



Public statistics

A vision for meeting society's needs for statistics in an increasingly data-rich world

June 2024



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Executive Summary

The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) is a charity which promotes statistics, data and evidence for the public good; we are one of the world's leading learned societies and the only UK professional body for all statisticians and data professionals. One of the RSS's strategic goals is to support public understanding and engagement, so that people understand the statistics that influence their daily life decisions, their work, and the world around them, and feel empowered to engage meaningfully with statistics.

This report is specifically about how statistics should be provided for the public good in an increasingly data-rich world. We focus on ensuring that the public, as well as government, have access to relevant and reliable statistics. It has been prepared after a series of discussions about what we are calling *public statistics*.

Public statistics – delivering statistics for the public good by:

- starting from identifying questions that need statistics to help answer them (rather than starting from the available statistics),
- acknowledging the vital role of the official statistics system in providing statistics for the public good, while
- recognising that data to promote the public good may also need to be drawn from a wider range of sources.

The aim of official statistics systems is to serve the government, the economy and the public with data. However, we highlight an imbalance: there is an innate – and understandable – tendency for producers of official statistics to prioritise government users over other users, which we discuss and illustrate with four case studies throughout the document.

We live in an increasingly data-rich world. There is a huge quantity of data available beyond official statistics that could be used – and indeed already is being used - to promote the public good. The UK official statistical system makes efforts to incorporate some of this into official statistics, but the process is not widespread. There are great opportunities to be gained by incorporating a wider range of data into official data.

But more than that, we advocate that delivering public statistics is not necessarily only down to official statistical systems. We envisage ways in which official statistics systems could draw more on other data sources, or might play a leadership role in a more diffuse statistical system.

However public statistics might be delivered in future, we have identified four main areas on which that delivery should focus:

- 1) A more open and ambitious focus on **user need**, increasing the public good secured from statistics, including producers and users working together to better capture the value that is delivered through use of statistics
- 2) More transparent, user and producer **partnership-based approach** to building an organisation's formal portfolio of statistics and to ensuring the **quality** of those statistics, including fitness for purpose.

- 3) A more strategic approach to **maximising the value of available data**, recognising the radically changing data landscape. This should apply not only to official statistics producers but to the organisations who voluntarily sign up to the Code of Practice for Statistics and thereby contribute public statistics directly.
- 4) **Appropriate governance**, especially around how the role of a UK statistical council and a full statistical programme can best be integrated into the statistical system, broadly defined.

We are publishing this now to generate further discussion of the issues, especially following recommendations in Professor Denise Lievesley's Review of the UK Statistical Authority (UKSA) that aim to support public as well as government use of statistics. The RSS has welcomed all the recommendations, many of which intersect with our concept of public statistics, including recommendations for a Triennial Statistical Assembly and on resolving data sharing issues, more UK wide data, and more consultation and engagement with users.

We argue that the Assembly should be used to test some of the key principles of public statistics – so that, if successful, UKSA is able to demonstrate the value of this approach to government in the context of the next spending review. We call for UKSA to use the Assembly to:

- Identify a key area where there is unmet demand for statistics, produce statistics to meet this need, publicly evaluate how these are used – to help determine the strength of the case for investing more in this type of work.
- Determine the scale of unmet need – how many questions are there that people would like to answer but where there are no official statistics.
- Identify datasets that are held by private companies that might shed light on questions of public interest, seek to make use of that data in ONS outputs, publicly evaluate the impact to help determine whether further effort should be made in that direction.

We also have concerns with aspects of the Government's response to the review, which goes against public statistics in two respects. So, we make two recommendations for the next government to build public confidence and trust in the statistical system:

- Recognise the importance of the statistical needs of other users – moving away from the Cabinet Office's expressed attitude that the statistical needs of government (especially economic) should take precedence.
- End the practice of pre-release access to statistics in government departments, to be in line with the limited approach of the Code of Practice for Statistics.

[National Statistics Advisory Group](#)

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1. Introduction

We strongly support the United Nations principles for an official statistics system (see following section) as an indispensable element in the information system of a democratic society, serving the government, the economy, and the public. The UK official statistical system is rightly recognised internationally as exemplary (for example in its response to the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as generally for its methodology, governance, and regulation).

However, even the UN principles suggest that official statistics systems are not necessarily the sole providers of statistics for the public good, faced as they are with increasing demands, constrained resources, and in an increasingly data-rich world. Nor can official statistics systems necessarily provide all the answers even by drawing on external sources.

We believe greater public value can be unlocked by a more balanced, user-focused, and more diverse portfolio of public statistics. Our aim in this report is to generate and sustain a debate about how best to deliver public statistics. The UK official statistics system – both its producer and its regulatory roles – is vital for this, but we also raise the question of whether that is sufficient for public statistics as we envision them.

2. Official statistics

The [UN Principles of Official Statistics](#) set out a vision for official statistics.

Official statistics provide an indispensable element in the information system of a democratic society, serving 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 test of practical utility are to be compiled and made available on an impartial basis by official statistical agencies to honour citizens' entitlement to public information. (Principle 1)

This vision essentially says that an official statistics system should provide impartial, reliable information for the public good. This aim is acknowledged at the heart of the UK statistics system – the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA) was established in 2007 with the statutory objective of “promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good” ([Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007](#), §7). The phrase *official statistics for the public good* was used purposefully in the legislation, with the intention of preventing any future interpretation that official statistics are primarily for government: the public good is understood as both informing the public about social, economic, and environmental matters *and* assisting in the development, delivery, and evaluation of public policy by governments.

One consideration of an official statistics system is that it should ensure that there are “final authoritative working statistics”. This is what Churchill demanded when he called for a Central Statistical Office¹ during the Second World War. This was specifically for government use, so that ministers did not argue

¹ Boris Starling with David Bradbury (2020), “The Official History of Britain: Our story in numbers as told by the Office for National Statistics”, HarperCollins, London (p2)

about figures, as it was described at the time. Over the decades the official statistics system has evolved to one that is directed towards meeting needs of businesses and society as well as those of government.

The statistical nature of public good is kept under review by the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR), for example working in collaboration with ADR UK to explore [public perceptions of public good](#). We welcome OSR's overall research programme into how the official statistics system can serve the public good. Their recently published [think piece](#) is a valuable contribution to the debate about delivering the vision for UK public statistics.

3. The problem: balancing user needs

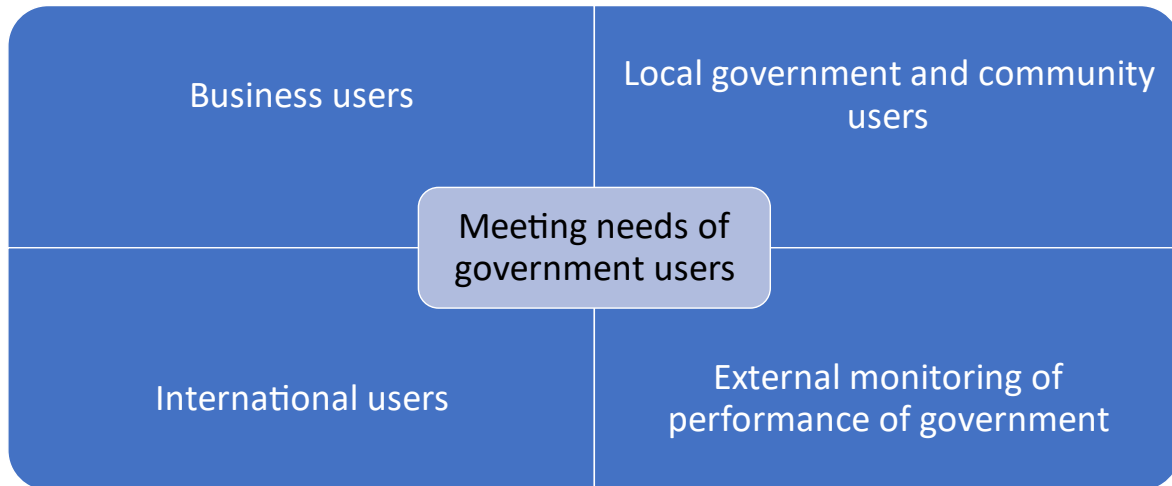
Determining how the public good is best served is a significant challenge for national statistical organisations. There is an innate – and understandable – tendency for producers of official statistics to prioritise government users over other users. In providing information to support government users, statisticians can be confident that they are working towards the public good in the sense of assisting the development of public policy and in its implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. It will not always be clear cut that this is all that needs to be done to serve the public good. For example, there are public interest questions on the performance of government and on the consequences of policy decision (both of which may be framed in different ways by government and by others), and on issues that are not current government priorities.

We acknowledge that the UK official statistics system identifies and responds to needs in each of the five broad user areas shown in the diagram below. However, the attention given to each varies, with government needs appearing to be central and often taken as meeting other needs in the first instance - which is why we have highlighted government needs in the diagram below, representing the established position as we see it, and which we seek to change.

We start from the view that much could be achieved in the short term through building on existing processes and sharing current good practice in the official statistics system. This now, however, needs to be focussed more on the questions of public interest. The four case studies in this document show how public statistics would differ from current outputs.

This is not just about statistical outputs but is also about engagement and other processes. For example, we welcome that ONS now contains a [Centre for Equalities and Inclusion](#). This “aims to improve the evidence base for understanding equity and fairness in the UK today, enabling new insights into important policy questions”. We would be especially reassured to see evidence that CEI is addressing potential policy areas as well as those that are already on the government's agenda, and to learn how CEI gains insights on public concerns and public engagement from the [National Statistician's Inclusive Data Advisory Committee](#) and other stakeholders.

Statistics for the public good: what's the problem?



Case study question one: is crime rising or falling?

✓ An [ONS podcast](#) in 2022 concluded that “When we look across trends in general over time, crime has been decreasing since the mid 90s, and has been more flat in recent years”. ONS publish [quarterly bulletins](#) on Crime in England and Wales.

✗ However, the data comes from two sources, reported separately within the bulletin and with no overall assessment (and this is for E&W only, not for UK). There are also strong critiques of this data (eg) and the BBC recently [reported](#) that the headline measure from the survey reported is a “key crime measure routinely quoted by ministers [which] excludes many crimes that affect women more often than men”.

► Clearly this is complex, but the question of what is happening overall to crime should be better addressed to meet user needs. (The [User Guide to Crime Statistics](#) does not currently consider this). The question might be answered with a broad assessment of long-term crime trends based on a number of metrics, or it should be clearly stated why this is not feasible. There might be a case for focussing on more specific questions (such as “Is violent crime increasing?”). In any event, there should be clearer labelling on the coverage, and the exclusions, of figures from each source so that these can be acknowledged when they are used (or misused).

4. The challenge: multiple data sources

We live in an increasingly data-rich world. There is a huge quantity of data available beyond official statistics that could be used – and indeed already is being used - to promote the public good. UKSA makes efforts to incorporate some of this into official statistics, but the process is not widespread. There are great opportunities to be gained by incorporating a wider range of data into official data and it is important that UKSA systematically evaluates where there are opportunities to do this (as well as identifying areas where the costs do not outweigh the benefits). However, delivering public statistics is not necessarily only down to UKSA, as we will consider in a later section.

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of users drawing on official and non-official data sources in meeting urgent needs for new information. Statistics from many sources were used to help understand and combat the virus. Statistics were also published by independent, peer-reviewed, research centres, including scientific modelling and projections of the possible course of the pandemic. A key statistic that came to the forefront of public consciousness during the pandemic in this way was the *R value*: a statistic important for understanding the transmission of the virus that emerged from outside the official statistics system and [published](#) on the gov.uk website by the UK Health Security Agency. (But we also note that this does not mean that everyone was aware of, or understood, the R number²).

There is also the good example of the [Coronavirus dashboard](#). However, having evidence collated like this does not necessarily mean that all policy decisions are evidence-based around a single set of facts. There is a lack of transparency of the evidence base used to inform policy (see eg [observations](#) of people well acquainted with, while outside of, government policy, recorded at a session of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee’s current inquiry into transforming the UK’s evidence base).

Official figures are sometimes obtained by media or other users using Freedom of Information requests (eg see the Centre for Public Data’s [Missing Numbers](#) investigations). While this provides a route to accessibility of official data, reflects user demand and unearths unpublished data, it invariably results in a one-off release, with no guarantee of updating.

As we debate public statistics, it will become ever more important to clarify the distinction between ‘official figures’ – a term popularly applied to any number or numerical comparison quoted by a government minister or spokesman for a government department or agency - and official statistics as quality assured and presented by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) or another part of the Government Statistical Service (GSS).

Over recent years the ONS, using new legal powers, has been able to obtain regular flows of administrative data from other government departments. There remain barriers to be overcome in initiating additional data flows from departments, including:

- Capacity – the resources (human or technological) to provide datasets
- Capability - the skills and experience to process data in a way that produces statistics
- Cost – of processing data and producing good quality statistics

² Eg Gavin Freeguard (2024), “The story of the R number”, [Significance](#), March 2024 (pp6-10)

- Culture – multifaceted reasons why there is no history of providing data (other than to meet statutory reporting requirements) such as that this is not core to the business of the department or that it is unwilling to open up to potential external scrutiny, or to devalue a competitive asset.

The RSS recommendations on data sharing to the PACAC inquiry on transforming the UK evidence base are also relevant here, please see Annex A below.

These challenges will also be faced if public statistics are to be generated through data sharing between non-government organisations, or between non-government organisations and ONS. There would undoubtedly be legal compliance issues to observe.

There are issues here that will not be solved quickly or universally. However, we suggest that the approach to more public statistics, especially when set in a broader context of building a more numerically confident society able to critically examine statistics, can only help make the case for more data sharing.

Part of the benefit in establishing a firmer, more balanced partnership between producers and users is to increase the legitimacy and sustainability of the overall statistical system (not just the official statistical system). The way forward involves statisticians recognising and responding to the evolving data ecosystem: quickly moving to be data takers as much as data makers, building public trust in information, building even better relationships with users and potential users. It is also timely to make the case for public statistics recognising that all public investments are under scrutiny.

Case study two: the way you measure the overall state of the economy is disconnected from the way I experience it.

✓ *During 2023, ONS and the RSS collaborated on a series of well-attended [events](#) on the ‘beyond GDP’ agenda – the demand for measures of progress in terms of wellbeing and sustainability as well as by measuring the economic growth as defined by the System of National Accounts. ONS publishes many outputs relevant to this wider assessment ([eg](#)).*

✓ *Similarly, the RSS has [welcomed](#) the quarterly publication of [Household Cost Indices](#) (HCIs) that report how inflation is affecting different types of households, as well as the ONS monthly publication of an economic measure of inflation, the CPI.*

✗ *However, in both cases there is more that could be done to improve the coherence and the timeliness of household, societal, and environmental measures. Economic measures appear to dominate.*

▶ *Current GSS user engagement processes (and indeed the attitude towards wider engagement) still appear too weighted towards government users. While there are places for user input ([eg an advisory panel](#) on consumer price statistics), non-government users are not party to subsequent decision-making and priority-setting that we expect in a system of public statistics. (And one quick win would be to make the latest HCIs much easier to find on the ONS website).*

5. Public statistics

Following a series of discussions with users, producers, and others involved in official statistics, we have come up with a vision that we are calling *public statistics* – delivering statistics for the public good by:

- starting from identifying questions that need statistics to help answer them (rather than starting from the available statistics)
- acknowledging the vital role of the official statistics system in providing statistics for the public good, while
- recognising that data to promote the public good may also need to be drawn from a wider range of sources.

We have concluded that there are four main areas which need developing, over time, to deliver more public statistics:

- 1) A more open and ambitious focus on **user need**, increasing the public good secured from statistics, including producers and users working together to better capture the value that is delivered through use of statistics. We note in passing that many other public services, such as housing and health, have clear and quantified ways of expressing unmet need. Are there lessons here for statistics? It is also important to incorporate the unmet needs that are highlighted in public policy work in academia and by bodies such as the Centre for Public Data³.
- 2) More transparent, user and producer **partnership-based approach** to building an organisation's formal portfolio of statistics and to ensuring the **quality** of those statistics, including fitness for purpose. This should include an ambition of work programmes that are co-produced by producers and users - publishing and maintaining a statistical work programme covering planned outputs and developments. Part of this would be to document the statistical outputs available for the public good, with details of how and when they are published.
- 3) A more strategic approach to **maximising the value of available data**, recognising the radically changing data landscape. This points to the need for the official statistics system to have the right encouragement and the right levers to be assured that they are delivering the maximum public good from the data available both within and beyond government. Existing legal powers for the official statistics system to access third-party data of public value should be fully used before any further powers are considered. And we think this should apply not only to official statistics producers but to the organisations who voluntarily sign up to the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#) and thereby contribute public statistics directly.
- 4) **Appropriate governance**, especially around how the role of a UK statistical council and a full statistical programme can best be integrated into the statistical system, broadly defined. The UK does not have a statistical programme as defined in international guidance relating to official statistical systems and national statistical institutes (NSIs). We explore in Annex B the concept of statistical work programmes and compare the UK with practice in three other NSIs. It is an open question as to whether such a work programme could or should then apply across all public statistics, rather than just to official statistics.

We are particularly concerned about the process of identifying gaps and unmet needs as part of compiling a budgeted statistical work programme, as well as scoping its potential content. Drawing again

³ Eg on [rental statistics](#) and on [land options](#)

on the PACAC session referred to above, “there appears to be a perception in some quarters that Government views often drown out other voices in the conversation about what data should be collected ...it is not at all clear to me how that prioritisation happens” (Q75 [here](#)). With better and more sustained user engagement, we call for co-production of the programme by producers and users. We envisage a ‘whole system’ response to gaps and unmet needs, including strengthening the Code of Practice⁴, improved and more extensive coaching in user engagement, and recognition of the value of effective user engagement in staff appraisal.

There is much to unpack and develop in calling for user-producer partnerships and to see how this might be made to work effectively, both at individual producer organisation level and, if this is not too far-reaching, across all producers of public statistics. We also recognise this places an onus on users to get involved, as well on producers to invite partnership working. The RSS is committed to supporting statistics users, for example through our hosting of the Forum of Statistics User Groups. Part of FoSUG’s mission is to help maintain a strong, self-sustaining user base community and we greatly appreciate the commitment and efforts of those who act as leaders in their communities of interest. They can invariably advise on practical aspects of effective user engagement and partnership – what works for different users and in what kinds of settings.

Case study question three: how many people are providing unpaid care to others in their family or community and what is the value of this?

- ✓ *In England and Wales an estimated 5.0 million usual residents aged 5 years and over provided unpaid care in 2021” - the latest [Census](#) asked ‘Do you look after, or give any help or support to, anyone because they have long-term physical or mental health conditions or illnesses, or problems related to old age?’ Further data, including by economic activity of caregivers, have been released ([eg](#)).*
- ✓ *ONS is collaborating with others, including the charity Carers UK, in the ESRC-funded [Centre for Care](#), which has published updated research on the value of unpaid care (now £162 billion a year).*
- ▶ *An exemplar of how ONS, working in collaboration with others, can help address needs for public statistics. We hope this also leads to consideration of the data within ONS, for example in understanding how the formal economy is dependent on many unpaid activities, and in differentiating between homecare, parenting, and caregiving.in data collection and in analysis.*

⁴ Eg see [recommendations](#) from the Centre for Public Data in response to the OSR’s Call for Evidence on the Code of Practice for Statistics

6. The Lievesley Review and its implementation

We started our work examining statistics for the public good before the Cabinet Office commissioned Professor Denise Lievesley to conduct her [independent review of UKSA](#)⁵. Professor Lievesley has now made 19 recommendations, recognised by the Government as directed towards helping delivering “a data enabled future”. Professor Lievesley introduces her findings by referring to “the critical importance of official statistics, which are fundamental for evidence-based policy and decision making” and that “official statistics have an even broader role: they serve to empower, enabling citizens to call governments to account and providing a window on society”.

The RSS has [welcomed](#) the recommendations. They very much intersect with our concept of public statistics. We see the review as pointing the UK statistical system towards public statistics, though this remains a long-term goal (see Annex C for a detailed commentary on the review recommendations). Moreover, we are concerned over parts of the UK [Government response](#) to the review. There is more to debate before a more equitable balance between meeting government and non-government needs is achieved.

There is an opportunity in implementing the review recommendations to consolidate the UK official statistics system’s provision of public statistics and to build on this, over time, to grow public statistics further. Just suggesting we need more public statistics is unlikely to lead to any profound change. More sources of reliable data, statistics, and analysis provided for the public good would always be welcome. But such a ‘supply side’ solution will not of itself ensure that questions needing statistics to help answer them are recognised and addressed, or that sources are quality-assured and curated so that statistics to answer questions can easily be found. We need to apply the Theory of Change process⁶ to plan activities that will lead to more public statistics.

Available public statistics might give the right answers to some questions, but there will be related questions requiring their own statistical answers. For example, the Consumer Prices Index (CPI) is designed to meet the needs for a whole-economy inflation measure, but it does not reveal the inflation experiences of different types of households, for which the set of Household Cost Indices (HCIs) are now being developed and published (currently quarterly and in arrears of the monthly CPI, which weakens their impact in policy and public debate).

Key to public statistics is identifying gaps in public statistics, then energising and encouraging more public statistics from trustworthy suppliers, to address unmet needs (or to explain why not). We had identified a range of different mechanisms for identifying and addressing gaps, such as:

- Incorporate these activities uniquely as a responsibility of the official statistics system: this does not mean that UKSA, in collaboration with the devolved administrations and the wider GSS, would be required to produce and publish all the public statistics for which needs had been identified - but it would require all existing user engagement processes to take a wider remit. A further step would be to enhance current internal processes for deciding on development and

⁵ The RSS was pleased to be one of the organisations included in Professor Lievesley's extensive stakeholder engagement (as detailed in Annex B of her report). Professor Lievesley is a member of the RSS and is a former President of the RSS (1999-2001).

⁶ Eg see Government Analysis Function [guidance](#).

production priorities to make them more inclusive of users outside of government, so that more public statistics can be generated from official sources.

- Establish an independent UK statistics council or similar body, to regularly assess the needs for public statistics and to encourage new sources of data, statistics, and analysis (drawing on multiple sources).
- Leave it to the information market of public and private providers to be attuned to needs for new sources of data, statistics, analysis and to develop solutions. In our assessment, it is too soon to adopt this option though we would see this as a sign of a mature public sphere in due course.

The specific proposal, centred on a Triennial Statistical Assembly, in the Lievesley Review and endorsed by Government and UKSA is one such mechanism, with elements of each of the first two options above. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the design of this new process, especially so that our vision of public statistics can, over time, be absorbed into the role, scope and ambition of the Assembly and embedded in user engagement structures, processes, and activities.

How best to grow the coverage of public statistics – for example outwards from the ONS’s work programme across the devolved administrations, the rest of the GSS, and beyond, or on a thematic basis – also needs careful consideration. The prospect of external partnerships on a work programme for public statistics would suggest reaching out to research councils such as ESRC and MRC and with commercial organisations who sign up not just to the Statistics Code but also committing to some form of public service provision of statistics. Another aspect of this, which also relates to RSS’s strategic goal of building statistical skills and thinking, would be to explore and stimulate citizen science as a source of data for public statistics.

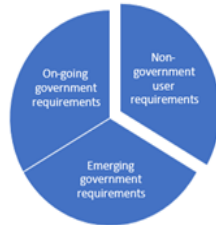
We are also in no doubt that in any solution to public statistics, the role of OSR is crucial and needs appropriate resourcing. OSR has responsibility for the Code of Practice and its adoption within official statistics and, on a voluntary basis, in other organisations. OSR also promotes and shares best practice and is well placed, through its other regulatory roles, to help identify gaps in public statistics.

On the issue of resources generally, we consider that the case for investment in public statistics needs to be made strongly and repeatedly. While this has been examined in some detail for some major statistical initiatives, notably the censuses of population, we suggest that a more strategic assessment of the value of official statistics, and public statistics overall, is long overdue. For example, we are aware that the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) and the National Audit Office (NAO) have highlighted the lack of data and statistics available to judge value for money on major contracts (and that the [current PAC inquiry on value for money](#) may also repeat this concern). It may well be the case that investment in statistics and engagement would result in savings, by helping identify problems earlier. More generally, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) recently set out a framework for [assessing and understanding the value of official statistics](#) that encourages moving towards “a consumer-centred approach” to value, and which could usefully be adopted here.

We understand of course that not all identified needs for statistics can be met and that there will always be resource constraints. Our vision that public statistics might be generated through co-production of a statistical programme will always be tempered by the two questions in the box below.

Public statistics: co-production of the statistical programme

- Who decides how to cut the cake?
- Who decided how big the cake should be?



Not to scale!

Case study question four: where do I find statistics about climate change?

✓ In October 2021, ONS [announced](#) that “Ahead of the COP 26 summit, a new [UK climate change statistics portal](#) has been launched. It’s an accessible one-stop shop for statistics on climate change and related topics, including drivers like energy use and emissions levels, giving clear, accessible and accurate information”. Feedback on this prototype was to drive its evolution.

✗ However, since September 2023, data on the portal has no longer been updated on this site, but “will remain available until at least September 2024”. Users are directed to five other sites, including the ONS searchable calendar of all its published and upcoming releases. Moreover, in December 2023, ONS reported to [NSEUAC](#) that its climate change insights were also ceasing as environmental and climate change statistics were not a core area of ONS business (paper NSEUAC(23)09). They explained that the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero was the lead central government department. There was no clarification of how ONS would continue its coherence role (dealing with different sources and with data from devolved governments) or how the National Statistician would ensure that is carried forward by appropriate members of the GSS and the Government Analysis Function, The link in this case provided to [gov.uk](#) results in a pre-filtered list of all 2,483 (as at 16 Feb 2024) research and statistics outputs on climate change and energy published by UK government, including ONS (and four items from the Scottish Government), not to any portal.

► Although ONS “listen to and act upon user feedback”, we question the extent to which such feedback was sought in this case from organisations and individuals outside of government with an interest in climate change. If the ONS portal was not receiving many hits, what could have been done to publicise it more? Some voters attach high priority to tackling climate change. A recent letter in [The Economist](#) calls for “better access to unbiased information”. It is certainly the case that different user groups have different priorities. However, it appears that the GSS’s current user engagement strategy for statistics is not yet working as effectively as would be needed to underpin public statistics through proactive and sustained engagement – for example to build on [Statistics from DESNZ](#) (the UK Department for Energy Security and Net Zero).

7. Our proposed way forward

This is an interesting time in which to be launching a call for more public statistics: UKSA is currently considering how to implement Lievesley Review recommendations; public sector finances are tight (the ONS budget decreases by 1 per cent in nominal terms in 2024/25 compared with 2023/24, but it continues to face rising costs which make the real terms impact larger⁷); and all against an imminent general election. While this suggests that it would be best to plan for the long-term vision of more public statistics, there are also steps to take in the short term.

To build the long-term vision, we welcome discussion, debate, and feedback on what we have set out here in terms of the aim for more public statistics and the broad areas that would need to be developed. We will be exploring this with the UKSA/devolved administrations/GSS and all with an interest in more public statistics, building on early and exploratory discussions that generated considerable support for the broad ambition and concept. This will include a session at the RSS 2024 Conference (Brighton, 5th September).

Over the short term, we welcome that UKSA is now working on implementing the Lievesley Review recommendations and we are engaging with that, including to test how well developments would support more public statistics. We would like to see UKSA test some of the principles of public statistics, review the impact that is approach can have and – if beneficial – use that to evidence the need for further work in that direction. This would help UKSA pivot towards a greater focus on public statistics when it updates its current (2020-2025) [strategy](#). This also needs to be echoed in the vision and strategic delivery plan for the GSS now under development and in preparing the UKSA strategy for post-2025. There is also an opportunity to reflect some of the principles of public statistics, eg around user engagement, when OSR's looks at [a refreshed Code of Practice for Statistics](#), later in 2024.

We welcome UKSA's work to deliver the Triennial Statistical Assembly that was called for in the Lievesley Review. We believe that this Assembly can be used to test some of the principles of public statistics, so we call for UKSA to use the Assembly to:

- Identify a key area where there is unmet demand for statistics, produce statistics to meet this need, publicly evaluate how these are used – to help determine the strength of the case for investing more in this type of work.
- Determine the scale of unmet need – how many questions are there that people would like to answer but where there are no official statistics.
- Identify datasets that are held by private companies that might shed light on questions of public interest, seek to make use of that data in ONS outputs, publicly evaluate the impact to help determine whether further effort should be made in that direction.

Alongside this, the RSS will be looking to develop aspects of public statistics not specifically addressed in the Lievesley Review. We will first carry out a Theory of Change analysis, to identify activities and actions that should lead to more public statistics. These might include the following (and in particular to explore the future use of non-government sources to meet public statistics needs:

⁷ ONS Business Planning Update, paper NSEUAC(24)01, 7 March 2024

- Helping to make the case for the value of statistics in society to be fully recognised and exploring the value of an agreed set of basic statistics as the window on society, or some other implementation of “final authoritative working statistics”
- Helping identify gaps in the national and local evidence needs that can be filled with statistics from non-governmental providers
- Showcasing good practice in data handling, statistical production, and multi-source analysis in different sectors (Local and regional government, other local public services including police and health, Third Sector, private sector)
- Finding partners (and funding) for small-scale pilot work and case studies, including to assess the costs and benefits to potential non-government providers.

We conclude this report by returning to the outcome that we flagged at the beginning. The production and delivery of public statistics should lead to a public sphere in which citizens engage with topics and issues. As we in the RSS take forward our strategy of supporting public understanding and engagement, we are firmly committed to working with all who share our passion for better data, better evidence, better decisions, and a better society. We do this by building a stronger, shared vision of the form, function, and intended outcomes of the UK’s public statistics system.

National Statistics Advisory Group

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June 2024



Annex A: Some earlier RSS recommendations relevant to public statistics

To support work in drawing on a wider set of data sources, we include here four of the RSS recommendations to the PACAC inquiry on transforming the UK evidence base:

Recommendation 2: Data design should be considered from the outset in administrative systems and in statistical systems, including appropriate experimental design to enable policies to be evaluated, and ensuring that data can be standardised (both across UK countries and within countries across departments) to enable data linkage, UK aggregation, and between-country comparisons when required.

Recommendation 3: The government should support the ONS to access the widest possible range of data for inclusion in the integrated data platform and ensure that the platform is available for researchers beyond as well as within the public sector, along with appropriate disclosure control to safeguard against identification.

Recommendation 5: Create a new role in each government department for a data custodian whose responsibility is to ensure that data is used for statistical purposes within the public sector to promote the public good.

Recommendation 6: Government should assess how the regulatory landscape is liable to change in the coming years and consider whether OSR will require additional resources.

Source: [RSS recommendations to the PACAC inquiry](#)

Annex B: Statistical Work Programmes and Statistical Councils

In proposing that the UK statistics system adopts more public statistics approach, we have raised the possibility of the (co-)production and publication of a statistical work programme (SWP). We turned to internationally-compiled guidelines in which there are relevant mechanisms and processes for these as part of an official statistics system. This Annex sets out:

- What an SWP is - as described within the [Generic Law on Official Statistics](#) (GLOS),
- What a selection of other National Statistics Institutes have done by way of a SWP and a Statistical Council
- How an SWP could be of benefit for UK statistical users
- Existing arrangements for the UK official statistics system that may be seen as partially meeting the role of a Statistical Council – but are not a substitute for one.

a. International recommendations regarding a statistical work programme and a statistical council

The United Nations Generic Law on Official Statistics (GLOS), provides recommendations and good practice guidance for producers of official statistics. It is shaped by the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and its aims are to support the production of high-quality official statistics, thereby enhancing public trust and promoting the use of official statistics. It highlights the critical role of such statistics for evidence-based decision making.

The GLOS has a number of articles that relate to statistical work programming. Particularly relevant are Articles 8 and 11-14.

Articles 11-14 are related to the coordination of national statistical activities and cover statistical work planning and how this is achieved. Article 11 promotes programming of statistical activities and sets out recommendations for statistical work programmes:

“Statistical programmes, including a multi-year statistical programme and an annual statistical programme, shall be established as key instruments for effective strategic and operational management and coordination of activities in the National Statistical System.” (Article 11.1)

Article 12 relates to the multi-year statistical programme which defines the strategic development of official statistics, aiming at satisfying existing and emerging user needs. Article 13 relates to the annual statistical programme which provides an operational translation of the multi-year statistical programme:

“The programme shall include information on the main annual development activities and their linkages to international requirements and the multi-year statistical programme. The programme shall also include planned internal or external assessments of the functioning of all or parts of the National Statistical System.” (Article 13.5).

Article 8 is the recommendation that a Statistical Council should be established:

“The Statistical Council shall be the main advisory body to the government and the Chief Statistician on issues of strategic importance to official statistics. The mandate and composition of the Statistical Council, as well as its work, shall be public. (Article 8.1)

Further, the Statistical Council is to consider reporting on the statistical work programme for official statistics, as stated in Article 11:

“The National Statistical Office, in close coordination with the Other Producers of Official Statistics, shall be in charge of reporting on the implementation of the statistical programmes including, if needed, measures for improvement. The reports shall be submitted for opinion to the Statistical Council. The implementation reports and the opinion of the Statistical Council shall be made public.” (Article 11.4)

Article 14 relates to the adoption of statistical programmes and the role of the National Statistical Office and the Statistical Council in the production and approval of the SWP.

Applying the GLOS, therefore, would result in a statistical programme drawn up in close consultation with users of statistics, respondents, and administrative data providers. The Statistical Council would be representative of different user bodies, where ideally the public sector users do not form the main group within the Council. With these aims the provision of an SWP and a Statistical Council should help broaden the coverage of official statistics to meet the pressing issues of the day in a transparent way that will enhance public engagement and trust in the statistics.

b. The adoption of work programmes by the UK and other National Statistics Offices

The table appended shows a summary comparison of key points for the UK compared with three other large national statistics offices – those of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

These four countries were also included in a wider review by Ken Roy, reported towards the end of 2023 as an [OSR blog](#). Roy has been “looking at some of the narratives” used by bodies producing official statistics in their strategies, budgets, business cases and plans. These narratives include examples of strong commitment to supporting public debate, holding government to account, enabling an informed society, and aiding business decision-making.

In 2020, we made contact with the US Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics ([COPAFS](#)), another potential source of experience on interaction of users and producers of official statistics.

c. Should the UK have a statistical work programme?

We recognise that the UK system is complex and widely dispersed. Some government functions, and hence the associated statistics, are devolved from the UK Government to the governments and administrations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. ONS is the largest single producer of official statistics and publishes its own strategic business plan. Other producers include DWP, which publishes a statistical work programme but not all departments do the same. The issue of coherence is a known issue and the [Government Analysis Function](#) is working to make improvements.

Nevertheless, we take from the GLOS and how it is implemented that a statistical work programme is not intended to impose undue burden on the national statistical office. Rather, the programme defines the strategic development of official statistics aiming at satisfying existing and ongoing needs. The purpose is to include what statistical sources are available (or under development) for the public good, with details of how and when they are published, so that users can determine whether the statistics they need to answer relevant policy questions exist and whether they are of the quality required or need further development. This provides transparency to enable statistics providers to draw up priorities systematically and in ways that meet the test of public good.

This also has the potential to highlight where previously used statistics have become less relevant. This has not been easy to do in the past, as users are often reluctant to let go of statistics that they have become used to. However, resource restrictions arising out of tight budgets mean that existing statistics that are identified as no longer needed may have to be replaced with higher priority information, unless resources are increased.

We welcome the work on coherence of UK official statistics. We believe that this work would help users better understand which official statistics they should use and ensure that they are working with the best information from official statistics. It seems to us that this work could be developed further such as to provide a framework for users. We note however that there is only partial overlap between the Theme Groups for user engagement and the categories of statistics analysed for coherence. Ideally there would be more correspondence where necessary, recognising that some statistics such as population are coherent at the point of release. A statistical programme could address these points.

It is also possible that with a clearer idea about coherence in statistics, users may be better able to identify whether the data they need exists and they may feel encouraged to flag key unmet needs that should be addressed in providing official statistics for public good.

We welcome the responsiveness of official statistics to the emergence of pressing issues, such as was seen with the response to the need for statistics during the pandemic. We do recognise that there may be a conflict between meeting ongoing statutory requirements and producing new statistics. A question might be whether there are any risks to the continuity of statutory statistics and are Ministers alerted to any risks.

Tables comparing statistical work planning across Canada, Australia, NZ, and UK – (1) What do they publish by way of a Statistical Work Programme?

Stats Canada	Australian Bureau of Statistics	Stats NZ	UKSA/GSS/ONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> >Departmental Plans cover 3 years with embedded annual plans eg Departmental Plan 2023–24 >Departmental Results Reports eg 2022–23 Departmental Results Report 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> >Forward Work Program, Statement of Strategic Intention - high level, 4-year plan includes a road map >Performance measures and targets that are reviewed at pre-published dates >Annual Report (stewardship) >Release calendar, list of products with publication dates looking forward 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> >Statement of Strategic Intention - high level doc >Release calendar >Annual report (stewardship) >The Data and Statistics Act 2022 states (section 18) the Government Statistician must establish and publish a multi-year data and statistical programme (draft to be submitted to the Minister for approval). >The purpose of the programme is to identify and prioritise: the collection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> >UKSA statutory objective of promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of official statistics that ‘serve the public good’. >Publish a 5-year strategy and an annual report of progress. >Release Calendar on GOV.UK covering all official statistics



		and holding of particular data by public sector agencies (including Statistics New Zealand); the production of particular statistics by the Statistician or public sector agencies.	
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(2) Is there a Statistical Council?

Stats Canada	Australian Bureau of Statistics	Stats NZ	UKSA/GSS/ONS
Yes, Canadian Statistical Advisory Council that advises the Minister and the Chief Statistician on general societal needs for information	Yes, Australian Statistical Advisory Council to Ministers and ABS on statistical services There is also a Consultation Hub on the ABS website for specific consultations.	No, but when preparing a draft multi-year data and statistical programme, the Statistician must consult, in the manner that the Statistician thinks appropriate - (a) the public sector agencies and the Offices of Parliament that, in the opinion of the Statistician, have a particular interest in the programme: (b) the public generally: (c) the individuals and organisations that, in the opinion of the Statistician, have a particular interest in the programme. The Statistician must engage with the Maori.	No. The UKSA Board oversees the UK Statistical System. It has a non-executive majority. Advisory committees and panels include the National Statistician's Expert User Advisory Committee (NSEUAC), one of whose roles is as a forum to provide strategic advice on how the National Statistician should best engage with all users. ONS supports a collaborative approach to theme-based user engagement across the GSS. ONS consultations are posted on their website .

d. Notes to Annex B

The national statistics agency for Canada, **Statistics Canada**, produces statistics to help better understand Canada, its population, resources, economy, society, and culture. The agency is led by the Chief Statistician of Canada and StatCan is accountable to Parliament through the Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry. Statistics Canada produces statistics for all the provinces as well as the federal government. It is mandated to take a Census every 5 years.

The national statistics agency for Australia, **the Australian Bureau of Statistics**, produces statistics to inform decision-making, research and discussion within governments and the community, by providing a high quality, objective and responsive national statistics service. The Bureau is led by the Australian Statistician. It operates as part of the Australian Government and it is accountable to the Parliament, and



ultimately to the public, through the Treasury Ministers, the Parliamentary Committee process and the tabling of its annual report. The ABS conducts a Census every 5 years, its legislated functions include:

- operate as a central statistical authority for the Australian Government and provide statistical services for state and territory governments;
- collect, compile, analyse and disseminate statistics and related information; and
- coordinate the statistical operations of official bodies with particular regard to:
 - the avoidance of duplication of statistical information;
 - the attainment of compatibility and integration of statistics compiled by official bodies;
 - the maximum utilisation of information available to official bodies for statistical purposes;
 - the development of standards for statistics and ensuring that official bodies comply with them;
 - the provision of advice and assistance to official bodies on the production and use of statistics; and
 - liaison with international organisations on statistical issues.

The national statistics agency for New Zealand is **Stats NZ** and its Chief Executive is the Government Statistician. Stats NZ leads the official statistics system which they describe as the whole-of-government system that underpins the production of official statistics. They collect data and produce statistics related to the economy, population and society of New Zealand and their stated aim is to tell the stories of New Zealand through statistics that are relevant, accessible, and trustworthy. Stats NZ takes a Census every 5 years.

Annex C: The Lievesley Review recommendations that relate to public statistics

The Lievesley Review [report](#) contains 19 recommendations. The following recommendations appear particularly pertinent to our concept of more public statistics:

Recommendation 1: Triennial Statistical Assembly, to determine the UK's needs for statistics through a wide consultative process, with UKSA then producing a proposal for the statistical priorities for the next three years.

- *Fits closely with our suggestion of an independent UK statistics council or similar body, to regularly assess the needs for public statistics and to encourage new sources of data, statistics, and analysis, especially when tied with a statistical work programme for UK public statistics*
- *However, the recommendation is framed in terms of the existing official statistics system, rather than the wider perspective we take*
- *Moreover, we challenge the Government's response that "external user engagement will always be balanced against the statistical needs of the Government – particularly economic – which take precedence". This is not our interpretation of the Fundamental Principles or how we envisage public statistics will work, although we acknowledge that the Government has made clear its priority and that the Statistical Assembly would be an open forum for priorities to be set out, challenged, and ideally resolved*
- *One way forward may be to explore the feasibility of an agreed set of core statistics essential for government and non-government use.*

Recommendation 3: Clarify the practical operation of UKSA, including that OSR reports directly to UKSA and the OSR Director General is expected to report separately to PACAC

- *This should be explored with a view to the major role we would expect OSR to play in public statistics (see also Recommendation 12).*

Recommendation 4: The limited approach to Pre-Release Access to ONS statistics (which is in line with the Code) to be adopted by other departments and the devolved governments

- *We are concerned that the Government disagrees with this. We think it is fundamental in building trust in statistics through ensuring that there is no privileged early access to truly public statistics.*

Recommendation 5: More UK wide data

- *Comparable data between the four nations of the UK, and the difficulty in compiling some statistics for the whole of the UK, are regularly noted as missing or inadequate for answering public questions about life across the UK or how we compare to other countries. Further efforts to harmonise statistics are needed. Where there are significant structural differences in the systems from which statistics are drawn, these should be clearly documented and the limitations in comparing between UK nations should be made clear.*

Recommendation 6: Action to resolve the systemic, often cultural, barriers to data sharing between departments and prioritise data sharing for statistics and research purpose

- *Data sharing within government and more widely is the foundation on which public statistics should be built.*

Recommendation 7: ONS to ensure that the purpose, scope and requirements of the Integrated Data Service (IDS) are clearly communicated and that the needs and concerns of departmental data owners are sufficiently understood

- *The IDS will be invaluable in providing secure access to data for researchers inside and outside of government and, like existing facilities such as the Secure Research Service, will support more public statistics. The RSS is already preparing to contribute to raising awareness of IDS and how it could be used.*

Recommendation 9: Actions within ONS to improve external communications

- *In order to support public statistics these actions should build on, and be integral to, the [GSS theme-based strategy for user engagement](#).*

Recommendation 12: Reinstate in the [Code of Practice](#) the reference to consulting users before making changes that affect statistics or publications

- *We agree this would demonstrate commitment to user engagement and remind producers of its importance, but will need to be accompanied with guidance, training and sharing of exemplars, to reduce the gap between procedure and practice*
- *There is also the need to extend the scope and application of the Code to provide relevant guidance where necessary on the appropriate use of non-official data sources, and encouraging further compliance with the Code on a voluntary basis by non-official producers of data and statistics.*

Recommendation 15: Engaging with Parliamentarians and Select Committees of both Houses and devolved administrations further

- *This recognises that debate in the public sphere can both influence and be influenced by how politicians and their advisors view and use statistics. The RSS will continue to assist with this engagement.*

Recommendation 19: Accelerate UKSA partnership building outside of government, particularly with universities and think tanks.

- *We would seem beneficial in extending the provision of public statistics through partnerships.*

From past to present...

The image of the sheaf of wheat first appeared in our original seal. Being the end product of the harvesting and bundling of wheat, it was a pictorial way of expressing the gathering and analysis of data: the foundations of statistical work.

It also implied that statistical practice comprises more than the collection of data: it consists of active interpretation and application as well (threshed for others, if the rural analogy is sustained). Rigorous data gathering is still at the heart of modern statistics, but as statisticians we also interpret, explain and present the data we collect.

