



DATA | EVIDENCE | DECISIONS

Public statistics

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

Summary version

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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Introduction

We strongly support the United Nations principles for an official statistics system 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.

The [UN Principles of Official Statistics](#) set out a vision for official statistics. They should provide impartial, reliable information for the public good. But 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.

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).

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 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.

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

These issues are difficult to overcome. However, especially in the context of an aim to build a more numerically confident society able to critically examine statistics, there is a strong case for more data sharing.

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).*

Public statistics

The RSS has developed 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 Data¹.
- 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

¹ Eg on [rental statistics](#) and on [land options](#)

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 the concept of statistical work programmes in the full report 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. 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 Practice², improved and more extensive coaching in user engagement, and recognition of the value of effective user engagement in staff appraisal.

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.*

² 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

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 larger³); 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.

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 its 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.

³ ONS Business Planning Update, paper NSEUAC(24)01, 7 March 2024

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).

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:

- 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.

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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.

