR expert teams agree on individual weeks of PR visits, ESTAT informs national peer review coordinator about date, identity and details of PR team	X	X		X	X
January 2021: Workshops for PR expert teams+ national peer review coordinators	X	X		X	X
January 2021: Workshop on communication campaign for NSI communication officers	X	X		X	
6-7 months before PR visit: ESTAT confirms to NSI specific date of visit, requests to send SAQs, core documents, ONA selection (+justification)	X	X			
5-6 months before PR visit: NSI sends information about participating ONAs+justification to ESTAT	X	X			
3 months before PR visit: National peer review coordinator submits completed SAQs (both NSI and ONAs) +supporting documents to contractor (central coordination desk), with Eurostat in copy		X		X	
10 weeks before PR visit: Chair of PR expert team holds video/telephone conference with team members to discuss roles, answers to SAQs, potential issues					X
9 weeks before: Chair of PR expert team proposes elements of draft agenda to national coordinator+informs about roles in PR expert team		X			X
8 weeks before PR visit: Chair of PR expert team+national peer review coordinator agree on general agenda items+duration of visit		X			X
2-3 weeks before PR visit: Finalised detailed agenda sent by NSI to Chair of PR expert team+ESTAT; all stakeholders invited+confirmed presence	X	X			X
PR Visit (4-5 days)	X	X	X		X
1 week after PR visit: Chair of PR expert team sends list of recommendations to NSI+ESTAT	X	X			X
4 weeks after PR visit: Chair of PR expert team sends draft report to contractor for checking; within 2 days, contractor sends draft report to national peer review coordinator and ESTAT for information	X	X		X	X
8 weeks after PR visit: NSI/ONAs to comment/check factual correctness/set diverging views and send response to ESTAT	X	X	X		
10 weeks after PR visit: ESTAT to comment/harmonise recommendations; revised version sent to contractor who forwards to PR expert team	X			X	X
11 weeks after PR visit: PR expert team to integrate comments, 2 days for final checking by contractor, send to NSI and ESTAT	X	X		X	X
13 weeks after PR visit: final approval by ESTAT/NSI; publication of report on respective websites	X	X			
21 weeks after PR visit: NSI to develop improvement actions (in cooperation with ONAs) and send them to ESTAT	X	X	X		
23 weeks after PR visit: ESTAT to comment on improvement actions, indicate amendments if necessary to NSIs	X	X			
26 weeks after PR visit: ESTAT+NSI to agree on improvement actions, publication alongside reports on respective websites	X	X			

7. Annexes

Annex I: Procedure and criteria for the selection of ONAs to participate in the peer review;

Annex II: The self-assessment questionnaire for the NSIs/Eurostat (SAQ NSIs);

Annex III: The self-assessment questionnaire for the ONAs (SAQ ONAs);

Annex I

Procedure and criteria for the selection of ONAs to participate in the peer review

1 Selection of the ONAs

The participation of ONAs in the peer reviews has been considered extremely beneficial. On the one hand, it helps forging a closer cooperation within the NSSs and on the other hand, it helps raise the participating ONAs' awareness of the ES CoP and of the ONAs' role in the production of European Statistics.

The final selection of the ONAs is the responsibility of the NSI based on the pre-defined criteria jointly developed by Eurostat and the NSIs. It is also the NSIs responsibility to decide on the number and character of the selection criteria as well as on the decision method. Each NSI should select between three and six ONAs to take part in the peer review; however, the exact number of ONAs is to be handled in a flexible way and can also be below the minimum of three ONAs or slightly above the maximum of six ONAs. The final number of selected ONAs is subject to the national set-up and discretion.

Five to six months before the peer review visit, the NSI should send an explanatory note to Eurostat to:

- Inform Eurostat about the ONAs selected to participate in the peer review;
- Provide an explanation about the selection process and the application of the criteria below in its selection process as well as a justification for the selected ONAs.
- Provide additional explanations if the number of selected ONA is below three or above six.

1.1 Criteria

The following four criteria mentioned in the ESSC document "Overall methodology for the next round of peer reviews" adopted by the ESSC in its meeting in October 2019, were endorsed as the basis for the selection of the ONAs to participate in the peer review:

- C1: Importance for European statistics, measured by a percentage threshold or amounts of producing European statistics;
- C2: Importance for European statistics, measured by its significance or relevance;
- C3: Degree of compliance of the ONA with the CoP;
- C4: Perceived importance of an ONA from the perspective of the NSI.

According to the final opinions of the ESSC meeting in October 2019, these criteria will be applied in a flexible manner to take into account national set-ups and circumstances. Therefore, NSIs could choose between the four criteria or a combination of them for their decision-making procedure and will justify their choice in the above-mentioned explanatory note.

1.2 Use and number of the criteria

The criteria are recommended to guide the choice and selection procedure of the NSIs for identifying ONAs to participate in the peer review of the country. The use of the criteria and their number depends on the specific situation in the NSS. Therefore, it is up to each NSI to assess how much efforts will be deployed for the selection procedure and to decide which criteria will be used for the selection of ONAs. It is recommended but not mandatory that at least two of the criteria are used for the selection. Three or more criteria could be used if two criteria seem to be insufficient for the selection procedure. The criteria used can be all quantitative or all qualitative or be a mix of quantitative and qualitative. They could be applied individually or as a combination of several criteria.

1.3 Quantitative criteria

Some of the criteria, most notably C1 and C2, could possibly be approximated by quantitative metrics. In the best case scenario, the metrics should be able to delineate European and national statistics, although in many cases this is not possible or feasible. C1 is related to output/production while C2 is thought to reflect/be based on input/resources. Therefore, the two criteria C1 and C2 could be co-related and it could be sufficient to use only one of the two depending on availability.

The following metrics could possibly be used:

Relevant to C1

- Volumes, meaning the total file size of the datasets transmitted to Eurostat;
- Number of datasets transmitted to Eurostat;
- Number of European statistical products in the ONA product portfolio;
- Number of variables produced for European Statistics;

Relevant to C2

- Financial resources invested for producing (European) statistics;
- Statisticians employed for producing (European) statistics.

The list above is not exhaustive and other metrics could be used if they could serve the purpose and are more readily available.

NSIs could also use proxies relevant to criteria C3 and/or C4 if considered more feasible.

Furthermore, Eurostat will provide an extract from EDAMIS containing the volumes and the number of transmissions of the various other national authorities for the past 12 months. The later extract, however, should be used with caution since due to national arrangements some ONAs could be missing if they do not transmit data directly to Eurostat. In addition, the countries may have sent the same datasets many times due to reasons such as corrupted files, data revisions, IT related issues, etc., which also affects the figures in the provided file.

1.4 Qualitative criteria

A value judgement by the NSI could be applied in those cases when the criteria cannot be approximated by quantitative metrics. A qualitative criteria-based selection could be performed with any criteria (C1 to C4) individually or as a combination of several criteria.

For **Criteria C4** the following aspects could be used to assess it:

- Ability to replace the activities of the ONA if it stops producing European Statistics;
- Importance of the ONA for national needs.

1.5 Selection method

It is the NSIs' responsibility to define the most appropriate and suitable selection method. The two illustrative examples of selection methods described below could be an option and are mentioned to illustrate a possible way to decide on the selection of the ONAs. The examples are called "Individual classification" and "Decision matrix". The NSI can however, use any other appropriate selection method. The selection method finally used by the NSI should be described in the explanatory note sent to Eurostat, informing Eurostat about the choice and the selected ONAs (see above).

i) Individual classification

- ONAs are classified for each of the criteria used (for illustrative purposes the example classifies the ONAs along criteria C1 and C2);
- Top-classified ONAs are selected. The selection should not necessarily be balanced among the criteria.

Example 1: Individual classification

C1	C2
ONA1	ONA8
ONA2	ONA5
ONA3	ONA6
ONA4	ONA1
ONA5	ONA2
ONA6	ONA3
ONA7	ONA7
ONA8	ONA4

ii) Decision matrix

- ONAs are distributed in a decision matrix as in the figure below (for illustrative purposes the example classifies the ONAs along criteria C1 and C4);
- ONAs falling in the blue zone are likely to be excluded from the selection;
- ONAs falling in the green zone are likely to be included in the selection;
- ONAs falling in the yellow zone are borderline cases.

Example 2: Decision matrix