

UK Official Statistics – a New Partnership Between Producers and Users

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Introduction

These are busy and significant times for the United Kingdom’s official statistics system. Since the start of 2025, we have seen:

- the inaugural UK Statistics Assembly, convened to review the priorities for data and statistics, with the National Statistician’s Expert User Advisory Committee (NSEUAC) taking a central role in preparing the Assembly and [reporting](#) on its outcomes;
- the welcome decisions to confirm delivery of full population [censuses](#) across the nations of the UK in 2031;
- publication of the [Devereux Review](#), setting out a range of operational and cultural recommendations focused on the Office for National Statistics, and the response from the UK Government signalling the prospect of some future changes to the 2007 Statistics and Registration Services Act that is currently the foundation of the official statistics system in this country.

Taking stock of recent events, the United Kingdom Statistics Authority has now issued a new statement of “[Strategic Priorities for the UK Statistical System](#)”.

The Royal Statistical Society has welcomed this new statement, recognising the increased transparency it provides and acknowledging some of the important changes in emphasis that it signals. Importantly, the first commitment in the new statement is to

“Openness: In engaging with users of statistics, with a willingness to listen, respond and collaborate”.

This is hugely welcome and reflects the belief of the Royal Statistical Society that a new partnership between producers and users needs to be at the heart of the future official statistics system in the UK, one that is effective, valued, and resilient. Our view remains that a better partnership with users is not a competing priority alongside the other important recommendations for producers from the Devereux Review: it is an essential element in their successful implementation.



In that context, the central purpose of this position paper is to set out some specific proposals for the ways in which this new partnership with users can be successfully established.

We hope that this contribution is valuable to, and triggers further ideas from, official statistics producers, users and stakeholders, all of whom have a shared interest in the maintenance and development of an official statistics system in the United Kingdom that continues to serve the public good.

The UK's Official Statistics System

In advance of exploring new ideas, it feels necessary to ground the discussion with some basic facts about the UK's current official statistics system.

The current system reflects the 2007 Statistics and Registration Services Act, which created the legal and organisational structures that we have today and which formalised the foundational purpose of “*statistics serving the public good*”. The Act enshrines the principle that UK official statistics are there not just to serve the government of the day but also the wider public. It is encouraging that the current UK government, [in a response to a report from the Public Affairs and Constitutional Affairs Committee \(PACAC\)](#), has recommitted to this principle.

The system that seeks to produce official statistics in the UK is large and complex – there are around 100 producing organisations (including the Office for National Statistics – ONS – and most government departments), combining to create a portfolio of around 2,000 official statistics. There is also a regulator, the Office for Statistics Regulation, which maintains the Code of Practice for Statistics and grants accreditation to statistical products that satisfy the Code. The strategic direction for the system comes from the UK Statistics Authority, which reports to the UK Parliament, through PACAC, and to the devolved governments and administrations.

This system serves the public good through users – whether they come from government (at all levels), businesses, civil society or from the general public.

The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) and Public Statistics



The RSS has long been a strong supporter of, and critical friend to, the UK's official statistics system. Through a number of initiatives, the RSS has worked to raise the profile, and to demonstrate the value, of UK official statistics as an indispensable element within the information system of our democratic society. In this work, the RSS has always sought to amplify the voice of users, seeing improved and sustained user engagement as an essential element of a successful official statistics system – one that is based on sound statistical methodology and is widely trusted and valued.

The landscape that official statistics operates within is not static – and the RSS has recognised some significant developments. We have seen the astonishing explosion in the amount of data available and in the range of tools now available to manipulate and often to create data, analysis, and information. These changes have generated real challenges, not least for producers in being able to support users in understanding the purposes of different statistics, the production choices, the uncertainties inherent in the data, and therefore the uses for which the statistics are fit, or are not fit. (While assessments of official statistics by the Office for Statistics Regulation [OSR] cover these points, simply knowing the OSR designation of a set of statistics is not necessarily all that is needed).

We have also seen, in part as a result of the technological developments, a more complex user base (and potential user base) – not all of whom may be aware that they are accessing statistics. All of this presents challenges for producing and disseminating statistics.

Recently, as this wider landscape has continued to evolve, the RSS has developed a wider vision for the ways in which statistics can contribute to society – under the banner of [public statistics](#). One of the key pillars of this initiative is the belief that there needs to be greater responsiveness of official statistics to the questions that society is asking. The official statistics system should be at the heart of public statistics, gathering the questions and identifying appropriate official and other data sources to help answer them.

User Engagement – Some Recent History

The 2024 independent review of the UK Statistics Authority led by Professor Denise Lievesley picked up on the themes in public statistics and reflected on the current state of the relationship between producers and users, noting that, while the UK has *“a rich and vibrant civil society of statisticians and statistics users”*, many users felt *“that there is too little transparency in the way the statistical agenda is set, and are unclear how they might get their needs to be recognised”*.

The Lievesley Review made many recommendations, the first of which was for the establishment of a regular UK Statistics Assembly to assist in determining the UK's need for



statistics. The inaugural Assembly was held in January 2025, attended by over 500 producers, users, and other stakeholders. The discussions on the day reflected a breadth of ambition for the value that official statistics can deliver. Sub-sessions compiled a broad range of proposals for enhancements to the current portfolio of outputs produced by the UK's official statistics system.

In addition to this exploration of specific needs, the event provided an opportunity for further debate on the way that the UK's official statistics system operates, specifically how producers and users work together and respond to each other. Many users (in particular those beyond central government) provided feedback that they did not feel well engaged, or well listened to, by the organisations producing official statistics. A hope expressed in many discussions on the day was that, when the next Assembly convenes, many users would be able to report a genuine step change in their experience.

Following the event, Professor David Hand produced a comprehensive, independent [report](#) and a set of recommendations. The first high-level priority was to “*Re-invigorate sustained and effective user engagement*”.

The RSS has been pleased to engage with UKSA and ONS in the exploring the detail of how this re-invigoration can take place. Hence it is encouraging to see the headline commitments to improved user engagement in the new UKSA statement of strategic priorities – and the commitment that this is now the first of the priorities of the Acting National Statistician.

The purpose of this paper is to build on these commitments and on the various ideas discussed over the last year in offering some specific proposals.

Lessons from Elsewhere (and from the Past)

We are not starting from scratch in designing and implementing better user engagement. There is [international guidance](#) curated by experienced official statisticians and reflected in some other national official statistics systems that it would good to learn more from. And there are many great examples of effective user engagement on specific UK official statistics products, recognised for example in awards, providing islands of good practice to share more widely.

It is also not too late to learn from the many previous UK reviews, especially those by PACAC. For example, the conclusions in the 2019 PACAC report on the [Governance of Official Statistics](#) open with the words: “*We agree with the evidence we received that those producing official statistics do not understand all of today's users and potential users of*



statistics and how statistics are used. It is surprising that UKSA and the GSS more generally seem not to have carried out research into users such as that produced by the Statistics Commission [forerunner to UKSA] in 2007 or actively followed up the main conclusions of that report”.

One recommendation in the 2019 PACAC report was actioned with the establishment in 2021 of the [GSS user engagement strategy for statistics](#), dedicated to “ensuring official statistics meet society’s needs”. However, PACAC had also recommended that “UKSA should lead cross-government research to build an evidence base of how statistics are used in practice, taking into account the full breadth of stakeholders (not just users) and to establish where data gaps persist. We also recommend that UKSA should conduct sector by sector reviews, to understand what stakeholders need or want, and to make statistics more relevant”. No such research or sector reviews appear to have been undertaken.

So, as with other aspects of the UK official statistics system, there is the opportunity for a reset on user engagement.

Some Starting Assumptions to Frame the New Partnership in the UK

The aim of this article is to build on the report of the Assembly in offering some suggestions about what that more sustained and effective user engagement might look like, and more broadly about how the future partnership between the producers and users across the UK’s official statistics system might function. It feels helpful to start with some grounding assumptions. The re-invigorated approach to user engagement needs to:

- work with the diversity and scale of the UK official statistics system, main-streaming user engagement within every producer team, encouraging them to get to know their users and prospective users, while recognising that users may have multiple needs best served through engagement that is more joined-up across producers;
- reflect the geography / governmental structures of the UK, notably the devolution settlement, while recognising there are some needs for comparable, UK-wide statistics;
- be agile and focused on learning and evolving (recognising the current pace of change in the world of data and statistics);
- reflect the ambitions and values of the UK official statistics system;
- have a broad scope – recognising that engagement with users (and wider stakeholders) is not just essential for questions about production (what to produce and how) but also for choices about communication, governance, and regulation.



Some Specific Proposals

1) A shared story and tangible actions

We are conscious that commitments to improved user engagement have been made previously - for example the current [User Engagement Strategy](#) for the overall UK official statistics system, published in 2021, stated that:

“A step change in our approach to engaging with users is essential and urgent if we are to meet the longer-term goal of maintaining a trustworthy, high quality and valued statistical system in the UK.”

The feedback collated from by the Lievesley Review and at the 2025 UK Statistics Assembly indicated that this step change has not yet been perceived by many users – and the new statement of strategic priorities clearly recognises that sufficient progress has not yet been made

One element of improved progress is for us all to have a clearer articulation of why improved user engagement is so important. This is not an administrative requirement, it needs to be understood as an essential investment. A real partnership between producers and users provides:

- A shared, detailed and dynamic understanding of the ways in which official statistics are being used and hence of the value that they are generating - this in turn allows producers to better evolve products and services;
- A more diverse and robust set of feedback loops about quality – giving essential ideas and challenges to producers as they navigate the ongoing choices to be made about data and about methodology
- A platform for greater trust in specific official statistics and in the portfolio and the system as a whole.

Building on that shared story, we need the commitment to improved user engagement to be reflected in the guidelines that steer day to day choices. Consequently, we are pleased to note the much stronger commitment in the latest version of the [UK Code of Practice for Statistics](#) that:

“Producers must put users at the centre of decision making about the statistics, listening to and acting on feedback, and be transparent about statistical planning.”



We look forward to that improvement being reflected in the future programme of formal assessments of official statistics.

Finally, we need the above ambitions to be reflected in the ways that producers understand their roles and in their performance objectives. Hence, at minimum, each production team should:

- have a clearly documented understanding of who their key users are;
- be able to articulate how their official statistics are used and the public good that results;
- maintain an ongoing open dialogue with users, providing regular opportunities for input and regular updates on changes and on decisions made about outputs, data and methodology;
- have an assessment of potential new user groups with an active plan to engage them.

These basic requirements can then be complemented by further cross-system work, including the more substantive research into users and user needs that PACAC called for in 2019.

2) An accessible engagement infrastructure

Not least for potential users coming fresh to the world of official statistics, there does need to be some sort of map, a navigable framework that, although flexible, helps guide people to places where their needs might be met or at least discussed.

That map probably has the [NSEUAC](#) at the head of it along with an agreed set of forums and all ranging over the full statistical system. The forums would be the first point of call for those interested in specific topics – for example, Health and Social Care, Population and Migration, Prices and Inflation. (These and other topics already feature as ‘themes’ in the GSS user engagement strategy and as ‘groups’ on [StatsUserNetwork](#), but the option for new or more specific topics is likely to be helpful in delivering dynamic and responsive public-facing engagement).

More needs to be done to build the profile of the existing groups and to make it easier for users to find them. Currently information on NSEUAC and on the other, topic-based advisory committees can only be found on the UKSA website. At minimum, signposts to relevant groups and forums should be made available as a matter of course as part of all new official statistics releases. More broadly, the ONS website should provide a more comprehensive set of links to information on the user engagement system as a whole.



3) A transparent portfolio (and waiting list)

It is commonplace in many other countries for there to be a regularly published work programme for the official statistics system setting out which official statistics are to be produced (and by whom and when). Although the UK system is, in international terms, relatively complex (with less than half of the outputs produced by the national statistical office), this is achievable.

Such a programme, when published, would give a factual foundation for ongoing engagement. It would also go some way to addressing the legal requirement set out in legislation for the UK Statistics Authority to be concerned with the comprehensiveness of UK official statistics. Importantly, the new transparency about the programme should go alongside a new transparency about the range of known but unmet asks against each series of official statistics – including unmet recommendations made by parliamentary committees or arising from major consultations. Transparency about recognised unmet user needs would address a frequently flagged user frustration about having to restate requirements.

This is not about adding a significant increase in bureaucracy but rather about capturing and using information in an efficient and transparent way. In a world where external organisations can maintain a live public register of many millions of products and services, it seems manageable for the UK official statistics system to be able to maintain a register of the official statistics that it is, or will be, producing.

Once we have that basic overview of the UK official statistics portfolio, this would then create the platform for more detailed topic-specific assessments of areas within the wider portfolio, which could then link into more systematic review processes (see below).

4) A dynamic and integrated set of feedback loops

In establishing the UK Statistics Assembly, we have, in essence, added a further feedback mechanism to what is already a rich, if complex, mix of user groups, theme groups, user surveys, stakeholder surveys, intermittent reviews. Each of these mechanisms will have a place in a dynamic conversation between producers and users – held either at the portfolio level or at the more specific topic level. But how these loops can work effectively (and whether or not some rationalisation is needed) deserves discussion as part of the refresh of the GSS user engagement strategy.

In the independent report of the 2025 Assembly, Professor Hand makes a number of insightful recommendations to inform the organisation of future assemblies. This includes a suggestion that some form of Assembly takes place every two years. This feels helpful –



with the wider thought that, at the national portfolio level, and at the thematic level, there ought to be a way in which a combination of producers and users maintain a high-level plan for the frequency of formal events and mechanisms. In some instances, frequencies might be relaxed and in other instances, more frequent use of different mechanisms may be needed.

At the highest level, to maintain the overall profile and transparency of this work, it feels as if the annual statement by the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority (as recommended in the Lievesley Review) could be complemented and informed by an annual assessment (of the overall match of the UK official statistics portfolio to user need) by the NSEUAC. This annual assessment would build on the current NSEUAC work to gather external perspectives on the UK official statistics system. This could be deepened by a planned sequence of deeper analyses of each area of the main topic areas assessing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats and offering specific recommendations for the prioritisation of unmet needs.

One set of feedback loops that is currently under-developed is Theme Groups. Although these are listed on an [ONS webpage on user-engagement](#), it appears that at least some of them are primarily focussed on cross-GSS collaboration rather than allowing “*all users of government data and statistics to interact with the Government Statistical Service (GSS) by their area of interest and collaborate with producers of official statistics to develop work programmes, etc.*” As mentioned earlier, ONS’s recently-launched user/producer networking website [StatsUserNetwork](#) reflects the theme group structure, providing one ready-made mechanism for engaging.

One of the recommendations from the 2025 UK Statistics Assembly is for greater participation in future events from under-represented groups, such as business, local government, and Third Sector organisations. For local government, existing networks such as for population statistics could be extended and developed. Business and Third Sector users and potential users are likely to be harder to reach, though trade associations, federations, umbrella bodies, and professional bodies are good places to start. The RSS’s Forum of Statistics User Groups (FoSUG) has tried to increase involvement with all these sectors and should continue to do so, for example with joint approaches from FoSUG and relevant statistics producers.

5) An increased focus on citizens

One final suggestion. All of the above processes will tend to engage those within or aware of the system and, largely, organisational and institutional users of official statistics. Yet there remains the agreed intent (and legal requirement) that the UK’s official statistics system should meet the needs of the public. It feels as if there could be space for a



periodic exercise (along the lines of a Citizens Assembly) to more directly capture a view about the statistics that members of the wider public feel would be of value to them.

The [recent work by the Office of Statistics Regulation](#) in engaging with members of the public about the statistics that they could use to support their own decision making gives us some confidence that a well-designed process could tap into potential interest and engagement, to supplement the existing processes. One aim should be to help identify different segments of citizens, their level of interest, and how they want to be communicated with.

The need for better engagement with citizens has been recognised in the past by the RSS and its partners – in seeking to grow skills and confidence with numbers. There is more to do in this space and those within the wider UK official statistics system have a key role to play in building public awareness. Access to clear information about the statistics in question is vital. One key ambition would be citizens (and users more broadly) are able to answer the question “Who told you that?”, as Professor Hand discussed in an article in *Significance*, August 2018.

Two Questions to Return to

As already noted, the wider information landscape that official statistics operates within is complex and changing at pace. In particular, rapid technological developments bring new opportunities but also new challenges and questions.

There are two current cross-cutting questions that we believe that the United Kingdom Statistics Authority and the National Statistician will need to address as they progress their new agenda.

- i) Are we clear on who counts as users?

We are entering a complex information world where the development of tools such as Large Language Models starts to challenge simple views of the ways in which producers of data might engage with users of data. For the purposes of maintaining a viable user engagement system, there do need to be some shared assumptions about what sort of use and users are in scope.

- ii) Are we clear on what counts as user needs for statistics?

There is, as always, a blurred line between content described as ‘statistics’ and content described as ‘data’. At one extreme, a headline estimate of national inflation is generally



termed as a ‘statistic’; at the other extreme, a database of anonymised welfare system transactions is probably thought of as ‘data’. But to complicate things further, an econometrician analysing national inflation over time would see each statistic as an item of data. For a user engagement system focused on official statistics, there is a question to address as to whether there are any requests for ‘statistics’ and ‘data’ that are better met outside the official statistics system.

These are important questions which we believe need to be addressed in order to future-proof ongoing user engagement activity across the UK official statistics system.

Conclusion

Recent activity and events have created the circumstances in which there has been a growing momentum for change within the UK official statistics system and the need for a step change in the way that producers and users work together has now been clearly recognised.

We understand that resources are tight and priorities need to be set. This might mean that not all user needs can be met. Indeed, we may not get all the user engagement that we would want, at least in the near term.

Nevertheless, our aim for this set of proposals is that it will be helpful – both in prompting further inputs and ideas from users and wider stakeholders and in informing the UK Statistics Authority in their ongoing work in implementing the commitments in the new statement of strategic priorities.

We believe that these proposals usefully build on the work to date and, with further input, can be evolved into tangible actions that deliver a stronger partnership between producers and users. This we believe will help us towards a stronger, more confident, more resilient, more impactful UK official statistics system: one that enables better public understanding, more informed public debate, and better decision-making in our country.

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