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By email

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Dear Secretary of State,

We were in touch last month following your appointment to outline some of our relevant work at the Royal Statistical Society (RSS), setting out our priorities for how data should be used in government, and to offer our support.

Statistical methods are at the heart of AI, and the RSS and our members are actively involved across a range of areas. We have recently launched an AI Task Force to lead our work in this area, and we also have a Data Science and AI section who represent over 1,000 data and AI practitioners who have a valuable insight into the discipline.

With this in mind, we are sharing with you our briefings on the need for investment in open-source development, a dedicated unit for developing AI evaluation methodologies, and a public register of cases where an AI tool is used in the public sector.

We welcome the new Action Plan to identify how AI can deliver better outcomes and drive economic growth. However, big tech companies based outside of the UK continue to pose a real challenge. We appreciate that the government's finances are challenging, but – as detailed in our briefing on open source – a relatively modest investment would allow us to better compete internationally and allow more knowledge sharing and training so public trust can be improved.

Additionally, to build public confidence in AI systems, we need robust evaluation methodologies to keep pace with the rapidly evolving technology. The UK's statistical community has a proven track record in establishing evaluation leadership in the context of health. We should build on this achievement by investing in a unit of statisticians and data scientists within the AI Safety Institute to develop new evaluation methodologies for AI.

We must also be mindful that AI is increasingly impacting people's lives. A publicly available register that sets out where complex algorithms and AI tools are being used will help improve transparency and avoid such situations as we saw with the Ofqual algorithm fiasco. As detailed in our briefing, in cases where citizens are directly affected by technology, risk assessments should be conducted, setting out the decisions that have been made and the limitations of the model.

In addition to our work on AI, we would also like to emphasise the importance of data infrastructure and share our briefing on data sharing and infrastructure. We are especially interested in Labour's plans for a National Data Library in this context – this could be an excellent way to bring together a range of data in one place. Given the issues we outline in our briefing around data sharing, there are likely to be challenges in getting this Library to work well. The RSS routinely engages with the UK Statistics Authority and has expertise in the issues that are likely to arise, and we would like to offer our advice and support in progressing your plans.

We hope you find the briefings helpful. Please let us know if you would like further information or if a member of your team would like to meet to discuss these issues and how we and our members might engage with you.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Sarah Cumbers
Chief Executive Officer

Dr. Andrew Garrett
President