

POST-ELECTION BRIEFING: BETTER DATA FOR INFORMED, TRANSPARENT DECISION- MAKING

RSS Manifesto ask

The new government to direct government departments to improve data sharing and report regularly on their progress and, within the first 100 days, to set out plans to support the UK's data infrastructure.

Summary

Government holds a great deal of information about its citizens that could be used to improve service delivery, better inform decision-making and make efficiency savings. However, there are a wide range of cultural and technical challenges that are currently preventing effective data sharing. Addressing these barriers requires direction from the centre of government to help drive a change of culture in departments. It is also important to ensure that the UK's data and statistical infrastructure is properly supported so that it can make full use of improved access to data and new technologies.

What's the problem?

Government departments and the wider public sector hold a great deal of data about individuals and the state of the nation. To unlock the full potential of this data, it is important that there is an effective system of data sharing among different parts of the public sector. Doing so can:

- Improve service delivery by enabling an improved understanding of citizen's needs and preferences.
- Better inform decision-making by combining data from different sources – enabling analysts to provide deeper insights on issues that are often complex and multifaceted.
- Improve efficiency and reduce costs by reducing duplication of datasets in different parts of the public sector.

However, government departments are currently not effective in sharing data with each other. The challenges in this area have recently been set out clearly in the [Lievesley Review of the UK Statistics Authority](#). Those barriers are:



- “Lack of clarity, or of consistency of interpretation, amongst departments as to what data sharing legislation permits, and whether their responsibility to protect privacy would be violated.
- Fragmented and technically incompatible systems.
- A lack of understanding as to the benefits or incentives for departments to share their data, with concerns amongst staff in departments that they are carrying the risks but see little benefit.
- Resource constraints, with departments reluctant to prioritise preparing data for research purposes over their core functions.
- Cultural and organisational reasons, including a hesitancy to make administrative data available externally in case, for example, issues are identified regarding the quality of the data.” (p40)

Tackling these problems requires greater ownership of the problem at the centre of government.

There is also a challenge around the UK’s statistical and data infrastructure. The UK has one of the world’s most respected statistical systems, but – given the potential of data, especially given the advent of AI, to improve decision-making – there is a risk that we can ask too much of the system without properly supporting it. The Cabinet Office’s initial response to the Lievesley Review was encouraging in supporting many of the recommendations – but much of that support was just in principle, without any commitment to support the work with additional resources. We cannot ask the statistical system to do more, without looking at questions of resource and infrastructure.

How to fix it

Addressing the challenges around data sharing requires proper grip from the centre of government. It is important that, as soon as possible, the centre of government gives a clear direction to departments to improve data sharing. Regular and transparent reporting on progress is important to build and maintain momentum. The RSS has also suggested that government departments might consider appointing data sharing officers (in the same way that they appoint data protection officers) to drive some of the cultural shift required.

We would also like to see funded plans set out to support the UK’s statistical and data infrastructure – this is important to ensure that UKSA and the wider system is properly supported to take advantage of improved data-sharing and new technologies.

RSS manifesto ask

All ministers to undertake statistical training and party leaders to commit to updating the ministerial code to ensure that ministers abide by the Code of Practice for Statistics – including on pre-release access to statistics.

Summary

The RSS believes that a culture of statistical thinking within government is crucial to effective government – part of this means ministers need to be comfortable in understanding statistical concepts, to be able to interpret statistical evidence, to understand what questions to ask of analyses and to know how to handle and communicate data ethically. The RSS has offered to provide training to assist in this. Handling data ethically means understanding and adhering to the Code of Practice for Statistics – we urge ministers to treat adherence to the statistical code of practice as a key ministerial responsibility. This would involve ending the practice of pre-release access to statistics.

What's the problem?

Ministers and secretaries of state routinely receive advice based on statistics and data and it is important that they are well-positioned to interpret and use that evidence. This means both understanding how to interpret data-based evidence (and what questions to ask of it) as well as how to handle the data in an ethical manner – in line with the Code of Practice for Statistics.

Interpreting data-based evidence – and knowing what questions to ask of it – is a key skill for ministers. The pandemic showed how important it can be for ministers to be able to interpret evidence and make sound evidence-based decisions and communicate the data underlying decisions in an effective manner. This is important even outside a pandemic – as our series of [Statistics Under Pressure case studies](#) show, there are a wide range of scenarios in which ministers and their teams may be presented with data and they need to be comfortable with concepts such as uncertainty and know how to question data to ensure that it is used properly.

As well as understanding how to interpret and question statistical evidence, decision-makers should also know how to handle and communicate data ethically – by ensuring that they and their departments abide by the Code of Practice for Statistics.

One way in which government departments currently fail to act in line with the Code of Practice is through continuing the practice of pre-release access to statistics – allowing ministers and civil servants (other than those involved in their production) to access statistics before the wider public. We believe that this has a harmful impact on our political system for two reasons. First, it means that when the public see a department’s statistical release it comes with a pre-prepared press line. The public is sensitive to the potential spinning of information and that risks mistrust in the statistics themselves. Second, it perpetuates the impression that ministers control data and its release. The Office for National Statistics does not allow pre-release access to statistics, and it is noteworthy that there is a high level of public confidence in that organisation.

The Code of Practice for Statistics states that “Access to statistics before their public release should be limited to those involved in the production of the statistics and the preparation of the release, and for quality assurance and operational purposes”. The Ministerial Code currently states that Ministers should “be mindful” of the statistical Code of Practice – which, on our reading, would suggest that ministers should stop pre-release access in their departments.

This points to a wider problem, which is that the requirement in the Ministerial Code that ministers be mindful of the Code of Practice for Statistics has not been effective in preventing ministers acting in opposition to it. Examples of this include:

- Referencing statistics or data in Parliament that is not available in the public sphere and – in some cases – subsequently refusing to publish the information on which the claims were based.
- Repeating misleading statistical claims, even after being cautioned by the UK Statistics Authority that they risked undermining public trust.

It is important that ministers demonstrate stronger leadership on these matters to promote greater public confidence in official statistics.

How to fix it

The [RSS has offered to provide training to any secretaries of state or ministers that would like it](#). We have senior fellows prepared to deliver training to groups of politicians (and their political advisors). This might cover, eg, a brief introduction to the types of evidence ministers might receive as well as the types of questions that they should ask of this evidence, what types of analysis they might ask for

and how to handle data in an ethical manner. This is intended to be supportive and delivered with interested ministers in private, solely with the aim of supporting them in making evidence-informed decisions.

In terms of the Ministerial Code, we urge the Prime Minister to update this to require ministers to treat statistics and data appropriately by adhering to the Code of Practice of Statistics – going beyond mere mindfulness of it. Regardless of whether the Prime Minister updates the Ministerial Code in this way, we urge all ministers to take mindfulness of the statistical code of practice seriously and to do their utmost to adhere to it. This would include ending the practice of pre-release statistics in their departments.

RSS manifesto ask

The use of more granular inflation measures in decision-making – using the new Household Costs Indices when focusing on the impact of rising costs on different household types.

Summary

The Household Costs Indices (HCIs) are new measures of inflation which more accurately reflect the impact of increasing costs on different types of households. HCIs started being published quarterly in December 2023 and have not yet cut through to decision-makers. We call on the government to emphasise that they see HCIs as important for their policy needs and on parliamentarians to refer to HCIs when raising issues around inflation in parliament.

What's the problem?

In 2020, the government decided to align the Retail Prices Index (RPI) with the Consumer Prices Index (including housing costs – CPIH). The [RSS opposed this move](#) because the RPI and CPIH have different purposes: CPIH is a macroeconomic indicator that is good for gauging the general performance of the economy, while RPI is intended to reflect changes in the cost of living. We argued that using a macroeconomic indicator to reflect how prices are changing risks giving people a misleading impression of how prices are changing and undermining confidence in statistics.

Instead, at our urging, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) developed an alternative measure of inflation, designed to measure the impact of inflation as it is experienced by the typical household – the [Household Costs Indices](#) (HCIs). This has been published quarterly since December 2023.

During the cost-of-living crisis, we have been relying on the macroeconomic CPI and CPIH to give us a measure of inflation. This is problematic because:

- They are weighted by pounds spent – meaning that high-income households' spend counts for more and what is happening to lower-income households is underrepresented in the headline figure.
- They exclude interest costs (including mortgage costs) and student loan repayments – this makes sense for a macroeconomic measure (the Bank of England uses it to set interest rates and it would be problematic if interest rates contributed to the figure), but they are a big cost for households. They should be included in calculations if we are seeking to understand the impact of inflation on households.
- They are not sufficiently fine grained to account for the fact that basic products in a category may have a different inflation rate to luxury products.

This means that throughout the cost-of-living crisis, we have not had an adequate measure of the impact of inflation on households. We have been working with Citizen's Advice and the Financial Fairness Trust and we believe that CPI has significantly understated the impact of inflation on households over the past few years.

Part of the problem has been solved by the regular publication of HCIs. But there is limited use in having an improved measure of the impact of inflation on households if it is not used in decision-making.

While it is not being used in decision-making (and if government continues to signal that the measure is not a priority for them), the ONS will not further develop HCIs – leaving them as an experimental statistical release rather than progressing them to the gold standard accredited official statistic status. While the measure remains only available in experimental releases, decision-makers are less likely to use them.

This vicious circle limits the information available about the cost of living, especially for lower-income households. It is important that policy makers have a full picture of how different types of households are affected, so that decisions can be made with the best available information.

How to fix it

This is best addressed by policy-makers starting to use HCIs. We call on the government to:

1. Emphasise to the National Statistician that HCIs are important for policy needs and that the government is prepared to consider its competing priorities for statistics, noting that an accelerated development timetable for HCIs would currently have to be considered within an ONS 2024/25 budget that is smaller in nominal terms than 2023/24.

2. Commission the ONS to estimate what impact product choice by households would have on the HCIs and examine ways to incorporate such factors. The ONS has commissioned research and completed early experimental work on this, as has the Financial Fairness Trust (in partnership with Loughborough University).

Parliamentarians also have an important role to play – they can help by referring to HCIs in parliamentary questions and speeches and highlighting them as a way to better understand the cost of living for households.

RSS manifesto ask

The assessment of policy proposals to extend beyond their impact on economic growth to their impact on societal wellbeing, inclusiveness and sustainability.

Summary

Economic growth – measured by GDP (gross domestic product) – is a key consideration when the government assesses the impact of potential policy interventions. It is not, though, the sole consideration that should (or in fact does) drive policy decisions. For all governments wider considerations play into their decisions. We encourage the government to follow the example of New Zealand in drawing upon the [UK's wellbeing measures](#) to set out additional measures against which to assess policy and to formally consider the impact of policy proposals in these areas.

What's the problem?

Economic growth is, understandably, a focus of the new government with early policy decisions – especially around planning – being made with an eye towards their impact on GDP (gross domestic product, the primary measure of economic activity). GDP is an important and enduring measure: it is convenient (in simultaneously measuring production output, consumption expenditure and income), simple (in providing a headline figure) and is available for all countries (allowing comparison). Growing GDP is considered desirable based on the idea that more economic activity, generally, means a better life.

This does not mean that it is the only important measure, or that increasing GDP should be the only impact that we seek to measure when making policy decisions. Problems with pursuing an increase in GDP without wider considerations include:

- Social costs of pollution and similar outputs associated with economic activities are incompletely accounted for.

- The depletion or loss of assets such as natural resources boosts GDP in the short term (because they are used in economic activities) but long-term opportunity costs are not weighed against that.
- There is no distributional element to the measure – an increase in economic activity among the richest in society, with a decrease among the poorest, can still show in the headline as increasing GDP.

So, while in general terms increasing GDP is likely to be beneficial, it is at least possible for a government to make policy decisions that increase GDP but that are also unsustainable and unlikely to increase society's general wellbeing. It is important that a range of measures are used when evaluating policy so that any decisions that involve trade-offs can be made deliberately.

No government is guided in its decision-making solely by considerations around GDP. Indeed the Treasury [Green Book](#) requires an appraisal of the impact of proposals on the welfare and wellbeing of the public. But there are few details on how this should be conducted. Our concern is that when economic policies are assessed for their potential impact, it is only the impact on GDP that is quantified and measured. Other factors certainly play into decision-making, but not in the open and transparent way that is conducive to achieving government's desired outcomes.

How to fix it

We propose adopting a system like New Zealand's [Living Standards Framework](#). The New Zealand Treasury uses the framework to help it allocate fiscal budgets in a manner that is consistent with their government's objectives around societal and economic progress. The government clearly sets out the measures that are important to it, in addition to GDP, and evaluates fiscal policy against its impact on a range of measures. The Welsh Government, similarly, has set out explicit [wellbeing goals](#).

The UK has, since 2010, been developing a suite of additional measures to capture national wellbeing. These have been selected through consultation to reflect what matters to people. They are published by the ONS as a [UK Measures of National Well-being Dashboard](#). This is a useful resource for tracking a range of measures which help give a picture of the overall state of the country. However, we do not get the sense that policy (especially fiscal policy) is deliberately designed with a view towards its impact on these measures.

We would like to see some of these measures used more intentionally to inform the policy-making process. This means government publicly setting out which measures it takes to be important and for the Treasury assessments of policy proposals to consider their impact on those measures in addition to projected impact on GDP.

We also note that the international [System of National Accounts](#) are currently being updated. The UK is expected to adopt the new version, which will be launched in 2025 and which may include a different headline measure to GDP.

RSS manifesto ask

Increased availability of government dashboards – using data for the public good to keep the public better informed about the functioning of the state.

Summary

During the pandemic the UK developed world-leading expertise in communication of data through dashboards – presenting data clearly and helpfully while ensuring that the underlying data was readily available. This method of presenting data has great potential to make information about the impact of government decisions available to a greater percentage of the population and build public trust in both statistics and government. We would like to see dashboards used more regularly to communicate on the most important issues facing the state – we suggest that the government's five missions might be suitable candidates for areas to develop dashboards in.

What's the problem?

During the pandemic, government dashboards proved to be a very effective way to communicate information with the public. Government statisticians worked incredibly hard to ensure the regular release of data and, after a slow start, the UK justifiably came to be seen as a world leader in the presentation of data. The UK's dashboards in particular were the only example in the world that we know of which both presented data clearly and helpfully while also making the underlying data reliably available.

Our sense is that the level of transparency that was eventually reached did not come naturally to government. However, it had huge benefits: it enabled every citizen to engage with the data at a reasonable level while also providing the tools for anybody who was interested and able to dig deeper and uncover interesting features of the data. One example of this was reported in the RSS's covid evidence sessions (pp24-5): from September-October 2021, an Immensa lab in Wolverhampton was sent around 43,000 false negative results and this was identified on September 10th by an individual looking at government data (far before it was officially recognised).

Now that the pandemic has passed, there is less emphasis on this type of data sharing than there might be. There are dashboards still being published, but none of them are given much prominence as a communication tool. If this is addressed there is great potential to inform the public, benefit from external insight and build public trust.

How to fix it

We would like to see the government identify some key areas of high public interest, where the approach of using dashboards to communicate data would be beneficial. An example might be around climate change and progress towards net zero. We would also note that the new government is intending to be led by its five missions: growth, the NHS, clean energy, safer streets and opportunity. These might be good candidates for areas where dashboards are considered – to bring together the available information for the public good and to enable the public to clearly assess progress.

In some areas, eg health and social care statistics, the government has stated an aim to publish a higher percentage of their outputs in dashboard format. We welcome that move. We urge government in using dashboards to engage with users throughout the process – this will help establish clarity over use and purpose, which is essential to developing successful dashboards.

Increased effort into developing dashboards should not come at the expense of the production of other data sets for which there is a demand from users.