



Simon Hoare MP
Chair, Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee
Sent by email

11 September 2025

Dear Simon Hoare,

Re. Independence of the UK's statistical system

We are writing to you to emphasise the importance of an independent statistical system in the context of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee's inquiry into the work of the UK Statistics Authority.

In your questions at public evidence sessions, you have repeatedly identified a challenge around accountability. In the session with Sir Ian Diamond on 9 September, you suggested that a single person – either the Cabinet Secretary or a minister such as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster – to whom the national statistician was accountable to may have been beneficial. In previous a previous session you also raised questions around the relationship between independence and accountability.

We are writing as users of official statistics, the professional body for statisticians and data professionals and an organisation that advocates for the public interest in policy evidence, to highlight the importance we place on independence. While it is vital to look at questions of accountability within the statistical system, we believe it is important that this is done while protecting the independence of the statistical system.

During the first oral evidence session with Sir Robert Chote, Emma Rourke and Ed Humpherson, you indicated that “an organisation which is independent of Government but dependent upon the mindset of the leadership” may be unaccountable in the court of public opinion. In the second session, there was a similar reflection that “tensions created by independence of operation seem to have resulted in a laissez-faire attitude towards accountability”. There was, it seemed, a suggestion that the independence of the organisation may have led to a lack of accountability.

It is clearly right to ask questions about an environment that was slow to respond to the declining quality of key statistics, and reasonable to question the existing mechanism for accountability.

However, the independence of the statistical system is a vitally important principle – and it is important that this is protected. The UN Principles of Official Statistics set out a vision for official statistics systems that provide impartial, reliable information for the public good. It also sets out that their responsibility should be to all users equally – and not just their governments' users. In the context of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), this means that they must be independent

to produce the statistics that they believe there to be a user need for, in the manner that they determine to be most appropriate.

We, collectively, would be very wary of watering down the independence of the ONS in order to address questions about accountability – including by making the leadership of the ONS accountable to a minister. First, it is not clear to us that the current challenges were a direct result of the ONS's independence – as identified by Ed Humpherson, it appeared that a greater problem was a culture of defensiveness and being slow to respond to external challenge. Second, there are ways to strengthen accountability without weakening independence – to the Board and to Parliament – that should be explored.

We are sure that the committee can recommend measures to improve the functioning and culture of ONS without resorting to sacrificing that independence for political control: PACAC and Parliament successfully do so with other independent statutory bodies, and we would be keen for PACAC to explore a greater role for itself going forward.

It is important that the statistical system as a whole is accountable to Parliament and, by extension, the public, and we are keen to speak with you further about how we can support your committee in ensuring that.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Sir John Aston, President, **Royal Statistical Society**
Tracey Brown OBE, Director, **Sense about Science**
Professor Imran Rasul OBE, President, **Royal Economic Society**
David Aikman, Director, **National Institute of Economic and Social Research**

The RSS is the leading membership organisation for statisticians and other data professionals. We have over 8,000 members in the UK, many of whom work for the government statistical service. As a charity, we are committed to promoting the use of data and statistics to inform decision-making.

Sense About Science is an independent charity that promotes the public interest in sound science and evidence. We work with communities all over the UK to make sense of evidence in key areas of decision making, and with researchers and policy makers to improve use of evidence in public life.

The Royal Economic Society is the pre-eminent economics association in the United Kingdom. Our membership of 4,000 individual members and a 4,600 further group and institutional members includes thousands of economists for whom access to high-quality UK economic statistics is important.

The National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) seeks to shape, influence, and improve public policy through high-quality, independent research and analysis. It is independent of all party-political interests and works collaboratively with academic institutions, government departments, charitable foundations, and international organisations to achieve its mission.