European Statistical System Peer Reviews

Third round: 2021-2023

Guide for peer review experts

Endorsed by the ESS Committee in October 2020

Table of Contents

1 Introduction

The third round of European Statistical System (ESS) peer reviews will be carried out from 2021 to mid-2023 in the Member States of the European Union and of the European Free Trade Area. It aims at improving quality and trust in European Statistics by assessing the compliance of the ESS with the principles of the European Statistics Code of Practice (ES CoP). It will cover the ESS statistical authorities (Eurostat, the National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) and selected Other National Authorities (ONAs)) developing, producing and disseminating European Statistics. The peer reviews will be followed by a period of annual monitoring of the implementation of the improvement actions developed to address the recommendations provided in the peer review reports.

This Guide together with its annexes aims to facilitate the work of the peer review experts in terms of preparing and executing the peer review visit, and the subsequent drafting of the report and recommendations. This documentation is complemented by a series of workshops. The intention is to ensure that the peer review visits, drafting of reports and recommendations are carried out in a standardised and harmonised way, not to compare countries, but to ensure equal treatment in order to present an objective and coherent picture across the ESS.

It should be noted that the peer review methodology and corresponding guides were developed in close collaboration between Eurostat and the NSIs of EU Member States and EFTA countries and agreed by all actors.

2 Background to the European Statistical System peer reviews

It is recognised that quality is one of the ESS comparative advantages in a world experiencing a growing trend of instant information and new challenges such as the situation created by the impact of Coivid-19. The ES CoP is the cornerstone of the ESS common quality framework, and ESS statistical authorities have committed themselves to adhere to the ES CoP. The importance of compliance with the ES CoP was further underlined by the adoption of the Quality Declaration by the European Statistical System Committee (ESSC) in September 2016.

In this context, it is crucial for the ESS to be equipped with an ES CoP review mechanism, the peer reviews, supporting with credible evidence this self-commitment to adhere to the ES CoP. The objective of this review mechanism is to enhance the integrity, professional independence and accountability of the ESS statistical authorities. The first round of peer reviews was carried out in 2006-2008, followed by a second round in 2013-2015. Both rounds covered Eurostat and the statistical authorities of all EU Member States and EFTA countries. The European Statistical Governance Advisory Board (ESGAB) carried out the peer review of Eurostat in 2014, using the methodology developed for National Statistical System peer reviews, with some light adaptations reflecting Eurostat's specific characteristics.

After the revision of the ES CoP in 2016-2017 and its adoption by the ESS Committee in November 2017, the compliance/alignment of the NSIs, ONAs and Eurostat with the principles of this revised ES CoP need to be re-assessed. The ESS has therefore decided to carry out a third round of peer reviews along similar lines to the previous rounds according to the objectives listed below.

3 Framework for the ESS peer reviews

3.1 The objectives of the peer reviews

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

- To review the compliance/alignment of the ESS with the ES CoP, in order to demonstrate to the ESS and to external stakeholders that the ESS is a system based on the principles of the ES CoP;
- To help NSIs, ONAs and Eurostat in their further improvement and development by indicating future-oriented recommendations; at the same time they should stimulate government authorities to support the implementation of the 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, ONAs, Eurostat and the ESS/National Statistical System (NSS), i.e. something that is inherent to the ESS, and can be achieved by the ESS itself. 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. However, the external dimension is considered particularly important as public trust in official statistics needs to be strengthened and the statistics demonstrated to be dependable. Therefore, an extensive communication campaign will highlight and promote the usefulness and necessity of the external dimension.

3.2 The scope of the peer reviews

Since the last round of peer reviews, the ES CoP has been reviewed and extended. This is reflected in the peer review, both in the Self-Assessment Questionnaires (SAQ) and in the visit itself.

Therefore, the third round of ESS peer reviews:

- Covers all 16 Principles of the ES CoP;
- Differentiates 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 are assessed as they are equally important, the peer review expert team has the possibility to decide, for each country, on which principles it will focus during the visit. The criteria for the basis of this decision can be found under Chapter 9.1: Collection and analysis of information.

  The principle on Professional Independence and the principle on Coordination and cooperation as well as principles including elements of modernization (principles 2, 4, 7, 8, 15) will be assessed for every member of the ESS (see more detail in annex II Template for the agenda of the peer review visit);
- Identifies advancement and progress of the NSIs/ONAs/Eurostat in complying/aligning with the principles of the ES CoP, compared to the second round of peer reviews;

- Covers Eurostat, the NSIs and selected ONAs (selected in a dedicated process by the NSI taking place 6-7 months before the peer review visit) in all EU Member States and EFTA countries;
- Ensures that the NSIs in their coordination role in the NSS decide which ONAs are selected for participation in the peer review. The NSIs will send the list of participating ONAs to Eurostat with an explanatory note outlining the procedure and reasons for these ONAs to be part of the peer review;
- Endeavours to identify elements/recommendations to be addressed to the ESS in general that will contribute to an enhanced partnership in the ESS;
- Does 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 (e.g. Gross National Income).

It should be noted that the ESS Quality Assurance Framework (ESS QAF) has been updated to reflect the changes in the ES CoP and, although it will not be used as a benchmark, it can provide useful guidance/will be a reference document for the third round of ESS peer reviews.

3.3 The approach

A combination of an audit-like and a peer review approach is used when assessing the countries in order to benefit from the positive aspects of both approaches.

The following elements from an audit-like approach are 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 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;
- The responsibility of the NSI to formulate (in cooperation with ONAs and other stakeholders) the improvement actions to address the recommendations in the peer review report.

The following elements of a peer review approach are 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 and potentially the ONAs;
- Focus of the peer review report on broad issues identified by the peer review experts for each NSI and participating ONAs rather than on principles – this is aimed at showing the bigger picture behind the

individual principles/indicators, demonstrating how they relate to each other in practice and rendering the reports more strategic;

- Focus on improvements as an objective of the reviews.

4 Language

The language of the peer review (both for the SAQ and the peer review visit itself) is English. The NSI and ONAs must ensure that all those participating in the peer review have the necessary level of knowledge of English. If this is not the case, interpreters must be foreseen for the peer review visit. Documentary evidence or a summary of the content of the documents must be provided in English.

5 Training

The following training is foreseen for the peer review experts:

- One 2-day workshop for peer review experts and a limited number of selected NSI representatives (could be the national peer review coordinator, members of the ESS Task Force on peer reviews or other colleagues from the NSI with the appropriate knowledge) before the start of the peer reviews. The representatives of the NSIs will take part in the workshop solely in a consultative capacity (to provide information from the NSI point of view when necessary);
- Three 1-day follow-up workshops every 6 months during the peer review process;
- One 1-day specialised workshop for the chairs to be organised after approximately one third of the peer reviews have been carried out;
- One 2-day final workshop on lessons learned for peer review experts and all national peer review coordinators at the end of the whole peer review process with the aim to identify and document the lessons learned and provide recommendations for the methodology and implementation aspects of any future peer reviews in the ESS.

The peer review experts will be trained on the methodology of the peer reviews before the programme of peer reviews starts and during the process (in December 2020/January 2021, January 2022, July 2022, January 2023) and should raise any issues detected during the process and not requiring immediate reactions. This planning may be reviewed due to the Covid-19 situation which will be monitored closely by Eurostat.

The first workshop in December 2020/January 2021 will focus on the methodology of the peer reviews. It will explain the different steps in implementing a peer review, the approach to be used (with some auditing principles), the expectations towards the conduct by the peer review experts, the work in teams, the role of the chair of the peer review expert team, the information to be analysed, the type of findings and recommendations expected, the agenda of the peer review visits, the report drafting procedure and content, advice on how to make the recommendations more comparable/harmonise them across the countries, the role of the Eurostat experts and any other topic deemed relevant.

There will be three more workshops during the implementation of the peer reviews to take stock of experience by the peer review experts, to discuss shortcomings in the process and possible problems/challenges and how to overcome them.

There will also be a separate workshop organised only for the chairs of the peer review expert teams to discuss not only issues arising from their role as chairs but also to review details and arrangements of the individual peer reviews and how to improve the functioning of the reviews e.g. better ways to organise the work, discussions with the NSIs/ONAs.

A final workshop will be organised after the peer reviews have been all finalised in order to take stock of the experience and lessons learnt. This workshop will involve both the peer review experts as well as the national peer review coordinators from the NSIs with the aim to identify and document the lessons learned, and to provide recommendations for the methodology and implementation aspects of any future peer reviews in the ESS.

6 Description of the peer review process and timeline

The peer reviews will take place under the responsibility of Eurostat. Two contractors assist Eurostat in its tasks: one contractor is responsible for the organisation of the peer reviews, especially the logistics linked to the peer review visits; a second contractor is responsible for communication aspects.

The task Force on Peer Reviews and Quality (TF PRQ) is Eurostat' main contact point for all aspects of the peer reviews. A functional mailbox has been created for this purpose: ESTAT-2020-ESS-PEER-REVIEWS@ec.europa.eu.

A *central coordination desk* is set up by the contractor, engaged by Eurostat, to manage the logistics of the peer reviews. The *national peer review coordinator* will be nominated by the NSIs as the central contact point for all matters relating to the peer review and may be supported by a *national coordination desk*. More explanations on the role and responsibilities of the contractor and the central coordination desk can be found in Chapter 8: The contractor: roles and responsibilities.

The peer review process is based on the analysis of the information collected by the peer review experts through the SAQs (completed by both the NSI and the participating ONAs), the core documentation, any additional information and documentation, and the peer review visit. The peer review experts will summarise the results of their analysis in a peer review report. After agreement of the findings between Eurostat and the NSI, the report will be published on the websites of both Eurostat and the NSI.

The timeline below indicates the latest date/period at which the event should happen. However, it is advised to start as early as possible with the planning and preparation of the peer review and to finalise the peer review report as soon as possible. Such a quick finalisation and publication of the peer review report will be of benefit for the NSI itself but will also be useful for the effectiveness of the communication campaign that will accompany the peer reviews.

The timeline is set out as follows[1] (a graphic description including the timeline for one individual peer review can be found in *Figure 1*):

- June 2020: Via a formal letter, Eurostat contacts the ESS NSIs asking for their preferred dates of the peer review visit in the period April 2021-April 2023;
- July 2020: Eurostat prepares a timeline for the peer review visits to each country, based on the information collected in June 2020 and adjusts the overall time schedule for the peer reviews for decision;
- July/August/September 2020: Start of the selection procedure for the nomination of peer review experts by the NSIs, by Eurostat and the contractor tasked with the implementation of the peer reviews;
- September/October 2020:
  - Eurostat publishes methodology, SAQs, Guides and Annexes on its website;
  - Via a formal letter from DG to DG, Eurostat informs all ESS NSIs of the formal launch of the third round of peer reviews, about the availability of the methodology, both SAQs (NSI and ONA), the guides for peer review experts and NSIs/participating ONAs and their annexes on the Eurostat website and asks the NSIs to start the procedure to select the participating ONAs; Eurostat asks the NSIs to nominate a national peer review coordinator and a contact person for all communication activities (communication officer);
- October/November 2020:
  - Via a formal letter, Eurostat sends both SAQs for NSIs and ONAs as well as the two guides and their annexes to all the appointed national peer review coordinators in the NSIs;
  - Eurostat provides the national peer review coordinators with the contact details in Eurostat (functional mailbox) and concerning the contractor (under contract with Eurostat) and its central coordination desk;
  - Compilation of the list of peer review experts based on proposals from the NSIs, Eurostat and the contractor; selection of experts by Eurostat for the peer review expert teams;
- November 2020: The central coordination desk – in consultation with Eurostat - fixes 2-3 possible dates for the peer review visit in each country according to the planning provided by the NSIs;
- November/December 2020:
  - Based on a global visit programme set up by Eurostat in cooperation with the NSIs and the contractor, there is an agreement between Eurostat, the central coordination desk and the national peer review coordinators on the individual weeks of the respective peer review visits;
  - Via a formal letter, Eurostat informs the national peer review coordinator of the precise date of the peer review visit, announces the names of the peer review experts for the peer review in the given country, including the name of the chair, and sends the CVs of the experts;

[1] It should be noted that this is the current planning. However, adjustments may be needed due to the evolvement of the situation around the Covid-19 pandemic.

- January 2021: One training workshop for the peer review experts and one training workshop for the national peer review coordinators;
- January 2021: Workshop on the communication campaign for NSIs' communication officers;
- 6-7 months before the peer review visit: Via a formal letter to the individual NSI, Eurostat confirms the specific date of the peer review visit and informs about the need to send the filled-in SAQs (NSI and ONAs), the core documents and other supporting documentation; Eurostat also requests to be informed about the selection (and its justification) of the ONAs based on the pre-defined criteria; all the information will be requested for the deadlines indicated below;
- 5-6 months before the peer review visit: The NSI selects the ONAs for the peer review (for completion of SAQ and participation in the visit) and sends the information on the selected ONAs as well as an explanatory note on the selection procedure and results to Eurostat;
- 3 months before the peer review visit: The national peer review coordinator submits to the central coordination desk the completed SAQs (both from the NSI and participating ONAs) with all necessary documents (background documents and evidence for statements/answers in the SAQ), with the Eurostat TF.PRQ in copy;
- 10 weeks before the peer review visit: The chair of the peer review expert team will hold a video/telephone conference with the peer review experts to discuss the roles of each expert in the visit, the answers to the SAQs and potential issues to be raised during the visit (so as to be included in the agenda);
- 9 weeks before the peer review visit: The chair of the peer review expert team will propose elements for the draft agenda (related to the content of the agenda, not to the people to be invited) to the national peer review coordinator (which principles will be assessed, which issues need to be discussed, how much time needs to be devoted to them, etc.) and informs the national peer review coordinator about the roles of the peer review experts in the team;
- 8 weeks before peer review visit:
    - the chair of the peer review expert team and the national peer review coordinator agree on general agenda items and how much time needs to be devoted to them and also on the duration of the visit (4 to 5 days);
    - The chair of the peer review exert team will inform the national peer review coordinator of any internal documentation (not publicly available) that is additionally required to be provided by the NSI/ONAs. If a summary is requested in English, the NSI/ONA has one month to provide this;
- 2-3 weeks before the peer review visit: the detailed agenda is finalised by the NSI, i.e. all stakeholders have been invited and confirmed their presence, and is sent to the chair of the peer review expert team, with the Eurostat TF.PRQ in copy;
- Peer review visit takes place: duration 4 to 5 days;
- 1 week after the peer review visit: the chair of the peer review expert team sends the list of recommendations, as presented during the last day of the peer review visit, to the NSI and the Eurostat TF.PRQ (copy to the central coordination desk);

- 4 weeks after peer review visit: the chair of the of the peer review expert team sends the draft report to the central coordination desk for formatting and language checking; within two days, the central coordination desk sends the draft report to the national peer review coordinator and to Eurostat TF.PRQ (for information purposes);
- 8 weeks after the peer review visit: the NSI/ONAs check the report for factual correctness and send their comments, including setting out diverging views on recommendations, directly to the Eurostat TF.PRQ at the latest after 4 weeks from the receipt of the draft report from the central coordination desk;
- 10 weeks after the peer review visit: Eurostat has 2 weeks as from the receipt of the draft report from the NSI to comment and further harmonise recommendations and to send the revised version of the report to the central coordination desk. The central coordination desk then forwards this document to the peer review expert team;
- 11 weeks after the peer review visit: the peer review expert team has 1 week to integrate all comments;
- 2 working days for final formatting and language checking by the contractor who then sends the version to the NSI and Eurostat TF.PRQ;
- 13 weeks after the peer review visit: Eurostat and the NSI have 2 weeks to finally approve the report; publication on both websites (Eurostat and NSI);
- 21 weeks after the peer review visit: the NSI has 8 weeks to develop improvement actions (in cooperation with ONAs);
- 23 weeks after the peer review visit: Eurostat has 2 weeks to comment on the proposed improvement actions and to indicate amendments if necessary;
- 26 weeks after the peer review visit: Eurostat and the NSI have 3 weeks to come to an agreement on the improvement actions; publication of the improvement actions alongside the report on both websites (Eurostat and NSI).

It should be noted that the total duration from the start of the peer review visit to the publication of the peer review report is 13 weeks.

Hints and tips:

- The national peer review coordinator to keep the peer review expert team informed on all contacts between the NSI, contractor and Eurostat.
- The central coordination desk of the contractor to provide the peer review expert team, Eurostat and NSI with the exact dates of the road map set out above.
- The central coordination desk of the contractor to prepare in advance an intranet or website specifically for the peer review experts, in order to facilitate their tasks. The site could contain the relevant documentation needed for the peer review (as the SAQ of NSI & ONAs, core documents, etc.)
- When requesting additional documents, especially from ONAs, the peer review expert team should be aware of the proportionality of ONAs participation in the peer review exercise and possible confidentiality of internal documents.

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 Peer review team

7.1 Composition of the team

The peer review expert teams consists of four experts, including at least one external (to the ESS) expert and one expert from Eurostat. The composition of the peer review expert teams provides for a balanced combination of competencies, knowledge and skills. The following requirements are met by the combined experience, knowledge and skills of the four experts who constitute one peer review expert team:

- Senior management experience in an NSI/ONA;
- Knowledge about the set-up and functioning of an NSS;
- Knowledge of latest 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 looks as follows:

- One (current or recent) senior manager from an NSI, who is the chair of the peer review expert team and ensures that the knowledge about the NSS and ESS is represented in the peer review expert team;
- One external (to the ESS) expert, whose presence ensures 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 ONA (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 is an equal member of the peer review expert team. The Eurostat expert also assumes certain facilitation tasks such as supporting the harmonisation of the recommendations and accompanying the peer review process in the given country.

In order to ensure a consistent approach and methodology for each peer review, to balance the workload between peer review experts and to ensure the respect of the deadlines, each peer review expert must be involved in several peer reviews.

7.2 Role of the Chair

For each peer review expert team, Eurostat will identify a chair (based on, for example, expertise, knowledge, seniority, participation in previous peer reviews) from among the peer review expert team members to facilitate the organisation of the process. It is the chair's responsibility to ensure the proper functioning of the team. This involves, inter alia, agreeing the distribution of work within the team, defining the work schedule and taking an overall responsibility for the peer review report, including that it is being produced in an independent manner. The chair has primary responsibility for the preparation of the peer review, for the conduct of the sessions during the peer review visit and for finalising the report. The chair is the main contact point for the national peer review coordinator and as such undertakes the organisation of all aspects of the peer review with the national peer review coordinator and the central coordination desk.

In the event of any disputes, the chair seeks advice from the Contractor; the latter will also offer advice with a view to enhancing comparability.

7.3 Conduct

The purpose of the peer reviews as described in Chapter 3 is in brief to improve compliance with the ES CoP as well as capacity and quality in European Statistics and the production of these, in addition to assessing progress. As in auditing operations in general this presupposes trust to ensure transparency and objectivity of the peer reviews. The conduct of the peer review experts must be in accordance with this. The peer review experts are expected to apply and uphold the following principles:

- Integrity;
- Objectivity and impartiality;
- Confidentiality;
- Professionalism and competency.

They must behave with courtesy and helpfulness in order to obtain the necessary information. Questions must be asked in an open manner without prejudice and be constructive.

Peer review experts must sign a declaration of absence of conflict of interest and a statement declaring that they will respect the confidential nature of the information, which must not be disclosed to other parties than the NSIs and ONAs concerned and Eurostat.

Hints and tips:

- It is good practice to involve all team members on equal footing and allocate the responsibility of chairing sessions in advance of the peer review visit. While the chair of the peer review expert team has the overall responsibility, peer review experts should be actively involved in chairing sessions and asking also questions in sessions not chaired by them as well as in drawing the conclusions of the day and proposing recommendations. The work of the four experts should indeed be team work for all stages and aspects of the peer review.

8 The contractors – roles and responsibilities

Eurostat is assisted by two contractors in the execution of the peer reviews: the first contractor is responsible for all organisational aspects of the peer reviews including the organisation of training workshops on the methodology; a second contractor with expertise in communication, is in charge of developing and supporting the implementation of the overall communication strategy on the peer reviews and the value of European statistics. In addition, the second contractor is also responsible for the development of the generic communication material as well as for the organisation of a workshop with the communication officers of the NSIs to discuss the campaign materials at the national level. It further supports the communication activities in each EU Member State and EFTA country before, during and after the peer review.

Both contractors work under the close supervision of Eurostat.

Contractor for the organisation of the peer reviews

The contractor in charge of the overall organisation of the peer reviews, has set up a central coordination desk in order to facilitate the communication between the contractor and the NSIs. The NSIs nominate a national peer review coordinator who may be supported by a national coordination desk in each country. The central coordination desk is the contact point for, and cooperates closely with, the national peer review coordinator and the peer review expert teams in preparing and managing the peer reviews. Establishing a good working relationship between these entities is important for the success of the peer reviews.

The responsibilities of the central coordination desk include:

- Working to shape and manage the programme of peer reviews, including identifying together with Eurostat suitable peer review expert teams to conduct each peer review, and the chair of each team;
- Organising together with Eurostat two training workshops, one for peer review experts and one for the national peer review coordinators including all the logistics and preparing some presentations;
- Organising together with Eurostat three mid-term workshops with the peer review experts, one workshop with the chairs and one ex-post workshop for both the peer review experts and the national peer review coordinators;
- Creating, organising, maintaining and updating an online interest group to coordinate the supply of documentation;
- Contractually engaging the peer review experts;
- Distributing to the peer review experts the documentation - completed questionnaires and core documents submitted by the NSIs;
- Setting up the fixed timetable for the peer review visits based on preferences submitted to Eurostat by the NSIs (avoiding, as far as possible, other European commitments such as EU Council Presidency, ESSC, DGs informal workshops and other meetings of Director Generals (such as ESS Partnership Group), Excessive Deficit Procedure visits/dialogues, the European Statistical Forum meetings as well as meetings of other international organizations, e.g. United Nations Statistical Commission, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Conference of European Statisticians (UNECE CES),

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Committee on Statistics and Statistical Policy (OECD CSSP);

- Preparing the agenda of the peer review visits together with the chair of the peer review expert team and the NSIs;
- Making travel and other logistical arrangements for the peer review expert team.

The contractor ensures that the peer review reports have a harmonised and consistent style (English proof-reading, same terminology, structure and coordinated content) and that they read well.

The contractor is responsible for the logistics of the training workshops and the travel and subsistence arrangements of all missions.

The table below includes an overview of the responsibilities of the various actors.

	Task	From/Responsible initiator	To/Co-responsible	Via CCD
Collection and analysis of information	SAQs are sent out to all NSIs	ESTAT	NSI	N
Collection and analysis of information	Filled-in SAQ and accompanying documentation is sent	NSI	ESTAT	Y
Collection and analysis of information	Check for completeness	CCD	NSI; ESTAT	Y
Collection and analysis of information	Final package of SAQ and accompanying documentation sent	NSI	PRE team; ESTAT	Y
Collection and analysis of information	Additional information requested	PRE team	NSI; ESTAT	Y
Collection and analysis of information	Additional information sent	NSI	PRE team; ESTAT	Y
Preparation of the peer review visit	Agree on specific date	NSI; ESTAT		N
Preparation of the peer review visit	Organise PRE team teleconference	CCD	PRE team	Y
Preparation of the peer review visit	Propose elements of the draft agenda	PRE team	NSI; ESTAT	Y
Preparation of the peer review visit	Propose and agree general agenda	PRE team; NSI	ESTAT	Y
Preparation of the peer review visit	Final agenda and participants sent	NSI	PRE team; ESTAT	Y
Drafting the report and consultation procedure	Draft report is proofread and sent	PRE team	ESTAT; NSI	Y
Drafting the report and consultation procedure	Comments and diverging views are sent	NSI	ESTAT	N
Drafting the report and consultation procedure	Harmonised version is sent	ESTAT	PRE team	Y
Drafting the report and consultation procedure	Consolidated version is proofread and sent	PRE team	ESTAT; NSI	Y
Drafting the report and consultation procedure	Report is agreed and approved	ESTAT; NSI		N

Contractor for communication activities

The contractor for communication is responsible for supporting the development of a communication strategy and the corresponding generic communication material. It also supports communication activities of the NSIs, if requested and necessary.

It is recommended that the NSIs nominate a communication officer to support the communication activities throughout the peer review process. It should be noted that a workshop for the communication officers of the NSIs is organised in December 2020/January 2021 by the contractor specialised in communication. The workshop informs about the peer review process and related communication activities, as well as about communicating the value of European Statistics.

Hints and tips:

- In order to ensure an optimal information flow, the central coordination desk should establish some rules on communication among all the actors in the process. For emergency matters, e.g. missed flights during the travel of the experts, etc., provide contact information to the contractor.
- The central coordination desk should establish a forum where peer review experts can post questions for a FAQ site and exchange experience.

9 Methodology

It should be noted that whilst seeking to ensure a harmonised approach, the peer reviews respect the diverse frameworks of each country. This is achieved by a two-step methodological approach: collection and analysis of information, and in-country visits. Information on the country is based on the SAQs and covers the whole ES CoP; whereas in-country visits focus on those issues identified by the peer review expert teams from analysis of the SAQs as meriting further study. This will help to form a picture of each country's situation within its specific national context.

The peer review process officially starts with a letter announcing the peer review visit and asking for the filled-in SAQ and other relevant material to be sent to the peer review expert team as well as for information on the ONAs selected to participate in the peer review process, together with the explanatory note justifying the reasons for the selection.

9.1 Collection and analysis of information

The SAQs are sent out to all NSIs in November 2020. The filled in SAQs and accompanying documentation have to be returned to the peer review expert team and the Eurostat TF.PRQ via the central coordination desk three months before the peer review visit takes place in the given country.

The peer review begins with the analysis of the information provided by the NSI and the ONAs in the SAQs as well as the in accompanying core documentation. Although the peer review targets the NSIs and selected ONAs as part of the NSS, it is the NSI that is ultimately responsible for the process. The NSI must therefore ensure that all self-assessment questionnaires (also those from the ONAs) are completed and sent to the central coordination desk (contractor) and the Eurostat TF.PRQ with all required documentation by the agreed deadline. An additional check on the completeness of the information is carried out by the central coordination desk before transmission to the peer review expert team (with the Eurostat TF.PRQ in copy).

It should be noted that the filled-in SAQs are shared with the respective peer review expert team only and will be used only in the context of their work. Eurostat's TF.PRQ also receives a copy of the SAQs for documentation purposes and for identifying good/innovative practices as agreed by the ESSC.

In addition to this information provided by the NSI, the peer review expert team identifies and consults any additional information relevant to the peer review (e.g. previous peer review report, Commitments on Confidence in Statistics, a summary of progress in improvement actions from the second round of peer reviews, difficulties in implementation) as well as consults the website of both the NSI and ONAs, and any internet/media reporting about the producers of statistics.

Although not to be used as a benchmark, the ESS Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) gives examples of methods and tools to implement the indicators of the ES CoP and can provide valuable guidance when analysing the replies in the SAQs. However, the professional judgement and experience of the peer review experts play a key role in this assessment.

During the analysis phase it is possible for the peer review experts to request additional information from the NSI and to send questions for clarification. This is done via the central coordination desk, with the Eurostat TF.PRQ in copy. However, it should be noted that the request for providing additional internal documentation (not publicly available) is to be made at least two months before the peer review visit. If a summary is requested in English, the NSI/ONA has one month to provide this. Peer review experts should also be aware that certain documents internal to the NSI/ONAs may contain confidential information and therefore not be available for consultation. In this case, a summary without confidential information should be provided.

One of the aims of this analysis is to identify areas, which need further explanation, and based on this analysis to detect inconsistencies or gaps in the information provided. The results of this analysis form the basis for the drafting of the follow-up questions to be asked during the peer review visit. The list of *Questions by interlocutor* (see Annex V) could also provide inspiration. This analysis phase obviously requires an exchange of views within the peer review expert team in order to share first impressions and results, and to arrive at a consensus on the questions for the peer review visit.

It should be noted that although the peer review visit is issue-based, i.e. focussing mainly on the issues identified during the analysis of the SAQ and the provided documentation, rather than encompassing all ES CoP principles, special attention is to be given to the principles on professional independence (P1), coordination and cooperation (P1.bis) as well as the principles including elements of modernisation (Principles 2, 4, 7, 8, 15 – see more detail in annex II Template for the agenda of the peer review visit). Furthermore, the peer review expert team has the possibility to decide, for each country, on which other principles it focuses during the peer review visit. The basis for the decision are the following criteria:

- Potentially problematic areas identified in the SAQ;
- Areas identified in the second round of peer reviews as being in need of improvement;
- Improvement actions from the second round of peer reviews, which have proven difficult to implement.

This should be taken into account when formulating questions for the peer review visit.

Hints and tips:

- Peer review experts should consider carefully what additional documentation to request as this can represent a non-negligible burden on the NSI/ONA, especially if a summary in English is required.

9.2 Preparation of the peer review visit

The schedule for the peer review visit is rather tight, allowing only a maximum of 5 days to assess the NSI and selected ONAs. Everything must be done to ensure that the visits are carried out as efficiently and effectively as possible. It is therefore essential that the visit is well-prepared by all peer review experts, that the NSI staff has been well briefed and that expectations are clear.

At the start of the peer review process for a country, Eurostat – together with the central coordination desk - confirms with the national peer review coordinator the specific dates of the visit (within the earlier agreed month and weeks). Documents for the peer review visit are provided to the peer review expert team at the latest three months before the visit takes place.

Approximately 10 weeks before the peer review visit the central coordination desk arranges a video-conference on behalf of the chair to establish an initial contact among the members of the peer review expert team, for sharing views on the general agenda items to be proposed to the NSI, distributing the roles of each peer review expert and tasks (preparing questions/principle, chairing the sessions on the principle(s)) and defining the work schedule. Each peer review expert should establish a list of questions to be used during the visit. This list should be shared and discussed with the other members of the team and serves as a framework for the visit. However, during the peer review visit, the experts are free to pose other or follow-up questions as deemed necessary.

Once the country information has been analysed by and discussed among the peer review experts and not later than 9 weeks before the visit, the chair of the peer review expert team proposes to the national peer review coordinator elements of the draft agenda and how much time needs to be devoted to them. Furthermore, the division of work between the peer review experts during the peer review visit should be agreed, in order for the peer review experts to be able to focus the preparations. It should be determined which member of the peer review expert team takes the lead on which session during the visit.

Eight weeks before peer review visit the chair of the peer review expert team and the national peer review coordinator agree on the general agenda and the duration of the visit. The agenda of the review visit identifies which aspects of the ES CoP and specific topics will be examined on each day. In order to ensure the participation of the ONAs in the peer review visit, the visit agenda should be detailed at this level. If several authorities and users are to be involved, then the allocation of their time needs to be planned. The authorities need to know when staff is likely to be required. Also, if time and logistics allow, a separate closing session with all participating ONAs is encouraged so that they receive first-hand feedback from the peer review expert team.

Once the peer review agenda for the NSI has been agreed, the national peer review coordinator contacts the persons/entities to be interviewed so as to set up lists of participants at the meetings. The chair of the peer review expert team informs the national coordination desk in advance (not later than 4 weeks before the visit) of any additional persons they wish to interview in order to allow the national coordination desk to contact them and to possibly be included in the agenda.

No later than 2-3 weeks before the visit, the national peer review coordinator submits to the chair of the peer review team a list of:

- Management, senior staff of the NSI and experts to be involved in the meetings;
- Up to 10 junior staff members (2-5 years' experience in the NSI and, if possible, from different departments across the organisation) to be interviewed. This session aims at providing a fresh view on the NSI and should therefore be kept strictly confidential and attended by junior staff only;
- Management and staff in the other national authorities to be interviewed;
- Data providers to be included in the interviews e.g. owners of registers which are being used in the statistical production process: cadastral register, population register, register of legal entities, providers of tax data or data on social security;
- Representatives of the Statistical Council and/or ESGAB-like body, if existent;
- Main users (such as representatives of scientific community/universities, representatives of business associations and federations, media, policy makers/government users) to be interviewed.

The agenda with the topics and the participants constitutes the basis for the peer review visit.

Hints and tips:

- The central coordination desk of the contractor can prepare in advance an intranet or website specifically for the peer review experts, in order to facilitate their tasks. These tools could contain the relevant documentation needed for the peer review (as the SAQs of NSI & ONAs, core documents, etc.)
- The central coordination desk to provide some short written information on the peer review expert team (e.g. short summary of professional experience) before the visit; the national peer review coordinator to make sure that all meeting participants receive the information package, possibly adjusted to national context, if necessary. This would save some time at the meetings (lengthy introduction speeches are not needed for each meeting) and allow for more in-depth discussions

9.3 Carrying-out the peer review visit

Organisation

The exact duration of these visits partly depends on the peer review expert team's assessment of the issues raised by its pre-visit analysis of the documentation. The default assumption for the peer review visits involving around 3-6 ONAs is that in-country visits will last 4 to 5 days.

All logistical matters are to be organised by the central coordination desk.

The work of the peer review expert team begins with a short meeting in the evening before the programmed start of the peer review visit to the NSI. This meeting is used to settle any issues and make sure that all peer review experts understand their role and the way of working of the team. It is also highly recommended that the peer review experts meet at the end of every day to discuss, compare notes, and agree on preliminary findings and a list of recommendations, either newly identified during the day or confirmed from previous days. The national peer review coordinator or an appointed member of the national coordination desk should be available at this time in case any questions arise but should not participate in the meeting. The national peer review coordinator/national coordination desk and the peer review expert team could also agree on different ways to exchange information or a different location for the peer review expert team meeting (such as the hotel).

The meeting in the evening mentioned above is followed on the first day of the review with a short meeting with the national peer review coordinator to discuss any remaining organisational issues. The first session of the peer review visit begins immediately after this meeting.

Short presentations from country representatives at the beginning of some sessions might be useful; this would be particularly suitable for the general information session but can also be applied for other sessions.

The meetings with 3-6 ONAs could last the major part of a day, but could need more or less time in some countries, depending on the number of participating ONAs and issues to be discussed. The length of each ONA session could vary between 1 and 2 hours, also depending on the need for interpretation.

On the last day of the visit, a final meeting between the peer review expert team and the senior management of the NSI is foreseen. The purpose of this meeting is to discuss the preliminary conclusions and recommendations, giving the NSI an opportunity to ask for explanations and to comment. It is highly recommended that the ONAs that have taken part in the peer review visit be invited to this session, so that they could benefit from receiving the peer review expert team's explanations on the strengths and the exact reasons behind the recommendations. A supervisory body/supervisory bodies could also be invited to this session, so that it/they could also benefit from receiving the peer review expert team's explanations on the strengths and the exact reasons behind the recommendations. The format of this session and the exact bodies to participate or not depend on the country context and the peer review expert team should agree with the NSI whether the participation of such bodies is appropriate/useful.

Content

As mentioned-above, in-country visits focus on relevant issues identified by the peer review expert teams in the preparatory phase; therefore, visits allow the peer review expert team to explore compliance with the ES CoP in detail. This is the basis for identifying recommendations intended to enhance ES CoP compliance.

In line with the usual objectives of a peer review, the peer review expert team might also identify examples of good/innovative/forward-looking practices, i.e. those which have genuinely helped implement the ES CoP in a country, and which are applicable to other national settings.

The agenda is structured thematically, but with reference to ES CoP principles, in addition to including meetings with stakeholders comprising the NSI, ONAs, data providers and main users such as representatives of policy makers, media and businesses as well as the scientific community. The length of each session is flexible and to be decided by the peer review expert team in accordance with the principles they wish to emphasise during the visit. Each country visit will focus on Professional Independence (P1) and Coordination and cooperation (P1.bis) as well as the principles including elements of modernization (principles 2, 4, 7, 8, 15).

In addition, the peer review expert team has the possibility to decide, for each country, on which other principles it will focus during the peer review visit. The decision is based on the following criteria: a) potentially problematic areas identified in the SAQ, b) areas identified to be in need of improvement in the second round of peer reviews and c) improvement actions from the second round of peer reviews experiencing difficulties in implementation.

A separate meeting with junior staff only (staff with 2-5 years' experience in the NSI) is foreseen without the presence of senior management, the national peer review coordinator, or other staff. The purpose of such a meeting is to receive a fresh view on the NSI and to listen to the opinions and ideas of newer staff in an NSI. This purpose should be clearly explained by the chair of the peer review expert team to the participants at the beginning of the meeting. It should also be stated that the information from this meeting will be kept strictly confidential in a sense that outcomes of the meeting are used as confirmation of findings or new findings but without references to the source.

Evaluation

After the conclusion of the peer review visit, the central coordination desk asks all actors involved (NSI, peer review expert team, Eurostat) for information on the level of satisfaction of the overall process, including the conduct of the interviews by the peer review experts, based on a standard evaluation form in EU Survey format/or similar for this purpose. The results are shared with Eurostat in order to suggest potential improvements in the process.

Hints and tips:

- It is recommended that each of the peer review experts takes note of possible findings/recommendations identified during the meetings of the day by him/herself. These findings can then be compared in the evening meeting and will ensure a good coverage of findings. It is the task of the chair of the peer review expert team to summarise all of them every evening and then to constantly update/refresh the list of findings. In this way the list of findings/recommendations is well prepared for the meeting on the last evening before its presentation to the senior management of the NSI.
- It is recommended that members of the peer review expert team have their rooms booked in the same hotel which could facilitate the short meeting on the day or evening before the programmed start of the peer review visit to the NSI and possibly also the discussion, comparison of notes and agreement on preliminary findings at the end of every day.
- At the end of each day of the visit, the national peer review coordinator/national coordination desk receives feedback from the peer review expert team on issues that should be clarified during the "clarification session" on the last day of the visit. This will ensure the appropriate representation during the "clarification session" and allow for more in-depth discussions.

9.4 Assessment guidance

The following guidance may prove useful during the peer review visit to help formulate questions and to assess the answers provided both during the visit and in the SAQs.

i. **Formulating questions**: During the peer review visit, the peer review expert team should pay attention to formulating open questions (with possible follow-up questions for further clarification). When formulating open questions, several best practices and guidelines should be kept in mind.

It is important that respondents clearly understand the questions in order to give accurate and unbiased answers. Therefore, it is advisable to use simple and unambiguous terms, which are understood in the same manner by all respondents. If a question necessarily contains more complex terms and concepts, which may not be immediately recognisable to respondents, they should be defined beforehand or explained during the session.

Similarly, long and complex questions and questions containing hypotheticals should be avoided. Complicated questions often confuse the respondent, to the point where the general intent of the question or what is asked of them, is lost. Including too many hypotheticals that may be imperceptible to the respondent may have a similar effect, as it is difficult for them to imagine themselves being in a situation that is vastly different from their current circumstances and give an unbiased response.

Additionally, double-barrelled questions and leading questions also confuse interviewees. With double-barrelled questions, i.e. questions that are entered on more than one issue, respondents may be unclear as to which of the issues to respond. Leading or loaded questions, for example questions mentioning "most people" or "usually", may limit the responses given by interviewees, as they feel like they should only give an answer that is "acceptable" to avoid embarrassment.

Finally, the overall structure of the questions should be kept in mind, so that the interview flows naturally from one topic to another. It may also be advisable to start with questions that are easy to answer to build a rapport with the respondent and to make them feel at ease. The following documents can provide guidance and inspiration for questions during the assessment:

- The ESS QAF (to be used as a reference document but not for benchmarking);
- The List of Questions by Interlocutor (see Annex V).

ii. **Issue analysis/Drawing conclusions:** Issue Analysis/Drawing Conclusions (IADC) is a tool often applied by auditors but its instruments can be adapted to audit-like performance reviews such as the ESS peer reviews. It is aimed at optimising the way that the review is defined (IA) and reported (DC). Therefore, the description below aims to relate two key phases of the peer review to the concepts of the IADC framework.

Issue analysis takes place after initial preliminary study work has been carried out. In terms of the ESS peer reviews, this is taking place when the SAQ is analysed by the peer review team. The aim is to define better the scope of the peer review and the work during the peer review visit that needs to be planned.

Drawing conclusions takes place as soon as possible after the individual peer review sessions or, at the latest, when the fieldwork has concluded but before any report drafting has started. In terms of the ESS peer reviews it is when the meetings during the peer review visit are over. It could be a method for arriving at the key messages to be included in the peer review recommendations, and the reporting structure for those messages.

When analysing the SAQs, peer review experts should come up with the most important issues that need to be reviewed during the peer review visit. An issue could be identified with a series of questions, which follow the so-called pyramid principle. This is done by breaking down the issue into a hierarchy of Yes/No questions forming thus a pyramid. This helps to impose a logical disciplined pattern on of the peer review experts and to ensure that all aspects of a question or sub-question are considered. At the end, the bottom level can be linked to either the evidence sources or the specific issue that needs to be further reviewed during the peer review visit.

An issue analysis of an item from the SAQ could be carried out as follows:

Main question: Is item X from the SAQ flagging a potential issue?

Question 1: Are all documents mentioned in Item X available?

Sub-questions: Are all documents mentioned in the SAQ available in the package provided by the NSIs? Does the text mention the specific sections in the documents where the issue is described? Are there too many documents quoted, so that the link between the issue and the evidence gets obscured?

Question 2: Are the ratings in Item X coherent?

Sub-questions: Are the ratings coherent with the answers provided? Are the ratings assigned in a consistent manner throughout the questionnaire (inconsistency might appear, for example, when different persons fill in different parts of the SAQ)?

Question 3: Are there negative propositions (e.g. ‘not’, ‘never’, etc.) in Item X?

Sub-questions: Are these appearing more frequently in the other items of the same principle? Is the answer in Item X too judgmental? Is there some particular attitude of the respondent towards the issue that is explained?

Question 4: Are there undefined quantity propositions (e.g. ‘little’, ‘many’, etc.) in Item X?

Sub-questions: Are these simply “parasite” words that could be disregarded? Are these providing the necessary information or on the contrary, mask some phenomenon that might be of significance?

Question 5: Is Item X referring to another item in the SAQ?

Sub-questions: Has the person understood the essence of the question? Is the reference well-explained with additional text?

During the drawing conclusions stage, the focus of a DC is not questions, but conclusions. For an IA, the pyramid of questions supports the overall review question; for a DC, the pyramid of conclusions supports the overall conclusion of the review. The raw material of the DC process is therefore assertions or evaluative statements. Review findings result from comparing the evidence against a criterion and describe the impact and, when deficiencies are identified, the cause. These findings are the source information for the assertions developed at a DC.

Examples of evaluative statements:

1. The NSI’s structure – is not an assertion, but a label; it tells you what is inside (like the label on a pot of jam), but no more.

2. The NSI's structure has 82 hierarchical levels – is an assertion, but is not evaluative; it does not say whether having 82 levels is a good thing or a bad thing. (We might suspect, but the assertion does not spell it out for the reader.)

3. The NSI's structure has too many levels in the hierarchy – is an evaluative assertion; the peer review expert team is making a judgement about the situation ("too many") – but, perhaps, the statement in isolation is not that helpful to the reader.

4. The NSI's structure is unnecessarily complex and hinders effective decision-making – provides further information still, and explains what the consequence is of the flaws in NSI structure.

Number 4 is the most helpful to the reader and is therefore perhaps the best. It is also, however, the longest; there is frequently a tension between clarity and length.

Hints and tips:

- It has proven useful to explain difficult concepts and complex questions through examples. Therefore, the peer review experts could use examples if it is necessary for the NSI or ONAs to gain a better understanding of a specific question.

9.5 Drafting the report and consultation procedure

When drafting the peer review report, it should be remembered that the purpose of the peer reviews is not to rank countries/statistical authorities; indeed such an approach is considered counter-productive so that steps should be taken to avoid it. The recommendations of each peer review are therefore formulated qualitatively, and the peer review report focuses on strengths (including the identification of forward-looking practices) and the issues where improvements are needed (including recommendations separately for the enhancement of compliance and for improvements). The peer review reports should be based on broad issues rather than on principles or indicators, but for each recommendation the relevant principle and indicator should be provided.

The peer review reports are to be highly standardised and based on a common structure (see Annex III – Structure of the peer review report). The nature of the reports is qualitative, inspired by an audit-like approach.

It should be noted that the aim of having a structured report is to ensure as far as possible harmonisation of the reports. The report is structured as follows:

- Executive summary highlighting strengths and stating recommendations;
- Introduction explaining the peer review process and methodology and a description on what principles the peer review experts focused in the country;
- Brief description of the NSS;
- Progress/advancement in the last five years;
- Compliance with the ES CoP:
    - Strengths;

- Issues and recommendations distinguishing between fundamental/important to ensure compliance/alignment with the ES CoP (compliance relevant) and less critical/technical supporting improvements (improvement related);
- In addition, the recommendations should be future-oriented and grouped around identified broad issues/themes, with a reference to the principle(s) and indicator(s) – Formulation of broad issues and recommendations can be found in Annex VI – Formulation of issues and recommendations;

- 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 ;
- Annexes: agenda of the visit and list of participants.

The recommendations are to be grouped under broad issues rather than by principle. They should be objective, reasonable, evidence-based, covering overarching topics and forward-looking, taking into account the country specific situation and addressing the potential implementing agency. The recommendations should also be clearly linked to a principle/indicator (if several principles/indicators, the leading principle/indicator should be specified).

Examples of particularly forward-looking practices applicable to other national settings are to be included in a separate report. This report will be drafted by Eurostat and will present in a consolidated form the best and most innovative practices as identified from the SAQs by the peer review expert teams.

For the recommendations, the following needs to be kept in mind to achieve a good degree of harmonisation of recommendations across countries and peer review expert teams:

- An example of formulations of issues and recommendations distinguished as fundamental (compliance-relevant) and less critical (improvement related) is available to the experts (Annex VI). This document will help peer review experts to be aware of the possible scope, magnitude and content of potential recommendations. It is a supporting tool for the peer review experts but suggests merely proposals for recommendations and is to be understood as a guiding document; the examples of formulations should not be used as a menu from which recommendations can easily be chosen;
- In case the recommendations are addressed to other stakeholders/actors than the NSI e.g. to ONAs, this will be clearly visible in the report;
- The Eurostat expert in the peer review expert team will support 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 of this round;
- At given times during the peer review process in 2021 to mid-2023 (e.g. after eight peer review reports were finalised), the available reports and recommendations might be reviewed by a group of people (editorial board), in order to provide additional input for further harmonisation of future reports.

The draft recommendations as discussed on the last day of the peer visit are sent by the chair of the peer review expert team to the NSI at the latest 1 week after the visit. The peer review expert team has four weeks to write a draft report which will follow a strict consultation and harmonisation process as follows:

- 4 weeks after the peer review visit: the chair of the of the peer review expert team sends the draft report to the central coordination desk for formatting and language checking; within two days, the central coordination desk sends the draft report to the national peer review coordinator and Eurostat TF.PRQ (for information purposes);
- 8 weeks after the peer review visit: the NSI/ONAs has 4 weeks to comment and check factual correctness, setting out diverging views on recommendations; their reply is sent directly to the Eurostat TF PRQ;
- 10 weeks after the peer review visit: Eurostat has 2 weeks to comment and further harmonise recommendations and send the peer review report back to the central coordination desk. The central coordination desk then forwards this document to the peer review expert team;
- 11 weeks after the peer review visit: the peer review expert team has 1 weeks to integrate all comments;
- 2 working days for final formatting and language checking by the contractor, who then sends the final version to the NSI and the Eurostat TF.PRQ;
- 13 weeks after the peer review visit: Eurostat and the NSI have 2 weeks to finally approve the report; publication on both websites (Eurostat and NSI).

Hints and tips:

- Recommendations from previous rounds can be used as inspiration for formulating new recommendations, but should not be not taken over verbatim. Peer review experts should reflect and formulate their own recommendations, adapted to the moment in time and the specific situation. Annex VI of the guide provides further guidance to the peer review experts.

9.6 Improvement actions

Although the peer review expert team will not be involved in this phase, it is mentioned so as to provide a more complete picture of the process.

After an agreement is reached between Eurostat and the NSI/ONAs, the peer review report is considered as final. After publication of this report on the NSI website, the NSI (together with the ONAs if applicable) then has 8 weeks to define the relevant improvement actions and their implementation schedule. Within the 2 weeks available for Eurostat to comment on the proposed improvement actions, particular attention will be paid by Eurostat to ensuring that the actions are clearly formulated, and that their implementation can be monitored, taking into account national contexts and constraints. They should be Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART) (see annex IV – Procedure for defining improvement actions).

Eurostat and the NSI should reach an agreement on the improvement actions within another 3 weeks after their submission by the NSI to Eurostat. The improvement actions will be published on both Eurostat's and the NSI’s websites together with the peer review report and will be monitored on an annual basis by Eurostat.

Annexes:

Annex I: Information and core documents to be provided by the NSIs/ONAs

Annex II: Template for the agenda of the peer review visit

Annex III: Structure for the peer review report

Annex IV: Procedure for defining improvement actions (applicable only to NSIs/ONAs – included solely for information purposes)

Annex V: Questions by interlocutor

Annex VI: Formulation of issues and recommendations