

# PEER REVIEW REPORT

ON COMPLIANCE WITH THE CODE OF PRACTICE AND  
THE COORDINATION ROLE OF THE NATIONAL STATISTICAL INSTITUTE

## BELGIUM

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## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Official or public statistics in Belgium have a long tradition dating back to 1826 when the Statistical Bureau was established by the eminent statistician, Adolphe Quetelet, and this was followed in 1841 by the creation of the Central Statistical Commission to facilitate the coordination of all statistical activities. A number of different organisational structures came into being in subsequent years as the structure of official statistics evolved towards its current form. The most notable was the creation of the National Institute of Statistics (NIS) in 1946 within the Ministry of Economic Affairs and the reforming and renaming of the Central Statistical Commission as the Higher Council of Statistics (HCS).

Under a Royal decree in 2003 the Ministry of Economic Affairs became the Federal Public Service Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy (FPS Economy) and the NIS was renamed as the "Directorate General Statistics and Economic Information" (DGSEI). Last year it was again renamed as the "Directorate General Statistics – Statistics Belgium" to take into account its growing international dimension. Statistics Belgium (StBe), as it is now known, is thus organisationally positioned within the FPS Economy which in turn reports to the Minister of Economic Affairs. In 1994 the National Accounts Institute (NAI) was formed as an umbrella organisation to facilitate the transfer of the compilation of most macroeconomic statistics to the National Bank of Belgium and the Federal Planning Bureau. Under these arrangements the role of Statistics Belgium is confined to that of provider of basic data with the result that its remit now is much narrower than that of most National Statistical Institutes (NSI) in comparable countries.

Increasingly, over the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there have been far-reaching reforms of the State that have progressively resulted in a comprehensive regionalisation through the transfer of a majority of the competences of the State from the federal to the regional levels. Up to now the production of public statistics has not been "regionalised" inasmuch that statistics remained the prerogative of the federal level. However, in the most recent round of general reforms (the sixth reform) of the State a chapter was included on official statistics, which will fundamentally change the relationship between the federal and regional/community levels in regard to the production of public statistics. A key principle that underpins the new structure is the requirement that the regional statistical authorities are put on a par with Statistics Belgium. A cooperation agreement was officially adopted on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 2014 and published in the Official Journal of the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 2014 to give effect to this decision. This cooperation agreement still has to be confirmed by federal and regional/community legislation. Under the agreement the NAI is to be expanded to facilitate input from the regions and communities and a new Interfederal Statistical Institute (ISI) is to be created to oversee and coordinate the production of all other public statistics at both the regional and federal levels.

Belgium has a very comprehensive statistical law that governs the activities of Statistics Belgium, which is in line with the European norms including the European statistics Code of Practice (CoP). Aside from the legal measures, the Peer Review team is satisfied that there is also a deep understanding and acceptance of the statistical principles embedded in the culture of Statistics Belgium at all levels. Similar conclusions were drawn in respect of the NAI and the Other National Authorities that were examined by the Peer Review team. However, compared to other comparable NSIs, Statistics Belgium has relatively limited resources available to implement its statistical programme and this restricts the degree to which it can fully comply with all aspects of the CoP.

Notwithstanding the resource constraint, the Peer Review team found that there is a good degree of conformity with the principles of the CoP within Statistics Belgium and throughout the Belgian statistical system. However, the team has identified a number of areas where it believes that improvements can be made to improve or enhance the level of compliance with the CoP. These are discussed with appropriate recommendations under the following three headings:

- Developing the institutional standing and capacity of Statistics Belgium;
- Improving statistical quality within Statistics Belgium and its service to users; and
- Greater coordination of the production of public statistics in Belgium.

The implementation of some of the recommendations may require legislative/institutional changes and thus they are implicitly addressed to the “appropriate relevant authorities” without specific designation. In these cases the Peer Review team assumes that Statistics Belgium will take the initial steps at national level in securing an appropriate response to the recommendations.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Developing the institutional standing and capacity of Statistics Belgium**

1. The Director General of Statistics Belgium should be enabled to comment publicly on budget issues related to the statistical activities of Statistics Belgium. (European statistics Code of Practice, Principles 1 and 3)
2. The staffing profile in Statistics Belgium should be adjusted to meet in a more effective manner the needs of a modern national statistical institute by increasing the proportion of highly skilled managerial and professional staff in the overall workforce. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicators 3.1 and 7.5)
3. The imminent retirement of a significant number of older, and lower skilled staff, in Statistics Belgium should be used as an opportunity to increase the absolute number of more highly skilled staff in a budgetary neutral manner. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicators 3.1 and 7.5)
4. Statistics Belgium should prepare and publish an annual statistical work programme and also issue periodic reports on progress made. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicator 1.5)
5. The position of Statistics Belgium should be strengthened so that there is no question mark, perceived or otherwise, over its professional independence. (European statistics Code of Practice, Principle 1)
6. The Director General of Statistics Belgium should be explicitly assigned, in respect of the agency’s statistical outputs, sole responsibility for deciding on the statistical methods, standards and procedures, and on the timing and content of statistical releases. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicator 1.4)
7. Statistics Belgium should optimise its logo and website so as to emphasise in a public manner its professional independence. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicator 1.6 and Principle 1)

## **Improving statistical quality within Statistics Belgium and its service to users**

8. Statistics Belgium should build on its existing work in relation to quality indicators and develop a formal quality management system, including quality guidelines and supporting frameworks, to systematically review and report on its statistical processes and outputs. (European statistics Code of Practice, Principle 4)
9. Statistics Belgium should give priority to strengthening its Methodology Unit as a key corporate resource in ensuring the soundness of its methodology and the cost-effectiveness of its statistical processes. (European statistics Code of Practice, Principles 7, 8 and 9)
10. Statistics Belgium should build on its existing approach and put in place a systematic programme for reviewing and developing all its statistical outputs and processes. (European statistics Code of Practice, Principles 7, 8 and 9)
11. Statistics Belgium should establish procedures to consult regularly and raise statistical awareness among users and potential users of official statistics. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicators 11.1 and 11.3)
12. Statistics Belgium should develop and publish policies for handling errors and revisions. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicators 6.3 and 6.6)
13. Statistics Belgium should review and streamline its policies and practices for releasing data and communicating them to users. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicators 6.5, 6.6, 6.7 and 6.8)
14. In order to facilitate better interpretation of its data, Statistics Belgium should produce and publish more in depth analyses of its statistical outputs. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicator 15.1)
15. The proposed Interfederal Statistical Institute should take the initiative and put in place a more user-oriented solution (for example, through a common portal) for handling and disseminating all official statistics produced in Belgium. (Coordination role and European statistics Code of Practice, principles 10, 11, 15)
16. Statistics Belgium, in conjunction with the Privacy Commission, should review the arrangements for granting researchers access to statistical microdata so that access can be provided in a more streamlined, flexible and timely manner. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicator 15.4)

## **Greater coordination of the production of public statistics in Belgium**

17. An operational concept of public statistics, as implicitly envisaged in the Belgian statistical law, should be defined in an agreed manner taking into account the current federal, regional, community and European statistical contexts and priorities, as well as the need to satisfy agreed quality criteria. (Coordination)
18. The proposed Interfederal Statistical Institute, in conjunction with the National Accounts Institute, should be assigned the responsibility for coordinating the production of all public statistics in Belgium. (Coordination)

19. The proposed Interfederal Statistical Institute should be empowered to designate, in line with statistical legislation and the Code of Practice, all statistical producers that are entitled to produce public statistics as defined. (Coordination)
20. The proposed Interfederal Statistical Institute should draw up and publish an annual statistical programme, which should *inter alia* cover the following: the identification of statistical outputs; the assignment of primary responsibility for the individual outputs; the setting of standards; the monitoring of the achievement of programme objectives; and the agreement of funding arrangements and priorities. (Coordination)
21. The proposed Interfederal Statistical Institute should be assigned adequate secretarial and other staffing resources and facilities in order to undertake its mandate in a comprehensive and proactive manner. (Coordination)
22. The leadership of the proposed Interfederal Statistical Institute should be entrusted to a Chairperson and Co-Chairperson, one of whom should be, on an *ex officio* basis, the Director General of Statistics Belgium. (Coordination)
23. Appropriate legislative and other measures should be adopted at federal and regional/community levels to facilitate the implementation of the Belgian statistical programme and to bind all parties to working in accordance with the principles of the statistical legislation and CoP. (Coordination)
24. Appropriate measures should be adopted to ensure that Statistics Belgium has full access to relevant administrative data at all levels without restrictions. Access to administrative data for statistical purposes should also be assured for all other statistical authorities to the extent that this is necessary for the implementation of their statistical mandates. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicator 2.2 and Coordination)
25. The mandate, composition and working arrangements of the Higher Council on Statistics should be reviewed and clarified in the context of it providing more effective input from users and advice on the overall system of public statistics in Belgium. (Coordination)

## 2. INTRODUCTION

This peer review report is part of a series of assessments, the objective of which is to evaluate the extent to which National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) and the European Statistical System (ESS)<sup>1</sup> comply with the European statistics Code of Practice (CoP).

The CoP, which sets out a common quality framework for the ESS, was first adopted in 2005 by the Statistical Programme Committee and updated in 2011 by its successor, the European Statistical System Committee. The CoP – 15 principles and related indicators of good practice – covers the institutional environment, the statistical production process and the output of European statistics. The ESS is committed to fully complying with the CoP and is working towards its full implementation. Periodic assessments review progress towards reaching this goal.

The first global assessment, a round of peer reviews in 2006–2008, explored how the NSIs and Eurostat were progressing in implementing the parts of the CoP relating to the institutional environment and dissemination of statistics (principles 1–6 and 15). This resulted in reports for each NSI and Eurostat, available on the Eurostat website<sup>2</sup>. These reports also include a set of improvement actions covering all the principles of the CoP; these informed the annual monitoring of the implementation of the CoP in the ESS in the period 2009-2013.

The scope of this second round of peer reviews is broader: the assessment of CoP compliance covers all principles; the CoP compliance of selected other national producers of European statistics (as well as the NSI) in each country is assessed; and the way in which statistical authorities coordinate the production and dissemination of European statistics within their statistical systems is explored.

It should be underlined that there is a fundamental difference between the reports in the previous round of peer reviews conducted in 2006-2008 and the reports from this round. In the 2006-2008 round compliance with principles 1 to 6 and 15 of the CoP was assessed by means of a four-level scale (fully met; largely met; partly met and not met) and improvement actions were agreed on all 15 principles. After five years of continuous development most of the improvement actions have been implemented and significant progress towards full compliance with the CoP has been made. Therefore, rather than stating the state of play for all principles of the CoP, the reports from the 2013-2015 round mainly focus on issues where full compliance with the CoP has not been found or further improvements are recommended by the Peer Review team.

In order to gain an independent view, the peer review exercise has been externalised and an audit-like approach, where all the answers to the self-assessment questionnaires have to be supported by evidence, has been applied. As in 2006-2008, all EU Member States, the EFTA/EEA countries and Eurostat are subject to a peer review.

Each peer review in the Member States and EFTA/EEA countries is conducted by three reviewers and has four phases: completion of self-assessment questionnaires by a country; their assessment by Peer Reviewers; a peer review visit; and the preparation of reports on the outcomes. The peer

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<sup>1</sup> The ESS is the partnership between the Union statistical authority, which is the Commission (Eurostat), the national statistical institutes (NSIs) and other national authorities responsible in each Member State for the development, production and dissemination of European statistics. This Partnership also includes the EFTA /EEA countries.

<sup>2</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/quality/first-round-of-peer-reviews>

review of Eurostat has been conducted by the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB).

To test and complete the methodology, it was piloted in two countries, Iceland and Slovakia, over the summer of 2013.

The peer review of Belgium was conducted by Gerry O'Hanlon (chair), Katalin Szép and David Fenwick, who conducted a peer review visit to Brussels on the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 2015. The programme of the visit is in Annex A and the list of participants in Annex B.

This report focuses on compliance with the CoP and the coordination of European statistics within the Belgian statistical system. The report highlights some of the strengths of Statistics Belgium in these contexts and contains recommendations for improvement. Improvement actions developed by Statistics Belgium on the basis of this report will be published within the four-week period starting when the final report is sent to the NSI.



### 3. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE NATIONAL STATISTICAL SYSTEM

Official statistics have a long and distinguished history in Belgium. For instance, the first population census was undertaken in 1846 and an agricultural and industrial census was organised concurrently. Many censuses and surveys were undertaken in subsequent years and this has resulted in a long list of statistical publications going back over time.

It was the eminent statistician, Adolphe Quetelet, who set up the precursors of the current statistical institutions with the Statistical Bureau being established in 1826 as the executive body and the Central Statistical Commission in 1841 to facilitate the coordination of all statistical initiatives. A number of different organisational structures came into being in subsequent years as the structure of official statistics evolved towards its current form. The most notable was the creation of the National Institute of Statistics (NIS) within the Ministry of Economic Affairs and the reforming and renaming of the Central Statistical Commission as the Higher Council of Statistics (HCS) in 1946.

More recently, the 1962 law on public statistics, with subsequent amendments, laid down the framework for the functioning of the NIS. Following the Royal Decree of the 20<sup>th</sup> of November 2003, and as a result of the Copernicus reform of the federal public service, the Ministry of Economic Affairs became the "Federal Public Service Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy" (FPS Economy) and the NIS was renamed as the "Directorate General Statistics and Economic Information" (DGSEI). In 2006 a new Belgian Statistics Act, which updated the 1962 law, came into force and brought the functioning of the DGSEI into line with the most recent evolutions as regards privacy protection, administrative simplification and data exchange for scientific purposes. The 2006 act had three objectives:

- to spell out the principles governing public statistics i.e. transparency of processes, proportionality, impartiality, objectivity and professional independence;
- the more effective use of administrative data; and
- to bring statistical legislation into line with national and European regulations, most particularly regarding privacy.

This had repercussions on data collection. Most particularly, in 2007 several initiatives were taken together with the Administrative Simplification Service to simplify some statistics. The response burden was reduced through extensive use of external administrative sources (Crossroads Bank for Enterprises, National Social Security Office, land register, national population register).

In addition to the HCS, which is now assigned a largely advisory role, the statistical law as revised made provision for two other bodies of a supervisory nature, namely: the Coordination Committee; and the Statistical Supervisory Board. The mission of the Coordination Committee is to "coordinate and ensure the follow up of the statistical programmes in the various public administrations, departments and institutions in order to improve the efficiency and quality of those statistics, to reduce the response burden as well as to meet the European and international obligations within the prescribed deadlines". The role of the Statistical Supervisory Committee is to ensure that statistical confidentiality is adhered to: most particularly that microdata from surveys or administrative sources are protected against any violation of confidentiality.

In January 2014 the DGSEI was renamed by Royal decree as the Directorate General Statistics - Statistics Belgium to take into account its growing European and international dimension. The designation Statistics Belgium (or StBe) is used throughout the remainder of this report.

In recent decades there has been significant functional decentralisation of statistical production at the federal level and regional decentralisation, the latter in the context of the successive Reform of the State initiatives. At the federal level the most notable change involved the creation in 1994 of the National Accounts Institute (NAI), which is a coordinating body that now oversees (in the context of compiling Belgian macroeconomic statistics) major elements of the statistical work of Statistics Belgium, the National Bank of Belgium (NBB) and the Federal Planning Bureau (FPB). Under the 1994 arrangement responsibility for national accounts, financial accounts, public finance statistics and foreign trade statistics was transferred from the NIS to the NBB where they are compiled by a dedicated General Statistics Department that also has responsibility for balance of payments and monetary statistics. The FPB – which has a major role in the preparation of official economic and budgetary forecasts – was assigned responsibility for satellite accounts, input/output analyses and (recently) sustainable development and well-being indicators. Under these arrangements the role of Statistics Belgium has been confined to that of provider of basic data with the result that its remit now is much narrower than that of most National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) in comparable countries.

In addition to the NAI there are a further ten public institutions at federal level that are classified as Other National Authorities (ONAs) in the context of the production of European statistics. They cover areas such as energy statistics, research and development statistics, crime statistics, labour policy market statistics and migration statistics. An unusual feature is that the statistical activities of these institutions are not directly covered by the provisions of the law on public statistics. Instead, they must rely on sectorial legislation and/or European statistical legislation for the implementation of their statistical mandate.

Increasingly, over the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there have been far-reaching reforms of the State that have progressively resulted in a comprehensive regionalisation through the transfer of a majority of the competences of the State from the federal to the regional levels. Up to now the production of public statistics has not been “regionalised” inasmuch that statistics remained the prerogative of the federal level. Notwithstanding this, the regions set up institutions<sup>3</sup> to draw up statistics at the regional level – in many cases by adding value to the basic data produced by Statistics Belgium. Moreover, a few regional/community administrations were classified as ONAs.

The combined effect of the functional and regional decentralisations of statistical production has led to a somewhat complex overall statistical system in Belgium. Figure 1 below, which was kindly provided by Statistics Belgium, provides an overview of the situation in 2014.

In the most recent round of general reforms (the sixth reform) of the State a chapter was included on official statistics, which will fundamentally change the relationship between the federal and regional/community levels in regard to the production of public statistics. A cooperation agreement was adopted on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 2014 and published in the Official Journal of the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 2014 to give effect to this decision. This cooperation agreement still has to be confirmed by federal and regional legislation. Under the agreement the NAI is to be expanded to facilitate input from the regions and communities into the statistical production of national accounts and a new Interfederal Statistical Institute (ISI) is to be created to oversee and coordinate the production of all other public statistics at both the regional/community and federal levels. A key principle that

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<sup>3</sup> Studiedienst van de Vlaamse Regering (SVR) in Flanders; Institut wallon de l'évaluation, de la prospective et de la statistique (IWEPS) in Wallonia; and Brussels Instituut voor Statistiek en Analyse (BISA) in Brussels.

underpins the new structure is the requirement that the regional statistical authorities are put on a par with Statistics Belgium. It is envisaged that the ISI will come into being on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2016 when it will take over the co-ordination responsibilities of the existing Coordination Committee.

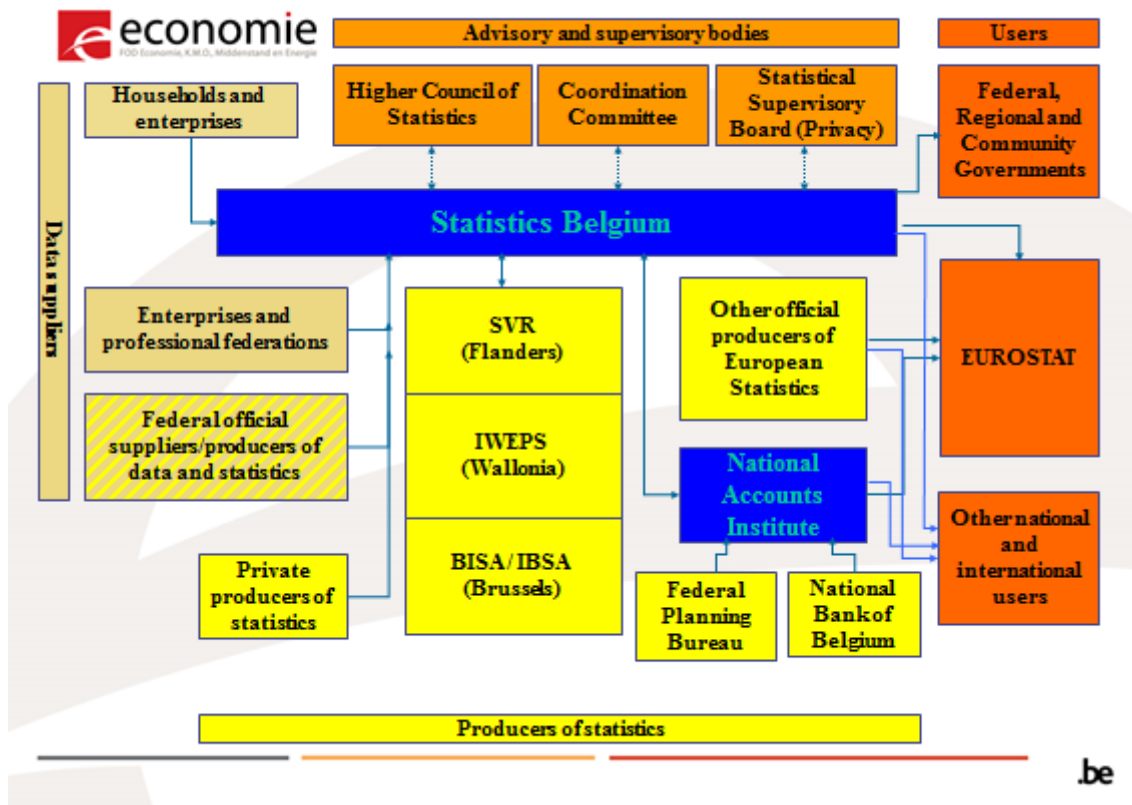


Figure 1: The Belgian Statistical System 2014, Source: Statistics Belgium

## **4. COMPLIANCE WITH THE CODE OF PRACTICE AND THE COORDINATION ROLE WITHIN THE NATIONAL STATISTICAL SYSTEM**

This section summarises the Peer Reviewers' assessment of CoP compliance and the nature and effectiveness of coordination within the NSS. In line with the review mandate, the first section focuses on the strengths of the NSI while the second explores specific issues and makes specific recommendations that the Peer Review team considers would strengthen compliance throughout the system as a whole.

### **4.1 STRENGTHS OF THE NATIONAL STATISTICAL INSTITUTE IN RELATION TO ITS COMPLIANCE WITH THE CODE OF PRACTICE AND TO ITS COORDINATION ROLE**

Belgium has a long tradition of producing official statistics in an objective and impartial manner that dates back to the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the influence of Adolphe Quetelet. That tradition has been maintained through many changes to the structure of the statistical system and the Peer Review team found that there is a good degree of conformity with the principles of the CoP throughout the Belgian statistical system.

The activities of Statistics Belgium are fully covered by the provisions of the law on public statistics, which was initially adopted in 1962 and subsequently amended in 2006. The law, as amended, provides a comprehensive legal basis for the work of Statistics Belgium that is fully in line with the principles of the CoP. This is particularly the case in respect of the principles of: professional independence (Principle 1); mandate for data collection (Principle 2); statistical confidentiality (Principle 5); impartiality (Principle 6); and cost-effectiveness (Principle 10). The statistical activities overseen by the NAI are also subject to the law on public statistics and thus the greater part of the production of European statistics in Belgium are more than adequately covered by the comprehensive legal provisions. It might also be noted that the law provides for the transfer of confidential data between statistical authorities to the extent that this is necessary for the performance of their statistical duties.

Aside from the legal measures, the Peer Review team is satisfied that there is a deep understanding and acceptance of the statistical principles embedded in the culture of Statistics Belgium at all levels. This came across very strongly and uniformly to the Peer Review team in its many interactions with the management and staff during the course of its visit. Furthermore, users and providers confirmed that Statistics Belgium is held in high professional regard, particularly in respect of its independence and objectivity and focus on quality. Similar conclusions were drawn in respect of the NAI and the ONAs that were examined by the Peer Review team.

Compared to other comparable NSIs, Statistics Belgium has relatively limited resources available to it to implement its statistical programme. The Peer Review team is very impressed with the manner in which Statistics Belgium has responded to the challenge of meeting its obligations in this environment. In short, it has in recent years adapted its organisational structure (away from the "stove pipes"), embraced new technologies and made increasing use of administrative data in a consolidated effort to achieve its objectives in a cost-effective and efficient manner.

## **4.2 ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

As mentioned in the previous section the Peer Review team concluded that there is a good level of overall compliance with the CoP. However, it did identify a number of areas where it believes that the level of compliance could be improved or enhanced. These are discussed, with appropriate recommendations, under three main headings as follows:

- Developing the institutional standing and capacity of Statistics Belgium;
- Improving statistical quality within Statistics Belgium and its service to users; and
- Greater coordination of the production of public statistics in Belgium.

The implementation of many of the recommendations may require legislative/institutional changes and thus they are implicitly addressed to the “appropriate relevant authorities” without specific designation. In these cases the Peer Review team assumes that Statistics Belgium will take the initial steps at national level in securing an appropriate response to the recommendations.

### **4.2.1 DEVELOPING THE INSTITUTIONAL STANDING AND CAPACITY OF STATISTICS BELGIUM**

Despite the fact that a considerable proportion of key national statistics (notably macroeconomic statistics) are produced elsewhere, Statistics Belgium as the main statistical authority in Belgium has an important role to play within a knowledge-based society where the demand for statistics continues to grow. To do this effectively it needs to be properly resourced particularly in regard to the availability of sufficient numbers of appropriately qualified staff. Furthermore, in order to ensure its credibility as a provider of high quality statistics, its image as a professionally independent agency, together with that of its Director General, needs to be enhanced.

#### **Budgets**

Statistics Belgium has a total annual budget of 26.5 million euro and at the end of 2014 it employed 444 staff (excluding field staff), of which less than a quarter had a university qualification or equivalent (Level A staff). In addition it employed 450 freelance interviewers, mainly in the conduct of household surveys. These numbers are low when factoring in the complexities of federalisation and even after taking into account the fact that a significant chunk of economic statistics is produced by the NAI. As a result of continuing overall reductions in the size of the federal public service, these numbers represent a sizeable reduction over the years and this trend is expected to continue. The squeeze on financial resources has led to the requirement to do more for less - a challenge that Statistics Belgium has taken up with some success - but even so it has meant that some work has had to be put to one side due to a lack of the means to take things forward. This is especially so for corporate initiatives such as taking forward plans for improving quality assurance of statistics and the corresponding metadata - areas of work that underpin the continued relevance and value of official statistics to the user. The Peer Review team was informed that with current budgetary constraints at national and international level it is difficult to convince Government of the need for more specific resources for official statistics. Under the recently agreed revision to the EU statistical law, which is awaiting formal adoption, it is specified that heads of NSIs should be enabled, in the context of publishing an annual report, to “express comments on budget allocation issues related to the statistical activities of the NSI”. The Peer Review team believes that the implementation of this requirement in the case of Statistics Belgium would be an important element in highlighting the current severe budgetary constraints and the resultant negative impact on the implementation of the statistical programme. It would

also serve to emphasise the professional independence of Statistics Belgium and its Director General.

Accordingly and in order to enhance the level of compliance with the CoP, the Peer Review team recommends that:

1. The Director General of Statistics Belgium should be enabled to comment publicly on budget issues related to the statistical activities of Statistics Belgium. (European statistics Code of Practice, Principles 1 and 3)

### Staffing

Budgets may be tight, but the underlying situation regarding staff numbers is worse because of legacy issues, which have resulted in a proportionately high number of staff, and lower grade staff in particular, nearing retirement age. The situation is even more acute due to the increasing need for more highly qualified staff with the skills needed to operate a modern statistical system. In short, more and better use of new technology and statistical methods is needed to drive through an efficiency programme to ensure that Statistics Belgium is able to deliver its core work programme for less money. The position is particularly challenging given the limited actions available to Statistics Belgium as a result of reduced budgets being universally applied to all government institutions following on from the current Government's austerity programme. The following table illustrates the difficult position that Statistics Belgium finds itself in respect of falling staff numbers – a trend that is expected to continue in response to future retirements.

#### Statistics Belgium: Staffing numbers and profiles at end of 2012 and 2014

Grade level	31/12/2012		31/12/2014		% change 2012-2014
	No.	%	No.	%	
A	111	22.2	107	24.1	- 3.6%
B	26	5.2	24	5.4	-7.7%
C	232	46.3	213	48.0	-8.2%
D	132	26.3	100	22.5	-24.2%
<b>Total</b>	501	100	444	100	-11.4%

The current staff complement (excluding freelance interviewers) fell by 11.4%, from 501 to 444, between the end of 2012 and the end of 2014. While the bulk of this decline was accounted for by the fall of almost a quarter in the number in the lowest grade category (Level D), there was also a fall of 3.6% in the number of Level A - those that have university degrees. In consequence, the proportion of staff employed that are Level A staff remains under a quarter and this compares very unfavourably with levels of 40% and more in many other NSIs. The Peer Review team strongly agrees with Statistics Belgium's management that there is an urgent need to increase both the absolute number of Level A staff, and the proportion they represent of the total staff complement, in order for it to meet its business objectives in a sustainable manner. A sizeable number of the lower level staff will retire in the short to medium term and this should provide an opportunity to increase the absolute number of Level A staff, and thus achieve a more realistic staffing profile, without adding to the overall budgetary cost.

In order to ensure that Statistics Belgium can operate in a more productive and effective manner and thus enhance compliance with the CoP, **the Peer Review team recommends:**

- 2. The staffing profile in Statistics Belgium should be adjusted to meet in a more effective manner the needs of a modern national statistical institute by increasing the proportion of highly skilled managerial and professional staff in the overall workforce. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicators 3.1 and 7.5)**
- 3. The imminent retirement of a significant number of older, and lower skilled staff, in Statistics Belgium should be used as an opportunity to increase the absolute number of more highly skilled staff in a budgetary neutral manner. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicators 3.1 and 7.5)**

### **Work programmes**

It was noted during the course of the Peer Review that the annual statistical work programme of Statistics Belgium is not made public as a distinct product but is a part of the annual statistical programme of the Belgian statistical system. It is currently the task of the Coordination Committee - representing mainly the main statistical producers at federal and regional/community levels - to prepare a Statistical Programme for the National Statistical System (multi-annual and annual, including European statistics). This was set down as a requirement in the amended statistical law of 2006 but a programme was only produced for the first time in respect of 2013 and repeated for 2014 and 2015. The published programmes so far are no more than inventories of the identified statistical activities undertaken (around 860 in 2015) by the public authorities at all levels and they are presented in a manner that does not readily allow the contribution of the various agencies to be analysed.

An annual work programme has three distinct purposes: to facilitate a consultation process for the setting of priorities i.e. customer engagement; as a base for negotiating and setting budgets; and as the base for a performance monitoring system i.e. to ascertain for government and the citizen whether the business objectives agreed when the budget was set have been met and the money well spent. The publication of Statistics Belgium's annual programme is necessary both for effective customer engagement and for the public reporting on performance and, in particular, for assessing whether the agreed objectives have been achieved. It is also a necessary pre-condition of Recommendation 1.

In order to ensure greater visibility of the statistical programme of Statistics Belgium and to improve compliance with the CoP, **the Peer Review team recommends that:**

- 4. Statistics Belgium should prepare and publish an annual statistical work programme and also issue periodic reports on progress made. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicator 1.5)**

### **Professional independence**

The principle of professional independence as it applies to Statistics Belgium is established in law (inserted into the statistical law of 04/07/1962 by law of 22/03/2006). Art. 1bis 4° b states that "the production and dissemination of statistics must be assured by an organisation that is professionally independent from other governmental and political organisations, from administration and private sector operators". In practice, it is recognised that the Director General (DG) must see to it that this is the case within his field of competence as head of the NSI and this is facilitated in part by the fact that he has a hierarchical standing that permits senior level access to policy authorities and administrative public bodies. But whilst the professional independence of

the DG in the performance of his duties has been established by custom and practice, this is potentially at odds with the fact that the hierarchical superior of the DG is the President of the Board of Directors of the FPS Economy. In theory, the latter could over-rule the DG of Statistics Belgium, at least in matters having an indirect bearing on statistical activities, thus undermining his professional independence and that of Statistics Belgium. Moreover, the President of FPS Economy is also ex officio the chair of the NAI, which has formal responsibility for the national accounts. The Peer Review team would emphasise that it has absolutely no evidence of any conflicts at present and was impressed by the assurances of both the President and the DG in this respect. However, it would strongly argue that Statistics Belgium needs to be protected from any potential future abuse of power. The arrangements also need to be transparent in order to guard against any misperception of the professional independence of Statistics Belgium.

In order to enhance the professional independence of Statistics Belgium and to achieve a full compliance with the CoP, **the Peer Review team recommends that:**

- 5. The position of Statistics Belgium should be strengthened so that there is no question mark, perceived or otherwise, over its professional independence. (European statistics Code of Practice, Principle 1)**
- 6. The Director General of Statistics Belgium should be explicitly assigned, in respect of the agency's statistical outputs, sole responsibility for deciding on the statistical methods, standards and procedures, and on the timing and content of statistical releases. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicator 1.4)**

The Peer Review team noted that press releases are presented under the logo of the FPS Economy with textual reference to Statistics Belgium. Similarly, the website of Statistics Belgium is part of, and interrogated via, a website where the FPS Economy logo dominates. This, in the view of the Peer Review team, could lead to confusion over who is responsible for the compilation and publication of official statistics and, indeed, some users mentioned that there was greater clarity and understanding amongst the general public prior to when the National Institute of Statistics (NIS) became the "Directorate General Statistics and Economic Information" (DGSEI) within the Ministry of Economic Affairs in 2003 (and subsequently, following the public service reform, within FPS Economy). In addition, the current situation does not help public perceptions relating to independence.

In order to improve the visibility and perceived independence of Statistics Belgium and to enhance compliance with the CoP, **the Peer Review team recommends that:**

- 7. Statistics Belgium should optimise its logo and website so as to emphasise in a public manner its professional independence. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicator 1.6 and Principle 1)**

## **4.2.2 IMPROVING STATISTICAL QUALITY WITHIN STATISTICS BELGIUM AND ITS SERVICE TO USERS**

### **Quality assured methodology and statistical processes**

Statistics Belgium is committed to providing high quality statistics based on sound methodology and procedures in a cost effective way. The organisational structure has been moved from the traditional product-based stove-pipe model to a more process oriented model structured around data collection, thematic processing, information management and communications departments. In addition there are two horizontal units that provide support across the organisation. The



Methodology Unit provides support and guidance in the development of methodology. The Quality Management Unit, headed by the Quality Manager, has the mission to design and develop systems to facilitate the regular monitoring of the quality of statistical processes and products including the regular and thorough review of all statistical outputs.

The results to date of the activities of these relatively small units have been promising, examples include: initial work in the area of standardisation and modularisation; the re-engineering programme in the frame of implementing the Synergy project in the business statistics area; and the development of a standard set of quality indicators. Standards have been defined and used systematically in some phases of the statistical process (e.g. sampling, variance estimation, data collection and data processing) and in the follow-up of the process. The application of these standards is verified. The process description for re-engineering projects follows the Generic Statistical Business Process Model (GSBPM) and the Quality Manager is involved in the consultation. This provides the opportunity to build in quality monitoring tools and quality indicators – for example in developing new data collection or sampling and estimation procedures. A standard set of quality indicators covering all quality dimensions has been developed, based on data gathered from statisticians. The indicators have been evaluated by the Quality Management Unit in respect of about one hundred products as part of two pilot exercises. The Peer Review team considers that, taken together, these activities provide a firm basis for the development of a more formal and comprehensive quality management system to systematically review and report on statistical processes and outputs throughout the organisation.

The availability of adequate numbers of highly skilled staff to ensure the soundness of its methodology and the cost-effectiveness of its statistical processes is a key issue for Statistics Belgium. The Peer Review team was informed that due to resource constraints the size of the Methodology Unit was halved in 2009, from six to three methodologists, and that the unfavourable age profile will pose a significant knowledge transfer challenge in the near future. Accordingly, the strengthening of the Methodology Unit should be pursued as an urgent corporate priority.

No standard quality reports or self-assessment tools have been designed so far to enable the systematic use of the quality indicators. Furthermore, the results of the exercises undertaken to date have not been published and no formal contact has been made with the Higher Council of Statistics, which under the law has the mission to contribute to the quality of Belgian public statistics. Statistics Belgium's management has the ambition to systematically review all its products and the Peer Review team would support this objective. However it is difficult to see how the under-resourced methodology and quality units can complete such a programme within an acceptable period of time. Finding the additional resources to undertake such tasks will become even more pressing if Statistics Belgium is required to assist in the quality assessment and coordination of statistical production in the wider Belgian statistical system.

In order to achieve better compliance with the CoP and to play an enhanced coordination role, the **Peer Reviewers recommend that:**

- 8. Statistics Belgium should build on its existing work in relation to quality indicators and develop a formal quality management system, including quality guidelines and supporting frameworks, to systematically review and report on its statistical processes and outputs. (European statistics Code of Practice, Principle 4)**

**9. Statistics Belgium should give priority to strengthening its Methodology Unit as a key corporate resource in ensuring the soundness of its methodology and the cost-effectiveness of its statistical processes. (European statistics Code of Practice, Principles 7, 8 and 9)**

**10. Statistics Belgium should build on its existing approach and put in place a systematic programme for reviewing and developing all its statistical outputs and processes. (European statistics Code of Practice, Principles 7, 8 and 9)**

#### **Processes to consult users**

The Higher Council of Statistics (HCS) is established under the statistical law (art 24, novies) to contribute to the quality of Belgian public statistics. Under the Royal decree of the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 1998 the Council is mandated to give advice on creating new, or stopping existing, statistics and on all proposals made regarding statistical policy and statistical activities. Its remit covers not only Statistics Belgium but also the statistical activities of other federal agencies and agencies under the control of the community and regional governments. The users involved as members of the Higher Council and its working groups are members from the academic world, socio-economic organisations, and federal and community representatives. There are several user groups, like journalists, voluntary bodies or the wider public that are not directly involved in the Council's work.

In addition to web use monitoring and some informal consultation, Statistics Belgium carried out a user satisfaction survey in 2014 and would intend to do so regularly in the future. However resource problems have restricted the analysis and follow-up of the results.

In order to promote statistics as a public good and an important input to democracy, non-users and potential users should also be approached. In this regard, Statistics Belgium has a programme to reach out to students with a printed publication and via Facebook and Twitter. Further initiatives of this nature should be undertaken in line with best practice elsewhere.

To further enhance compliance with the CoP, **the Peer Reviewers recommend that:**

**11. Statistics Belgium should establish procedures to consult regularly and raise statistical awareness among users and potential users of official statistics. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicators 11.1 and 11.3)**

#### **User-oriented dissemination**

In Statistics Belgium there is a culture that ensures impartiality and objectivity in practice but there is generally an absence of formal guidelines and documented processes. Procedures are in place to prevent errors, but when errors occur they are treated on a case by case basis. The Peer Review team was informed that the manner of any correction is decided by management and usually depends on the size and potential effect of the error. In case of serious error an announcement is published on the website. No revision policy as such is defined and there is no systematic analysis of revisions. However, some consideration is given to the question of revisions when new statistical processes are being introduced or existing processes are being re-designed.

Although a release calendar exists there are some limitations. It is not comprehensive and indicates only deadlines; statistics can still be published before the announced date. A number of users expressed the view that a more precise indication of the time and date of upcoming releases (e.g. over the next week) would be welcome. Generally the experienced users were satisfied with the meta-information provided by Statistics Belgium and with the availability of contacts for further clarification. Statistics Belgium has developed a meta-database that is available on the intranet

and plans to make it available to the public on the website. Some metadata are systematically available for all publications, but the further development of structure and content could be achieved by implementing the Euro-SDMX Metadata Structure (ESMS), as internally all the information needed is available. The Peer Review team was struck by the limited availability of user friendly analyses prepared by Statistics Belgium – something that is linked to the scarcity of skilled resources. This limits the ability of the general, or non-expert, user to access the data in a meaningful way.

In Statistics Belgium the dissemination services use modern information and communication technology, the website and statistical databases facilitate self-tabulation and provide descriptions and metadata of the products. However, viewed across the wider Belgian statistical system the availability and format of the data and the content and structure of the metadata are very different. While there are some links on the Statistics Belgium website to other statistics provided by other organisations, this is not complete - for example national accounts are not included. In short, there is not a common platform/website through which all the official statistics can be accessed in a user friendly manner. Accordingly, it is difficult for general users in particular to access and handle information related to several areas. In the context of further decentralisation of statistical production in Belgium the availability of such a service assumes an even greater priority. Accordingly, the Peer Review team believes that the proposed Interfederal Statistical Institute, as part of its coordinating function, should take the initiative and put in place a more user-oriented solution (for example, through a common portal) for handling and disseminating all official statistics produced in Belgium.

To further enhance compliance with the CoP, **the Peer Reviewers recommend that:**

- 12. Statistics Belgium should develop and publish policies for handling errors and revisions. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicators 6.3 and 6.6)**
- 13. Statistics Belgium should review and streamline its policies and practices for releasing data and communicating them to users. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicators 6.5, 6.6, 6.7 and 6.8)**
- 14. In order to facilitate better interpretation of its data, Statistics Belgium should produce and publish more in depth analyses of its statistical outputs. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicator 15.1)**
- 15. The proposed Interfederal Statistical Institute should take the initiative and put in place a more user-oriented solution (for example, through a common portal) for handling and disseminating all official statistics produced in Belgium. (Coordination role and European statistics Code of Practice, principles 10, 11, 15)**

#### **Access to microdata**

Statistical law and privacy legislation allow access to microdata for researchers, but the rules, procedures and protocols that must be followed are time consuming. The access is strictly regulated by the Statistical Supervisory Board of the Privacy Commission and the process is underpinned by article 15 of the statistical law. The researcher has to get the permission of this body for each request and an intensive process has to be followed on each occasion, sometimes lasting over six months. It would appear that a case by case approach is adopted without offering shortcuts based on frequent and/or similar demands. Some of the users expressed their desire for a faster, simpler and more coordinated procedure. The Peer Review team sees possibilities to

benefit from the experiences of other countries and move from what might be considered an unduly risk-avoidance approach towards a more risk management based approach.

To further enhance compliance with the CoP, **the Peer Reviewers recommend that:**

- 16. Statistics Belgium, in conjunction with the Privacy Commission, should review the arrangements for granting researchers access to statistical microdata so that access can be provided in a more streamlined, flexible and timely manner. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicator 15.4)**

### **4.2.3 GREATER COORDINATION OF THE PRODUCTION OF PUBLIC STATISTICS IN BELGIUM**

As already indicated in Chapter 3 above, the production of public or official statistics in Belgium has undergone major transformations over the past fifty years or so since the law of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1962 on public statistics was adopted. In 1962 the production of public statistics was very much concentrated in the hands of the then National Institute of Statistics (NIS), which had a near monopoly position, and the law of public statistics was very much framed in this context. Since then there has been significant functional decentralisation of statistical production at the federal level and, in the context of the successive Reform of the State initiatives, increasing regional decentralisation. Up to now the production of public statistics has not been “regionalised” inasmuch that statistics remained the prerogative of the federal level. However, in the most recent round of reforms (the sixth reform) of the State a chapter was included on official statistics and this will lead to a fundamental change in the relationship between the federal and regional/community levels in regard to the production of statistics. A key principle that underpins the new structure is the requirement that the regional/community statistical authorities are put on a par with Statistics Belgium.

A cooperation agreement was adopted on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 2014 and published in the Official Journal of the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 2014 to give effect to the latest reform. Under the agreement the National Accounts Institute (NAI) is to be expanded to facilitate input from the regions and communities into the statistical production of national accounts and a new Interfederal Statistical Institute (ISI) is to be created to oversee and coordinate the production of all other public statistics at both the regional/community and federal levels. It is envisaged that the ISI will come into being on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2016 when it will take over the co-ordination responsibilities of the existing Coordination Committee.

In the view of the Peer Review team, increasing decentralisation of statistical production, whether functional or regional in nature, brings with it the need for greater coordination of the resultant statistical system. In its examination of the current and proposed systems in Belgium the Peer Review team has identified a number of weaknesses and inconsistencies that should be addressed in the context of finalising the arrangements for the new approach. The Peer Review team notes that many of the issues it would raise have already been identified as part of a detailed audit recently concluded by the Belgian Court of Audit of the statistical work of Statistics Belgium<sup>4</sup>.

In many respects the institutional arrangements for statistics are very much determined by the wider institutional and governance arrangements that must apply in Belgium, in particular the emerging relationship between the federal and regional/community authorities. Accordingly, the

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.ccrek.be/EN/Publications/Fiche.html?id=25194e06-96a4-449f-823e-aa5a77e3f5ea>

Peer Review team is of the opinion that many of the current and proposed institutional and operational arrangements for statistical production are not optimal when viewed solely from the perspective of statistical coordination. While fully accepting the absolute necessity to take the wider context into account, the Peer Review team considers that there would also be some value to be gained from examining how the arrangements might be adjusted to take better account of the statistical requirements. The Peer Review team would put forward its recommendations for enhanced coordination under the following headings, which might be considered as the generic building blocks for achieving effective statistical coordination:

- Agreed definition of public statistics;
- Coordination and identification of producers of public statistics;
- Development and implementation of a comprehensive statistical programme;
- Adoption of appropriate legal and other supporting measures.

### **Agreed definition of public statistics**

The law on public statistics when adopted in 1962 did not provide a definition of public statistics – presumably on the basis that such a definition was not necessary in the context of the monopoly position of the NIS. The current Coordination Committee, in the context of establishing the 2015 statistical programme, identified around 860 separate statistical activities undertaken at federal, regional and community levels by around 120 separate entities. This inventory of statistical activities covered the outputs of Statistics Belgium, the NAI, the regional statistical institutions, the ONAs and a large range of other public and private organisations. If all these activities were considered to be public statistics then it would pose a huge challenge to coordinate their production in a quality assured manner. Accordingly, the Peer Review team would recommend that a more focused or targeted definition of public statistics should be developed. Such a definition of public or official statistics should cover the most important statistical outputs produced to meet federal, regional, community and European requirements. Ideally, the agreed concept of public statistics should also require the fulfilment of agreed statistical quality requirements.

In order to provide greater clarity and focus in the coordination of public statistics in Belgium, **the Peer Review team recommends that:**

- 17. An operational concept of public statistics, as implicitly envisaged in the Belgian statistical law, should be defined in an agreed manner taking into account the current federal, regional, community and European statistical contexts and priorities, as well as the need to satisfy agreed quality criteria. (Coordination)**

### **Coordination and identification of producers of public statistics**

Once the concept of public statistics has been defined then the coordination of the programme of such statistics should be assigned to an appropriate body or bodies. Having regard to recent developments, it would appear to be sensible that the Interfederal Statistical Institute (ISI) should be assigned the lead role in this regard. Under current arrangements the NAI will continue to operate independently from the ISI in respect of its area of competence. Active cooperation between the two institutes will therefore be essential in order to ensure effective coordination of the overall statistical system.

A key first task for the coordinating bodies should be the identification and designation in line with statistical legislation and the Code of Practice, of the bodies that are entitled to produce public statistics as defined. The Peer Review team considers that at a minimum these bodies should

include Statistics Belgium, the General Statistics Department of the National Bank of Belgium (NBB), the Federal Planning Bureau (FPB), the statistical institutions of the regions and, in the context of providing European statistics, the ONAs.

In order to strengthen the coordination of the planned Belgian statistical system, **the Peer review team recommends that:**

**18. The proposed Interfederal Statistical Institute, in conjunction with the National Accounts Institute, should be assigned the responsibility for coordinating the production of all public statistics in Belgium. (Coordination)**

**19. The proposed Interfederal Statistical Institute should be empowered to designate, in line with statistical legislation and the Code of Practice, all statistical producers that are entitled to produce public statistics as defined. (Coordination)**

### **Development and implementation of an integrated statistical programme**

As mentioned already, the current statistical programme produced for the past three years is essentially an inventory of all statistical activities at federal, regional/community and local levels. However, while this is a useful exercise it falls short of what normally would be considered as representing an integrated statistical programme. Increasingly, the latter now includes, *inter alia*, the agreement of the statistical outputs, the assignment of primary responsibility for individual outputs, the setting of standards, the monitoring of the achievement of programme objectives and the agreement of funding arrangements and priorities.

The ISI and, to the extent necessary, the NAI must have available to them the necessary dedicated secretarial and other resources to implement their mandates. In particular, they must have access to the professional and other resources necessary to set standards and monitor their implementation.

The cooperation agreement of the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 2014 envisages that the chair of the ISI will rotate between the members on an annual basis. Furthermore, it recognises that the DG of Statistics Belgium shall speak on behalf of the statistical system in international forums subject to “the taking into account the advice or mandate of the board of directors of the ISI or the NAI”. In addition, it is specified that the DG should always be accompanied by the chairman or vice-chairman of ISI in order to ensure that the regions and communities are permanently represented. In reviewing these arrangements, it is important to bear in mind the assignment to the NSI (i.e. Statistics Belgium) of responsibility for coordinating European statistics at national level under the revised European statistical law. Since there is a high overlap between public statistics and European statistics, particularly in respect of the statistics produced at federal level, this may give rise to some confusion. The Peer Review team believes that this might be alleviated somewhat by adopting a different approach to the chairmanship of the ISI. The Peer Review team would put forward the notion of “co-chairs” where the DG of Statistics Belgium, on an “ex officio” basis, would fill one of the positions (and represent the federal level), while the second position would be rotated between the members representing the regions and communities. This approach would provide greater clarity around the respective roles and responsibilities and would also, in the opinion of the Peer Reviewers, lead to greater stability and continuity in the work of the ISI.

To ensure the effective development and implementation of an integrated statistical programme in the new statistical environment, **the Peer Review team recommend that:**

- 20. The proposed Interfederal Statistical Institute should draw up and publish an annual statistical programme, which should *inter alia* cover the following: the identification of statistical outputs; the assignment of primary responsibility for the individual outputs; the setting of standards; the monitoring of the achievement of programme objectives; and the agreement of funding arrangements and priorities. (Coordination)**
- 21. The proposed Interfederal Statistical Institute should be assigned adequate secretarial and other staffing resources and facilities in order to undertake its mandate in a comprehensive and proactive manner. (Coordination)**
- 22. The leadership of the proposed Interfederal Statistical Institute should be entrusted to a Chairperson and Co-Chairperson, one of whom should be, on an *ex officio* basis, the Director General of Statistics Belgium. (Coordination)**

#### **Adoption of appropriate legal and other supporting measures**

In the Belgian federal state structure there is one feature that must be emphasised, namely: that federal law does not overrule regional/community law. As mentioned earlier, the law on public statistics dates from 1962 when statistics were predominantly produced centrally by the NIS. While aspects of the law have been updated (notably in 2006), the revisions have not taken sufficient account of the huge changes that have taken place in recent years, especially the regionalisation of statistical production. One anomaly is the fact that only Statistics Belgium and the NAI are mandated to collect data under the provisions of the statistical law. In order to support properly the functioning of the modern statistical system in a comprehensive and integrated manner it will be necessary to adopt appropriate legislation at both federal and regional/community levels and also to conclude cooperation agreements between the parties at all levels where legal measures might not be possible or appropriate. An over-riding objective should be to ensure that all parties involved in the production of public statistics cooperate in a constructive manner and are bound to work in full accordance with the principles set down in the statistical legislation and CoP.

In the modern era access to administrative data for statistical purposes is assuming an ever increasing importance. Article 24 bis of the statistical law guarantees Statistics Belgium's legal right of access to administrative data for statistical purposes. However, it does not always extend in practice to data held by regional authorities. The Peer Review team was also made aware of some other obstacles (such as restrictions on data matching) that restrict Statistics Belgium's ability to fully exploit administrative data for valid statistical purposes. In the context of the new arrangements, the opportunity should be taken to put in place the necessary additional measures to ensure that Statistics Belgium has full access to relevant administrative data at all levels without restrictions. Furthermore, access to administrative data for statistical purposes should also be facilitated for all other statistical authorities to the extent that this is necessary for the implementation of their statistical mandates.

The role and functioning of the longstanding Higher Council of Statistics, which provides advice to the Minister for the Economy on statistical matters and also has an input into the preparation of the statistical programme, should also be reviewed in the context of the new statistical environment. The Court of Auditors pointed to a number of shortcomings in how the Council implemented its mandate in practice in recent years. The Court pointed to poor and variable attendance by the various interest groups represented on the Council, a disproportionate focus on

the activities of Statistics Belgium and little or no consideration of statistics produced by the regions and communities.

In order to ensure that the implementation of the statistical programme is fully supported and informed by the needs of stakeholders in a structured manner, **the Peer Review team recommends that:**

23. Appropriate legislative and other measures should be adopted at federal and regional/community levels to facilitate the implementation of the Belgian statistical programme and to bind all parties to working in accordance with the principles of the statistical legislation and CoP. (Coordination)
24. Appropriate measures should be adopted to ensure that Statistics Belgium has full access to relevant administrative data at all levels without restrictions. Access to administrative data for statistical purposes should also be assured for all other statistical authorities to the extent that this is necessary for the implementation of their statistical mandates. (European statistics Code of Practice, indicator 2.2 and Coordination)
25. The mandate, composition and working arrangements of the Higher Council of Statistics should be reviewed and clarified in the context of it providing more effective input from users and advice on the overall system of public statistics in Belgium. (Coordination)



### **4.3 NATIONAL STATISTICAL INSTITUTE VIEWS WHERE THEY DIVERGE FROM PEER REVIEWERS' ASSESSMENT**

Statistics Belgium would like to thank the peer reviewers for the high quality and professionalism of their work, as well as for their openness to see the specificities of the Belgian statistical system. Statistics Belgium welcomes the overall high appreciation for its compliance with the European Code of Practice. On the other hand, it acknowledges that there is room for improvement.

However, regarding some recommendations, Statistics Belgium has diverging views from those of the peer reviewers. As to professional independence, the peer reviewers already pointed out that “The principle of professional independence (...) is established in law” and that “the professional independence of the [director general of Statistics Belgium] in the performance of its duties has been established by custom and practice”. We would like to stress that this is also the case for the President of the National Accounts Institute. The principle is also laid down in the staff regulations on managers in federal public service and in the job description of the director general. The latter explicitly refers to the Code of Practice and the recommendations of the peer review.

Moreover, for some recommendations on the institutional context, Statistics Belgium has to point out that it does not have power of decision. The peer reviewers already pointed out that “The implementation of some of the recommendations may require legislative/institutional changes and thus they are implicitly addressed to the ‘appropriate relevant authorities’ without specific designation.” This is especially the case for aspects of recommendations 1 to 3, 5, 6 and 15 to 25. For some of these, legislative initiative is needed; for others, the decision lies on the political level. In particular for those recommendations (especially on coordination, e.g. recommendation 22) involving directly the specificities of the Belgian federal institutional system, where there is no hierarchy of law, implementation will have to be on the basis of a compromise taking into account, inter alia, the necessary link between the competences of the different institutional levels and the statistical support provided at these levels.

Wherever it has the power to do so, Statistics Belgium will take the initial steps that are possible at federal level to seek for an appropriate response to the recommendations. However, some of these steps will have to be taken at regional level and/or by the proposed Interfederal Statistical Institute. It is therefore not always within the power of Statistics Belgium to guarantee full or even partial implementation, nor even a timeline.

## ANNEX A: PROGRAMME OF THE VISIT

### AGENDA

Peer review visit to Belgium (2 February 2015 – 6 February 2015)

Time	Programme	Organisation	Participants
<b>Day 1 Monday 2 February 2015</b>			
09.00-10.30 1	PR team discussion to finalise the preparation of the visit.		
10.30- 10.45	Coffee break		
10.45-12.00 2	Preparatory meeting with the NSI coordinator team	StBe	Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens
12.00-12.30 3	Welcome and introduction to visit	StBe	Nico Waeyaert, Annie Versonnen, Erik Meurisse, Dominique De Baets, Philippe Mauroy, Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens
12.30-13.15	Lunch		
13.15-14.15 4	General information session with a description on how the national statistical system is organised (bodies, distribution of responsibilities, relations between authorities).	StBe	Nico Waeyaert, Annie Versonnen, Erik Meurisse, Dominique De Baets, Philippe Mauroy, Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens
14.15-15.45 5	The statistical law and related legislation governing the Institutional Environment for Statistics (CoP principles 1, 2, 5 and 6)	StBe	Nico Waeyaert, Annie Versonnen, Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens
15.45-16.00	Coffee break		
16.00-17.15 6	Meeting with Junior staff	StBe	Pieter Vermeulen, Ken Van Loon, Antonio Fiordaliso, Hannelore Van Der Beken, Patrick Lusyne
<b>Day 2 Tuesday 3 February 2015</b>			
09.00-10.30 7	Programming, planning and resources, including training (CoP principles 3 and 10)	StBe	Nico Waeyaert, Annie Versonnen, Erik Meurisse, Dominique De Baets, Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens
10.30-10.45	Coffee break		
10.45-12.15 8	Quality (organisational structure, tools, monitoring etc ) (CoP principles 4 and 12 - 15)	StBe	Annie Versonnen, Dominique De Baets, Luc Lebrun, Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens
12.15-13.00	Lunch		
13.00-14.30 9	Methodology, data collection, data processing and administrative data (CoP principles 2, 7, 8 and 9)	StBe	Annie Versonnen, Erik Meurisse, Dominique De Baets, Anne Van de Voorde, Marc Debusschere, Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens
14.30-16.15 10	Co-ordination, including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role of NSI</li> <li>• National Accounts Institute</li> <li>• Supervisory Bodies (Higher Council for Statistics...)</li> <li>• Impact of Interfederalisation proposal</li> </ul>	StBe  NAI	Nico Waeyaert, Annie Versonnen, Dominique De Baets, Philippe Mauroy, Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens  Jean-Marc Delporte, Hamadi Elidrissi, Olivier Goddeeris, Rudi Acx, Philippe Donnay, Bart Hertveldt

Time	Programme	Organisation	Participants
16.15-17.15 11	Meeting with NCB/NAI	NCB/NAI StBe	Jean-Marc Delporte, Rudi Acx, Hamadi Elidrissi, Olivier Goddeeris Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens
<b>Day 3 Wednesday 4 February 2015</b>			
09.00-10.30 12	Dissemination, including user consultation (CoP principles 6, 11 and 15)	StBe	Stephan Moens, Lucia Decuyper, Frank Verschaeren
10.30-10.45	Coffee break		
10.45-12.00 13	Meeting with FPS Energy	DG Energy StBe	Ken De Sadeleer, Aline Guilmot Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens
12.00-13.15 14	Meeting with Science Policy	BELSP0 StBe	Ward Ziarko, Julien Ravet, Jeffrey Malek Mansour Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens
13.15-14.00	Lunch		
14.00-15.30 15	Cooperation / level of integration in the ESS	StBe	Nico Waeyaert, Dominique De Baets, Marc Debusschere, Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens
15.30-15.45	Coffee break		
15.45-17.15 16	Meeting with main users - scientific community	Universities St Be	Ronan Van Rossem, Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens
<b>Day 4 Thursday 5 February 2015</b>			
09.00-10.00 17	Meeting with main users - Media	Media StBe	Françoise Dehalleux, Wouter Vervenne, Gilles Quoistiaux, Stephan Moens, Frank Verschaeren
10.00-10.30	Meeting with Court of Audit	COA StBe	Kristel Behets, Luc Pennings, Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens
10.30-10.45	Coffee break		
10.45-11.45 18	Meeting with main users – Ministries and other public institutions	VL region BR region WL region Central Econ. Council FPS Employment, Labour Federal Planning Bureau StBe	Josée Lemaître, Ann Carton, Xavier Dehaibe, Françoise Vanderkelen, Sile O'Dorchai, Luc Denayer, Valérie Burnel, Virginie Vaes, Bart Hertveldt, Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens
11.45-12.45 19	Meeting with Higher Council of Statistics	HCS StBe	Marcel Remon, Martine Van Wouwe, Carlo Cornelis, Annie Versonnen, Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens
12.45-13.30	Lunch		
13.30-14.30 20	Meeting with data providers	Persons Register Social Security Admin Business Register St Be	Marc Ruymen, Peter Vets, Adriaan Rosseel, Erik Meurisse, Marc Debusschere, Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens

Time	Programme	Organisation	Participants
14.30-15.30 21	Meeting with main users – Private Stakeholders and Trade Unions	Business Federations Trade Unions StBe	Raf Van Bulck, Jeannine Screurs, Giuseppina Desimone, Annie Versonnen, Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens
15.30-15.45	Coffee break		
15.45-16.30 22	Clarifications, remaining or additional issues	StBe	Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens
<b>Day 5 Friday 6 February 2015</b>			
09.00-10.45 23	PR team discussion		
10.45-11.00	Coffee break		
11.00-13.00 24	Meeting with senior management: conclusions and recommendations	StBe	Nico Waeyaert, Annie Versonnen, Erik Meurisse, Dominique De Baets, Philippe Mauroy, Philippe Haumont, Frank Verschaeren, Stephan Moens

## ANNEX B: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

	<b>Peer Review Team</b>
1	Mr Gerry O’Hanlon, Chair
2	Ms Katalin Szép, Reviewer
3	Mr David Fenwick, Reviewer
	<b>Eurostat observer</b>
4	Mr Gunter Schäfer, Eurostat, Head of Unit, Regional statistics and geographical information
	<b>Participants from Statistics Belgium</b>
	<b>Management of Statistics Belgium</b>
5	Mr Nico Waeyaert, Director General
6	Ms Annie Versonnen, Chief Operating Officer
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