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SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION AT RSS ROUNDTABLE ON THE INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF UKSA

1 September 2023

1. Participants

Andy Garrett	RSS president
Paul Allin	RSS honorary officer for national statistics
Denise Lievesley	Leader of the independent review
Simon Briscoe	Statistics consultant and journalist
Siobhan Carey	Former CEO Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
Peter Gordon	Transport statistics user group
Roger Halliday	CEO Research Data Scotland (and ex-GSS)
Mike Hughes	Former UKSA and former RSS honorary officer for national statistics
Deana Leadbeter	Health statistics user group
Rachel Leeser	Greater London Authority
Jill Leyland	RSS representative on Advisory Panel on Consumer Prices
Anna Powell-Smith	Centre for Public Data
Geoff Tily	Trade Union Coalition
Dev Virdee	Chair, Forum of Statistics User Groups

This was an open meeting and there are some contributions by other attendees.

2. Overview of the review process

Denise highlighted that this review is not being carried out because of concerns – it is a regular part of the cycle. It is quite a light touch review so that the review doesn't hang over the statistical system for a long time – especially as there has been so much change in the in the statistical system over recent years. The review is also intended to be quick so that anything can be implemented ahead of a general election – which has to be called before the end of January 2025. This will give the opportunity to implement the result of the review so that it is not kicked into the long grass.

There has been an open consultation with quite a short timetable to enable them to get started as quickly as possible. There is a support team in the Cabinet Office, which includes the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA). It is independent and there has been no pressure to either say or not say particular things.

So far, Denises's focus has been on trying to speak to as many people as possible. She has spoken a lot to people within government – but users outside government are critical too and she's trying to meet as many as possible. She has also been engaging internationally to see what challenges their statistical offices are facing – and understand the extent to which they're similar to the UK – and to see what their external perception of the UK system is.

She is especially interested in the public good aspect – many of the discussions in government have been focused on the role of statistics in policy-making. She wants the review to be constructive to help people within the system to make improvements.

3. Public statistics

Paul Allin began by setting out the UN's view of the role of official statistics systems. He began by quoting from the UN fundamental principles of official statistics – which set out a vision for statistics for the public good: "Official statistics provide an indispensable element in the information system of a democratic society. So in the government, the economy and the public with data about the economic, demographic, social and environmental situation to this end, official statistics that meet the tester practical utility are to be compiled and made available on an impartial basis by official statistical agencies to honour citizen's entitlement to public information."

Here in the UK, UKSA's statutory objective is promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. The UK official statistics system routinely delivers statistics intended for the public good. There were 3,963 statistical releases in the last 12 months, an average of 76 a week. Release dates are announced and the statistics release calendar also gives links to published releases. Innovation is strong with, for example, a data science campus now embedded in the UK official statistics system. The UK is also unique in having an Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) as part of the official statistics system.

Statistics for the public good is the title of the UKSA's current five-year strategy, launched in 2020, with the promise to inform the public about social and economic matters as well as assisting in the development and evaluation of public policy and regulating quality of statistics and publicly challenging their misuse. However, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that statistics for the public good is largely interpreted by UKSA and the system as meaning that statistics produced by the official statistics system are made available for the public good. This begs the question, what statistics should be produced? Whose needs are being met? Are the public being informed on things that matter to them, rather than just on the things that matter to government?

User engagement is a key part of this and improvements to wider user engagement are emerging with a strategy launched a few years ago now but only slowly being implemented across the GSS. That's something to build on. The Integrated Data Service (IDS) being showcased at the RSS conference next week is welcome. But why was the value proposition for the IDS that it is for the government community of data professionals who collaborate to help solve complex policy questions, rather than also providing secure access to anonymised data for external researchers? Access is now being widened, but it appears that software and content decisions are not yet on a level playing field.

These and many other examples indicate an innate tendency, a culture for official statistics producers to prioritise government users over others. Of course, statistics for policy and for public services are vital, necessary components of statistics for the public good. Necessary, but not sufficient. What about statistics that the public need to assess the performance of government, for example? This is why the RSS is pursuing the goal of having more public statistics in the UK.

Our working description of public statistics seeks to put the spotlight on information needs rather than on differentiating between the designation of data sources. The essence of public statistics is to help answer questions about society, the economy and the environment by drawing on existing statistics and devising new ones. It might, for example, result in an agreed set of statistics that assess how the UK is doing as well as well as responding to emerging needs. This requires the official statistics system to pivot away from being driven by the production of statistics and towards assessing user needs and seeking to meet them by drawing on relevant data of appropriate quality from a range of sources.

International good practice emphasises that production of official statistics starts with investigations about the information needs of various users – processing these to meet as great a number of needs as possible and not targeted exclusively to one user group. The UK Code of Practice requires that the suitability of existing data,

including administrative, open and privately held data, should be assessed before undertaking a new data collection. Channels and protocols are available to import data, but all need to be much enhanced on quality concerns. OSR is supporting of nonofficial producers to adopt the code already.

The RSS has long been a critical friend of the official statistics system and welcomes the independent review of UKSA and indeed the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee's (PACAC) current inquiry as ways of involving a public statistics approach to official statistics.

4. User perspectives

Deana Leadbetter

Deana focused on three different issues that have been raised within the health stats user group.

First the scope of statistics that UKSA covers: the review mentions the public good, but the focus in terms of user engagement seems to be very much on economic statistics while official statistics obviously covers a much broader area. It's really important to consider how they how UKSA functions in all areas because statistics that are produced influence decisions that are made in the real world, and they affect people's lives directly. And this introduces the challenge of how to understand the different approaches that might be needed in those different areas, and how to understand how the statistics that are produced influence decisions that are made by a range of people in real life, not just policymakers or first line users. There is also a question of how to ensure collaboration and exchange of ideas across the different areas, because many of those are interrelated. How do you decide when that is relevant? This also highlights a point as to what is meant by "official statistics". The review relates to UKSA, but clearly statistics are produced within the wider Government Statistical Service (GSS) and not just the ONS. And, importantly, by many different organisations who are responsible for producing and publishing statistics that are used nationally for the public good. So the challenge that this introduces is that even if the OSR is not directly responsible for all official statistics produced, if they are the national authority then they should have a role in ensuring that appropriate, relevant and good quality statistics are produced in all important areas of production of national statistics. It's particularly important for health and care statistics but is also relevant in other areas.

Second is the role of OSR. The review mentions, OSR as part of UKSA but focuses on its role in monitoring performance and production of statistics. There are challenges here in terms of how one should assess the performance of an organisation that's responsible for monitoring and review of the use of statistics, rather than the production of statistics. Perhaps more importantly, there is a question of how you maintain separation between regulatory and production functions when they are part of the same organisation. That is not just a question of how the two organisations work together, but it is also about the perception of the wider community.

Third, the impact of changes in the data world. There have been many changes in the way data is collected, processed and made available. Which means really there may be a broader question about the role of the national statistics organisation in the context of this new data and statistics world. Part of this is that there are many different users now, many different interests, different levels of experience and knowledge, many different ways of capturing and analysing data and of making information available. This provides more opportunities as well as challenges in how to use those opportunities effectively. A feature of this new world is that there are many interconnections. So, the way forward should include collaboration across boundaries, which needs to be embedded as part of the way of working. There are different aspects to that: collaboration across technical and analytical boundaries and collaboration across organisational boundaries. Both of those were features of the pandemic and it would be hoped that this should continue now because that was tremendously valuable. In addition to that collaboration across all those in involved in handling and using statistics, there is also collaboration with users. Effective user engagement means understanding not just the needs of users, but also liaising with them on ongoing basis. So you can draw on their expertise and understanding of the data. There is much still to be done and progress is slow, but the user engagement strategy, the development of the user engagement hub and also the review and redevelopment of the user engagement platform that's using it is a step in the right direction. It is important that this continues to be

supported and encouraged because it's an important way of trying to address some of the challenges that have been highlighted.

Dev Virdee

Dev focused his comments on user needs – in the context of a wide definition of users. Not just the major stakeholders, but the whole of society, including small voluntary groups and individual citizens; not just existing users, but all those who could be using statistics more effectively. This would involve raising statistical awareness among society as a whole. In recent years there have been some big successes from ONS – the 2021 Census, Covid Infection Survey and huge expansion of the sub national data that's now available. But he argued that more needs to be done to engage wider society.

The National Statistician's Expert User Advisory Committee (NSEUC) is up and running, but it is still in its early stages and is yet to show its impact. The ONS Assembly, which is a part of the user engagement structure, is yet to get off the ground and there's very little about it in the public domain – yet that is intended with the means by which charities and communities are meant to engage with the ONS. That needs to get off the ground as soon as possible.

The user engagement strategy is wide-ranging, but again driven largely by producers and the users and potential users need support to get organised to form user groups for areas that aren't currently supported. There are some very active user groups – such as for health statistics one and prices – but there are whole areas of statistics where the user communities need help. An example is census analysis for faith groups. ONS analysts are doing work for the Sikh community and they have had an encouraging meeting with Dev, but it is not clear who else has been contacted. It is unclear what sort of discussion has been had with others from the community or from other faith groups. And it would be so useful to have discussions with others in a joined-up user group.

This is particularly important in taking forward the equalities agenda and the recommendations of the Inclusive Data Task Force (IDTF). The various equalities communities need to be better engaged with official statistics, but they have no user forum where they can get together and share experiences. Some ongoing ONS resource to support more user groups to be organised and maintained would be of huge benefit. Most producers understand that user engagement is not a one-off exercise, but an ongoing resource. In the past the ONS has funded a user engagement programme manager who was based in the RSS and that arrangement might be worth revisiting.

Peter Gordon

Peter is the co-chair of the transport statistics user group. He started by setting out that the quality of transport statistics is very good. His focus is on dissemination. Currently the system is fine if you just want a report, but it works less well if you want more information. It is possible to request a download but that can require specialised software that is difficult to access and use. The alternative is to use a portal. In the transport sphere there is the Travelpack portal, which is very good: it is easy to use and gives some information. However, the information isn't at the level of detail that would be most helpful and it doesn't have access to, eg, port data. The portal is preferable to downloads as a means of dissemination as a mechanism, but to enhance it, it is important to look at a really good portal – like the US's Bureau of Transportation Statistics.

There is room to do more with the data. There are concerns around confidentiality and it may be necessary to sometimes limit the availability of information – but, as with the census, there are still ways to do more with the data. This is an area that user groups could facilitate through conversations with people from ONS or the Department for Transport. There have also been cases where the way that statistics are produced change and it hasn't been documented – so copy documents that explain changes would be very useful.

The key point is that while transport statistics are very good, you always want to have more detail. The challenge is disseminating the detail in a manner that is easy for non-statisticians to use.

Jill Leyland

Jill started by setting out her view that the current statistical system is a lot better than that which it replaced and that there have been some very substantial improvements in statistics produced. But there have been failures, and one of the biggest was the failure to maintain the quality of the retail prices index (RPI). The crucial statistic, widely used for uprating in contracts (for example, pensions, index-linked gilt, student loan repayments, etc). She highlighted two key lessons from it and subsequent developments.

First, around complexity. The RPI problem started in 2010 when various changes were made to the collection of clothing prices. The statisticians at the time did not apparently understand how one of the formulas used in compiling the RPI would react to these changes and in fact make RPI, as it has since, overestimate clothing inflation. Generally, they should have but these things happen. But now we're moving to very large administrative and scanner data sets and these are using much more complex formulas. So, the dangers of statisticians not fully understanding them, not understanding how they might interact with the data, not understanding what assumptions they imply about consumer behaviour and – crucially – under what circumstances they might misbehave, are much, much greater. At the moment this isn't too concerning because a lot of attention is being paid to the issue. But, say, 10 years down the line when different staff are in post and attention has drifted away to other matters this could become an issue. Now, that's not the only issue with these new formulas. They require more statistician time to manage than the older ones – which may become another problem when money is tight. And how are these complex formulas going to be explained to users, even expert users? Maintaining confidence in inflation series is particularly crucial, given that when used in uprating, they impact directly on people's incomes and outgoing. None of this is a reason for not using the new data, but UKSA at all levels up to and including the board needs to be aware of the risks and ensure they are well managed. It's perhaps a job for the OSR to put a paper together on this.

The second lesson, and this picks up some of the things other people have said, is that the UKSA does need to pay attention to and be understanding of all the different needs. Different needs and inflation measures, as with other topics, require different statistics. CPI, as it is used by the Bank of England (BOE) for inflation-targeting, needs to be different from measures of inflation used to measure household experience. For example, the latter should include mortgage interest payments, which is rather important to a lot of households, and the former should not. One of the depressing things about the RPI saga was seeing how some of its characteristics, which were perfectly logical given its original purpose as a measure of household experience, where denounced as flaws as they did not fit the prevailing consensus between the economic establishment, Treasury and BOE as to what an inflation measure should be.

It would be unfair to put all of this at the Treasury's door, but, she argued, the Treasury has at times had too much influence. Back in 2017, the then national statistician set out a three-way landscape for consumer prices that consisted of CPI, CPIH and a new measure of household costs – the Household Costs Indices (HCIs) – with RPI as a legacy index. This remains the official plan for consumer price indices. But it has sometimes been a real battle to get the HCIs developed and to make sure they are genuine household in-depth indices. Progress has been made and from later this year they're going to be published every quarter, which is a success, but ONS's current plan is not to develop them further after that. While accepting that there are constraints on what ONS can do, it was surprising to hear, at the last meeting of the Stakeholder Advisory Panel on Consumer Prices, that one reason for not developing HCIs further was that the Treasury and BOE weren't interested in them. While this is bound to have some influence it is important that UKSA sits back and makes a concerted effort not to be overly influenced by government user needs.

The two main points in summary: One: be aware of the problems with using large data sets and think carefully how these problems are going to be managed. Two: be aware of all needs and do not let government departments have too much say

Discussion

Denise reflected that when she had been talking to other countries' statistics offices, they have reflected that one of the greatest strengths of the UK is the RSS because users are seen as being too owned and managed by statistical officers in many countries. The RSS's role as a critical friend is seen as beneficial. But it sounds like that may be slipping a bit and could be exploited more.

Geoff Tily reported that TUC had been pushing for better data on equalities. He uses the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) for pay data, but it does not give an ethnicity breakdown. He reiterated Peter's point about the importance of portals for accessing data.

Simon Briscoe questioned whether there was evidence to support the speakers' claims that the general statistical product was good and an improvement on fifteen years ago. Over that time the world of data has been transformed and it is important to assess whether the government's statistical offering has kept pace.

Mike Hughes highlighted a paper he had produced detailing the genesis of user engagement over time and offered to share it with the review.

Jill suggested revisiting the past arrangement whereby UKSA funded a post based in the RSS to support user groups.

Alison Macfarlane highlighted challenges that have emerged since health data was privatised and raised a concern that the new Integrated Data Service seems to prioritise government users to the detriment of researchers.

5. Regional perspectives

Siobhan Carey

Siobhan's comments focused on devolution – how UKSA can understand it and respect it as well while working for all parts of the UK. Others have spoken about how government needs are prioritised, but there is more than one government. When people talk about government needs being prioritised, they mean Whitehall needs. It's important to recognise that the public good will vary between countries. This was very clear on Brexit around trade where the needs of policy-makers in Whitehall were quite different from the needs of policy-makers in Northern Ireland. In the context of Northern Ireland, cross-border issues are a real interest to both decision-makers and the general public. So it is important to recognise that the public good varies between nations.

She argued that when data is being redesigned or there is a new data collection, there is an assumption that what works for England will work everywhere else and there is very little opportunity to influence at the design stage – this has happened, eg, for the labour market survey redesign and the Covid Infection Survey. There are cases where Northern Ireland operates differently from the rest of Great Britain (GB). While the ONS collects all the household surveys and business surveys for GB, Northern Ireland collects its own data. That needs to be aggregated in with the wider GB-data to get a UK-wide picture. The data collection element and the autonomy of the Northern Ireland statistical system is important and doesn't always seem to be considered at UKSA board level.

It is important for the UKSA board to really challenge the ONS on its involvement of the devolved administrations – where is the voice of devolved administrations in the system? There are also particular challenges around funding mechanisms. So, for example, where funding is being put into something like the IDS it is not as straightforward as thinking that the Barnett Consequential will go directly into the Northern Irish statistical system because they do not have the resources to engage on it.

Roger Halliday

Roger began by supporting Siobhan's points about the importance of the voice of devolved administrations. His focus though was on highlighting an issue which explains why he moved from being chief statistician in Scotland to leading Research Data Scotland –a data curation and research-sharing organisation. GSS spends lots of its resources collecting data and getting it to a high level of quality. And so it should. But this is a significant asset, and he believes that we're not achieving the public value from that we should.

The first area that he highlighted was a significant potential for linking data to better provide official statistics and save resources in data collection. For example, the longitudinal educational outcomes data sharing between multiple owners has helped in the space of further and higher education and apprenticeships, but not much of the government's fiscal service is set up in ways to effectively do that data sharing. His sense is that doesn't really happen more regularly because it seems too difficult, partly because of some people aren't aware of what's possible and partly because of a lack of skills from analysts working with linked data.

And then, going beyond official statistics, lots of the value can be realised by the academic community. So, for example, work during Covid on vaccine effectiveness was world leading and based upon data curated by Public Health Scotland, that's primarily used for official statistics or linking range of sensitive case level GSS data together. This also helped identify causes of homelessness, leading to solutions that prevented that from happening and improved outcomes through GSS and academic collaboration. And it's not just about securely sharing deidentified sensitive data. Eg, during Covid there were some fantastic and innovative data visualisations of what the data at that time told us about the pandemic. The Travelling Tabby website got hundreds of millions of hits but was only possible because the fact that data was released in open formats. Publishing the underlying data should be seen as a key part of the statistical publication process – if it is just seen as an add-on there is a risk that significant value is lost.

His overall message was that we're missing out on lots of public value from GSS investments in high quality data. While the code of practice includes lines on data sharing and data linkage, there's a significant programme of change that UKSA should be leading to drive improvements across government statistics to deliver new insights, efficiencies and data collection as well as empowering individual communities with data. His proposal would be for a GSS wide capability building programme to be delivered through the integrated data programme to ensure that producers are properly challenged through OSR's work on data sharing.

Rachel Leeser

Rachel suggested that the biggest challenge around producing the statistics for the public good is ensuring that the data are of a good enough quality for all areas at a level of geography that is needed. To do this will require better engagement with users at all levels of government and at other agencies.

Currently, engagement is incredibly patchy and dependent upon individual relationships. Most people in local government aren't members of the RSS and would not describe themselves as statisticians, so don't have that route to engage with ONS. Some of the routes that local government did have to engage with the ONS have been watered down in recent years. One of the ways that people can engage is through the formal consultations and a huge amount of effort goes into these from both the ONS and users. But it's not always clear whether users' views are accepted or even whether they are heard – quite often in the reports of consultations it is not always possible to recognise what you have said as a user being in there and your points is rarely addressed. So, they are quite often frustrating exercises, and it is often the case that they don't even ask for what users would consider to be the right questions.

There can be a lack of understanding or connection to the real world in a lot of the statistics that are produced –in the timing, in what is produced and in the topics that are being addressed. One of those areas is the small area projections that ONS are producing which were initially due out in September but been put back by several months. There was no announcement about the change, the date just changed on the release calendar. This has a massive impact because the statistics feed into next year's school roll projections that all local authorities need to

understand how many classrooms are needed. It is important to engage on what is needed, definitions and when it is needed. An important use of data is to identify the parts of society that are doing less well. The level and detail of statistics is much more important than an average national picture for enabling local government to make improvements.

Another challenge is around the identity of UKSA. Most people do not understand the relationship between the OSR and ONS and they certainly don't understand the relationship between them and other government departments and other who have signed up to the Code of Practice for Statistics. The national statistic badge also isn't properly understood.

Discussion

Denise reported that she has been looking at devolution and the impact on the statistics system and has also taken on board the message about the difficulty of getting the balance right between harmonised UK data and locally relevant data. She has spoken to the national statisticians of the UK's nations but would welcome contacts with users in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. There is also an upcoming roundtable with local government statisticians. And it is important to think about how consultations can be more effective.

Denise asked Rachel whether she thought ONS's new local initiative would be effective. Rachel did not because people in local government find it difficult to have the time and impetus to engage because they are responsible across so many different types of statistics and must engage with a wide range of government departments in addition to ONS.

Michael Baxter emphasised the importance of having UK-wide data and noted a recent example of being unable to access waiting list data for Northern Ireland, where the data is not produced due to resource issues. Some way of ensuring comparable data for each nation on key measures is important.

Peter Gordon commented on local use of statistics. One local authority asked for a seminar on how they could use the national travel survey and it became apparent that very few of the statistics can really be used at a local authority level because the sample size is too small. Getting a larger sample size would cost money, but there is certainly a gap there.

Tom King suggested that the RSS itself needs to have a more geographically diverse membership to be more effective in helping ONS to improve local data.

Simon thanked Rachel for her comments which expressed clearly some points that he thinks are critical – regional and local data is an area that has gone backwards.

Mike Hughes pointed to a disparity between ONS's view of the management of devolved statistics – where they think that the governmental committee of ONS and the other nations' statisticians – as a great success and Siobhan's perception. That mismatch bears investigation. He also suggested that the issue around lack of clarity of the national statistic designation was not helped by the lack of a framework document.

6. Wider perspectives

Simon Briscoe

Simon set out his concern that the phrase "National Statistic" is becoming discredited and set out some of the reasons why he thinks that has happened. Some of these are more serious than others.

Simon's blog catalogues points on earnings, inflation and GDP – the important statistics that determine people incomes. He also noted that some census outputs on gender had to be pulled. A lot of these figures are misleading and not showing what they should be. The Covid infection survey on some of the basic figures like excess deaths

were also found to be seriously wanting. Even the OSR, he suggested, undermines its own system at times. It's de-designated statistics for crime, migration, trade and the. And yet these critical figures make front page news every time they're published without impunity. This is despite the national statistic badge being removed – so why bother to designate and why bother to de-designate?

He is also troubled by UKSA's boosterism. UKSA is not transparent and so little light is shone on it that no one can ask the right questions of it. In an increasingly complex world, he argued that UKSA is increasingly deaf to its users when they ought to be working with them. UKSA insiders will say that the data they produce are overwhelmingly sound, ethical and accurate and that problems are exaggerated. But from the outside it can look as though the system is skewed to turn a blind eye to quality and give short shrift to the public good.

He made four further points:

1. UKSA craves status and more public money. It cannot show weakness, mistakes or errors. It serves government. Many users, including powerful ones like governments, economists and think tanks, simply want numbers – any numbers. They can't question the accuracy of the numbers as that undermines the strength of their headline chasing conclusions. It's a much more pleasant life day-to-day for UKSA civil servants to run with their fellows and government departments rather than try and improve the public's lot. So what about governance? He sees no great challenge in the system as it's set up at the moment. For many government statisticians, ministers run the show and they do what their minister pleases. That should be acknowledged.
2. The UKSA board is spread thin and not presented with the tools to challenge the ONS. There are no work plans of notes, costs of producing data are secret and no one ever discusses value for money.
3. Massive users, as we've heard are disenfranchised.
4. OSR has a value, but it is not a robust independent regulator.

Finally, Parliament, Simon was one of the advisors to PACAC for seven years up to 2019. Many reports were produced containing dozens of recommendations. His assessment is that UKSA's response to those reports was poor. He has drawn up a list of 200 questions or comments based on those recommendations, where he thinks UKSA has failed, and he will publish this shortly and submit to the review team – it looks as though Parliament is basically ignored by UKSA. It's possibly worse than that, in fact, because there have been no reports from PACAC since the 2019 election and that happens to be the time when ONS staff started working for the committee.

He made two proposals. First, as the 2019 PACAC report said, serious parliamentary time should be given to scrutiny, and that should be a Lords and Commons Joint Committee. Second, culture and practise within the system needs to change. The system must allow statisticians within it to raise doubts once problems for data are identified. A programme of improvement can be produced, and that requires a restructuring of OSR, giving it genuine independence.

Anna Powell-Smith

Anna runs the Centre of Public Data – a non-profit working for stronger public data and statistics. She focused on the questions of whether the government statistics offering has kept pace with the data and digital service development in terms of effective user engagement. She compared this with user engagement in the context of digital services – eg, online passport and driving licence renewal. The Government Digital Service, which uses techniques established by the start-up and digital world, leads this work. Anna's background is in the startup world where they think a lot about user needs. This might seem irrelevant to statistics, but there are lessons to help ensure that statistics remain relevant to people – answering questions they don't care about. people will stop trusting them and turn to other sources of information.

Where is UKSA with user engagement? In response to the PACAC review, there is a user engagement strategy. It looks fairly predigital in the sense that it's based around the idea that people will come to producers with their needs. It encourages producers to do user research, though there's no funding for them to do so and it's nonbinding – so there's no real penalty for not doing user research. That makes life really difficult for producers

who want to do the right thing because they don't have the money or time. And even if they can get the money to do it, they can't prioritise it against the more pressing demands on their time. It looks a lot like how early software used to work: you have to be an expert, you have to know who to talk to, you have to kind of hack your own patch. Then there was the revolution in Silicon Valley – led by Apple – when services started to be based around user needs, not developer needs.

In the early 2010s government digital services were poor. Forms used flash, they couldn't be done on mobile phone, there were too many of fields and things used to fail. In 2011, a report called *Revolution not Evolution* by Martha Lane Fox recommended a radical change. Government should make services simpler, clearer and faster, save money and boost the economy. In response, the government digital service set up in the Cabinet Office and rebuilt gov.uk, it reformed 25 services and then rolled out across departments, giving them a playbook they could use themselves to rebuild digital services. And now while digital services in government may not perfect, they're usable, not going to randomly fail and can be used on a phone. That's a big change in a relatively small number of years across government. So how did that happen?

Anna highlighted three key parts of this success.

1. Requiring active user research. A service standard was written, which said all services have to go and talk to users, find out what they need, find out if they're using the service, find out what's going wrong, observe them and bring them back to the team.
2. Providing money for user research: each service got money to pay for a user researcher. They found all kinds of odd things, such as many people were filling out forms on their PlayStation – no one knew that beforehand.
3. It was binding. Services weren't allowed to go live on gov.uk unless they showed they'd done active user research and had met the user needs.

Given that this approach worked across digital government, what could UKSA learn? How could the review think about this? Anna argued that UKSA needs to make user needs a core strategic pillar. It should be put in the Code of Practice service standard that UKSA needs to do active user research, it has to go and talk to people who are not in government and has to show that it has done that. There would need to be money for that – it is not hugely expensive, but it takes a little bit of money to hire people who know how to do that and can do it well. There should also be some kind of lever so something like saying that if this is not done for a specific statistic then the statistic cannot be designated as a national statistic, or funding is reduced. What doesn't work is asking users to get in touch. In fact, that's harmful because if you do that, you're prioritising people who have the time and money to do that over the needs of people who don't have time to do that.

The bad news is that UKSA starts from a long way behind digital services. But the good news is there's a playbook for doing this. It's been done before, even in government. It can be changed. It's not expensive. And there are people out there who know how to do it.

Mike Hughes

Mike began by reinforcing the comments made by colleagues about user engagement – even though it has been going on for a long time, UKSA just can't seem to grasp these points. He also reinforced the points made about prices and supported Simon's excellent summary of issues.

Mike focused on the complete absence of plans to give users visibility on what ONS is seeking to do – not just ONS and UKSA but across the GSS. When Statistics and Registration Service Act (SRSA) was developed, there was no standard model for statistics law. Partly because of the situation in the UK, the UN Economic Commission for Europe and Eurostat subsequently went away and developed a generic law on official statistics which has now been widely adopted. One of the key features of the law is a requirement for a National Statistics Office to produce both an annual work programme of everything that is going on and a multi-year one to give a longer-distance view. There is a clear policy in a statement by the UN Statistics Directorate as well that statistical offices should publish these plans.

The ONS does nothing on this front. The five-year strategic plan that is so broad-brush as to be almost meaningless. Mike presented a paper on this to PACAC in 2019 comparing the SRSA with the Generic Law on Official Statistics and one of PACAC's recommendations was for ONS to develop a proper work programme. PACAC saw it both in terms of the need for users and to reinforce the GSS concept where it was already clear that the traction that ONS was having on the GSS was much reduced. It is quite interesting that when Robert Chote (current UKSA chair) gave evidence to PACAC in his former role at the Office for Budget Responsibility he said that the presence of a work plan would strengthen the hand of statisticians in departments. That recommendation from PACAC, like many others, has been ignored.

His second key point related to the confusion that exists between official statistics and national statistics. The term "National Statistic" (NS) was introduced by Tim Holt in 2000 and it as meant to identify statistics that conform to the Code of Practice. The SRSA codified this and there's an assumption that any new statistics would progress through being identified as official statistics to achieving NS designation. But people don't know the difference between an official statistic and a national statistic – it is good that the OSR is tackling this by undertaking a review. But the proposal to introduce an official statistic logo in addition to a national statistic logo risks making the situation worse. There are around 90 official statistics produced in the GSS that are nowhere near the NS designation – indicating that there's no evidence that official statistics are conforming with fundamental principles. This seems to be a complete breakdown in what was originally intended by the SRSA.

Geoff Tily

Geoff began by reinforcing Jill's comments on prices and he is also concerned about the sway of group think over the ONS and UKSA. This goes beyond inflation – but that is the flashpoint because it's the most visible economic phenomenon to the public.

He is interested in the relation between social change, academic discourse and economic outcomes. Trade unions have been involved in discussions around inflation since the end of the First World War, but there is a sense that once unions were at the table they were met by the higher authority of economic science. First in the persons of Wesley Clair Mitchell and Irving Fisher and the US authority has proved throughout to be the global authority. The British economist J M Keynes has not been brought to bear on the present controversy but is commonly cited in review articles and methodological manuals. He complained of quasi mathematical economic conceptions, borrowed by analogy from the physical sciences, as not true analysis during a celebrated debated after the Second World War. When the committee convened again under Mitchell in 2009, the highly respected insider Jack Triplett, judged from the vantage point of 60 years later that it is hard to avoid some sense that the trade unions' evidence was dismissed too readily during this debate.

Despite this, and other examples, trade unions are still battered into submission with the same quasi mathematical economics. And worse, big data is seemingly leading to an intensification of the same pseudoscientific accroach. We shouldn't need the benefit of history to tell us that the present debate has fallen far short. The battering includes inflation measurement but goes beyond that – most fundamentally to the notion that productivity statistics somehow contain the possibilities of society.

He asked that the review forcefully calls out UKSA where it has fallen short in the context of the inflation debate. In an in an intervention ahead of the last consultation on inflation, trade union general secretaries called for the RPI to be renewed, not scrapped. But the bottom line is that groupthink cannot be allowed to stand in the way of the existence of the sound and robust measurement of inflation for indexation purposes – in a way that treats housing in the least bad way, and commands public confidence. This seems vital to the idea of statistics as a public good.

He also asks that the review considers whether the same reasoning applies more generally and to consider the extent to which pseudoscientific groupthink cuts across all the outputs of the ONS and distorts both what is produced and how it is produced. Most obviously this requires a comprehensive account of distribution inequalities.

Discussion

Denise said that she was listening to the criticisms and reassured those who were concerned that the 2019 PACAC report is very much on her agenda – it will be addressed. The point on work programmes is important as it is hard for users to engage without a published work programme. There is also a need to address whether the national statistic designation is helpful. It is good to hear from Anna about what the country is doing well. It would be interesting to hear examples of other countries whose official statistics systems are performing well.

There are topics that weren't mentioned that Denise would be interested in hearing about – eg, how users engage with OSR. Should users have some mechanism to engage with OSR and is it effective in its reaction to users' interests. She's also interested in developments that ONS has made in terms of the expert groups and how we see a broader user community engaging with those groups. She admitted that she didn't even know about these groups until she started to do the review – so is interested in whether those might be used to the advantage of the broader community. There is also a question about how government statisticians engage with the analytical services and whether initiatives like the Data Science Campus are actually driving innovation in the statistical system. It would also be useful to hear about what is being done in terms of education, skills and leadership.

David Caplan, on OSR, questioned how much confidence we can have in its quality review programme in economic statistics. They are widening their ambitions and there is a question over whether they have the skillset to deliver it. He suggested that we need more transparency on the quality review programme and potentially the need for peer review of the reviews so that we can have more confidence in what they're doing. There was also a point made about the absence of a work plan in the ONS – sometimes it seems as if they focus on the new and shiny at the expense of the core product. A recent example was the national statistician announcing that there would be a focus on net domestic product rather than gross domestic product. But the core economic statistics for driver loss of the decision making remain important and it's important that the ONS does get that balance right between innovation and focusing on the historical core

David also has questions about the effectiveness of the ONS, which relates to the skill set. There are a couple of things that it seems to have taken forever to do. First, scanner data. He was in the ONS in the early 2000s and this was being discussed then. Now maybe progress is being made, but in 20 years not much has happened. Another example is that it took 17 years to implement a recommendation to use double deflation in the national accounts. So, there does seem to be quite a lot of slowness, which raises a question of whether the ONS has the skill set it needs to deliver on statistical products. There's been a lot of focus on data science, which is good. There are also a lot of economists now in the ONS and, in his experience, this group is not always that skilled at measurement. Is there a hierarchy where strong statistical skills aren't valued as much as users might expect.

David also argued that dissemination is not sufficiently emphasised and that the ONS needs to make more use of APIs rather than formatted spreadsheets which are almost completely useless for reuse. He also supported Rachel's comments about local government – there is a huge cost to local government both because of missing data and because existing data isn't disseminated in a way that is useful to local public services.

Tom King discussed OSR's user engagement. In his experience they manage casework well and responsively – if you have a clear concern, you get an effective response. There is a potential issue in that if something isn't resolved it can be forgotten about and this requires users to keep an eye on it. Tom also made a point about research integrity. ONS has slipped out an announcement that it is now a public sector research establishment. This should mean that they are obliged to take heed of the research integrity questions that Simon Briscoe mentioned. This has potential to lead to a lot of other development in the way that statistics work.

Rachel spoke about OSR engagement and suggested that there was almost no engagement from local government. She also noted that, in terms of planning, it seems quite rare that things happen in the ONS when they are planned, which means that users are constantly waiting because they are being promised something that doesn't materialise. An example is the population projections where ONS have noted serious errors with the way that children of migrants are being counted. They know it is a problem but seem unable to fix it.

Jill Leyland emphasised that user engagement needs users who are willing to engage and that does not always happen. Sometimes people just aren't interested and sometimes the system appears too dense and difficult to engage with.

Simon Briscoe urged the RSS to focus on one of its original purposes, which was about providing facts about society.

Ken Roy suggested that it would be helpful to have a sense of the future landscape. Some countries are discussing whether their country's statistics agency should also be their data steward – but that doesn't really seem to be on the agenda in the UK yet.

Denise thanked everyone for useful contributions and reported that they would start to draft the review in October. She would like to engage with the RSS on what the organisation should do in relation to the statistical system and how we can most effectively make a positive contribution.