

## UK official statistics: The issues that the RSS is pursuing

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The turn of a year seems a natural time to reflect on things. Writing this in January 2023, I am also close to the end of the first year in my RSS role, so a good time to reflect on the UK's official statistics system. I have certainly been reminded of the huge range of official statistics that are published (over 4,000 official statistics releases in 2022) and the extensive development programmes taking place. This includes for example the Integrated Data Service with its promise to bring together “ready-to-use data to enable faster and wider collaborative analysis for the public good”. In May and June, Census 2022 results for Northern Ireland, England, and Wales started to be published, while 31 May was the last day for people in Scotland to complete the Census there.

Covid is still with us (indeed, infection rates rose again in December, according to the ONS survey) but media and public attention is less focussed on regular Covid statistics than during the previous two years. Important work is under way, across the RSS and more widely, to learn lessons about the use of statistics from that time. However, it is now statistics on economic growth/recession, cost of living, energy, climate change and the state of the environment that are more in the spotlight, among a diverse range of issues. Other, more specific examples have reached my inbox: re-writing of the story of UK research and development spending; debate about the validity of data on the impact of changing the tax position of public schools; confusion over trends in crime according to the different sources of crime statistics; “green jobs” being discussed but with no agreed definition of them; similarly, what does “levelling up” mean; and are international students migrants?

Given the extent of the statistics system and the diversity of its users and their understanding and awareness of it, any review of the year must be treated with caution. National Statistician, Sir Ian Diamond talks very positively about his highlights in a [podcast review](#). On the other hand, the [Better Statistics](#) CIC is asking if we should be looking for a new statistical system. In its report on the state of the statistical system in 2021/22, the Office for Statistics Regulation celebrates areas where the system “consistently performs well and had improved over the past year as well as highlighting both continued and emergent areas for improvement”. This is also the line recognised by Sir Robert Chote, the new chair of UKSA, in a [blog](#). The OSR's balanced approach, as well as the areas they would like to see improve, chimes with how I envisage the RSS's position on official statistics: to act as a critical friend of the system, to recognise its strengths and the good it does, while not being afraid to draw attention to areas for improvement and to work with official statisticians, drawing on the expertise and experience embedded in the RSS.

Meeting with senior UKSA members is one way of exploring our concerns. In August, Chief Executive Stian Westlake and I met twice with Sir Robert Chote. This was a good and early opportunity to set out the NSAG's agenda, summarised below, as well as hopefully leading to a pattern of more regular meetings. Stian and I are also members of [NSEUAC](#), which met first in March, as are Sir Ian Diamond and Ed Humpherson, the head of OSR. ONS Head of Communications, Owen Brace and colleagues came to the [NSAG](#) meeting in June to discuss theme-based user engagement developments.

So what's on our agenda? We raised the following topics with Sir Robert and are progressing them through the work of NSAG:

- **Measures of household inflation:** we continue to support the development and regular publication of the Housing Costs Indices as a distinctive complement to the CPI and the legacy RPI. The President [wrote](#) to the National Statistician in April, calling for the development of HCIs to be more urgent in light of the deepening cost of living crisis, a message we repeated in a [letter](#) to *The Times* published in November;
- **Greater UK-wide coordination and integration of official statistics:** we recognise the devolved issues and urge UKSA to make progress towards meeting needs for UK-wide statistics by voluntary and pragmatic means;
- **International guidance and standards:** more debate is needed on the appropriate position of international guidance in the UK statistical system now that it is no longer part of the formal European Union statistical system, and on the role of [NSCASE](#). In particular, the current revision of the System of National Accounts (SNA) should be the opportunity for national conversations about what 'Beyond GDP' means and how we will change behaviour as well as changing the measures, but who will foster that debate?
- **Governance of the statistical system:** we anticipate the Cabinet Office review of UKSA as an arms-length body, floated at the time of Sir Robert's appointment and now mentioned in correspondence with [PACAC](#), as the place to explore our concerns;
- **User engagement:** much has been promised over the years, but less actually delivered. The [strategy](#) launched in 2021 applies across the GSS, where the culture may be different to that in ONS. It is now about making the new model (including NSEUAC) work together to do what a Statistical Advisory Committee as recommended in international guidance would do. The key point is that user engagement operates at various levels, but none more important than getting to specific users and potential users. RSS is therefore exploring how to maintain some kind of Statistics User Forum, perhaps more as a Forum of Statistics User Groups. Local and subnational data are now getting some attention and better tools, but local data users need greater recognition in the new model, regardless of whether or not levelling up continues as a UK government priority;
- **Public statistics:** the framework we are developing to progress all these issues is to ask how the UK official statistics system might better perform its role in delivering statistics for the public good. NSAG held discussions, culminating in a [roundtable](#), earlier this year and garnered general support to explore what we are calling *public statistics*. That is, to start with the questions that need statistics to help answer them and to spotlight all relevant statistics, rather than just on those that are designated official or national statistics. The official statistics system and the Code of Practice for Statistics should be at the heart of public statistics, to enable the needs of a wider range of users to be met by drawing on a wider range of official and non-official data and statistics. NSAG is finalising its action plan for 2023 to work on the concept of public statistics in collaboration with UKSA and the GSS, and with other partners inside the RSS and beyond.

I am grateful to all those in NSAG and beyond who are actively involved in helping the RSS to be that critical friend of the UK statistical system, as well as to all those working in official statistics. Do contact me to follow up on any of this, or with any other concerns or appreciation you have for UK official statistics. Thank you.

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