ROYAL STATISTICAL SOCIETY

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RSS STATEMENT ON THE UK STATISTICS SYSTEM: A RESPONSE TO THE REPORT OF THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS SELECT COMMITTEE

5 November 2026

1 Introduction

1.1 The RSS has been a long-standing supporter of, and advocate for, the UK's independent official statistics system. We believe in the public good that this system is designed to deliver, both through improving public understanding of the world we live in and through enabling and informing public policy development.

1.2 As a result, the RSS has had a keen interest in the difficulties faced by the official statistics system over the past few years. Methodological challenges – notably with the Labour Force Survey – and difficulties with the development of an Integrated Data Service (intended to bring together data from across government) led to increased concern from users and to increased public, political and parliamentary scrutiny. As scrutiny increased through 2025, we saw the resignation of the national statistician and of the chair of the United Kingdom Statistics Authority (UKSA). Against this backdrop, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee's (PACAC) decision to launch a parliamentary inquiry was welcome.

1.3 In September 2026, PACAC published the findings of its inquiry, *The Work of the UK Statistics Authority*, in which it sets out its recommendations to ensure the effective running of the statistical system. Under the leadership of Penny Young (as interim UKSA chair) and with the appointment of a new group of senior leaders at the Office for National Statistics (ONS), progress has been made towards tackling methodological and cultural challenges. PACAC's report provides the opportunity to build on this progress and address the further challenges facing the statistical system.

1.4 This paper sets out how the RSS would like to see the statistical system – in its widest sense, covering UKSA, ONS, Government Statistical Service (GSS) and devolved nations – respond to the PACAC inquiry. PACAC has produced a good diagnosis of the problems at ONS and weaknesses in UKSA's oversight. We agree with its view that significant steps have been taken to correct the situation and we particularly welcome its robust defence of the statistical

independence of the system. We also support their conclusion that the priority should be trying to make the existing governance structures work as effectively as possible, rather than pursuing legislative change to develop a new settlement. However, it is important that – in responding to the inquiry and with the new leadership arrangements – the existing governance structures can be shown to work more effectively – if not, there may be a case for reviewing them in future.

1.5 Our response focuses on the six areas that we think are most important:

- **Leadership of the statistical system:** There is a fundamental need for greater clarity on the way in which the UK's statistical system is led. In the short term, there is a need to clarify the respective responsibilities of the national statistician and ONS permanent secretary. In the longer term, we need a model that delivers both effective leadership across the UK's diverse statistical system and for the ONS, as the central producer, while developing the pipeline of future leaders so that, in future, the national statistician can again lead the ONS in line with legislation. We also urge rapid appointment of the new permanent UKSA chair.
- **ONS scrutiny and accountability**: New arrangements need to ensure that in the future ONS is held meaningfully to account. We believe there is a strong case for a separate ONS Board, acting as a subcommittee of the main board, as has been the case at times in the past.
- **The new governance framework:** The planned development of a new Framework Document, which clarifies the full range of roles and responsibilities within the UK official statistics system is welcome. Given the centrality of governance issues over recent years, it will be important that the proposed new arrangements are subject to wider stakeholder and parliamentary scrutiny.
- **User engagement, transparency and prioritisation:** PACAC identified a range of failures in the way that ONS prioritised different parts of its portfolio. We believe that there is a need for a more transparent and genuinely user-informed process for deciding statistical priorities and identifying unmet needs. We endorse the committee's call for a system-wide capacity assessment to be carried out by the national statistician, which can then provide a firm foundation for future decisions as well as highlighting where gaps and constraints exist.
- **Parliamentary accountability:** Parliamentary scrutiny of the statistical system is essential and should be sustained and forward-looking, rather than intensifying only when problems reach crisis point. We recommend regular and systematic parliamentary engagement with the



statistical system – eg, through a regular opportunity for the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) to present its system-wide assessment directly to Parliament.

- **Data sharing:** There has been a lack of progress in improving data sharing within the UK public sector. In the wake of recent structural changes, there is a need for central government to take clear responsibility for overcoming the persistent barriers to data sharing and to sets out how it will deliver the improvements PACAC has called for.

1.6 This paper sets out further detail on our view on the challenges and opportunities and on how we would like to see the UKSA, government and Parliament respond in each of these areas. Our full list of recommendations is included at the end of the paper.

2 Leadership of the statistical system

2.1 We welcome PACAC's recommendations around leadership of the ONS. The report states that the appointment of a separate ONS permanent secretary was a reasonable response to the immediate challenges but recommends that "As and when a National Statistician is appointed, the Government and the UKSA Board will need to clarify the structure, including who ultimately leads the ONS, and how the arrangement aligns with the relevant legislation" (paragraph 54). We agree.

2.2 The current arrangements emerged as a temporary response to an exceptional situation at a time when there was no permanent national statistician in post. Once the new national statistician has taken up their post, we recommend that the UKSA Board and Cabinet Office formally review and clarify the respective responsibilities of the national statistician and ONS permanent secretary, and set out publicly both how the leadership arrangements will operate in the immediate future and their intended longer-term direction – PACAC should formally review and comment on this. We agree with PACAC's analysis that any permanent change to the national statistician's statutory role in leading ONS would require legislative change.

2.3 It will be important that this review is undertaken with the new national statistician rather than simply confirming arrangements developed before he was in post. The national statistician has statutory responsibilities as the head of ONS as well as a much broader responsibility for the wider statistical system. We would therefore be concerned if arrangements established during the current period of recovery were allowed to determine how those responsibilities operate in



practice without the new national statistician having a central role in shaping them. The arrangements should clearly set out the national statistician's primary accountability to the UKSA Board, an issue PACAC rightly highlights in its report.

2.4 The role of the UKSA chair in these arrangements should also be considered. UKSA – as an independent body – does not have a minister who is ultimately accountable as would be the case in a government department. The chair and Board therefore need to be confident in holding the national statistician and ONS senior leadership to account and in challenging them where necessary. The appointment of a new permanent chair provides an opportunity to consider how the role and supporting governance structures can enable this – we would welcome the opportunity to work with PACAC, UKSA and Cabinet Office to ensure that accountability is working effectively.

2.5 We view the appointment of the next chair as crucial. They will take over at a point when the immediate situation at ONS is improving, but when important decisions still need to be made about the future leadership, governance and priorities of the statistical system. The role requires a leader with the authority and independence to lead the UKSA Board, rebuild confidence and provide challenge where necessary – incisive challenge is essential and PACAC's report suggests that the lack of this contributed to the situation of the past few years. We are pleased to see that Cabinet Office has opened applications for this appointment and encourage them to make an appointment as quickly as possible.

2.6 The new chair's appointment should be made before the three new appointments to the Board, currently being advertised, are finalised so the chair has input into the final decisions. If needed, the terms of the three members to be replaced can be temporarily extended. In addition, we agree with PACAC that re-appointing existing members for a second term should be possible when it is necessary to prevent key skills being lost from the Board. However, it is preferable to avoid that situation by effectively staggering terms.

2.7 For the period in which the national statistician and permanent secretary operate alongside one another, our view is that there should be public documentation of the respective roles. This should include information on which decisions sit with each role and confirmation that it fits with the statutory position; the information that each is expected to provide to the other; how professional statistical advice from the national statistician should inform decisions about the



operation and priorities of ONS; and how issues which involve both statistical and operational considerations should be handled. These arrangements should be publicly available so that users, staff and parliament can understand where responsibility for different parts of the system ultimately lies.

2.8 There should be a clear mechanism for handling significant differences of view between the national statistician and permanent secretary – especially as the national statistician (with responsibility for the GSS as a whole) has wider responsibilities than the ONS permanent secretary. It is healthy for senior leaders to sometimes approach difficult decisions from different perspectives, and arrangements should not discourage candid internal challenge. However, where there is a significant disagreement affecting statistical quality, independence or priorities, there should be a clear process for escalating this to the UKSA Board. For decisions with significant implications for users or public confidence, there should also be appropriate transparency about the decision and how it was reached.

2.9 The wider role of the national statistician needs to be considered in this. The UK has a very diverse official statistics system with components within UK government departments, devolved governments and public bodies. The national statistician needs to provide professional leadership across this diverse system and to be a visible and authoritative public advocate for statistics and their value. In addition, the senior statistical leaders across the system have a professional accountability to the national statistician. Therefore, the role needs sufficient authority, capacity and independence to meet these broader needs in parallel to the responsibilities towards ONS.

2.10 In the longer term, our view remains that the national statistician would be able to function as permanent secretary of the ONS – as is intended by the current legislation. The current individuals may be able to make a split model work effectively, particularly while ONS remains in a period of recovery, but this does not in itself demonstrate that dividing the roles is the right arrangement once the organisation has stabilised. There are advantages in the person providing professional leadership of the statistical system also having the organisational authority necessary to put that leadership into practice within its principal statistical organisation.

2.11 If this is the way forward, there is a need for more resilience in the way that the role is filled in the future. The RSS has been working in partnership with the GSS on the development and



implementation of the Future Statistician vision, a framework for the skills and approaches needed to equip government statisticians for the future. We would like to see the publication of a plan for building a pipeline of future national statisticians by supporting the professional development of government statisticians – this should set out how to equip future leaders with the broader skills necessary to lead ONS and provide professional leadership across the system. The need to promote leadership skills among statisticians has been recognised in the past, and we think that it is now pressing to develop concrete plans to address this.

2.12 We recognise that there is also a need to extend this work outside of the statistical system to ensure the development of a diverse pipeline of leaders and the RSS will be considering what role we can play to support this goal.

3 Holding ONS to Account

3.1 There needs to be a clear mechanism for ensuring that ONS gives a proper account of its performance including internal management, is held meaningfully to account and acts on UKSA Board conclusions and decisions. This requires structured and comprehensive reporting on all aspects of performance. It also requires the Board to scrutinise that information, challenge management and to follow through on conclusions.

3.2 In the past there has been a specific ONS Board – as part of the process of developing the new framework, we would like to see the merits of reintroducing this board considered. An ONS Board could meet regularly, review management information and report to the UKSA Board: this could serve as an extra level of scrutiny that would help alert the UKSA Board to coming challenges earlier in the process. We would suggest ensuring that this board contains a high proportion of people with statistical expertise. This approach would also give the main Board more time to oversee the statistical system as a whole.

4 The new governance framework

4.1 PACAC notes that UKSA and the Cabinet Office are developing a new Framework Document. This is important and overdue work as the UKSA has not had a fully-fledged statement of its governance for too long. PACAC recommend that this is used to give clarity on the Cabinet Office's responsibility for ensuring a properly functioning UKSA Board and on the mechanisms for determining funding.



4.2 The development of the new Framework Document provides an important opportunity to clarify the governance arrangements for the statistical system. Noting PACAC's strong restatement of the importance of the independence of the UK's official statistics system, we think there should be wider engagement in its development. As such, we encourage PACAC to hold a public session to consider the proposed arrangements before they are finalised and would welcome an opportunity for users and other stakeholders to contribute to the process.

4.3 The Framework Document also provides an opportunity to address some of the wider governance issues identified by PACAC – for example regarding the detailed governance of ONS.

4.4 PACAC also found that the Cabinet Office's handling of appointments had weakened the Board at an important time and recommends that its responsibility for ensuring a properly functioning Board should be made explicit. We support this recommendation.

4.5 In considering these arrangements, it is important to recognise the breadth of the UKSA Board's responsibilities. In addition to oversight of ONS, they are also responsible for promoting and safeguarding the quality, good practice and comprehensiveness of official statistics across the UK statistical system. The Board therefore needs the capacity and capability to discharge its full responsibilities, and the new Framework Document should support it in doing so.

5 User engagement: transparency and prioritisation

5.1 The RSS has been arguing for the importance of user engagement and transparent prioritisation for a number of years. In our 2025 paper *UK Official Statistics: A New Partnership Between Producers and Users* we argued that a "waiting list" would be a welcome step in this direction. So we were very pleased to see the ONS adopt this earlier this year. We also welcome PACAC's discussion of this new approach to prioritisation, and that they recognise the value of the "waiting room". PACAC argues that the waiting room should not become a mechanism through which demands for new statistics are parked indefinitely and that there should be clear evidence of work moving out of, as well as into, it (paragraph 43).

5.2 We agree that there should be evidence of work progressing out of the waiting room, but from our perspective the value of this development goes beyond that: we think it can be a tool to improve user engagement and ultimately help ONS evidence the weight of user need for



particular developments. This would address one of the frustrations raised by users of having to repeatedly restate needs which producers already know about, without being able to see whether or how these have been recognised. Our 2025 paper on user engagement argued for the regular publication of the UK portfolio of official statistics. Together these would then create the foundation for greater transparency about known but unmet demands for new or improved statistics and hence enable better informed debate about priorities. We see the portfolio as an essential companion to a more visible and comprehensive waiting room.

5.3 Responsibility for the official statistics portfolio and wider user-engagement process (including the waiting room) should sit with the national statistician. They can bring a system-wide view (going beyond ONS) of the overall state of supply and demand.

5.4 Greater transparency about unmet demand can also support better central decisions about resources. PACAC concludes that ONS has not always matched its ambitions to its capacity and recommends that the national statistician publish and regularly update a baseline view of capacity across the statistical system, including workforce data, skills gaps and constraints. It also recommends clearer mechanisms for reconciling demands for statistics with the funding available to provide them. We welcome both recommendations. A transparent picture of work that users want but which cannot currently be progressed would provide important evidence for those discussions. It would allow decisions about funding and capacity to be informed by the public value that could be realised through meeting currently unmet needs. The next UK Statistics Assembly should help inform this, providing a visible and transparent mechanism through which users can help inform priorities for future development of the statistical system.

5.5 This approach would provide a solid foundation for engagement between producers and users about priorities across the statistical system. It would also help UKSA fulfil its wider responsibility for the comprehensiveness of official statistics, by making it easier to identify important gaps and consider them alongside the capacity available to address them. This would also provide the statistical system with stronger evidence of user need should it need to make the case for funding to meet additional demand. This was the model envisaged in our 2025 proposals for a new partnership between producers and users.

6 Parliamentary accountability



6.1 We are pleased that PACAC's report, by requesting quarterly updates on various topics from the ONS and the Cabinet Office and emphasising that PACAC is an appropriate route for OSR to raise concerns, indicates that the committee will maintain an ongoing interest in the statistical system. Continued parliamentary scrutiny is vital.

6.2 While respecting the pressures on parliamentary time, we consider this scrutiny should become more regular and systematic. PACAC has conducted a number of important inquiries into official statistics, but engagement has tended to intensify when serious concerns arise. There would be particular value in guaranteeing regular parliamentary time to consider the health and future of the statistical system, alongside more detailed inquiries where circumstances require them. It is of vital importance to the nation that we have timely, reliable statistics that enable effective policy decisions – without them decision-makers are severely hampered. This should look across the UK statistical system rather than focusing predominantly on ONS and should consider longer-term opportunities and risks as well as current performance.

6.3 The OSR could play an important role in supporting this scrutiny. The OSR does vital work in identifying issues across the statistical system and producing its annual State of the Statistical System report. PACAC raises concerns that some of the issues OSR had identified before the recent problems at ONS did not receive sufficient prominence or urgency. This could be helped by giving the director general for regulation an annual appearance at PACAC, around OSR's State of the Statistical System report – at which they would appear without any other UKSA official – to explore the report and identify issues that may warrant further parliamentary attention.

6.4 More regular scrutiny should include greater follow-up of previous recommendations. PACAC's 2019 inquiry into the governance of official statistics made many good recommendations, including recommendations aimed at improving understanding of users and unmet needs. UKSA committed in its response to keep PACAC updated on progress against the recommendations. However, some of the actions proposed following that inquiry were not subsequently taken forward, while the Committee that formed following the 2019 General Election did not maintain sustained scrutiny of their implementation. We consider PACAC should establish a mechanism for following through on the recommendations those reviews make, even as the leadership and composition of the committee may change.



6.5 In summary, we believe that this is now an opportunity and a need for PACAC and UKSA to agree a more systematic approach to parliamentary accountability. This should include regular scrutiny of the health and future of the statistical system, a regular opportunity for OSR to present its system-wide assessment directly to Parliament, and a transparent process for monitoring UKSA's response to PACAC recommendations. This would help ensure that parliamentary attention is sustained between major inquiries and that concerns can be identified and addressed before they develop into crises.

7 Data sharing

7.1 One of the major issues discussed in the PACAC report is the failure of the Integrated Data Service (IDS). The challenges with the IDS were identified in the Lievesley Review of the UKSA in 2024. Lievesley cited two main causes of the problems, which are also picked up by PACAC (paragraph 30): systematic and cultural barriers to data sharing between government departments and a lack of clarity regarding the purpose, scope and requirements of the IDS among users.

7.2 The RSS has long been concerned about data sharing within government. This was a central call of our 2014 Data Manifesto, and again when it was refreshed in 2019. Ahead of the most recent general election, we set out a series of policy recommendations, the first of which called on parties to commit, within the first month of forming a government, to "direct government departments to improve data sharing and report regularly on their progress". After the election we wrote to relevant ministers urging them to address this issue.

7.3 Given this, we are very pleased to see the emphasis placed on data sharing in the PACAC report and especially welcome the recommendation that "The Cabinet Office and the UKSA should update us [PACAC] on the long-term plan to improve data sharing across government in light of the failure of the Integrated Data System in its response to this report and quarterly thereafter" (paragraph 34). This is now urgent. As we have expressed before, we think that this needs to be a direction that is set by central government – so we view this as primarily a challenge for the Cabinet Office to take ownership of and resolve (while seeking input from UKSA will be crucial, UKSA alone cannot drive the shift in culture that will be required.)

8 Conclusion



8.1 We welcome PACAC's report and agree with its assessment of the problems that have affected ONS and UKSA's oversight of it. We also agree with the committee that significant progress has been made and that the priority should now be to make the existing statutory settlement operate as effectively as possible, while maintaining the independence of the statistical system. PACAC's report provides an important opportunity to learn from what went wrong without losing sight of what continues to work well across the wider statistical system.

8.2 We agree that the focus should now be on making the current governance structures work as effectively as possible. The appointment of permanent leadership, development of the new Framework Document and forthcoming responses from UKSA and government provide an opportunity to address the issues identified in this paper. These changes should focus on ensuring that the UK statistical system as a whole is equipped to meet changing needs and continues to produce statistics for the public good.

8.3 The RSS plays an important role in supporting this process as a constructive and independent voice for statisticians and users of statistics. We look forward to working with UKSA, ONS, OSR, the wider statistical system, government and Parliament to help ensure that the lessons identified by PACAC lead to lasting improvements.

9 Summary of recommendations

9.1 Leadership of the statistical system:

- The UKSA Board and Cabinet Office should review and clarify the respective responsibilities, in both the short and the long term, of the national statistician and ONS permanent secretary once the new national statistician is in post. The national statistician's role in the longer-term should be consistent with legislation.
- The appointment of a permanent UKSA chair should be prioritised.
- A longer-term plan should be developed for leadership of ONS and the wider statistical system, including development of future national statisticians: supporting the development of leadership skills among statisticians is a crucial part of this.

9.2 Holding ONS to account:



- UKSA and the Cabinet Office should consider whether a dedicated ONS Board would strengthen oversight and challenge.

9.3 Governance

- The new Framework Document should clearly set out responsibilities across the statistical system and be subject to parliamentary and stakeholder scrutiny. Its development should be subject to both public and parliamentary scrutiny.
- The Framework Document should ensure that the UKSA Board has the capability and capacity to fulfil its wider statutory responsibilities, including promoting and safeguarding the quality, good practice and comprehensiveness of official statistics across the UK statistical system.

9.4 User engagement, transparency and prioritisation

- User engagement should be at the heart of the system and a key responsibility for the national statistician who, as part of this, should lead the development of a transparent portfolio of official statistics including unmet user needs.
- A system-wide assessment of statistical capacity, along with initiatives such as the “waiting room”, should inform decisions about priorities and funding.
- Future UK Statistics Assemblies should help shape discussion of unmet needs and future priorities.

9.5 Parliamentary accountability

- PACAC should establish more regular scrutiny across the entire statistical system.
- The director general for regulation should have an annual opportunity to discuss the OSR’s State of the Statistical System report directly with PACAC.
- PACAC should establish clearer mechanisms for following up recommendations from inquiries with UKSA.

9.6 Data sharing

- The Cabinet Office should take clear leadership for improving data sharing across government.
- Government should set out how responsibility for data-sharing reform is being coordinated and how progress will be monitored.



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10 About the RSS

The RSS is a membership organisation and charity, advocating for the importance of statistics and data. The Society was founded in 1834 and is the learned society and professional body for statisticians and other data professionals. The Society has over 11,000 members in the UK and across the world. Around three quarters of the membership are UK based. As a charity, we champion the key role of statistics and data in society, and work to ensure that policy formulation and decision making are informed by evidence for the public good.

The RSS is interested in areas where statistics and data can be used to inform and improve decision making in government, businesses and in everyday life. Our work is guided by our members, who identify topics where statistical thinking and data can have the most impact. A key focus of our work is public statistics: looking at how statistics can be produced to support the wider public good and meet a range of user needs.

As a Society, we engage closely with the UKSA, ONS, OSR, devolved statistical institutions and the GSS. We partnered with UKSA on delivery of the 2025 UK Statistics Assembly, with GSS on a project to think about the future of the statistical profession and with the ONS and OSR on a series of round tables to address pressing methodological challenges in statistics production. Many of our members, around 40% of those based in the UK, are statisticians working for one of the UK's governments. We are committed supporters of the principle of the UK having an independent statistical system that produces data for the public good and we seek to provide constructive challenge and insight to the different parts of the statistical system to support them in delivering this goal.

