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Public Administration Select
Committee

Appointment of the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority

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The Public Administration Select Committee (PASC)

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Witnesses

Tuesday 10 May 2011	<i>Page</i>
Sir Michael Scholar KCB , Chair, UK Statistics Authority, Jil Matheson , National Statistician, and Richard Aldritt , Head of Assessment, UK Statistics Authority.	Ev 1
Tuesday 28 June 2011	
Professor Dame Janet Finch , preferred candidate	Ev 15
Tuesday 6 December 2011	
Andrew Dilnot CBE , preferred candidate	Ev 30

List of printed written evidence

	<i>Page</i>
1 Sir Michael Scholar KCB, Chair, UK Statistics Authority	Ev 43
2 Supplementary evidence submitted by Sir Michael Scholar KCB, Chair, UK Statistics Authority	Ev 46
3 Royal Statistical Society	Ev 49
4 Royal Statistical Society Statistics Users Forum	Ev 52
5 Ian Maclean MBE	Ev 53
6 Academy of Social Sciences	Ev 55
7 Equality and Human Rights Commission	Ev 55
8 Further written evidence submitted by the Royal Statistical Society	Ev 58

Oral evidence

Taken before the Public Administration Select Committee

on Tuesday 10 May 2011

Members present:

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Chair)

Alun Cairns
Paul Flynn
Robert Halfon

Kelvin Hopkins
Greg Mulholland

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Sir Michael Scholar**, KCB, Chair, UK Statistics Authority, **Jil Matheson**, National Statistician, and **Richard Alldritt**, Head of Assessment, UK Statistics Authority, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Sir Michael, Jil Matheson and Richard Alldritt, welcome to this session. Would you identify yourselves and each of your roles for the record, please?

Sir Michael Scholar: Yes. My name is Michael Scholar and I am the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority.

Jil Matheson: I am Jil Matheson, the National Statistician.

Richard Alldritt: I am Richard Alldritt, the Head of Assessment in the Statistics Authority.

Q2 Chair: Sir Michael, I believe that you have one or two opening remarks. If you keep them very brief, we would be very grateful.

Sir Michael Scholar: I simply wanted to say, Chair, that perhaps the single most important feature of the Statistics Authority, in our view, is the independence that the Statistics and Registration Service Act accorded to us. We think that is most important to our whole operation. It, of course, rests on our accountability to Parliament, so I am very glad to be here and I will try to answer your questions as best as I can.

Chair: Thank you very much. We are very grateful for your being here and for the work that you have been doing. We are going to start on the question of the census.

Q3 Robert Halfon: Good morning. May I ask why we have the census in this day and age with open information?

Sir Michael Scholar: We need the census to have a robust estimate of the total number of people who live in this country, and also to have good estimates of where they live. That is primarily and essentially the purpose of the census, although it does give us information on a granular basis, and on a detailed regional basis, that cannot be obtained by other methods.

Q4 Robert Halfon: Is it right that this will be the last census?

Sir Michael Scholar: The Statistics Authority has expressed the hope that it will be the last census. I think that the Government have gone a little further

than that and said that it is their firm intention that it will be the last census.

Q5 Robert Halfon: And if it is the last census—something you described earlier as so essential—why was there a need to do this census?

Sir Michael Scholar: Because if it is the last census—if there does not need to be a census on the conventional lines that we have been used to since 1801, and if there does not need to be one in 2016 or 2021—it will be because the ONS has developed better methods of making those estimates that I referred to before.

Q6 Robert Halfon: But do you not think that it is wrong that the census is somewhat authoritarian and that people are compelled to fill out their personal details?

Sir Michael Scholar: It has been a feature of censuses in this country for many decades, and I believe it has helped to ensure a high count in the censuses that have happened.

Q7 Robert Halfon: I saw one advert for the census near my constituency that suggested that you had to fill out the census because otherwise you would miss out on public spending. Surely that is the wrong way to encourage people, because whether or not they fill out the census does not really affect the public spending rounds. In essence it is a bribe; that must be the wrong way to encourage people to do it.

Sir Michael Scholar: I do not think so. Every year about £100 billion of public expenditure is allocated in various ways by the Treasury—through local authorities, through the health service and so on. If there are not good population estimates, there will be serious misallocation of those funds. You are absolutely right that there is no reason to think that the total of public expenditure would be different, but if, say, more money is being allocated to a local Authority than is needed, and not enough to another local Authority where it is needed, there is a misallocation of resources. I think that that is a perfectly reasonable argument to put to those who are being asked to fill out the census.

10 May 2011 Sir Michael Scholar, KCB, Jil Matheson and Richard Aldritt

Q8 Robert Halfon: You have agreed that it is likely that there will not be a census in the future, but the public allocations to various areas will still happen in the future, so the link between public expenditure for your locality and whether you fill out the census must be a false one and the wrong way to advertise it.

Sir Michael Scholar: I have not said that it is likely that there will not be a census. I expressed the hope that there would not be a census on conventional lines, and I expressed that hope because the census is a very expensive operation. If it were possible to have estimates that were more up to date than are possible if one is doing the census every 10 years—if it is possible, as it were, to have a running tally of the number of people in the country, their characteristics, where they are and so on—that would be better, but we do not have the capability to do that at the moment.

Q9 Robert Halfon: In the last census, 300,000 people apparently described themselves as Jedi Knights in the question about their religion. Does that not show a healthy scepticism among the British people because of the compulsion to fill it in? Is not the census rather an unnecessary authoritarian measure in the sense that people are being forced to give out their personal details to the state and facing penalties if they do not?

Sir Michael Scholar: I do not know the motivation of the people who wrote Jedi Knights in 2001. It was particularly strange, because they were not compelled to answer that question. The question on religion was in 2001—it has been in this year's census—voluntary. However, as you say, a number of people did write that in 2001.

Q10 Paul Flynn: Can I say a word of thanks and congratulate you personally and the Authority on your work in establishing the Authority as an independent and courageous voice that has been critical of the Government, the Opposition and anyone else who tries to manipulate statistics? I think we have taken a step along the road of restoring public confidence in statistics, which is crucial to having policy making that is based on evidence. However, may I join my colleague in suggesting that there really is no possibility of having a census in the future based on the biblical methods of 2,000 years ago of gaining information by asking everyone? There is no other investigation you take that involves anything but a sample of the population—one in 10,000 or perhaps one in 100,000—to give a result that would be, considering the costs, almost as good as having a census of the entire population. The only reason why it continued—these criticisms have been made over the past five years—was inertia in the system. People decided, and no one had the courage to stop it and say, “No, there is a better way of doing this. Let's take a sample”. It will not happen again, will it?

Sir Michael Scholar: The answer, as I have discovered from talking to professional statisticians here and abroad, is that it is not straightforward to dispense with that kind of enumerative census. Some countries do it every five years; we have chosen to do it every 10 years. The process of using the surveys

that you describe is highly useful for gathering information, but that needs to be pinned down from time to time with the kind of census that we have had in this country. We would be in a stronger position to manage without this kind of enumerative census if we had an address register in this country, which we do not. We would be in an even stronger position if we had a population register, which we do not. I think that the population register is something that would be highly desirable from a statistical point of view. I imagine that the House of Commons might be unwilling to introduce a population register, but I am very happy to see that the case that we have made as an Authority for the creation of an address register has at last been accepted by the Government in recent months. I think that that will be a very important element for moving forward in the way that Mr Halfon was inviting us to do.

Q11 Robert Halfon: May I just ask how you work out the questions on the census? For example, if I am not mistaken, there is no ethnic recognition of Sikhs on the census whereas there is recognition of other ethnic groups. How do you make that decision?

Sir Michael Scholar: Well, on the Sikh point, there was a place for recognition of Sikhs in the religion question, although not in the ethnicity question.

Q12 Robert Halfon: But they argue that it should be done ethnically. Who makes that decision? Why do you choose some ethnic groups and not others?

Sir Michael Scholar: Parliament made the decisions, because we put the questionnaire to Parliament for its approval, as we are obliged to do under the Census Act. However, we did so on the basis of testing and consultation. Perhaps Ms Matheson would like to fill that out a bit.

Jil Matheson: The process of determining the content of the census is a lengthy one that involves a lot of public consultation, a lot of engagement with users of very different kinds and, I have to say, a huge demand—a demand that far exceeds the capability of any household or individual to be able to fill in. So we go through a process of testing. The form that we have had in 2011 was extensively tested. Of course, what we had to do was to make recommendations to Parliament based on a combination of: the case that had been put to us by users; whether there was any other sort of information available; why it was essential to have it for a total population and for small areas and so on; the ability of people to fill in the form; the length of the form; cost; and so on. In terms of the ethnicity question, we could have had a page of ethnicity classifications. What we did was look, as I say, at user need and people's ability to fill it in, but also at the numbers in the population. So, you have a cut-off that recognises the largest groups and then the ability for people to write in for the other categories.

Q13 Robert Halfon: But the Sikhs are inexorably exercised about this point. There is quite a high proportion of Sikhs in the United Kingdom and they regard themselves as an ethnic group, not just a religion, and yet they are not allowed that option. They have no say in how that decision is made.

10 May 2011 Sir Michael Scholar, KCB, Jil Matheson and Richard Aldritt

Jil Matheson: They had a very strong say, actually, because we did have a lot of engagements with Sikh groups and I am sure that there was representation to Parliament at the time that the content of the questionnaire was debated. There was also some research done that showed that the answer to the Sikh category in the religion question was a very good indicator of the answer that would have been given had it been in the ethnicity classification. There is some question of avoiding redundancy as well in making some very tough decisions.

Q14 Chair: Can I ask a bit more about the alternatives to the census? Ms Matheson, you might want to say something about this. Is this address register in fact a national identity register? Is this the identity card by the back door?

Jil Matheson: Shall I say something generally about alternatives? The first point to say, I think, is that what we are talking about is not that the need for this kind of information has gone away—nobody has argued that. It is a question of how you provide that information. It is quite right that we are looking at ways in which that information can be provided in a way that is cost-effective and timely, and that provides the information that users across the country need. In fact, we looked at that after the 2001 census as well and the recommendation was not based on inertia—it was based on an analysis of the available data sources to be able to provide that kind of information. The conclusion was that there was no other single source that would enable that information to be provided, so the decision was made to proceed with the census. However, it is absolutely right that we look again, because there is more information available and out there and because it is getting more difficult across the world to carry out traditional censuses. So, that is what we will be doing—we will be evaluating the alternatives. The address register is simply that: a register of all the addresses in the country, not of the people who live at those addresses—that is different. We do not have a population register, and the address register is simply that—a register of addresses. One of the things that we had to do for the 2011 census was to create an address register, in effect, which is why I think we are all pleased to see that is now going to be taken forward into a national address register.

Q15 Paul Flynn: All your other reports are based on a minute sample of the population. Can you tell us, as a statistician, what the difference in value would have been between the results we are going to get here from doing the whole population—lots of which, with the delay that is likely to take place because of the mass of results that have to be analysed, will be out of date by the time they are reported—and doing one in 10,000 people?

Jil Matheson: The sample surveys certainly have their place, but even now with the sample surveys that we have, the population estimates that come from the census, and are updated intercensally, form a benchmark for those sample surveys. You do not do a sample survey without having some way of being able to calibrate the results. The information that comes for the total population is one way of doing that, and it is

not a question of simply being able to do a survey. That is one part of the technical answer. The second is to do with the level of granularity with which information is required. It is granularity in two ways, first of all geographic. It is about being able to provide information for small geographic areas that a sample survey simply cannot do. Secondly, it is granularity in terms of some fairly small population subgroups that will not be represented in random samples of whatever size in a systematic way.

Can I make just one other point on this? Of course, one of the things that we are also looking very hard at is what other countries do. There are countries that have moved away from the traditional biblical form of census taking; there are others that, like us, are looking at the options for the future; and there are some that combine a headcount—a very short census forum—with a sample survey, so you do just the headcount on a population-wide basis and then fill the gaps on a sample-survey basis. All those options are ones that we are looking at and evaluating.

Q16 Robert Halfon: What is the compliance this year compared with previous censuses?

Sir Michael Scholar: In the census that is under way now?

Robert Halfon: Yes.

Sir Michael Scholar: The period after the census during which the field force of 29,000 people went round following up those who had not returned the forms has just ended, and the ONS is cautiously optimistic that more than 90% of the forms that were sent out have been returned or will be returned in the coming few days. It is still very early days; there are still many forms coming in. That leads it to predict that at the end of the process there will be coverage of around 94% across the country as a whole, which in fact is the target that it was seeking to achieve from the outset.

Q17 Robert Halfon: How does that compare with previous censuses?

Sir Michael Scholar: The previous census also had a target of 94%. There was a subsidiary target in this case: no local Authority should be below 80%. The ONS is, again, cautiously optimistic that when all the forms have come back, there will be no local Authority below 80% this time.

Q18 Robert Halfon: Finally, do you, as the Statistics Authority, think it is right that the census is compulsory, given the resentment that it creates among a significant number of individuals?

Sir Michael Scholar: I think the way I would put it is that the Authority thinks it right to recommend to Parliament that there should be a compulsory element in the census in order to achieve the kinds of returns that I have just been talking about. Whether there will be that compulsion in any census in the future is a matter for Parliament, not for us.

Q19 Kelvin Hopkins: In the interest of balance, as most of my colleagues are rather hostile or sceptical about the census, let me say that I am a great supporter of the census and that I enjoy filling in my census

form—it gives me a sense of belonging, identity and all of that. Is it not a concern that we would lose some of the time series that goes back to 1801 by abandoning the census? That is just a matter of history and interest. Of more concern to me is that in a constituency such as mine that has 30% or so ethnic minority people who have a very low response level to the census, the process understates that population very substantially. Is not that a worry in all sorts of ways? Can we not do something more to ensure that we get higher returns from those areas?

Sir Michael Scholar: I think that that was the real difference between the 2001 census and the census that is currently in process. The ONS has made an enormous effort to target those areas that are difficult to enumerate and for which there were some low figures in the 2001 census. I think that there were some local authorities in 2001 that achieved no more than 63% coverage, so if we have achieved 80% everywhere, that would be a considerable improvement on what happened in 2001.

Q20 Chair: What needs to be in place for the 2021 census to be definitively cancelled?

Sir Michael Scholar: I will have a stab at it and then I will ask Jil Matheson to put me right. I think that we would certainly need an up-to-date address register.

Q21 Chair: And that is simply an address of every household in the county?

Sir Michael Scholar: Every household in the country. We had to do that. It had to be done by the ONS.

Q22 Chair: But don't local authorities have that already?

Sir Michael Scholar: No, they do not.

Q23 Chair: Then how do they collect their council taxes?

Sir Michael Scholar: There are three separate sources of addresses: Royal Mail, the Ordnance Survey and local authorities. They considerably overlap, but they had to be put together by the ONS to achieve a comprehensive address list.

Q24 Chair: How inaccurate is the council tax base, then?

Sir Michael Scholar: I cannot answer that question without notice, I am afraid.

Q25 Chair: Are they collecting too much money or not enough money?

Sir Michael Scholar: I am afraid that I cannot answer that.

Q26 Chair: It is a fairly obvious question to ask, isn't it? If that address list does not satisfy your requirements, what tends to be wrong with it?

Jil Matheson: It does not satisfy our requirements. That was why we had to create it for 2011.

Q27 Chair: But what is wrong with it?

Jil Matheson: Addresses missing, certainly, and lags in getting house conversions, new builds and demolitions on to and off registers. It is not up to date.

Q28 Chair: Why are not local authorities better at keeping their records up to date?

Jil Matheson: Local authorities are one of the sources. They have been part of creating this new address register, and one of the things that some local authorities have been saying to us is that the process of going through this has helped them to update and maintain their address register, which was certainly not fit for statistical purposes.

Sir Michael Scholar: May I complete the answer I was trying to give your question? The first point would be an up-to-date address register. I think the second point would be to achieve a reconciliation of some very large databases that at the moment are not reconciled with one another—certainly not as far as the information technology is concerned. I am thinking of the schools census, GP registers, the national insurance database and HM Revenue and Customs information.

Q29 Chair: And the barriers to this are simply practical, not legislative? There are not legal impediments?

Sir Michael Scholar: Some of them are legislative. Of course, the Statistics and Registration Service Act has allowed us to begin to dismantle some of these barriers, but that is not a straightforward process. There is some understandable hostility towards the proposal that one Department should hand over all its information about the population to another Department, and that a massive database on the whole population should be created. There are political anxieties about that.

Q30 Chair: I think there is also public resentment at having to tell the Government again and again and again where you live.

Sir Michael Scholar: Yes. It cuts both ways, certainly. There is a great deal of work to do before those databases are reconciled with one another and can communicate with one another. For this process to work, that will have to be achieved.

Q31 Robert Halfon: One brief technical question. One of the problems we face, as of course Moser identified 10 years ago, is that 20% of the population are functionally not literate and filling in forms is a challenge for some people. Sometimes hostility to voting or doing anything of that kind is disguising the fact that people are not literate—they are not prepared to admit it, obviously. How do you overcome those problems? Especially, how do you overcome the situation when people will not say, "Look, I cannot read and write; will you help me?" and just say, "I do not fill in forms because I think it is an outrageous intrusion on my personal life," and so on?

Sir Michael Scholar: That is the reason for having 29,000 temporary staff recruited by the ONS for a month or so. It is one of the reasons why the census is expensive, because these people have to be recruited and trained. This time they have been able to act in a much more targeted way than they could in 2001, because in the census this time a system has been in operation so that each form is tracked. If a form has not been returned, there has been

10 May 2011 Sir Michael Scholar, KCB, Jil Matheson and Richard Aldritt

management information to tell the ONS that this particular address has not yet replied. These 29,000 staff have been able to visit very specifically the people who have not replied. Of course, some of them will come into the category you have described.

Q32 Chair: When does this address register need to be in place? When will you have sufficient confidence that you can say that we cancel the 2021 census? Perhaps more importantly, when have we got to initiate the 2021 census if it is going to happen? When is it too late to make this decision?

Sir Michael Scholar: Well, the utility of an address register is not simply for statistical purposes.

Q33 Chair: I appreciate that, but I am asking about the timing.

Sir Michael Scholar: “Beyond 2011”, which is the ONS’s programme for developing plans for a future census, expects to make recommendations in 2014.

Q34 Chair: And do you feel that the address register is being approached with sufficient urgency to meet that deadline?

Sir Michael Scholar: Well, it wasn’t.

Q35 Chair: Ms Matheson?

Jil Matheson: No, it wasn’t, but it now is.

Sir Michael Scholar: We hope it is now, yes.

Q36 Chair: I think we would like a note on that progress and what we need to look for as a Committee to make sure that progress is being made. Do you think you could furnish us with that, please?

Sir Michael Scholar: Certainly, yes.

Q37 Chair: Thank you very much. Moving on, we next want to ask about measuring well-being. I note that a great deal of resource is being devoted to this. How far have we got on devising a well-being index?

Jil Matheson: Let me just give a bit of the background to this. This is not just about a well-being index; it is about a programme of work that has been going on internationally for a while to develop a suite or a dashboard of measures that will reflect the progress of society, reflect performance and change, and go beyond the traditional measures of GDP. In fact, a lot of this has been developed through the OECD and the EU, and what they call it is “Beyond GDP”. In other words, it is a way of looking at how the country as a whole and how different groups in the country are faring economically, how the country is doing environmentally and how it is doing in terms of quality of life, including subjective well-being.

Q38 Chair: When will you unveil your index?

Jil Matheson: We started asking questions on the subjective well-being aspects of this in a survey this year. The results of that will be available from summer next year. It is going to be after the whole-year round.

Q39 Chair: So it is quite a protracted process. What indicators are you using? If someone has got a job, or is living in a house—they have got a home—or is

healthy, those are measurable outcomes. Generally, if people do not have these things, they become unhappy. Why do we need to move to more subjective indicators? What indicators are you likely to use?

Jil Matheson: There will be those objective measures of the kind that you describe, many of which are quite well measured in the UK. What they will be supplemented with—as recommended in the report that has generated a lot of interest in this by Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi—are subjective measures of how people think they are faring in different aspects of their lives. There is increasingly good evidence that how people feel about things impacts on behaviour and on some outcomes. Of course, there are also people who are interested in that as a measure in its own right.

Q40 Chair: But isn’t the fundamental problem here something that psychologists and psychiatrists refer to as insight? As soon as you are made aware of what you are being asked about, you feel differently about what you are being asked about. Isn’t this an inherently subjective process?

Jil Matheson: Yes, that is part of the academic debate about this. However, I think there is evidence—international, well-based evidence—that you can ask people.

Q41 Chair: But who is producing this evidence? What is the impetus behind this? Isn’t it that some people want different policies and they are looking for new ways to justify them because they have failed to satisfy other measures? For instance, GDP growth in the EU is not very good, so they are looking to produce other measures on the benefit of those policies that are failing to produce better GDP growth.

Sir Michael Scholar: I think that the desire to produce something on well-being goes back quite a long way. There have been statisticians who for decades have hoped to be able to do for well-being what was done for income and wealth in the 1930s and 1940s, when measures of national income and national wealth were developed and agreed internationally so that international comparisons between countries could be made. I think that this is a very ambitious programme and it has a very long way to go. I personally think that the subjective element is just one aspect of it, and it would be very important to have elements that measure health, education, security, liberty and various other things of that kind. Whether they can all be put together to make a single index is, I think, a very open question, but I guess in the 1920s or in the late 19th century it would have seemed inconceivable that you would be able to compare different countries’ incomes and their stock of wealth, but nevertheless that system, for all its imperfections, has been developed by statisticians and economists.

Jil Matheson: May I add one point? The ONS will not stop publishing GDP and all those other measures. This is not a replacement; it is an addition. Nor will other countries, so it is not a replacement.

Q42 Chair: But can you give an example of the sort of things that you might be measuring that might result in different policies and an example of what

10 May 2011 Sir Michael Scholar, KCB, Jil Matheson and Richard Aldritt

those different policies would be? I might give an example that divorce makes people unhappy, and if you measure people being unhappy, it might then result in a strengthening of family policy.

Jil Matheson: It would be up to the politicians to decide what the policy is that flows from this.

Q43 Chair: But doesn't my question demonstrate how subjective and political it all is? Family policy just tears apart the political consensus, doesn't it?

Jil Matheson: That does not invalidate the need for information to inform your political tearing apart, as you put it.

Q44 Paul Flynn: Does not history show that equality is the main factor in deciding happiness? You mentioned the 1940s, Sir Michael. As a child of the 1930s and 1940s, I remember in those times that the lack of choice and the shared misery—it was equal shared misery—led to a general level of contentment, whereas the inequalities of prosperity and higher GDP made people unhappy. For example, when communism collapsed in Hungary, the suicide rate went up—they had all been in the same boat before then. Equality is the main factor. I am sorry to be getting on to this.

Chair: It is all right, but what is the question?

Paul Flynn: Should not we ask people whether they feel equal in society and whether society is being fair? That would be a far better measure of happiness than GDP.

Sir Michael Scholar: I think it is an enormous and, as I said, ambitious programme. If it is to be successful, its authors will also want it to be an international programme—they will want to be able to make international comparisons of well-being. To secure international agreement on the kinds of points we have been talking about would clearly be a tall order.

Q45 Chair: So do you think that your index would be able to indicate whether the Government should be seeking to make people more free or more equal? Would that be an outcome of this index?

Paul Flynn: America or Scandinavia.

Chair: It is about whether we go towards a Scandinavian system or an American system?

Sir Michael Scholar: I think people would make very different uses of it. They would make all kinds of uses of it, as they do of measures of GDP, measures of earnings and measures of prices and income. They make all kinds of political points based on this information, but they are glad to have the information.

Q46 Chair: Will not different countries try to manipulate their happiness index to show that they are happier than their rivals, rather like East Germany did with their GDP figures?

Sir Michael Scholar: Yes.

Jil Matheson: That is why you have independent statistics offices doing this stuff.

Q47 Alun Cairns: Can I come back to the Chair's question about where you were seeking to gain a policy consequence out of the information that was

gleaned? Is there any one international example that you can come up with whereby, as a result of information that was thrown out of the happiness index, there was a shift in public policy?

Jil Matheson: I think it is very early days. We have not even got our data; we will not have that until next year. In fact, some other countries are at about the same point as we are. I think that that is a good question, but you should ask us a year or two years from now.

Q48 Alun Cairns: But were we not told at the time that this policy was launched that this had been done in Canada for many years? Is that one example or one nation we can look to to see where there has been a shift in public policy?

Jil Matheson: I do not know of shifts in public policy in Canada, I am afraid.

Paul Flynn: Can we go on to pre-release, Chair?

Q49 Chair: Before we leave this well-being stuff, isn't there something rather authoritarian about the state measuring the happiness of the population and then telling the population how happy they are, when in fact how happy you are is a matter for individuals in their own circumstances? If a whole community is being put out of work, obviously that community will be unhappy. What is this going to tell us that we do not already know, because we are dealing with our fellow human beings?

Sir Michael Scholar: I could turn the question against you if we go back to income and wealth. People could have made precisely that point in 1860: "What is the point of knowing what the national income is? All we are interested in is our own wealth and income, and those of our neighbours." Nevertheless, most people now think it has been useful to have some measure of our national income and growth, and the comparisons with that of neighbouring countries and countries that have other systems.

Q50 Robert Halfon: But it is easy to measure income and wealth, because you are clear what you are measuring, whereas if you are measuring happiness, it is completely subjective.

Sir Michael Scholar: There are considerable problems about measuring income, aren't there?

Chair: Not really. Mine is published.

Jil Matheson: Being subjective does not mean it is not an issue.

Kelvin Hopkins: But a lot of it can be done with objective measures such as obesity—the number of children who are massively overweight—mental ill health, even among young people, and illnesses of various kinds. There are objective measures that you can build into it rather than saying, "How happy do you feel?" That depends on individual nature as much as anything else. I happen to be a happy person but I know people who are not as happy as me, just because that is their nature.

Chair: I am going to watch this issue very carefully.

Q51 Greg Mulholland: Could I ask you, Sir Michael, if you share the concerns expressed by the

10 May 2011 Sir Michael Scholar, KCB, Jil Matheson and Richard Alldritt

RSS about the standing of statistics as a profession in the civil service?

Sir Michael Scholar: I have had real concerns about the standing of statisticians in government, and I believe that the Statistics and Registration Service Act and the creation of the Authority have enabled us to strengthen the position of such statisticians. I think that that has happened over the past three years. I have been concerned about it, and I remain concerned about it, but I think we have made some progress in this respect.

Q52 Greg Mulholland: You recommend giving more weight to the reporting line between the departmental heads of profession and the National Statistician. Do you think that is sufficient in addressing this issue?

Sir Michael Scholar: I think it would make a big difference. As you may know, I wrote to the Prime Minister in May last year and asked him if he would make three changes to strengthen the position of statisticians in Government Departments. One of my proposals was that before any significant changes could be made to the statistical capability of a Department, or any major changes to its statistical output, the Department would be obliged to secure the agreement of the National Statistician. That would be going back to a system that pertained in this country during the time that Claus Moser was head of the Central Statistical Office. I asked the Prime Minister if he would go back to that system, which would be something that he could do through administrative action without any need for legislation or for any additional expenditure. I also asked him if he would accept the proposals we had made on pre-release access.

My third proposal to him was that he should give the Authority a place in the decision making about cuts in statistical capability across the whole Government. Recognising, in the difficult fiscal position that the Government were and are now in, that there were going to be cuts, we felt it was very important that the Statistics Authority, with a view right across the scene of the whole statistical system, should be brought into the process of decision making about where cuts should be made. I put that in a letter to the Prime Minister and if, as I hoped, he accepted those recommendations, he would strengthen the position of statisticians in Departments materially.

Q53 Greg Mulholland: Thirty years ago, senior statisticians in Government Departments were at director level; none of them are now. The RSS has said that they find “this loss of capability alarming”. Do you think that that is a result of the lack of priority that Government are giving, or are there other reasons for that happening over the past 30 years?

Sir Michael Scholar: When Governments cut public expenditure, I think that they always try to preserve front-line capability and are very tempted to cut policy analysis. I believe that the statistical service has been cut disproportionately in the past 30 or 40 years, and I think the RSS is quite right to point out that the number of senior statisticians has been greatly reduced. If we look at the number of Fast Stream

entrants to the statistical service, that has also been greatly reduced. If we compare the membership of the Government Statistical Service with the Government Economic Service, the statistical service is very much outnumbered by the economic service. Over this period, we have seen a big reduction in statistical capability at the same time as we have seen a big increase in the number of special advisers and political advisers in Departments, some of whom are paid at very significantly high levels.

Q54 Chair: Do you think this is reflected in the politicisation of information?

Sir Michael Scholar: I do. When I saw that this Bill was going through Parliament, I felt very glad about it—it was one of the reasons why I put my name forward to become Chair of the Statistics Authority—because I felt that it gave us an opportunity to reverse some of that direction.

Q55 Paul Flynn: There was a great deal of enthusiasm for the Bill at the time, as you rightly say, but one of the disadvantages of the Bill that Parliament delivered to you was this dual function in which you are the producer of statistics and also responsible for the scrutiny of what you produce yourself and the statistics produced by other Government Departments. Do you think the Chinese wall that you put in—with Lord Rowe-Beddoe taking a slightly removed position—is working? Does there need to be a change in the air to ensure that there is a division between the two functions?

Sir Michael Scholar: It has been a difficulty that we have wrestled with. The Act did not specifically prescribe two deputy chairmen, but it did not prevent us from seeking the appointment of two deputy chairmen. The decision to do so permitted us some separation—as much separation, in fact, as I think it is possible to achieve. I would say that, in the main, it has worked well. There were of course those who at the outset said that it could not work and that we would never, as a regulatory Authority, criticise ourselves as an Authority as a producer of statistics. In fact, we have done so on a number of occasions, as I think you have probably noticed.

Q56 Paul Flynn: One of the things I recall very strongly from the passage of the Act through Parliament was the main contentious issue of pre-release. I believe that the Lords took the opinion that there should be no pre-release period. The Conservatives’ policy in opposition was that they did not want a pre-release period and the Government defended it. Now the Opposition and the Government have changed scripts. We now have Mr Maude defending pre-release, quite extraordinarily. There really is a strong argument to say that Governments in the past have used the 24 hours pre-release to spin the facts and to give their gloss—they have an advantage over someone else. Other countries do it in a different way with no pre-release period or a three-hour period. What is your view now? Should we get rid of it altogether?

Sir Michael Scholar: My view is that we should get rid of it altogether. Our report recommended that there

10 May 2011 Sir Michael Scholar, KCB, Jil Matheson and Richard Aldritt

should be a maximum of three hours and that the norm should be considerably less than that. My personal view is that there should be none. I do not see why we have to have it; I have never understood a single reason why we have to have pre-release access. It is convenient for political advisers and Ministers. I think it is damaging to the credibility of the statistics that are produced by Government. Even if there is never any spinning going on, the public think that because Ministers have these figures, it is likely that there is a manipulation of the figures. We have seen that in a number of cases. When there was the televised debate between the party leaders during the election campaign, the then Prime Minister was aware of a number of economic statistics ahead of those with whom he was debating, which I think was an uncomfortable situation for him as well as for them. Then we have seen in recent weeks a situation in which the Chancellor was aware of the GDP figures that were about to be published by the ONS and, in giving his appraisal of the economic situation to the Cabinet, there were fears and accusations that he had disclosed the figure that had been given to him on a pre-release confidential basis.

Q57 Chair: So are you saying that the Chancellor of the Exchequer cannot disclose pre-release information even to the Cabinet?

Sir Michael Scholar: No, he cannot. Under his own pre-release access orders, he is prohibited from passing on that information.

Q58 Chair: Is it your understanding he did so on this occasion?

Sir Michael Scholar: No, no. I have seen no evidence that he did so. I do not believe that he did so, but there were a number of people who thought that he had, so there was some suspicion about his position that would not have existed if there was no pre-release access.

Q59 Chair: But would it be released to special advisers?

Sir Michael Scholar: Well, it is released to special advisers.

Q60 Chair: On a pre-release basis?

Sir Michael Scholar: Yes, they are on the list.

Q61 Chair: So how much confidence do you have that the rather jejune political community that is special advisers is as disciplined as, say, your former civil service colleagues in the Treasury?

Sir Michael Scholar: Well, the ONS produces the RPI and the CPI, and I must tell you that I am alarmed that—I am told—there are more than 50 people on the ONS pre-release access list in the Treasury, the Bank of England, No. 10 and the Deputy Prime Minister's office. I do not know why more than 50 people have to see the RPI before it comes out.

Q62 Paul Flynn: That sounds like a step backwards rather than the progressive move that the statistical world had hoped for from the Act—that we would get rid of pre-release and that that would absolve anyone

of these accusations of spinning, bias and so on. You have made representations to the Government on this. Do you think that we as a Committee really have to say to Government, “You really must do what you promised in opposition—let's get rid of this pre-release period because it is not helping to build confidence in national statistics”?

Sir Michael Scholar: I would think that a very appropriate thing for the Committee to decide to do.

Q63 Chair: Are there elements of the civil service that are obstructing this reform? Do you think that your former colleagues in the Treasury are unhappy about losing pre-release, or is it purely a political matter? I am asking you to make quite a controversial statement.

Sir Michael Scholar: I do not think it is simply Ministers and special advisers, no.

Q64 Chair: At the moment, there does not appear to be consensus in the Cabinet on abolishing pre-release or even limiting it.

Sir Michael Scholar: As I understand it, a firm decision was taken in July not to abolish pre-release access—so I was told by Francis Maude.

Chair: Which is contrary to his aspirations as expressed in his own personal statements. Is there anything more on pre-release?

Q65 Paul Flynn: Just a final thing. Do you think that confidence in statistics has been improved since 2007? Are the Act and your Authority really working?

Sir Michael Scholar: It is very hard to say that confidence has increased. It is very difficult to find hard evidence of that.

Chair: Sorry, this is Alun's question. Do you want to deal with that public confidence issue now?

Alun Cairns: That is fine. I will listen to the answer from Sir Michael first, if that is okay, before I add a supplementary.

Sir Michael Scholar: I think that confidence and trust in the statistical system have multiple sources and I think, if there has been a reduction in public trust in the Government, in authority and in Parliament, and the institutions of government and Parliament, confidence and trust in statistics will suffer. I suspect that that is what has happened in recent years, and I believe on the basis of the surveys we have done that there has been no improvement in trust in official statistics as we have measured it. But against that, I would say that the actions we have taken as an Authority over the past three years have led a number of people who follow these things closely to believe that there has been an improvement in the integrity of the figures and of the statistical releases, and I believe that that indeed is the case. I hope that, in time, that increased confidence will communicate itself to others.

Q66 Alun Cairns: Can you tell me the most important actions you have taken that have made the biggest difference?

Sir Michael Scholar: I think it goes back to December 2008, when the Authority criticised the then Prime Minister's office and the Home Office for

10 May 2011 Sir Michael Scholar, KCB, Jil Matheson and Richard Aldritt

the way in which they published some material on knife crime. If you look back at that episode, you will see that the Prime Minister's office issued an apology and the Home Secretary made an apology in the House of Commons for what had happened. Very importantly, the Cabinet Secretary sent some very important guidance about statistics around Whitehall at the end of January. That guidance told all officials—not simply press offices, Ministers' offices and political advisers, but all civil servants—that they had to abide by the terms and the provisions of the Code of Practice for statistics, that they had to consult professional statisticians in their Departments before putting out statistical material, that they had to accept that the word of professional statisticians on these matters was final, and that they must not publish selectively from unpublished datasets numerical or statistical material that was politically convenient. He produced that guidance and I think that it has had a considerable effect in Whitehall.

Q67 Alun Cairns: Can I go back to the period leading up to December 2008? That was quite an unprecedented act by the Statistics Authority. Were there various protestations made within government before you went public and took that bold move?

Sir Michael Scholar: Yes. The head of profession in the NHS Information Centre protested about the use of these statistics before they had been quality assured and before they were ready to be published. They were not due to be published for several months. He protested about the selective use of them.

Q68 Alun Cairns: Excuse me for interrupting, but I am trying to get at not only those statistics specifically, but the trend of the misuse of statistics by Government Ministers. Was the Statistics Authority objecting to or privately complaining about the way that they were being used before you took the bold move to go public and criticise them in the way that you did? What I am trying to lead on to is: are we at any stage following that same path, yet with the new Administration, where you may well be flagging up some early concerns because statistics might not be being used in the way that you would like them to be?

Sir Michael Scholar: Well, I very much hope not, because I think the situation was greatly changed by the guidance that the Cabinet Secretary sent round to which I referred. That guidance is still in force under the coalition Government. Furthermore, it has been strengthened, because at the suggestion of the Statistics Authority—I wrote a letter to the Cabinet Secretary—a paragraph was put in the Ministerial Code of Conduct to enjoin Ministers to abide by the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, so there is now a very clear mechanism that should prevent the kind of situation that took place in December 2008 from happening again—I hope it will not.

Q69 Alun Cairns: What further role could the Statistics Authority play in ensuring greater confidence and developing greater confidence in the statistics that are being shared?

Sir Michael Scholar: If the Government were to accept the three suggestions that I made in my letter

to the Prime Minister—giving a greater role to the National Statistician on professional matters; giving a greater role to the Authority on budgetary matters; and abolishing pre-release access—which are the three things that the Authority has consistently been asking for since early last year, the trustworthiness and credibility of statistics would be improved.

Q70 Chair: The only thing I would press you on in that is that aren't there public expenditure implications to your second recommendation? It is about resourcing the statistical service across the Government more fully than it is currently resourced.

Sir Michael Scholar: We are not asking for special treatment for statistics in the expenditure exercise. We are not defending the statistical service against budgetary cuts; we are not in that situation. The situation we are in is to say that if cuts are being made and the Government wish to cut expenditure—and that is a matter for the Government; it is not a matter for us—please give us the opportunity to comment before it is done. The most powerful reason we have for that is that a cut in one Department's statistical work can disproportionately affect the work done by another Department, or a statistical series that is not put out by that Department. We have had one example of that in recent weeks, in which the NHS Information Centre proposed to reduce its contribution to the General Lifestyle Survey, which would have the effect of ending several very important series of statistics on smoking, drinking and experience of the National Health Service.

Q71 Chair: Jil Matheson, if the Authority is not consulted, are you consulted about these changes, or do the departmental silos operate in isolation from each other?

Jil Matheson: I do my best, but one of my concerns, exactly as Michael has said, is the fact that departmental silos do operate in that way, of course, because that is where the budgets are held and the decisions are made. I think one of the things that has changed, and one of the impacts that the Statistics Authority has had, is that there is wider recognition of the requirement to consult publicly on changes to statistical work programmes, but nevertheless that is still done on a departmental basis. I certainly try to encourage statisticians across Government to consult each other, but there is no requirement that they should do so.

Q72 Robert Halfon: I have no problem with your criticism of Governments and I think it is probably a good thing, but could I just ask how you made those decisions to come out publicly and criticise Government statistics? Is it decided by you? Do you have a meeting? Is there a set of guidelines that you follow when you do this?

Sir Michael Scholar: We have the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. It has various, very clear clauses. Under "Principle 3: Integrity", it says, "Ensure that those producing statistical reports are protected from any political pressures that might influence the production or presentation of the statistics".

10 May 2011 Sir Michael Scholar, KCB, Jil Matheson and Richard Alldritt

Q73 Robert Halfon: But that is different from making the actual decision to come out publicly. Because you are an independent body—which is right—your word is seen as the law, in essence, so when you come out and criticise a Government of whatever persuasion, it is seen as a massive criticism of that Government. How do you make the decision to come out in that particular way?

Sir Michael Scholar: It is a difficult decision to make. It requires statistical analysis; I need to understand the statistics, what has been said about them and what has been done—the statistical facts, as it were. There is also a political element that must come into my judgment. The Authority has no powers of enforcement under the Act. It has no powers, as other regulatory authorities have, to fine people or to disqualify them from carrying out their business—we have none of that. Our only power is to make a report to Parliament and to the public. So, we can make a report, but if we were to make a report every day or every week, nobody would take the slightest notice of us. We have to judge when an intervention will be effective.

Q74 Robert Halfon: Is it you who makes that decision or is it your board or your colleagues? Is it done in the same way each time?

Chair: Mr Alldritt might like to comment on this, as your principal adviser on the scrutiny of statistics.

Sir Michael Scholar: Yes.

Richard Alldritt: Certainly I am involved in those decisions and, as Sir Michael says, there is a process. There are so many dimensions to this. There are questions such as how sure we are of the facts. If we are talking about a statement that has been made in Parliament or in the media that we think misrepresents the underlying statistics, is there a consensus among the experts that what was said is actually incorrect, and is it sufficiently serious to be worth correcting publicly? There is a whole set of considerations of that kind. There is a process of drawing this information together and setting it before the Chairman and the other relevant members of the Authority and reaching a consensus on whether to proceed. It is also true that on occasion we indicate to a Government Department that we are concerned about a particular use of statistics and that we would like reassurance on particular points, and we get that reassurance and we leave it there.

Sir Michael Scholar: If I may just add to that, we very often act through phone calls and contacts with the Department. A big public letter or interview is not the first thing one does; it is the last thing one does. You try to ensure that there is compliance with the Code of Practice, that people understand the Code and that you bring it to their attention. I think in many cases we have seen that action of that kind has been effective.

Q75 Chair: Sir Michael, I think that this Committee would like to know on every occasion that you, the Authority or Mr Alldritt feels that there has been a breach of the code or that some other legitimate concern has been uncovered about the quality of statistics or the way in which that statistics have been

used in Government—rather more like a regulatory Authority. Is that beyond your resources?

Sir Michael Scholar: No it isn't. What you have just described is in fact our intention and our practice. It is just that I wanted to say to the Committee that we do not go out at every breach with a huge statement and attempt to seek the headlines. That is not our intention at all. We want to be effective, but we very much recognise the obligation to report to Parliament, and that is to this Committee.

Q76 Robert Halfon: But it is you and the board that make that final decision about whether to fire the gun, in essence.

Sir Michael Scholar: Well, if there is time, I would certainly involve the whole board, but sometimes one has to act quickly. Certainly I would say that the actions I have taken have always been endorsed or agreed by the board.

Q77 Robert Halfon: What happens if it is very near an election—I do not mean in the purdah itself, but two or three months before? Your intervention publicly could be incredibly damaging to either the political party or the Government concerned. Is that taken into consideration when you make these decisions?

Sir Michael Scholar: I do not want to engage in party political debate. I do not think it is appropriate for the Authority or for me to do so. Similarly, however, if there is a serious breach in the way in which statistics are being handled and produced, I would not think myself to be prevented from making that public simply because an election was impending. I do not think that would be correct.

Q78 Alun Cairns: Can I press you a little bit further? I think it is right and fair that that judgment should be made on any Government. Do you also think that it is your role to make a similar judgment on the Opposition if they are also misinterpreting your statistics?

Sir Michael Scholar: That is a very vexed question. Our role, as set out in detail in the Act, is to deal with the production and publication of official statistics. That means that most of our regulatory work and public utterances are directed towards the producers of official statistics: the Government. However, we also have the ability under the Act to comment on statistical matters generally. That presents quite a dilemma for us because every day in the newspapers, and on radio and television, statistics are misquoted, and used selectively and in a way that perhaps damages their credibility. If we commented on everything, I think that we would need 10 times as many staff, and I think it would be rather pointless because people would take no notice of us. The kind of test we have set ourselves is to comment on Opposition spokesmen or on media use when the effect of what has been said is to do serious damage, in our judgment, to the integrity of the official statistics that we are there to safeguard. That has meant that we have criticised Opposition voices from time to time, but probably rather less than the Government of the day would have liked.

10 May 2011 Sir Michael Scholar, KCB, Jil Matheson and Richard Alldritt

Q79 Paul Flynn: Could we look at the effect of cuts on jobs? Will you remind me of the number of jobs that were originally expected to be moved from this area to Newport, and the number of jobs that actually were relocated?

Sir Michael Scholar: I have not got those figures at the front of my mind.

Jil Matheson: The plan was to move 700 ONS jobs from London—mainly to Newport, but also a few to the Titchfield office. That relocation programme is now complete. There have not been 700 jobs because of the intervention of efficiency savings, cuts and so on.

Q80 Paul Flynn: How many have there been?

Jil Matheson: It is hard to say, because there have also been changes in the Newport staffing, but it is something like 500.

Q81 Chair: What percentage of the statistics work force is that?

Jil Matheson: Of the total? There is a total of just over 3,000 staff, including 1,000 interviewers, all over the country.

Chair: So it is about 15% of your staff.

Q82 Paul Flynn: Are you expecting any job losses as a result of the 20% cuts?

Jil Matheson: There will be a reduction in staffing in the ONS, and that is partly because of the run-down of census operations, so there is a big build-up around 2011–12.

Q83 Chair: So it is a cyclical thing.

Jil Matheson: Yes. All those people are on fixed-term appointments, but the total number of jobs will go down.

Q84 Paul Flynn: What kind of percentage?

Jil Matheson: I have not got those numbers, but I can let you have them. There will be a reduction in the total numbers. We think, certainly for Newport, that we certainly ought to be able to manage the reduction as a result of the spending review without compulsory redundancy, and probably without redundancy.

Q85 Paul Flynn: You obviously have a responsibility to defend the jobs of your employees, but do you think you have a responsibility for continuing the policy that was followed by all Governments up until recently of it being desirable to relocate jobs from the overheated south-east of England to places such as Newport, Scotland and so on?

Chair: Newport being Mr Flynn's constituency.

Paul Flynn: If the cuts are being imposed that way, is it likely to frustrate that regional policy that has, as I say, been pursued and accepted as desirable by all Governments?

Jil Matheson: I do not want to comment on overall policy. For the ONS, our relocation programme is complete. We have now moved all the posts that are there to be moved, so in London we are now down to fewer than 50 staff, which is what we said we were going to do.

Q86 Paul Flynn: I do not want to put words in your mouth, but how successful has it been? How has it gone? Is it something that you think was worth while and beneficial in every way? There was a lot of criticism at the time that this would be very damaging.

Jil Matheson: Yes, and very difficult for a lot of individuals who had to make their choices. However, I think that the ONS ought to be very proud of the fact that it has managed to maintain the production of its key statistics, that it has transferred that work, and that it has been able to recruit and develop, and to provide opportunities for staff who were already in Newport and for new staff.

Chair: Mr Flynn, we do want to get on to the terms and conditions of the new Chairman of the UKSA, but can we just tidy up other areas first? Mr Hopkins, do you want to ask anything more about cuts in the service?

Q87 Kelvin Hopkins: A general point about cuts, but before that, we are very much your Select Committee, so may I say that even though you may think that public confidence in you has not increased, I have great confidence, particularly since Sir Michael has been Chair? I am a statistics anorak; I have studied it and indeed taught it. I think it is important that we say we are your Committee in the same sense as we are the Committee for the ombudsman. From time to time we have had to defend the ombudsman and her reports, and hopefully we can do the same for you as well.

Sir Michael Scholar: Thank you very much.

Kelvin Hopkins: However, there is some concern that we are losing valuable time series through the cuts being imposed by the Government. Can you assure us that we have not lost time series—I know you mentioned one or two, about health in particular—that we should really keep?

Sir Michael Scholar: Well, no, I do not think we can give you that assurance. What we can say to you is that we will report to you on the matter. We have begun a series of Statistical Expenditure Reports. Although the Government have not been willing to bring us into the process of cutting expenditure on statistics, we have decided that we will do what we can through the good offices of Jil Matheson giving as much information as she can to us. Where we have concerns about the discontinuing of a particular series or the dismantling of some statistical capability in some Department, we will write a report and submit it to you for your attention. We did so recently on the Citizenship Survey, where as you perhaps recall I wrote to Mr Pickles and suggested that he think again before cutting that survey. He has not agreed, by the way—he has rejected our request.

Kelvin Hopkins: Perhaps we can take that up, Chair. I wanted to come to some specifics on the RPI and CPI.

Q88 Chair: We will come to that in a moment. Can I just ask you, on cuts, have you been able to help the Government to find reductions in spending among the statistical service?

Sir Michael Scholar: There is a survey called the Place Survey that the Government have decided to discontinue, and we are about to produce a report on

that. I think it is likely to say that we think that that is a justified cut, because on a cost-benefit basis, one can see why the Government would want to save money there.

Jil Matheson: I think there are two things. There have been things that have been cut, and some of those decisions have been made on the basis of a good understanding of the impact of that. The other thing I would say is that there is opportunity. Part of this is finding opportunities to do things in different ways, and there are quite a lot of initiatives, for example, in seeing whether there are administrative data that could be used instead of going out and collecting data again from businesses or households. There are therefore innovations in the way in which data that already exist are used as part of the programme, both within the ONS and across Departments.

Q89 Chair: On the question of resources—and, indeed, public confidence—how is the decentralisation of statistics going? In particular, we know that the crime survey has been moved out of the Home Office. Is that a cheaper way of doing things? Is it going to improve public confidence?

Sir Michael Scholar: I do not think that it will be undertaken in order to achieve an economy; I think it will be undertaken in order to improve public confidence in crime statistics. I think that is why the Home Secretary has announced that she wants that to happen. Jil Matheson is at the moment working out, at the Home Secretary's request, where these statistics should go. I think they are very likely to come to the ONS.

Jil Matheson: Yes.

Q90 Kelvin Hopkins: There has been some criticism that the RPI and CPI indices not only that they are a poor way of measuring inflation, but that they have been poorly constructed. Have you got any thoughts or comments on that?

Sir Michael Scholar: Perhaps I could ask Richard Aldritt to speak on one aspect of this. The Authority recently published its assessment of the RPI and the CPI and made a number of criticisms of these two indices which, as you know, are produced by the ONS. This is another case, to go back to Mr Flynn's point, of the Authority criticising itself. Richard.

Richard Aldritt: Thank you, Sir Michael. We have published two reports. One is a regular assessment report against the Code of Practice, and the other is what is called a monitoring brief on communicating inflation. I think the main points are first of all that the Authority has said publicly that the consumer prices index needs to be enhanced by information about housing costs. We recognise that both the RPI and CPI are needed; they have different histories. The retail prices index is very much an established index—it is written into legislation and so on and is needed for those purposes—whereas the CPI is the internationally comparable index. We would like to see better explanation in public about the differences between the indices and the reasons for them. We have proposed there should be consultation on issues like the demand for regional indices and indices for particular household types—pensioners and so on—

and generally an improvement in communication and explanation. It is not an ideal world to have two indices measuring inflation and showing rather different trends at times, and quite a lot more explanation is needed on that. There are several recommendations and there is a programme of work in hand on that.

Q91 Kelvin Hopkins: With two indices, the Government can opportunistically choose the one that is most convenient to them for uprating purposes, which has caused some political friction from time to time. Should the proceedings of the Consumer Prices Advisory Committee be more open, public and transparent?

Sir Michael Scholar: It is a committee that advises the National Statistician, so I think I would like to leave her to comment on that.

Jil Matheson: Yes is the short answer. It is a committee that brings together lots of experts who advise on the priorities for development and also discuss the technical composition of the indices. I am aware that there has been a request for the committee to operate more publicly. We have already started doing that; we are now publishing papers, minutes and so on, on the ONS website so that we can respond to the interest that there is and encourage people to be interested in what we are doing.

Q92 Kelvin Hopkins: There is another factor in this, of course: international comparisons. It is very important to have a genuine measure of real inflation in each country so that we know we are getting our macro-economic policies right and so on. Do we look at the international comparators?

Jil Matheson: Yes. Indeed the CPI is the one that is determined by international standards. We get reviewed internationally, too, to make sure that we are compliant with the way other countries measure.

Kelvin Hopkins: A flippant comment, if you like. You suggested that the Government economic service had mushroomed and yet it is constantly incompetent. It has made a complete mess of our economy over several decades, in my view, and special advisers have been mischievous as well as incompetent. Why do we not suggest that the Government reduce the size of their economic service and spend a little bit more on the statistical service? I would do that.

Q93 Chair: Can we move on?

Sir Michael, this session has underlined the importance of the work of the Authority and indeed the importance of your role as Chairman. But, to be blunt, you were originally appointed on the basis of three days a week at £150,000 a year. That was subsequently reduced to £100,000 and it is proposed by the Government to reduce the time commitment to two days a week and reduce the salary to £57,000 a year on the basis, as Francis Maude told us, that people do not take public sector jobs like this for the money. Do you have any comment on this?

Sir Michael Scholar: I was concerned when I heard that the advertisement for my successor would be in terms of two days a week and £57,000. I was concerned that it might have an adverse effect on the

10 May 2011 Sir Michael Scholar, KCB, Jil Matheson and Richard Alldritt

quality of the people who put themselves forward. I have no idea about that, because I am not part of the process. I was also concerned that it would be seen as an indication of the Government's regard for the Authority and that it would be taken as a sign that the Government thought that the Authority was not really very important.

Q94 Chair: So what in fact motivated you to take the job? Would you have taken it at £57,000 a year and two days a week?

Sir Michael Scholar: Very hard to say. I was motivated to take the job for the kinds of reasons I explained in reply to earlier questions from Mr Halfon and Mr Flynn. I felt that the Statistics Act gave us the opportunity of turning the tide or moving against developments in government that I personally deplored, and I believe that that has been something that we have been able to do. But I was also aware when I put my name forward that it was going to be a very significant job—a significant commitment of time and energy. It is always hard to know what role money plays in such decisions, but I was concerned to hear that the salary was going to be £57,000.

Q95 Chair: Of course, this is to link the salary to the Prime Minister's salary. Will Hutton's fair pay review stated, "The Government should refrain from using the pay of the Prime Minister or other politicians as a benchmark for the remuneration of senior public servants, whose pay should reflect their due desert and be proportional to the weight of their roles and their performance." To either of the professional statisticians sitting either side of you: is the Prime Ministerial benchmark a suitable way of deciding a salary of this nature? Or is that a little bit too hot to handle?

Jil Matheson: I think that is for Government to decide.

Q96 Chair: Mr Alldritt, in your professional opinion?

Richard Alldritt: I agree with the National Statistician on that point.

Chair: But I think we have it in black and white from an independent source.

Paul Flynn: It is clearly a downgrading of the post to reduce it in that way. We are trying to cope with this self-described Maoist egalitarianism of the Government of everyone cut down to the same level, presumably wearing blue boiler suits in the future. We have the evidence from Francis Maude, who told us that money did not matter in jobs, which may not be the case. Those who are the sons of former Cabinet Ministers are in this world where money does not matter, but in the real world money is a major determinant in people's jobs and accepting jobs, even at this level. To advertise it at £57,000 when previously it was £150,000 suggests that you do not believe the job is that important. With the other evidence coming in about pre-release and so on, the worry must be there that the Government do not have their heart in ensuring that the Statistics Authority does its task in the future—they want to undermine it, perhaps.

Q97 Chair: Would this salary put you below the salary level of any of the special advisers?

Sir Michael Scholar: It is very considerably below the level of a number of special advisers.

Q98 Chair: Pro-rated at two days a week?

Sir Michael Scholar: Well, I do not accept that this job should be described as a two day a week job; I believe it should be described as a three day a week job.

Chair: Well, can we go on to the time commitment, which is a very important question?

Q99 Alun Cairns: Sir Michael, we have heard what you have just stated, but Francis Maude told the Committee that you had asked for the days to be reduced from three to two. How can I reconcile both statements?

Sir Michael Scholar: When I was appointed, it was envisaged that after a setting-up period—when the work of setting up the Authority had been accomplished—the time commitment might go down from three to two days a week, and it was envisaged that at that point there would be a discussion with the Cabinet Office Minister about whether I should be on three or two days a week. What happened was that before the election, under the previous Government, the then Cabinet Office Minister decided, against my wishes and against my advice, that my time commitment should be reduced from three to two days a week, and my salary reduced commensurately.

Q100 Alun Cairns: Can I be clear on that? You asked the previous Cabinet Office Minister to reduce it?

Sir Michael Scholar: I asked that it should not be reduced.

Alun Cairns: Should not be reduced.

Sir Michael Scholar: Because I had experienced no diminution in the amount of work, time and energy that I had to put into the job over that period of time.

Q101 Alun Cairns: So the statement by the current Cabinet Office Minister is inaccurate. Is that right?

Sir Michael Scholar: If that is what he said, it is inaccurate.

Q102 Alun Cairns: Thank you very much. Can I clarify that you still think that the job should be three days a week? Do you recognise that the job has changed from setting up the Authority now to running the Authority?

Sir Michael Scholar: The job has changed, without any question, but the time commitment has not changed. It is a complex job. These statistical matters require a considerable amount of attention and care. There are lots of bear traps and it is necessary to put a good deal of time into this job.

Q103 Alun Cairns: Finally, then, what are the main challenges for the next three years, and what skills would your successor need to deliver the objectives?

Sir Michael Scholar: I think we have covered some of the important challenges. I think that the whole question of the future of the census is a very important

10 May 2011 Sir Michael Scholar, KCB, Jil Matheson and Richard Aldritt

challenge for my successor in doing all that can be done to make progress to a more efficient and a more up-to-date record of the population in the way we discussed earlier. I think that would be very important. I think it would also be very important to try to make progress on the three points that I put to the Prime Minister: pre-release access; a stronger central role for the National Statistician; and some strengthening of the Authority's oversight of the system as a whole.

Q104 Paul Flynn: How do you suggest that we approach the pre-appointment hearing when we get the candidate along and ask her or him what motivated them to join? How can we reach a decision on whether, if the salary was being paid at the full rate as it was before, it would have produced a broader range of candidates and perhaps more independent candidates, rather than possibly a list of candidates who are second-raters?

Sir Michael Scholar: I can imagine that that will be a significant task for the Committee. I recall the hearing that the Treasury Committee held when I was appointed. To go back to my opening remarks, I think that the Committee was particularly concerned about whether I would act in an independent way. I think it was concerned, because of my previous background as a permanent secretary, that it would all be very cosy. I imagine that when you interview my successor, wherever he or she comes from, that will be a point that will be pretty much in your minds.

Kelvin Hopkins: There is a very strong and admirable sense of public duty and commitment to the public interest in everything you say, your demeanour and so on, but that should not be taken advantage of by paying below the rate for the job. Indeed, if we are fortunate enough to find someone who is your equal to replace you, we will have to pay the rate for the job, I would suggest, and not take advantage of that commitment to public duty. I think it is very important.

Chair: Well, Sir Michael, unless you or either of your fellow witnesses have any further comments, we shall conclude what has been a very full evidence session. I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to your work as Chair of the Authority and to thank you for your exemplary public service. I do not think that anyone can possibly say that you have not acted with fearless independence—to the annoyance of some of the establishment. It is always best when members of the establishment defect, in the way that you have, to the anti-establishment, and I think that the nation is in your debt for your tremendous service. As we evaluate your successor in our pre-appointment hearing, I can assure you that you have set a very, very high benchmark for that person. You have also created a context for our scrutiny of this that is quite exacting for us as well—we appreciate that—so thank you very much indeed and to your two fellow witnesses.

Sir Michael Scholar: Thank you very much.

Tuesday 28 June 2011

Members present:

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Chair)

Charlie Elphicke
Lindsay Roy
David Heyes

Paul Flynn
Alun Cairns
Kelvin Hopkins

Examination of Witness

Witness: **Professor Dame Janet Finch** gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: May I welcome you, Dame Janet Finch, to this pre-appointment hearing? We call it a “pre-appointment hearing”, though that might be a slight misnomer. In any case, we look forward to hearing what you have to say with regard to your appointment as the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority. I am going to put you slightly on the spot straight away. Is there anything you want to say to us at the outset?

Dame Janet: Is there anything I want to say to you at the outset? Well, I am absolutely delighted to have got to this stage of the appointment process. If my appointment is indeed confirmed, it would be an honour to take up this role, which I think is of exceptional importance to the UK. I did have some knowledge of the process of setting up the Authority, because I was on the board of the Office for National Statistics up to the point when the changes came through. I was always very strongly in favour of a governance and regulatory structure that was independent of Government, and I think the Authority has proved its worth in the three years since it was established. I think there is still an important job of work to do to take it further, and I would be very pleased to be invited by Parliament to do that.

Q2 Chair: What do you think is the most important aspect of the role of the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority?

Dame Janet: To ensure that the Authority fulfils its core remit, which is to secure the integrity and independence of UK official statistics.

Q3 Chair: Presumably you were doing that as a non-executive Director.

Dame Janet: Completely different governance structure—different governance structure, only in relation to the Office for National Statistics and only in an advisory role. This is an entirely different structure, with an Authority that has genuine independence but also some very important functions in relation to the oversight of the system.

Q4 Chair: What do you see as your greatest challenge?

Dame Janet: There are three things that I would identify, if I may—if you would allow me to have a three-part answer to the greatest challenge. To ensure that the Authority is focused on its core functions of maintaining the integrity of UK statistics, which, in the Act, focuses on the quality and the comprehensiveness of the statistical system that

produces official statistics. I think there are some significant challenges there at a time of public expenditure austerity, which I would be happy to elaborate on if you would like me to. I think that making sure that the Authority is focused on those functions is going to be a challenge, but an important one. I also think that there are two other areas that are going to be challenges, and which I would regard as priorities for the Authority. One is to continue the good work that has been started in enhancing public trust in official statistics and also in securing value for money for taxpayer investment. Those are the things that I think are the main challenges and where I would put my priorities.

Q5 Chair: Do you think your predecessor has been regarded as sufficiently independent, because he has sometimes been regarded as too much of an insider?

Dame Janet: I beg to differ. I have seen only comments that have praised his independence and the independence that the Authority has established for itself. This Committee was very complimentary when you met him for his valedictory meeting, so to speak.

Q6 Chair: How would you establish your independence?

Dame Janet: The Authority is independent in that it has a statutory basis for that and it is my role to ensure that that basis is maintained. My personal independence, in a sense, cannot be doubted.

Q7 Chair: Can you give an example of where you have asserted your personal independence?

Dame Janet: On many occasions. I am not a Government insider, so I start from the position that I am delighted to be invited to take this role from the perspective of an outsider, but also a fairly well-informed outsider. Examples of where I have asserted my independence in the past? Well, let me give you one example. When I was a university vice-chancellor, I was invited by my fellow vice-chancellors to take the lead in establishing the Equality Challenge Unit for higher education, at a time when many vice-chancellors felt that that was an unnecessary feature; they felt that the university system was doing well enough in equality and diversity. I was quite clear that the system was not doing well enough and I made sure that we established the support system for equality and diversity to universities, in a robust fashion, which then gained the assent of those fellow vice-chancellors who had been very sceptical about the matter. I think asserting

28 June 2011 Professor Dame Janet Finch

independence is a matter of being clear about what needs to be done, and then doing it in whatever ways become available. Sometimes it is persuasiveness, but sometimes it is straightforwardly making clear statements about the position, which people do not necessarily like.

Q8 Chair: You do see your role as Parliament's public enforcer?

Dame Janet: My role in relation to Parliament is that I report to you—and would be delighted to have the opportunity to report to you—about the charge that I will be given if you confirm it to make sure that the Statistics Authority is independent. I would not necessarily say that enforcer is the only role that independence implies.

Q9 Chair: In what sort of circumstances do you see yourself intervening with ministers, and what would be the manner of your intervention?

Dame Janet: Intervening with ministers? I presume you are thinking about intervening in a way that asserts the Authority's independence. There have been cases in the past, and there may be cases in the future, where Government Departments use statistics in a way that is not justified to draw conclusions that are potentially misleading or even damaging. Those are quite clearly the circumstances where such interventions have been necessary in the past and may be necessary in the future. I would make a judgment about whether it was necessary, in any given circumstances, to do that. You cannot necessarily say that, every time there is a slightly misleading comment from a Government Department, it is appropriate to object to a minister. But if there are such occasions that are misleading and damaging, then I think it is essential that that happens.

Q10 Chair: Do you think the reputation of UK statistics is good enough?

Dame Janet: It is probably not sufficiently well known. For those who know about the Authority—do you mean the general system rather than the Authority?

Q11 Chair: Do you think the reputation that statistics have in the UK is good enough?

Dame Janet: Okay, I apologise; I misunderstood the question.

Chair: That is alright; I perhaps was not clear.

Dame Janet: No. I think we are still living with the legacy of the period when statistics were very much mistrusted and the general public's view, if they thought about it at all, was that the political input to the interpretation of statistics was more important than any factual basis for them.

Q12 Chair: What are the measures that you would take as Chair of UKSA in order to rectify that?

Dame Janet: There are a number of things that are already underway. The very establishment of the Authority is an important step, and has been a very significant process in establishing, for example, a system where we have an assessment system for national statistics, where there is an independent view

taken of the impartiality and fitness for purpose of the different statistical products that come from Government. That is an important groundwork for the independence of the system. But I think that the public understanding of statistics, how they are produced and what they can be used for is an extremely important step that needs to be enhanced further in the future.

Q13 Chair: May I repeat the question? What measures would you take as Chair?

Dame Janet: What measures would I take? I think that the engagement of the general public in understanding and use of official statistics is an objective that I would wish to set for the Authority. The non-expert user of statistics is as important, in my view, as the expert user. We will only get full trust, or as close as we can get to full trust in official statistics, if the whole process of producing and using them becomes much more understood, demystified, is something that people who are interested in finding out about some aspect of the world in which they live, which is important to them, feel that they can get easy access, which they can understand, to impartial and authoritative information.

Q14 Chair: How would you go about that? What specific steps would you take?

Dame Janet: I would, if appointed, challenge my colleagues in the Authority to work together with the Board to find ways of making statistics more publicly accessible and available.

Q15 Chair: For example, there is a whole lot of hidden data, isn't there, that is covered by the Data Protection Acts, which nevertheless could produce very interesting analysis about companies, about individuals. We do not want the personal company details, but they show trends and features of the corporate world and the population, which would be very interesting to the public and perhaps very useful to policymakers. How would you winkle that data out of Government, given that it has to be processed in order to be made public?

Dame Janet: I do not see that as the priority. I do not think lack of data is the problem. I think the problem is the difficulty that people who are not experts feel in accessing information, so that the general public is very much dependent on interpretation of statistics through the media, and through other ways of mediating those pieces of information that are already there. I do not think lack of information is the problem. I think the problem is the accessibility and comprehensibility of information that the general public accesses.

Q16 Chair: Do you not think there are a lot of users of statistics that are hungry for this information? Statistics generally are rather an expert thing. I do not go down to the pub and find people complaining about statistics much. And yet there is an enormous amount of information, which would be released in the public interest for use by expert users, which is not available at the moment.

Dame Janet: I am of course not undervaluing the importance of expert users, and the Authority has

28 June 2011 Professor Dame Janet Finch

already identified the need for the producers of official statistics to engage more directly, regularly and simply with expert users. That is important. But I do think that the fact that statistics—it is the underlying information; it is not the technicalities of how they are produced, or even the detail of what the product is, but the underlying information about our democracy, the sort of economy and society that we are producing by our actions. That information is absolutely vital to a healthy democracy, in my opinion. People need to understand information about the world in which they live. There are things that could probably be accomplished, which are not being accomplished now, in terms of making that information more comprehensible to the non-expert user.

Q17 Chair: Obviously you will take advice from your own staff at UKSA and from the Office for National Statistics, but how will you involve a much wider selection of advice in order to reflect these ambitions of yours?

Dame Janet: I am quite sure that there is a research project, generating somewhere in the background, on how to best ensure public engagement with statistics.

Q18 Chair: It's not so much public engagement. It is engagement with other expert bodies like the Royal Statistical Society, for example.

Dame Janet: Of course the Royal Statistical Society and other interested bodies are already thinking along these lines, actually. The RSS already established an initiative called GetStats, which is designed to work in this space. There are plenty of allies there. There is also a great deal of experience in the scientific community on public engagement in science. The Royal Society, for example, has just established another initiative on public engagement in science, which I think could itself be a collaborative exercise related to statistics. This is pushing at an open door in many ways. Public trust in statistics will never be as full as I would like to see it, while it is regarded as expert only.

Q19 Chair: The point is these organisations are relying on you to push the door open, in a way.

Dame Janet: I would be very happy to do that.

Q20 Charlie Elphicke: Just on a supplementary, it is not surely just about experts looking at statistics. It is not about the great and good and elites just talking to each other. Do you agree with the proposition that it is 'our data', as in the data of each and every one of us? Do you agree with the proposition that we should have data scraping and the massive presentation of statistics, so that every person in an armchair can review what Government does, take an interest and take a view and start debates outside the great and good and expert bodies?

Dame Janet: It follows from what I have been saying that I would wholly welcome debates being started from outside expert bodies. However, I do not think that the simple availability of very complex data sets is in itself enough to produce that. There needs to be effort put into the interpretation and presentation of

complex technical data in a way in which people who are not experts can understand it.

Q21 Chair: It is a prerequisite, is it not?

Dame Janet: That the data is available? Yes, of course.

Q22 Chair: Among Government statisticians, there is a horror that the *Daily Mail* is going to get hold of this raw data and use it for sensationalist purposes, but that is just one of the hazards of living in a free society, is it not?

Dame Janet: A great deal of data is already available actually. I really do not think the lack of availability of data is the main issue, from my point of view.

Q23 Chair: You do not agree with the Government on that—that transparency is a very important step they are taking.

Dame Janet: The Government's Open Data Initiative is about something slightly different from what I am talking about.

Q24 Lindsay Roy: You have a very impressive CV. I would just like to pursue further what experience and expertise you would bring to the challenges of the job. You have given us the big picture of where you see us going. Can you just focus on the experience and the expertise?

Dame Janet: I would point both to my professional background as a social scientist and also to my experience in a chief executive position, as a vice-chancellor of a university, and the substantial non-executive experience I have had in a number of public and not-for-profit bodies. I bring knowledge of running a large complex organisation and all the things that that entails. I bring knowledge of operating at board level in various organisations and I have chaired a number of boards in a non-executive capacity. I understand the governance structure of a board, how to get a board working effectively and make sure that there are good working relationships with the executive, which means that they should be supportive but also challenging. My substantial experience, both as an executive and as a non-executive, is part of what I bring.

The other part of what I bring is as a social scientist. I am not a statistician; I have never been a statistician and I am not claiming technical expertise. I do understand and have had a lifelong interest in the importance of data and information in public life, both in terms of the way in which policy is made and implemented, and also as public information of the sort that I have been talking about. As a social scientist, I have had substantial experience of setting standards for research—chairing a key research council committee, for example. At the moment, I am also charged with the oversight of the Research Excellence Framework, the assessment exercise in universities, for all the social sciences. I am attuned to a number of social research issues, which are parallel to the sorts of issues that the Statistics Authority deals with.

28 June 2011 Professor Dame Janet Finch

Q25 Lindsay Roy: Understandably, you have focused on knowledge and information. If you do not blow your own trumpet, nobody else is going to. Can I ask you about the skill sets that are crucial to this job?

Dame Janet: I have answered it partly, because skill sets are about leading and running a board. I am good at leadership; I have had experience of doing it both as an executive and as a non-executive board chair. I know how to set objectives. I know how to get the best out of people on a board, and also to hold an executive to account. Board-level skills are leadership skills, judgment, wisdom and an ability to get absorbed into an organisation in which you were not previously absorbed.

Q26 Lindsay Roy: How would you characterise your leadership style?

Dame Janet: My leadership style is that I like to be well informed, but I am not too much of a details person. I like to know enough detail, but not too much, so that you do not get drawn into the detail and cannot see the wood for the trees. I like to be well informed. I also like to lead from the front. I like to set an example of the way in which I expect board members to operate. I like to make sure that I have a leading role in setting the strategy for the organisation, but not to have it as a personal blueprint, but to involve other board members and executives in that strategy-setting exercise. Strategy, being well informed, and setting an example.

Q27 Lindsay Roy: And empowering other people who work with you?

Dame Janet: Most certainly. In a recent example of a board that I have recently taken over, I found that the other members of the board were rather frustrated that their expertise was not being used. I have worked that through with them. We have moved to a situation where we have fewer formal meetings but more individual involvement of board members in the business of the company. We did that, for example, by just my listening to what I was hearing, coming in as an outsider, and hearing what the other board members were telling me and then working out the best way to react to that.

Q28 Lindsay Roy: On a narrower front, what do you hope to achieve in the first year in post?

Dame Janet: As well as becoming more familiar with the Authority than I am now, in the first year, I would hope that we would be able to look back and feel that the system of official statistics was stronger, rather than weaker, than when I started. I think that is a significant challenge, because we are going through a period when, particularly in the Departments that are outside the ONS in the Government Statistical Service, we are going to see a potential further diminution of capacity to produce statistics. I am very concerned about that. I think there is a danger that the statistical system is going to be diminished as a result of that, and I would hope that the Authority can play its role, as well as Parliament playing its role, in ensuring that that does not happen.

Q29 Lindsay Roy: When you say 'stronger', do you also imply there greater trust in statistics?

Dame Janet: I would hope we would see continued progress in that area but, in one year, I would not expect to see a dramatic difference.

Q30 Lindsay Roy: In a short period of time, how would you gauge success in the objectives you are setting in terms of the first year?

Dame Janet: I would gauge success in the output of the process that goes on, in any event, in the Authority, and in the assessment processes, the extent to which the Authority's voice is heard in Government, in Parliament and outside. Feedback from various important stakeholders and this Committee would be particularly important in telling me whether you think that that objective has been met.

Q31 Lindsay Roy: Would that be done on an informal or a formal basis, or a combination?

Dame Janet: It is for you to say whether you want to review formally or informally.

Chair: I think we would prefer both.

Dame Janet: Fine.

Q32 Chair: You see yourself as a leader, rather than as a technician.

Dame Janet: Most definitely, yes.

Q33 Chair: Your academic specialism is relationships and personal life. You might have much to teach politicians on that basis.

Dame Janet: You do not want me to comment on that, do you?

Chair: It depends how much you want the job. Some people would say that statistics are, by their very nature, a very technical business. Surely you need to bring that technical frame of mind to this job, even if you see your role as you do.

Dame Janet: One needs to understand the key underlying points, absolutely. I would expect to work hard to make sure that I did, on any particular issue. It is the case that the National Statistician is the professional expert and advises the Authority. In fact, I believe that the Act requires the Authority to take her advice, so I think it would be completely wrong to have the Chair of the Authority second guessing whether the National Statistician has got it right or not. That would actually be outside the provisions of the Act.

Q34 Chair: Have you ever attended the annual conference of national statisticians?

Dame Janet: No.

Q35 Chair: Apart from your role as a non-executive director of ONS, have you ever, in your line of work and various roles you have had, grappled extensively with statistical data? Is that part of your academic discipline as well?

Dame Janet: It depends what you mean by 'grappling extensively'. In my academic discipline, demographic data is bread and butter, and I have used that in some of the research projects that I have done. In running a university, there is a certain degree of statistical data

28 June 2011 Professor Dame Janet Finch

that one needs to use—data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency and so on. As a data user, I have been familiar with the things I needed to be familiar with in my job, but I am not presenting myself as a technical expert.

Q36 David Heyes: Your predecessor in the job, Sir Michael Scholar, was pretty fed up when the previous Government reduced his time commitment for this job from three days a week to two days a week. You are accepting this on a two-day-a-week basis. Is that enough to do what you have already described as a very demanding role?

Dame Janet: Needless to say, I have given this quite a lot of thought and it is quite difficult to make a final judgment about that before starting doing it, if I have the opportunity to start. My view would be that I have been asked to do this job on a two-day-a-week basis. I will make an assessment, when I am confirmed in post—if I am confirmed in post—of what I can do in two days a week, given my own working style, which is bound to be different from my predecessor's or anybody else's. Within my own working style, how I can best use two days a week is how I propose to start. If I find that it is impossible to do a proper job on two days a week using my time and in the best way I can figure out, I will say so. I will tell you; I will tell the minister that it is impossible. As we sit here today, I can only say I will try to do it on a two-day-a-week basis to the best of my ability. I will not skimp on doing the job properly. If it is genuinely impossible, I shall make sure it is known.

Q37 David Heyes: Given that Sir Michael was on the public record as saying that two days were not enough, clearly you have thought about this issue. Did you do any prior discussion with anyone? Did you take any advice? Did you sound anyone out on this time-availability issue?

Dame Janet: Not on that specifically, because I am well aware I have taken over from other people in different capacities on a number of different occasions. I am very conscious that different people do these jobs in different ways. Although I absolutely hear what Sir Michael says, and he has been a very fine Chair of the Authority on the basis that he was asked to do it, I will do it in my own way, and we will see.

Q38 David Heyes: Let me turn the question on its head. We have been provided with a very impressive portfolio of your present other non-executive directorships. I will not read the list out; you know what they are. Will you be able to find two days a week to do the job?

Dame Janet: If you pay very close attention to that list, which you obviously have, you will see that four of the things I am doing at the moment finish in 2011, this year. One of them actually has almost finished already, the Office of the Health Professions Adjudicator, because the Government has decided to disband that organisation. It is just waiting for the legislation to go through Parliament. Another of them, my role in chairing the trustees of the National Centre for Social Research, was due to finish anyway at the

end of the year. If I am appointed to this role, I shall resign before I start this role, because there is a potential conflict of interest. The other two will finish at points during the autumn. By the end of 2011, I will have divested myself of four things that are on that list.

Q39 David Heyes: You are obviously in demand in Government circles, in public service circles, for this kind of work, given your experience over the years. In what you have just said, can I take it that that amounts to a promise of no other non-executive roles in the future, because of the importance that you attach to this job?

Dame Janet: This job, if I am appointed to it, would be my prime role. It is the only one that has this level of commitment. The other one that I would continue, Chair of the Board of the Ombudsman Service Limited, is two-and-a-half days a month. You can rest assured that, at two days a week—even at three days a week if that were necessary in the future—this would be the priority.

Q40 Chair: Your predecessor says it has been taking him four days a week.

Dame Janet: I hear what he says.

Q41 Chair: Having that spare capacity in your schedule is very important to us.

Dame Janet: Certainly until I have made an assessment about my view of how long I need to spend doing this job to do it properly, that is how it will be.

Q42 Paul Flynn: Parliament, in their wisdom or not, decided, when they set up the Authority, to give you a conflicting role in that you are both in charge of the Office for National Statistics, but also responsible for the scrutiny of what was produced by the Office for National Statistics. An arrangement has been made to create a kind of Chinese wall, with David Rowe-Beddoe running it. This is hardly a satisfactory permanent solution. Have you any ideas of how you would improve things to avoid this conflict, which involves the possibility of political interference? There would be a difficulty there.

Dame Janet: Looked at completely from the outside, it does look like an unusual structure. Interestingly, I have had some familiarity with a similar structure, which is the BBC. It has a similar—not exactly the same, but similar—role in relation to governance and regulation. I was a member of the independent panel chaired by Lord Burns, which was established ahead of the 2006 review of the Charter of the BBC, to advise on changes to the Charter. We focused a good deal on the governance of the BBC. What came out of that was not exactly what we had recommended in every particular, but the role of the BBC Trust changed, and so on. My view of these structures, both that BBC structure and the Statistics Authority structure, is that they look messy but they can be made to work. The last three years in which this Statistics Authority has been establishing itself has demonstrated that such a structure can be made to work very effectively, and alternatives have carried

28 June 2011 Professor Dame Janet Finch

disadvantages as well, potentially. I do not have any aspiration to change the structure, insofar as I see that now.

Q43 Paul Flynn: Can you give me an example of the way that it is working where the scrutiny element of the Board has been operated in a critical way against what ONS has produced?

Dame Janet: It is absolutely essential to the credibility of the whole Authority's being that the work that the ONS does reaches the highest standards, that it is subject to the full weight of the assessment centre, and the assessment system that the Authority operates is completely separate from the ONS and does not report through the same structure. It is essential that the ONS meets the highest standards and, if it does not, that it is criticised. The Board has been critical, where it needed to be, of standards within the ONS, just the same as of standards elsewhere in the Government Statistical Service.

Q44 Paul Flynn: Are you happy with that arrangement, because the Royal Statistical Society suggested that it needs a new arrangement, because this is potentially one that could cause problems in the future? Do you think it is working effectively?

Dame Janet: There is no doubt that, in principle, it could cause problems. That, I think, is self-evident. I do not think it has, and I have no particular reason to suppose that that will change or that it would cause problems in the future. I do not see the need to change it at the present time.

Q45 Paul Flynn: In your two days a week, much of your time could be taken up travelling to the heart of the ONS, which is in Newport. Are you thinking of moving to Newport in order to pack four days' work into two days, to avoid excessive time spent travelling?

Dame Janet: No, I am not thinking of moving to Newport. I live in Cheshire, 15 minutes away from Crewe railway station, which is the most wonderful railway station to live near to, because you can go anywhere. From there, there is a regular train that goes directly to Newport, and takes two hours, 10 minutes. That is how I propose to do it.

Q46 Paul Flynn: Have you any idea how you would spend your time and how much time you are likely to spend in Newport?

Dame Janet: I have not worked through the detail of that yet, but I would say that I think it is important for the Chair of the Authority to be seen, to be visible, with the ONS of course but also with other parts of the official statistics systems. I would want also to be visible to key producers of statistics in the Government Statistical Service.

Q47 Paul Flynn: Can you point to any weaknesses in ONS that have been apparent in the last three years, in the work they produce?

Dame Janet: Weaknesses in ONS? I think ONS is a strong part of the system. I do not believe that there is a particular problem with the work that ONS does. There are always going to be things that do not go

perfectly and, when they do not, they need to be criticised. But I do not wish to point to any specific issues, no.

Q48 Charlie Elphicke: The impression so far with everything you have said is that, under your management, the ship of statistics is going to have you on the bridge, it is going to perhaps see a few deckchairs shuffled here and there but, otherwise, it is going to be steady as she goes. Is that fair? Are you going to change anything?

Dame Janet: I am trying to extend the nautical metaphor, but I think it rather eludes me. I think that the earliest questions from the Chair indicated that I believe that there is an issue about the non-expert public use of statistics, which I would definitely like to change. I also said at the beginning that I think that one of my objectives relates to value for money. I am not sure where that will lead, but it is quite clear that, in a time of financial constraint within Government, we have to make the best possible use of public funds to get the best possible outcome for official statistics. That may mean looking again—I think probably we should look again on a regular basis—at what statistics are produced directly, for example, by ONS and what are commissioned from other bodies. I certainly do not expect to cause major changes in the Authority. It is a body that has only been in existence for three years. It needs further time to develop its role. It has been regarded as successful by a number of people, including by me, in those first three years. I would want to build on that. Of course, there will be changes, but I do not expect to tear everything up and start again, no.

Q49 Charlie Elphicke: When it comes to the issue of public trust, we can see that it is really low, so why not have a major change? Why not have a revolution? Why not ensure that Departments are forced to data scrape, put things on an easily accessible basis? These days we have internet communities that pick over statistics, look at all these numbers. Why not ensure that we have a true democratisation of all our data, so that everyone can see what Government is up to, have full transparency and have real accountability?

Dame Janet: The transparency that you are talking about is transparency about the workings of Government, rather than about the production of official statistics. To my mind, it is a separate agenda, although it is linked in the aspiration—which I applaud—to make the general public and the taxpayer able to access as much information as possible.

Q50 Charlie Elphicke: The reason I ask this—and I am particularly concerned about the public trust issue—is that generally the Statistics Authority fusses about whether Departments misuse or misrepresent statistics that they publish. Meanwhile, down in the engine room of the ship, there is a whole load of civil servants busy suppressing statistics, making sure there is a whole load of things that we do not know about, which never come out, whereas you could actually use your position to ensure there is a flowering of the amount of statistics we see, rather than just worrying

28 June 2011 Professor Dame Janet Finch

about whether a Department happens to have spun this story or that story when it is released.

Dame Janet: I do not think that worrying about spinning stories is a major part of what the Authority does. It is much more important that the Authority focuses on the regular production of good quality information about whatever we need information about, and that that is done to standards which meet the standards set for national statistics. That is very much less glamorous, perhaps, but a really important day-to-day role for the Authority.

Q51 Charlie Elphicke: My point is—broadly that happens already. Broadly, public trust is not high because people do not trust the statistics being published. If we had a data scrape—and this kind of stuff exists already; the technology to do it exists already—to ensure that we push all these Government numbers out there, and that they could be monitored by the Statistics Authority to make sure that they are broadly correct and not woefully inadequate, would that not be the kind of revolution we could have that could increase public trust and make people think, “Yes, the Government is not hiding anything, yes, these statistics are valid and, yes, we can see what is really going on and have much more information”?

Dame Janet: I think I have already indicated that I think more data is not the key to increase public trust, but it is a matter for Government to decide how much information about the workings of Government it is going to publish.

Q52 Alun Cairns: Can I come back to something you said to Mr Elphicke earlier, when he referred to Government spinning a story? What do you see as your role, should Government choose to spin a story and maybe misinterpret the statistics?

Dame Janet: I would expect to have this quickly drawn to my attention by the Authority and look at it in detail, and then make a judgment, with the National Statistician, about what the appropriate reaction, if any, was. I think there are circumstances when, quite clearly, the highest possible profile reaction is necessary. That is to say, if, for example, as has been the case sometimes in the past, the professional statisticians have warned ministers or officials that the statistics are not yet ready for publication, if they are then published and used to make particular points, then that is a circumstance that is completely unacceptable. I would expect to ensure that that was drawn to ministers’ attention in a public way. But that is not necessarily going to be the case with everything.

Q53 Alun Cairns: Do you think that has been done sufficiently often in the last couple of years?

Dame Janet: It has certainly been done. Whether it has been done sufficiently often, I do not feel qualified to say, because there may have been breaches of which I am not aware, by definition, if they have not been made public. It is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for enhancing public trust that that does happen when statistics are misused.

Q54 Paul Flynn: Can I follow on from that? I think the word ‘sparingly’ was used by Sir Michael Scholar,

but certainly he courageously stood up to Government and opposition, and absolutely correctly. I believe he had the full support of this Committee in doing so. Would you be less sparing in your judgment? Do you think you would extend your criticisms to even the media, if they would ever use statistics in a misleading way?

Dame Janet: Statistics are produced for Government, so it is particularly important that any alleged misuse of statistics by Government is drawn to public attention, in the context that I have just outlined. I think that any serious misuse is something that the Authority should be concerned about. Now, whether the reaction to media misuse, for example, should be different, I think I would need to work that through with colleagues in the Authority. But I certainly think that the reaction to use by Government and, to some extent by the Opposition as well, in the political process is something that is a legitimate role for the Authority.

Q55 Chair: Would you agree that an abuse of statistics by the media would have to be very serious for you to intervene?

Dame Janet: I did not intend to imply that I was committing the Authority to intervening at all. I said I would need to look at it.

Q56 Chair: I think we would encourage you to be even-handed, because the Government and the Opposition have both been victim to the media many times. If the media were straightened out once or twice, it would not do any harm.

Dame Janet: There is a great danger. The danger of that, if I may say so—which is why I would really need to look at it carefully—is drawing the Authority into political debate, which potentially then compromises its independence.

Q57 Chair: That is inevitable. We are all grown-ups and this is politics. You are going to have to get your hands dirty and, occasionally, be the proverbial ton of bricks that Parliament expects you to be.

Dame Janet: I have had some experience of being the ton of bricks in other circumstances. I am quite happy to do that, but—

Chair: Please tell us.

Dame Janet: I am sorry, if you would just let me finish—I would not wish to do it in a way that compromises the Authority’s position.

Q58 Chair: Can you give an example of where you have exercised your authority in the manner described?

Dame Janet: As a vice-chancellor of a university, it is fairly necessary to do that on a number of occasions, when academic colleagues wish to go in directions that are inappropriate for the university. I would prefer not to give details.

Q59 Paul Flynn: Presumably the Authority should be courageous enough to take on Government and the Opposition, but not courageous enough to take on the *Daily Mail*.

28 June 2011 Professor Dame Janet Finch

Dame Janet: I do not think it is about courage. I think it is about judgment, and recognising that the Authority has been given a very particular role by Parliament, which it is very important not to undermine.

Q60 Paul Flynn: To strengthen, I would have thought, having been on that Bill that went through, there were great hopes that this would be—and I think it has been mainly achieved—that we would do a great deal to restore the credibility of national statistics, by setting up the Authority. Progress has been made. But, if you were to take that step of criticising anyone who was responsible for a major distortion of statistics, that would surely enhance that role.

Dame Janet: Possibly. I would prefer to reserve my position on that.

Q61 Chair: On the question of pre-release, the Act says that the rules on pre-release have to be set out in secondary legislation. There was a review in 2010 under the previous Government, but that did not engage with the wider topics, such as the effect of trust in statistics. The Royal Statistical Society argues that pre-release should be less than 24 hours, or abolished altogether, and the current incumbent, Sir Michael Scholar, has suggested that the norm should be considerably less than that. He recommended three hours or even nothing. What is your position on this?

Dame Janet: The Authority has taken the view that it thinks it should be three hours. I am certainly not going to renege on that view. Pre-release is an issue because of precisely the matters that we have been talking about previously in relation to public trust. The reason why it is important is that there is a belief that ministers and officials having access to statistics before their release enables them to write a story that suits their particular needs, but may not be accurate. That is the concern. If that happens, then pre-release becomes a major issue. If it does not happen, if the existing rules about pre-release and who the information is shared with, how it is used and so on, are respected—and I think that there have been breaches but they have largely been respected—then the present situation is tolerable. If the breaches become regular and if this has a further effect on undermining public trust, then it is not tolerable.

Q62 Chair: You seem to be taking a softer line than Sir Michael.

Dame Janet: Sir Michael expressed a personal view to you, I think. I certainly would not take a softer line than the Authority's position.

Chair: But you take a softer line than Sir Michael.

Dame Janet: I am not entirely sure what his particular view is. He said he would express a personal view to you. I am very much signed up to the importance of respecting the pre-release rules, and it would be desirable to be less than 24 hours.

Q63 Chair: Sir Michael said, "I think it is damaging to the credibility of the statistics that are produced by Government. Even if there is never any spinning going on, the public think that, because Ministers have

these figures, it is likely that there is a manipulation of the figures."

Dame Janet: That opinion is obviously quite correct. I do not disagree with it. It is a question of whether it is a practical problem at the present time.

Q64 Chair: Do you believe that abolishing pre-release access would improve public confidence?

Dame Janet: I do not know whether it is so critical. It is one factor. It is one factor, but I am not sure, if it was abolished tomorrow, that you would see an immediate increase in public trust. The increase in public trust will only come through a number of different measures—of which that undoubtedly would be very helpful—over a period of time. It is not going to be an instant reaction.

Q65 Chair: To say "I do not know", when this is one of the raging controversies about statistics in this country, seems a rather open-minded attitude to bring to this job. One would have thought anybody applying to this job would have had hard and fast opinions about this matter.

Dame Janet: I am sorry—if I could just clarify what I intended to say. I did not say, "I do not know about pre-release access." I said that I am not sure how significant it is in changing public attitudes instantly. It will certainly help. I entirely support the view that, if we did not have it, it would be better. I think it would not have an instant impact on public trust in statistics. There are a number of other things that need to be done as well, which I have elaborated earlier in this discussion, alongside it, which would really in the longer term have the impact.

Q66 Chair: You will be aware that, when in opposition, Conservative frontbench spokesmen made clear their opposition to pre-release.

Dame Janet: Yes.

Chair: The Government has so far reneged on that commitment.

Dame Janet: Government took a view that it was not going to make the change when it came into office.

Chair: We all know why. Those particular individuals may not have changed their minds, but they are up against vested interests—notably the Treasury—in respect of pre-release.

Dame Janet: I am aware that there was that change but it is, in the end, for Government to decide.

Chair: You are for letting Government off the hook on this one.

Dame Janet: No, not at all. I do not think I said that.

Chair: Well then, what are you saying?

Dame Janet: I am saying that pre-release access is a very important issue. It would be better if it did not exist. I agree with Sir Michael there, but I also think that it would be unwise to imagine that simply that act, on its own, would increase public trust in statistics immediately.

Q67 Chair: Have you been asked about pre-release during the process of this recruitment by the panel that interviewed you?

28 June 2011 Professor Dame Janet Finch

Dame Janet: I am afraid I do not recall every question that they asked me. I honestly do not recall whether that was part of it.

Chair: You cannot remember whether they raised the question of pre-release or not?

Dame Janet: I cannot remember whether they raised it specifically, no, I cannot.

Q68 Chair: Do you think there is any danger that your appointment will be seen as opportune for the Government, because you are adopting a slightly less abrasive tone on the question of pre-release than Sir Michael?

Dame Janet: I think you are putting words into my mouth.

Chair: No, I am not putting words into your mouth. I am just wondering if this is going to be the perception, if you are appointed to this role.

Dame Janet: I do not believe that is true. I am not renegeing on anything that the Authority has already said.

Q69 Chair: Do you not think that public confidence in your independence relies upon a robust attitude towards pre-release?

Dame Janet: I think I have already said that I am absolutely signed up to the position that the Authority has, and I agree with Sir Michael that it would be better to go further.

Q70 Chair: I think you said it would be better not to have it.

Dame Janet: Yes.

Q71 Paul Flynn: Could I just say briefly on this—what is the significance that the Opposition, when the Bill went through, was very critical of pre-release and the Government defended it? Now the roles have changed. The Government is defending pre-release and the Opposition is attacking it. No one is suggesting it is a panacea, as it did not create all the problems, but there is no question that it is in the interest of the Executive, which has a major interest in spinning the figures, that they have maximum pre-release. It should be basic for the Authority to be seeing as a major reform the elimination of pre-release, as all oppositions in the last five years have asked for.

Dame Janet: The Authority has already made representations to Government that have not been accepted. I do not doubt we will continue to do that.

Q72 Paul Flynn: You seem to be putting words in the mouth of the Chairman. The Chairman is only asking whether there should be an improvement, and your answer was it would not be a total panacea, it would not change everything. No one is suggesting that. But it does seem to be that you are damning this with feigned enthusiasm for pre-release, where Michael Scholar had great enthusiasm for eliminating pre-release. It seems strange that it has not cropped up. It was almost the only subject that crept up in the passage of the Bill, in both Houses—whether pre-release should be a day or not, or should be eliminated altogether.

Dame Janet: I am sorry. I probably need to make the position clear again. Your phrase “a panacea” is very helpful. My main point is that pre-release, on its own, if it were abolished, would not immediately increase trust in statistics. I do think that it should be abolished, but I also accept that it is for the Government to take a view in the end, to make the decision.

Paul Flynn: But the Government has a vested interest in keeping pre-release. It is Opposition you should be listening to, whether it is a Conservative opposition or a Labour opposition.

Chair: Constitutionally, of course you are correct. But, in the real world, if you persistently argue against pre-release, you do not need to accept the Government’s view; you can continue to recommend the abolition of pre-release.

Dame Janet: Indeed, I would expect to do that.

Paul Flynn: I am sorry to use this expression, but you appear to be suggesting that you are a Government stooge or that you are acting in the interests of the Government. That is not what the role that you are seeking to fill is. It is very much an independent role that should be removed from Government, should be critical of Government and should be challenging the Executive, not agreeing with them.

Dame Janet: Of course.

Q73 Chair: Can you explain, for example, why 50 people have to see the RPI or CPI figures before they come out?

Dame Janet: No, I cannot.

Q74 Chair: Will you make that clear to Government, because that is undermining public confidence in statistics?

Dame Janet: I do not know whether that information, as such, is undermining public confidence in statistics, but it is something that I would expect to keep pressing Government on. Yes of course.

Q75 Charlie Elphicke: What can you do about it legally? What powers do you have to say it should not be 50 people; it should be 40 people?

Dame Janet: The role of the Authority is to be independent and to report to Parliament. I do not know the detail of whether we could actually get down to that level of detail with Government, I have to say. I would notice of that question. I think it is for Parliament to call the Government to account, as the executive, and I would expect to work with you to be able to do that.

Q76 Chair: Can I ask a tangential issue, which is about the shift from RPI to CPI? Do you have a view about that?

Dame Janet: That is a very technical issue. I am aware that the Royal Statistical Society has become engaged in discussions about that. It is also a matter of the international comparability of the data that we produce on the economy in this country. The Statistics Authority is working on that. It has taken a view on it. This is an area in which I would be advised by the National Statistician on the appropriate outcome. I think that it is an important issue. The Royal Statistical Society has asked the Authority to take a

28 June 2011 Professor Dame Janet Finch

view on it, and the Authority has obliged partly but not wholly.

Q77 Chair: Can I just finish this matter about CPI and RPI? It is, again, another running sore, because the CPI is generally lower than the RPI, and the CPI is now being used in wage negotiations and so on and, therefore, is becoming a running sore in industrial relations. Do you think it is the role of the Authority to adjudicate on this, and to make recommendations as to whether CPI or RPI is the better measure?

Dame Janet: I think one of the problems is it is good for some purposes but not for other purposes. It may be very good for macroeconomic purposes, but not so good for some of the other purposes that you mention. Pensions, for example. Pensions has been an area that has been particularly contentious. It is the role of the Authority to give technical advice on this and, as I say, it has to also bear in mind the international comparators, where we have to produce statistics that are internationally comparable.

Q78 Chair: I am not asking you what you might recommend. I am simply asking you whether you think it is the role of the UKSA to express views on these matters robustly.

Dame Janet: Yes, I do, but views which are about the integrity of the statistical product, not views about the political use of the data.

Q79 Chair: I appreciate that. If it is clearly a manipulation to try to restrain the cost of pensions, for example, by using the CPI, you would regard that as legitimate for the UKSA to make that clear, robustly.

Dame Janet: Not in a way that engages in the political debate; in a way that is about the accuracy and integrity of the statistics.

Q80 Chair: My concern is if you are too frightened of being political, you will not say anything.

Dame Janet: I do not accept that, if I may say so. I am very familiar with making comments that are quite robust but not in the political domain.

Q81 Charlie Elphicke: Just a quickie. Have you read the Pre-release Access to Official Statistics Order 2008, and other allied secondary legislation under the Act?

Dame Janet: No, I have not read the detail of it.

Q82 Charlie Elphicke: To what extent have you read the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 itself?

Dame Janet: I have looked at that.

Q83 Charlie Elphicke: To what extent are you aware of the powers that you have under the Act, and under associated secondary legislation?

Dame Janet: I am aware in general terms but, if appointed to this role, I would obviously look at it in much more detail.

Q84 Alun Cairns: Can I ask you about your view of the census, particularly in light of comments that have been made on cost?

Dame Janet: Are we talking about the census that has just been conducted or the potential for another one?

Alun Cairns: The need for a census.

Dame Janet: It is quite clear that the information that the census collects at the moment, and has collected since its initiation, is not collected in any other way, and gives us a population base that other statistical information can be fed into. As things stand at the moment, and have stood, it is an essential part of public information. That said, everybody I am sure here will be aware of the disadvantages of it. That it goes out of date very quickly is a particular disadvantage, and it is a very expensive operation. I therefore do support the initiatives that are now underway to assess whether it is possible to find an alternative, which would be more cost-effective and also enable us to keep that population information more up-to-date. I want to keep an open mind on whether there is such an alternative. The National Statistician is going to report in three years' time on the work from that.

Q85 Alun Cairns: The Beyond 2011 programme aims to come up with an alternative means of collecting the broad information. Is that feasible? Do you think that that could succeed?

Dame Janet: I think the work is the right work to be doing. It is right that we should be looking at it very carefully. What the outcome will be, I do not know and I do want to keep an open mind until we have the outcome of that work.

Q86 Alun Cairns: Bearing in mind the £500 million cost between 2005 and 2016 on the census, the need to save money, and the duplication and the intrusion that the census provides, do you think that ending the census or not requiring the census in 10 years' time could be a mark of success or not of your role, should you be appointed?

Dame Janet: I have already said that I think value for money in taxpayer investment in the statistical products is one of the things that should be a particular objective. If there were an alternative that was better value for money, then yes it would be.

Q87 Alun Cairns: What do you think is the biggest hurdle to that at the moment? Practically, why did it not happen this time, for example?

Dame Janet: It is quite difficult to say why it did not happen this time, because I am not sure that it was a practical possibility this time. The biggest hurdles for doing it in the future would be the lack of a population register in this country, or its equivalent, so we do not have anything on which to base administrative statistics to link into a population database. It is probably politically unacceptable to have a population database. Finding a way around that, which also would then enable the linking of other databases held by Government Departments and others together, in a way that genuinely provides an alternative to census information—some of that is quite technical, but some of it is also political.

28 June 2011 Professor Dame Janet Finch

Q88 Chair: The census is coming to an end, we are told. Does that not make the question of a population database even more essential?

Dame Janet: The decision about whether there is to be another census is obviously not yet made.

Q89 Chair: What is your view on these questions? Do you think we should stick with the census?

Dame Janet: My view is that we need the information that a census provides. If an alternative cannot be found, then we need another census.

Q90 Chair: That is a very political answer, if I may say so. It is the sort of thing we expect a minister to say. What is your view? Do you think the census is the right tool to gather this kind of information or do you think we should have a population database? Which will you be campaigning for?

Dame Janet: I will not be campaigning for anything. That is not the role of the Authority.

Chair: It is for you to have a view. You must have a view about the superior utility of one system over another.

Dame Janet: The utility of the census has been tremendous in the past and, in the past, we could not have done it in any other way. It is not only a population database. That is something that may not happen. It is a question of whether it is possible to link in other existing databases and to supplement them by rolling large sample surveys. That is really the model that would have to be effective and robust for the future, in order not to have another census. As I say, the National Statistician is working on that at the present time. Until she produces her recommendations, I do not know whether it is actually feasible to produce such a system, but I hope it would be.

Q91 Chair: Generally, you are not in favour of a population and address register.

Dame Janet: I think if we had one that would be one important contributor to the alternative.

Chair: Is that a yes or a no?

Dame Janet: Is that a yes or a no?

Chair: Yes.

Dame Janet: Yes, from the point of view of finding an alternative to the census. Yes, I am in favour of it.

Chair: You would give advice to the Government that, if they are going to drop the census, they need a population and address register.

Dame Janet: The question of an address register is already being progressed, I think. That advice would be subject to the professional advice that the National Statistician produces.

Q92 Chair: What do you think we should do about the missing million from the 2001 census?

Dame Janet: From the 2001 census?

Chair: The ONS has been rather obsessed with getting forms returned rather than the quality of data or the spread of data. The missing million is mostly men and mostly young men.

Dame Janet: That was in 2001.

Chair: Yes.

Dame Janet: The most important thing is that the 2011 census, I hope, will have produced a much better picture than that.

Chair: Is it not that the overall percentage of forms returned is not the material point? It is whether you have forms returned that will give a sufficiently accurate picture of all sections of the population, including young men.

Dame Janet: Yes, that of course is true, but there are other ways of assessing that. The large sample survey that followed up the census is a method that enables there to be an estimate made of if there are missing forms and whether those missing forms are skewed in a particular direction or not.

Q93 Charlie Elphicke: Just touching on the census, do you not think that the latest census, the 2011 census, is incredibly long and has an incredible number of stupid and unnecessary questions?

Dame Janet: No.

Q94 Charlie Elphicke: Would you be surprised if a whole load of people do not bother to return it?

Dame Janet: We do not yet know exactly what the rate of return is, but the signs are that it has been quite good. The content of the census form is a matter of huge debate and consultation in the years while the census is being developed. If you think it is long, detailed and boring, I think that it could have been even longer and more detailed. There is a huge demand from all sorts of sections of society and Government to have questions included. It is a very difficult judgment about what actually is going to be included.

Q95 Lindsay Roy: Dame Janet, are you concerned that the inevitable cuts in Departments' budgets will lead to uncoordinated and perhaps ill-judged cuts in statistical information across Government, which may impinge on other bodies and their statistical output? If so, how would you address this?

Dame Janet: Yes, I am very concerned about this. This is probably, in the immediate future, my main concern. The problem is not cuts in expenditure per se, because obviously we know that that is happening around Government and I cannot expect the statistical system to be totally protected from that. The problem is the uncoordinated nature of those cuts. I am very concerned that there are going to be a number of instances where the decisions taken by a particular minister—and I completely accept that, ultimately, ministers have to take decisions on their own budgets—the decisions that they take, which may make sense to them, have a very detrimental effect on the statistical information that is being produced across Government.

What can be done about it? Well, the Authority has already protested in one or two cases. It has started to produce statistical expenditure reports, which I wholly support, making sure that the information is available to Parliament and to the public about what is happening. I think that a great deal more could be done by coordination across Government to produce the best value from the investment that the taxpayer makes in statistical products, so that Departments

28 June 2011 Professor Dame Janet Finch

ought to be able to share with each other a particular piece of survey, for example, which could then perhaps give better value for money to everybody. There are a number of things that could be done, but this is something I expect to pay quite a lot of attention to in my first year.

Q96 Lindsay Roy: Do you see yourself as having a strategic role with Government in this regard to ensure there are no black holes?

Dame Janet: I absolutely think that the Authority should be vigilant about making sure that it understands whether there are any black holes, drawing it to the attention of Government and, indeed, to Parliament where that is the case.

Q97 Lindsay Roy: You are saying the Authority there, but what about your own role?

Dame Janet: My role is to spearhead the Authority in this respect.

Lindsay Roy: So it is in terms of leadership.

Dame Janet: Yes, absolutely.

Q98 David Heyes: Even putting aside the issue of budget cuts, there is a fairly longstanding view now that the status of Government statisticians has been downgraded over the years. For example, there are no longer any senior statisticians at director level in Government Departments. The Royal Society is certainly of that view. Do you agree with them?

Dame Janet: Yes, I do. When you put that together with the concern about decisions and cancelling statistical products or not beginning new initiatives, these two things together really do concern me. There is a parallel actually, which I have already been involved in to an extent, which is that the same thing is happening with the social research capacity within Government. Exactly the same thing is happening. The more senior positions are disappearing and the leadership is passing to a lower level within the civil service. I have already been involved, in another capacity, in protesting to Government about this, in relation to social research. These things are very worrying and I hope to take a particular interest in them.

Q99 David Heyes: What can you do? What will you do?

Dame Janet: My predecessor on behalf of the Authority has been pressing for the National Statistician to have a more active role in decisions about the appointment to statistical posts within the Government Statistical Service. I think that would be very desirable, but I am not sure that on its own it would make the difference. I would link it into initiatives related to the question that came before about statistical products, put the two together and make sure there is very public identification of these deficiencies.

Q100 Kelvin Hopkins: One or two preliminary questions if I may. Just a preliminary question here: were you actually tapped on the shoulder and told that the job was vacant and would you like to apply, or did

you see it advertised and decide that it might be a good job for you?

Dame Janet: I saw the advertisement in the *Sunday Times* and took the initiative.

Q101 Kelvin Hopkins: The second simple question: you are a distinguished social scientist and academic, and sociology involves a lot of statistics. I was a bit of a social scientist myself. You are familiar with statistics to an extent at least, even if you would not call yourself a statistician.

Dame Janet: Yes.

Q102 Kelvin Hopkins: Good. I am a lover of statistics and I studied and taught statistics to an extent myself, and I am fearful about the loss of time series. Government squeezes on the statistical service could see time series cut back and squeezed out. Would you resist that?

Dame Janet: Absolutely. Longitudinal data that shows trends, whether it is social statistics or in the economy, is absolutely vital for public understanding—not only for policymaking but for public understanding, coming back to my early comments about the importance of statistics to public understanding in a healthy democracy. So time series are particularly important. That would be a very real concern, if we are beginning to compromise those, yes.

Q103 Kelvin Hopkins: I have said it before and I will say it again: I am an enthusiast for the census. Maybe not all my colleagues are, but I certainly am and I hope we can preserve it in some form. We were talking about public trust in statistics and the popularity. There are two possible factors. I wondered if you had given any thought to this. One is that statistics sometimes gives us answers we do not want to know, like when governments are told, for example, that class sizes in Denmark or Switzerland are 15 on average, and in Britain they are 30 on average. They do not want to hear that, because they know that it implies spending more money. Is that not part of the unpopularity of statistics?

Dame Janet: I think that is unpopularity with those who have to make decisions, whether it is central government, local government the health service or whatever. Yes, statistics do sometimes produce very uncomfortable information, but that is one of the reasons why I think it is important that there should be much greater accessibility and use to the public at large, so that people understand what the true position is, even if those in political positions, who have to take decisions, take a decision that is in a different direction. It is like research evidence and the use of research evidence in policymaking. It is very important that ministers should have access to accurate information. They may choose to ignore it, but then it should be clear that they have ignored it.

Q104 Kelvin Hopkins: Much has been made of evidence-based policymaking in recent times. I have heard from a civil servant, who shall remain nameless, that when the Government has evidence that does not fit with their policy they get rid of the evidence rather

28 June 2011 Professor Dame Janet Finch

than change the policy. Is that something that statistics have to take a firm stand on and say, “This is the reality. This is what the Government has to accept as the truth”?

Dame Janet: Absolutely. I would deplore any situation where the evidence was being suppressed. I accept that, sometimes, ministers take decisions on a basis that is not simply driven by the evidence.

Q105 Kelvin Hopkins: Another possible factor in lack of public trust in statistics is the fact that we are not, as a nation, very numerate. We have excellence at the top but a real poverty of understanding of statistics and numeracy at the bottom. Lord Claus Moser did a report 10–12 years ago, where he found that 50% of the population was not functionally numerate. He illustrated this by saying that 50% of the population do not understand what 50% means. If you throw statistics at people, people react and say, “Oh yes, it’s just statistics.” I have had this experience myself. How are you going to address that to try to get it across to people that these things are important—that 50% is a half, for example?

Dame Janet: I would agree with that entirely. Quite a lot of it is about the way in which you communicate. 50% of people do or do not like some product or other is one way of putting it. There are other ways of expressing it: one in two of us does not like it. There are ways of making things more comprehensible to people who are afraid of numbers. I agree with you about that.

Q106 Kelvin Hopkins: My formal question really now, after those preliminaries, is: would you agree with the view that to fulfil the objective of the Act to have official statistics, “which serve the public good”, a key role for you is to promote and defend the interests of statistics users against those who might abuse them?

Dame Janet: Yes, I do agree with that. I think that the relationship that the Authority has built up with the Royal Statistical Society and other bodies that represent statistics users has been very helpful way forward there. I am sure there is further to go, but I think that the professional users of statistics have been attended to by the Authority. I would certainly wish to continue to do that.

Q107 Kelvin Hopkins: Do you think there is indeed a need for a more formal relationship between UKSA and users?

Dame Janet: A more formal relationship? Can you explain what—?

Kelvin Hopkins: I can imagine a regular consultation body, joint meetings. I could imagine how a more formal relationship would work, but something where you had quarterly meetings with representatives of users, and you listened to their suggestions and responded, in a sense.

Dame Janet: If that does not happen, I would expect to do something like that as a matter of course—not exactly necessarily in that form. Of course, users can be consulted in a number of different ways. The Authority consults on, and ONS consults on, a number of different proposals that it is bringing forward.

ONS’s work plan, for example, is a matter of formal consultation, and that is a very important way in which the potential users of statistics can be involved in influencing the Authority and, in that case, ONS in particular. There are a number of different ways of consulting other than simply talking to people, although that is important.

Q108 Kelvin Hopkins: Finally, you emphasise value for money. We are constantly told about value for money. I am not an enthusiast for savage cuts in any sphere, but it may just be that it is not just about value for money but having enough money in the first place. If the Government is squeezing the statistical service too much, would you go and say, “We cannot do the job unless we have the resource. If we want these truths that statistics reveal, we have to be given the resources to do the job”?

Dame Janet: Certainly, if necessary. Absolutely, but because it is taxpayers’ money—it is not the Government’s money, so to speak, but the taxpayer’s money—it is very important to do that only when one is sure that the best value is being obtained from the money that has been invested.

Q109 Chair: The Government has asked the ONS to develop a wellbeing index. What do you think of this project?

Dame Janet: I think it is very interesting, very ambitious and I am keen to see it work. I would not underestimate the difficulties of doing that, but the aspiration to find measures that are parallel to the use of GDP, but different, focusing on different things, is admirable. It is something that a number of other countries are also looking at at the present time, so we may be able to be in the lead a bit there. I think it is very good that it is now underway. The challenges of actually finding ways of doing it are quite considerable, and it is quite easy to criticise the questions that probably members of this Committee are familiar with, about happiness and so on. I think that a serious approach to assessing wellbeing—which I am sure we will get as the National Statistician is leading it—is a very good thing.

Q110 Chair: This is almost closer to your academic discipline than much else. What do you think are the legitimate elements of a wellbeing index?

Dame Janet: There are both objective and subjective elements. A good deal of the information that is already collected through official statistics on domestic life, on employment and so have a bearing, potentially, on a wellbeing index, but the thing that has attracted attention particularly are the subjective measures of wellbeing. It is going to take a little while before we can be confident that we have the subjective elements. It is necessary to have that there.

Q111 Chair: What are the subjective elements?

Dame Janet: The subjective elements are how I feel about myself, how I feel about my life, and that is a really difficult thing to find robust measures for.

Q112 Chair: You do not think this is potentially rather political?

28 June 2011 Professor Dame Janet Finch

Dame Janet: In what sense?

Chair: This is a political idea; it has been proposed by politicians.

Dame Janet: That does not make it wrong, does it?

Q113 Chair: No, it certainly does not, but it does make it quite political. What would it be like if there was a divergence? Economic and conventional indicators were on a downward and rather depressing trend, but the Government insisted that people were getting happier because its wellbeing index was going up.

Dame Janet: We are in the realm of speculation here, I think. If that were to happen, I would hope that the said politician, who you are speculating about, would be well informed about what these statistics actually show.

Q114 Chair: What is a wellbeing index for? What could it legitimately be used for?

Dame Janet: I think it is a matter for public information.

Q115 Chair: It is too subjective a measure to use for guiding the allocation of Government resources for example.

Dame Janet: No, not at all.

Chair: It would affect Government decision-making?

Dame Janet: Presumably that is one reason why the Government is interested in it. But I think it is important as a matter of public information as well.

Q116 Chair: Don't you think there is a danger that the wellbeing index would be championed by people who are not happy with the way that resources are allocated using conventional indicators and, therefore, they want to invent a new indicator in order that they can get their way?

Dame Janet: I do not know that there is a group of people there championing it, but I think there are a number of other people who are very interested in it, who do not fit that description.

Q117 Chair: It does tend to be an idea that emanates more from, dare I say, the left of politics than the right.

Dame Janet: No comment on that.

Q118 Paul Flynn: I am sorry. I just missed the start of the discussion. Is it really sensible to spend £2 million asking 200,000 people if they feel happier today than they did yesterday?

Dame Janet: I think when you were out of the room I said that my belief is that it is a very good thing to have an index of this sort, if it can be developed in a robust fashion. We do not yet know whether it can. It is not only the subjective elements to it. There are obviously also objective elements to it, which are based on statistics collected in other ways.

Q119 Lindsay Roy: What is your inclination as a social scientist as to how easy it would be to develop a robust approach?

Dame Janet: I think it is quite difficult. If you ask me as a social scientist, I think it is quite difficult to

develop the subjective element in a robust way. But we will see where we get to.

Q120 Chair: Then why do you think it is a valid idea?

Dame Janet: I did not say it was impossible; I said I think it is very difficult. I think it is going to take some time before the instruments for doing it are sufficiently robust that we can all believe in them.

Q121 Chair: Do you think we are right to be a little bit sceptical about a wellbeing index?

Dame Janet: There is a difference between a wellbeing index and the instruments that gather the information about that index. The idea of an index is a really good thing. I am speaking about the difficulties of developing the instruments. There is some research evidence that it is possible to do it, but the social scientist in me remains sceptical until some more work has been done.

Lindsay Roy: There is a difference between possible and how well.

Kelvin Hopkins: I confess freely, so I am a politician of the left, that a wellbeing index might lead us to policies that make society more equal. It might even be that more equal societies are happier than more unequal societies. Very political stuff, but a wellbeing index might help in that direction. And, if it made society happier, it could be a good thing.

Q122 Charlie Elphicke: If you were not here applying for this job and all the rest of it, and someone said to you six months ago, "What do you think of the idea of a wellbeing index?" Wouldn't you actually say, "That is a really stupid idea"?

Dame Janet: No.

Charlie Elphicke: Why not?

Dame Janet: For the reasons that I have given. I think that the social scientist in me welcomes the thought that Government is interested in something that is broader than the measure of GDP as an indicator of the development of the country.

Q123 Charlie Elphicke: What would it be useful for? What would you expect such a time series to actually be useful for in practice?

Dame Janet: Just like all official statistics, it ought to have a number of different uses, some of which we cannot envisage at the present time. It quite clearly can inform Government policy on a number of particularly social policy areas. Also, I think it will contribute very significantly to my aspiration to make more non-expert access to official statistics. People will understand what is being said about their society.

Q124 Chair: Is there not a danger in creating an index that will encourage Governments to make people happier in the short term, rather than, for example, improving the long-term competitiveness of the British economy, which actually would make people happier in the longer term?

Dame Janet: You have made a number of assumptions there, which I would perhaps question as a social scientist, about the causal links.

28 June 2011 Professor Dame Janet Finch

Q125 Paul Flynn: Is this not part of this fashionable myth that we can go through life with a smile on our face, from cradle to grave, being happy? If Mozart had been on Ritalin or Beethoven on antidepressants, we would never have heard of them. Is there not a need for angst, grief and suffering in life? It is an inevitable part of the human condition that we are trying to deny. It is madness.

Dame Janet: Developing a robust measure that will tell us whether there are changes in wellbeing, not just happiness, is a piece of impartial information about society. The way you interpret that is another matter for debate.

Q126 Chair: Would you not agree that somebody who manically insists that they are perfectly happy is not necessarily happy? Somebody who is depressed and does not mind being depressed is probably happier.

Dame Janet: The illustrations that you give reinforce my view that it is going to be quite a challenge to get robust measures, as subjective measures of happiness, if that is what we are looking at.

Chair: If we have the opportunity to discuss this with you further, we will relish it. Mr Hopkins, a last comment.

Q127 Kelvin Hopkins: Just a general question. The whole purpose of collecting statistics is for us to know more about our society. Is that not about helping Governments to make judgments, which are going to make society better than worse—even if it means unemployment increasing or decreasing, or output increasing or decreasing, so we have less to consume or more to consume, elementary things like that? We perhaps might draw the line at a certain point, whether it is a good idea to take drugs all the time or whatever.

Basically, statistics are about helping Governments, in particular society as a whole, to make judgments about how it orders itself and hopefully to make it more enjoyable for everybody and more satisfactory for everybody, shall we say.

Dame Janet: Yes, if the taxpayer is paying for statistics to be collected, you would hope they would be used.

Q128 Chair: Did the happiness index, wellbeing index, come up in the interview?

Dame Janet: You are stretching my memory here, from the interview. No, it did not.

Chair: It cannot have been that long ago. I know this has been a protracted process.

Dame Janet: No, it did not actually. No, it did not.

Lindsay Roy: Has this process contributed to your wellbeing today?

Q129 Chair: Thank you very much indeed for coming before us today. I have to ask you the absolute shocker of a question, which is that, if this Committee were to recommend against your appointment, it is in fact still the Government's prerogative to appoint you anyway. Would you accept the appointment on that basis?

Dame Janet: That is a shocker of a question, which I had not thought about. It would give me pause for thought. I would like to reserve my position on what I would do.

Q130 Chair: Very good. When did you first decide that this might be the job for you?

Dame Janet: When I saw it advertised.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. We have put you through the mill and you have been very open with us. Thank you very much indeed.

Tuesday 6 December 2011

Members present:

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Chair)

Alun Cairns
Paul Flynn

Robert Halfon
Priti Patel

Examination of Witness

Witness: **Andrew Dilnot CBE** gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: May I welcome you to this pre-appointment hearing for the office of Chair of the UK Statistics Authority? Could you, at the outset, please identify yourself for the record?

Andrew Dilnot: I am Andrew Dilnot.

Q2 Chair: Thank you very much. I think that you wanted to say a few words to open.

Andrew Dilnot: Yes. I was asked at the panel interview for this job to speak for five minutes about why I wanted the job, what I thought the challenges were and how I would address them, so I thought that it might help if I were to run briefly through that statement.

The simple answer to the question, “Why do I want the job?”, is because I think that statistics is the most important thing that we face. There is no decision that any of us can take that is not, in the end, based on statistics. “Who to vote for?” is a pretty important decision. If you are running the Bank of England’s Monetary Policy Committee; if you are the Office for Budget Responsibility; if you have responsibility for climate change, poverty alleviation, transport policy or pensions policy; or if as an individual you are trying to work out where to live, or if as a business woman you are trying to work out what business you might want to run and where you should site it, you are dependent on statistics. We can’t do anything if we don’t know what the world looks like, so statistics are unbelievably important.

I have spent the whole of my career—31 years now—working in this area, trying to get, use, analyse and communicate data. I spent 21 years at the IFS and I have studied 23 consecutive Budgets and five general elections, all trying to work with what was at that stage a particular set of economic and social data. I have spent time in Oxford; I have worked on radio programmes for the BBC about numbers and statistics; I have worked as Chairman of the Statistics Users Forum; and recently, in the last year, I have worked on the Commission on the Funding of Care and Support, the commission looking at long-term care. All of those activities have been trying to get the very best out of data, and in all of those activities independence and integrity are vital. If we can’t trust the numbers, then we’re nowhere, so I’ve tried very hard throughout that time to stand up for that independence.

I love this material. I care about it deeply, and not just the numbers, but the way in which they are used and interpreted. The science of statistics is really important to me. We have in this country huge and marvellous richness of data. There is an astonishing

array of data available, but by and large it is not used as well as it could be, inside Government or outside Government. We have a pretty good Act—an Act that I think we can be pretty proud of—but we need that, because trust in statistics is so low. So I think that there is a huge scope to do good in an area that I care deeply about.

What are the challenges? I think that there are three. One is to do with trust, user engagement and communication, and we have a long, long way to go on all of those issues. The second is making sure that we actually have the impact that we ought to in the development and evaluation of policy. And the third area of challenge is how we manage in an era where public spending is quite constrained, where there is growing complexity in the world and where there is technological change that we need to manage and use effectively.

How would I do that? To begin with, I think that I would get the whole team of the UK Statistics Authority board, the national statistician, the head of assessment, the Director General of the Office for National Statistics and the whole of the staff of the UK Statistics Authority and the ONS to feel that we have a shared vision, where we can be confident and ambitious.

Then I think that we need to reach out to the public, to Parliament, to Ministers, to the private sector, to the civil service, to the Bank, to the media and—a sector that is a particular passion of mine—to schools and universities. We desperately need to get young people more engaged with statistics than they have been.

I would want to be a guardian. I think that one of the things that has been really important about the first few years of the UK Statistics Authority is the way that it has established its credibility and reputation, so that if something is going wrong the authority says something about it. That is something that I would want to continue, identifying bad practice and identifying changes that are needed, and trying to create a culture where the expectation is that if—as a Minister or anybody else—you do something statistically wrong, you will be shown to have done something wrong. So let’s create a culture where people do the right thing first, because they know that if they don’t do the right thing somebody’s going to be coming down on them.

The second thing is that I would like to be a champion. I want us to start thinking about statistics positively and see the positive value of them: the excitement, the power that they create, and the sense of surprise and delight. Above all, I’d love us to think

6 December 2011 Andrew Dilnot CBE

of statistics not by saying, “Statistics”, but by saying, “Statistics—what fun, what enlightenment, what excitement, what surprise and what power there is there.”

Thank you very much.

Q3 Chair: Thank you for that. So, as Chair of the authority, what is your most important role?

Andrew Dilnot: What is my most important role? I think that it is creating a sense of the significance of statistics and the consequences of their misuse. You may not like this answer; you might have wanted me to choose either champion or guardian, but I think the two are intimately linked. You can be an effective guardian only if you have made people realise how important statistics are. It is about helping people to understand their significance, the necessity for good statistical analysis and the consequences of going wrong.

Q4 Chair: How do you plan to maintain the independence of the UK stats authority?

Andrew Dilnot: It seems to me that the stats authority has made a marvellous start in the first four years. It has established a very strong sense of independence. It has done that through making very good judgments in a politically sensitive area, and I want to go on doing that—to make appropriate judgments that are entirely impartial and entirely outside the political realm, but that are none the less firm. In the many years I spent at the IFS, I had a great deal of experience of doing that with Government parties of both major political persuasions. It is a matter of seeking very seriously engagement with the statistics and with what the statistical issues are, of making a careful assessment of what has and has not been said, and, where something has been done inappropriately, of saying so very loudly.

Q5 Chair: I can attest that your predecessor—the current holder of the office—is regarded in Whitehall with a mixture of fear and outrage because of some of his interventions. Under what circumstances would you intervene on Ministers and others, and what would be the manner of those interventions?

Andrew Dilnot: I would seek to intervene if it seemed to me that the code of practice that has been agreed and published was materially abused—if something had been done with statistics that did not fit in with the code of practice and that seriously misled. As to the range of ways in which that has been done so far, Sir Michael has largely intervened through writing letters when things have got to the point where he has felt the need to intervene publicly, and that seems appropriate. It is hard to imagine the particular circumstances that will come up in the future. I have looked back at the interventions that the authority has made over the last three or four years. Although I have not, of course, had all the detail for all of those, it has not seemed to me that any of those have been inappropriate; they have been brave and impartial, and, as far as I am aware, there has been no significant comeback from any of those criticised that might undermine that judgment. I would hope to carry on that record of extremely effective, impartial,

professionally-based judgment about what it is and is not appropriate to say.

Q6 Chair: How do you think you can assist Parliament in the scrutiny of statistics?

Andrew Dilnot: Perhaps the most important thing about this Act is that the Statistics Authority is answerable to Parliament, largely through this Committee, although through other Committees as well. Building strong relationships with Parliament is important. Building a strong relationship with this Committee is something I would very much hope to do if I were appointed to this post. Some of that relationship can be built through meetings like this; some of it, I would have thought, needs to be maintained and enhanced by regular reporting directly to this Committee of any issues that come up. I imagine that is done already, but I certainly would have thought that if something that looked like a breach of the code occurred, and the authority felt that was the case, it should be communicated to this Committee. I would be interested in the possibility of more regular, perhaps informal, meetings with some members—either the Chair or other members of the Committee. Relationships are very important here, and a relationship of trust needs to be built up. I am sure it exists already.

Q7 Chair: So you think the Committee itself could be seen to be more proactive in this role?

Andrew Dilnot: I am not sure that it would be fair to ask the Committee to be proactive—I imagine you have much to do already. It is about making sure the Committee is absolutely fully briefed at all times, and perhaps about raising not simply issues that come up when there has been a clear breach, but more strategic issues about the way in which we might like to move, the whole direction of statistical work in the UK and things we might like to see done. For example, there is the way analysis and data are considered in the civil service. These are important issues, which go beyond the crucial but quite narrow matter of identifying breaches of the code.

Q8 Alun Cairns: Would you use the Committee—should you be successful, obviously—where you thought a Department, a Minister or someone else might be misinterpreting statistics for their own advantage?

Andrew Dilnot: I would certainly hope—I hesitate to say “use”—to work with the Committee on a wide range of matters. My guess is that it would rarely be the case that, where a particular breach had occurred, there would be time to swing the machinery of the Committee into action. I think it more likely that it might be interesting to bring to the Committee wider ranges of issues. I am sure we will have the chance to talk about pre-release access later on. That might be one such example.

I also have a wider concern about the role of analysis and data within the machinery of Government. That is the kind of issue where, if there was work being done in the authority, it might be interesting to have a discussion with the Committee about what the

6 December 2011 Andrew Dilnot CBE

appropriate way of bringing that more to Parliament's attention might be.

Q9 Chair: You are very reliant on ONS and UKSA staff for advice, but will you be using other sources of information?

Andrew Dilnot: I will certainly be reliant on ONS and UKSA staff for advice. My impression is that those staff are of very high quality. I have myself a long-running record of interest in these matters and will want to get my hands very dirty indeed. I will be interested in the possibility of engaging the UK academic scene as well. That may be being done already, but the UK has some outstanding academic statisticians and I think that there may well be a role for getting advice and involvement from groups such as that. I have a very high view of statistics. I think that it is an extremely important profession and I want to get input from all parts of that profession, not just from the civil service.

Q10 Chair: Finally in this section, do you have an idea of what you want to achieve in your first year and how you will measure success?

Andrew Dilnot: There are some obvious prerequisites, such as ensuring that the independence of the authority is maintained and ensuring that, if any breaches occur, they are responded to appropriately, but, most of all, what I would love is a greater sense of confidence within the authority and the statistical service and a greater sense among the whole population—both private sector and public sector, and both individuals and institutions—of the value of statistics and the need to engage with what the data tell us, so that we have discussions that are based not on knee-jerks, but on the vast amount of data that are out there. I would love there to be more active use of the astonishing array of statistics that there is. That will be a good measure of success over the first, second, third and fourth years. We ought to be able to make progress pretty fast.

Chair: Being a statistician, I am sure you would find some means of measuring it.

Q11 Alun Cairns: I should say, as a Swansea boy, it is nice to welcome another Swansea boy to the Committee.

Can I press you on time commitment? You will be familiar with the reduction in commitment from three days to two days a week. Can you tell us whether you think that will be sufficient to conduct the tasks and keep the enthusiasm that you have talked about?

Andrew Dilnot: Of course, the post this time around has been advertised as two and a half days, not two days. It went from three days to two days and now it is back at two and a half days. There is a lot to be done, but I am confident that it can be done in two and a half days or roughly that. I am sure that there will be weeks when much more than that is necessary. If a particular issue blows up, there will be times when more time might be necessary, but, on the whole, my view is that two and a half days will be enough to get this done.

If the Queen chooses to appoint me on the advice of the Committee and Parliament, I will be resigning

from almost everything else that I do. I plan to move from St Hugh's College to Nuffield College next August, but I think that I will be resigning from all my other commitments. I will be resigning as a pro-vice-chancellor of the university and I will be resigning as Chairman of the Statistics Users Forum. I will be resigning as a trustee of the Nuffield Foundation and I will be resigning from any other smaller committees that I sit on. I am confident that I will have the space, and I am also confident, which I think is more your question, that two and a half days a week is enough, on average, over a year, to get this moving.

Q12 Chair: Can I just press you a little more on that? Your predecessor does more than two and a half days a week and has always argued that the time commitment needs to be more than two and a half days a week. If you find the same, would you be able to make that extra commitment?

Andrew Dilnot: Yes, but I don't expect to find the same. I have talked extensively with Sir Michael and I have looked at the job description. It is a non-executive chairman's role, so my own view is that it should be possible to do it in that. But yes, I have done many jobs now and a similar question might have been asked, for example, about the care commission over the last year. Sometimes you need to put some more in and you do it, and I would do it.

Q13 Chair: We have consistently reserved our position on whether two and a half days a week is sufficient.

Andrew Dilnot: Sure.

Q14 Chair: I imagine we are minded to reserve our position until you have proved that that is the case.

Andrew Dilnot: Yes. And that would seem to me entirely right. The job was advertised at two and a half days a week so that is the post to which I have applied. But if I am appointed, which I very much hope I will be, then I will make this work.

Q15 Alun Cairns: Can you envisage a situation in which two and a half days is not sufficient and what action would you then take?

Andrew Dilnot: Well, I can certainly envisage a situation where in a particular week or several weeks a set of issues comes up which means that two and a half days a week is not sufficient. Of course it is possible that on average two and a half days a week is not sufficient. That is not my expectation and that is not the job for which I have applied. If that turned out to be the case then I would have to re-evaluate what to do about it.

Q16 Alun Cairns: Do you envisage taking on any additional roles? You talk about resignations from many of the roles that you currently hold. Do you envisage taking on any other role to go with it?

Andrew Dilnot: No. One of the entirely peripheral benefits of this from my perspective is that I think it would give me the absolutely perfect excuse to say no to all of the other things that I was asked to do. So, no, if I was to take this on then I will, of course,

6 December 2011 Andrew Dilnot CBE

maintain my commitment to Nuffield College, to which I go in August of next year, but that is the only other post that I would have.

Q17 Alun Cairns: Do you see a risk of a conflict of interest between the roles that you currently hold and the time that they might wind up, or even some of the work that you have done within those roles?

Andrew Dilnot: I am always hesitant to say an absolute no, but I cannot see any. I see no conflict of interest between any of my past roles and the role of the Chairman of the UK Statistics Authority. In all of the roles that I have taken, I think part of the duty has been to be aggressively independent. The 21 years I spent at IFS, from 1980 to 2002, was the period during which the IFS's reputation particularly developed and the reputation that the IFS sought to develop was precisely one of absolutely rigorous impartiality and independence, complete abstraction from the political fray while being entirely engaged with it. The commission on the funding of long-term care, which I have been involved in over the last 18 months or so, is also very explicitly independent of the political debate. So, no, I don't see any conflict between anything I have done in the past. The role as Warden of Nuffield, absolutely not. It seems to me that Nuffield College exists to champion the social sciences—statistical analysis is crucial across all of the social sciences—but it does that without fear or favour in an entirely independent way. So I don't think there is any conflict of interest and I am confident that the potential of conflict for time is something that I can manage.

Q18 Alun Cairns: Can I pursue the line about conflicts? UKSA is both a producer and a regulator of statistics. Do you see any risks for conflict within its role and how will you best balance your priorities and responsibility between the two roles?

Andrew Dilnot: I think this is an important point. It is quite an unusual set up for UKSA to be, as you say, both producer and regulator. The way that UKSA has managed that in its first four years has been to achieve, it seems to me, just about as much separation as you can by having two deputy chairmen, the ONS board somewhat separate from the authority itself, and a member of the authority board being the chairman of the ONS board. My impression and the view of those that I have spoken to about this is that that has worked pretty well. But you are right to point out that there is a potential conflict facing all members of the authority in their capacity as both regulators and producers. Now we can see in the actions of the UKSA that there have been occasions when the authority has criticised the ONS as producer. But the fact of criticism does not demonstrate that there is no conflict. If I am appointed, one of the things that I shall certainly want to do in my first few months is talk more with my colleagues on the authority and on the ONS to make sure that we have a line arrangement that works, because it is an unusual set-up and it merits further analysis.

Q19 Chair: Are there Chinese walls? Do you think there should be more physical separation? Is it possible physically to separate the roles?

Andrew Dilnot: The honest answer is I don't know. It is possible that physical separation would be valuable and that is something to be looked at. I don't know. It is something that I would want to work on once I were part of the organisation and able to discuss it.

Q20 Chair: Would it be fair to say that this an issue of concern to you?

Andrew Dilnot: It is an issue of potential concern. I have seen no evidence that it is causing a problem, but it seems that a reasonable person could, in principle, say, "Well, that is a bit unusual," as the authority has already said. It is in here—it is in the Act. The authority has come up with its best attempt at making sure that the arrangements work and it is confident that they have done so. I have seen no evidence that they do not, but it is a sufficiently unusual arrangement to merit further study.

Q21 Alun Cairns: Can I pursue the sources of statistics—the ONS, the Government Statistical Service and the various departments that throw out statistics? Have you assessed any strengths or weaknesses between the various sources? Is there anything that you might want to develop further in the role?

Andrew Dilnot: A very large number of assessments have been published by the authority since it got under way—we are well beyond the halfway point. By the middle of next year, I think just about every single national statistic will have been assessed.

My reading of the assessments that have been published so far is consistent with some of my greatest enthusiasms. The one consistent relative failing is in communication and explanation. That seems to cut right across from the ONS into the Government Statistical Service and it runs across the gamut of statistics. As I have said, my feeling is that the statistics available in this country are a great delight. If you know what you are looking for and if you can find your way around the ONS website, there is almost nothing that you cannot find out about, but for many people, those two ifs are quite a big obstacle. I would love to see a transformation as soon as possible in the way in which we engage with users and in the communication of our statistical material. That is true as much for the GSS as for the ONS.

The Statistics Authority is already working on this—there is a great deal of work on user engagement—but there is recognition that it is one of the really important next steps. We are hiding our light somewhat under a bushel and that is something I want to get some progress on.

Alun Cairns: Thank you.

Q22 Paul Flynn: When the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 went through this House, there was hardly a flicker of interest here and even less in the press, except for one article that I read and repeatedly quoted, which was written by you. It expressed what we have heard today—this wonderful

6 December 2011 Andrew Dilnot CBE

enthusiasm for statistics, which you regard as a turn-on and sexy. I am sure that my many constituents who watch these sessions live will be applauding now and there will be gales of approval coming up the M4 because of the enthusiasm you have shown towards statistics. In that article, which I quoted repeatedly to the intense boredom of everyone else, you said that the Act was—I don't remember the exact words—one of the most important that was likely to be introduced by the Labour Government. In their 13 years of office, this was the big Act. Do you still believe that, and was your enthusiasm justified by subsequent events?

Andrew Dilnot: I think I do still believe that, because it was a turning point. It has made possible something that otherwise was not possible, which is the recovery of a sense of independence and integrity for statistics. It seems that in the first few years of the authority, great progress has been made. There were a number of sceptics four years ago who were not sure whether the chairman of the authority would be able to do the job effectively. It seems that we have heard almost nothing but praise for the authority's work so far. We have an extremely strong base from which to build. We have a long way further to go and we will come later to some problems that still exist in the Act. Yes, I do think that it is worth holding this up next to the independence of the Bank of England. The independence of the Bank of England gave a particular role in the setting of certain types of economic policy to something other than political control. This Act gives the control and management of statistics back to Parliament, taking it out of political hands. I think that was a very, very important step.

Of course, there has not been as much progress as I would have liked so far. The area where there has been least progress has been in communication, but even there I think we are making progress. If we look, for example, to the BBC website, these days you see some really marvellous representations of data. Just this week, there is an extremely good set of stuff on road accidents, which allows you to zoom in on interactive maps, see where they have occurred and what the changes have been.

There is potential for doing some really important stuff, and I think that that can transform our democracy. I really believe that if people are to understand whom to vote for and what is going on, they need to know what is happening, and by and large, they do not. It is worth saying that by and large it is not even the case that parliamentarians always know—they do not know what they have done. They do not know the data. How can we govern, if we do not know?

Q23 Paul Flynn: Because, I'm afraid, government is based on prejudice and not on reason or evidence.

Andrew Dilnot: Well, that needs to come to a stop.

Q24 Paul Flynn: In fact, it is going backwards. On e-petitions, we have handed over the power to the tabloids to make decisions, but I share your enthusiasm.

It might have made sense in biblical times to count the entire population, but is it not a wasteful nonsense

now to take a sample of the entire country, instead of getting the same information from a 1,000th, 10,000th or 100,000th of that sample? Would you regard it as a failure if you do not get rid of the 10-yearly census and replace it with something likely to be more accurate and would not introduce, as the census does, its own distortions, when the forces of the Jedi knights and Pastafarianism decide to register some point by describing themselves as Jedi knights or Pastafarians? The whole thing is a nonsense. It should have stopped. It is a waste. It is there because of inertia, surely. You will stop it, won't you?

Andrew Dilnot: There is an extremely important process called, "Beyond 2011", which the UK Statistics Authority is already engaged in. It will report back by 2014. My view is that it would be disappointing if in 2021 there were not a way of getting hold of the data that we crucially need. We absolutely, crucially need good estimates of the size of the population and its distribution across the country and by various types, so that we can allocate funds appropriately. Yes, I, with you, would be disappointed if by 2021 there were not a more effective and probably cheaper way of getting the data than simply going out and counting everybody. It is worth remembering that counting everybody turns out to be quite tricky.

There is some lovely evidence from the US census, which in 1970 suggested that there were slightly more than 100,000 people aged over 100 in the US, whereas the U.S Census Bureau thought that the answer was actually 3,000. Ten years later, the census itself produced an answer of 30,000, whereas the U.S Census Bureau thought the number was probably nearer 5,000. Just asking people does not necessarily give you the right answer and you cannot ask everybody unless you know where they are.

My view is that we desperately need a proper address register. I know that work on that is going on at the moment, supported by the Government, which I welcome. My expectation would be that once a proper address register is in place, it should be perfectly feasible to combine that with various forms of administrative data to get us timely and entirely satisfactory estimates of the size of the population and its distribution. Yes, I would be very sorry if we had not found a better way by 2021 of finding out the information we need.

Q25 Robert Halfon: Do you agree that it should be compulsory? Is it wrong that it is compulsory?

Andrew Dilnot: I certainly think that it is important that we are able to count everybody. Whether we should compel people to fill in forms, depends on what is being asked. We need to be able to compel people to know whether people are here or not. Once you go beyond that, you get into trickier issues about personal freedom, and those are things that—

Q26 Robert Halfon: But the compulsion element is very authoritarian, and given the length of the form and its detail, it seems very un-British—if you understand where I am coming from—to force people to fill out lengthy forms for no, or very little, personal benefit.

6 December 2011 Andrew Dilnot CBE

Andrew Dilnot: Yes, because it is not no personal benefit. In the end, we all benefit from funds being well allocated. I am afraid to confess that in my household there was a fight over who got to fill in the census form, but I do recognise that a long form might seem oppressive, particularly if there were any sense that the information could be got in another way. Part of the point of Beyond 2011 is to say, "Of course there is some information that we need to have. Let's be clear about what that is, and then let's find the most efficient way of doing it." I do not imagine that our successors will be sitting here in eight years' time having a conversation based around something like the old-fashioned census.

Q27 Robert Halfon: So you think it could move to there being more of a sample element, as with opinion polling and how the BBC judges viewing figures?

Andrew Dilnot: I think it can. It is complicated. We absolutely have to have an address register, because you cannot have a sample unless you know what it is you are taking a sample from, and at the moment that is one of the things we get from the census. Then there is a wide variety of administrative data, including school and GP data, which ought to cover a lot of areas, but we need to make sure, for example, that we capture the institutional population correctly, and we need to do all we can to capture marginal bits of the distribution. My sense is that by targeted specialist investigation we can probably do better than we can with just a census, and that seems to be the consensus.

Q28 Paul Flynn: I do not know if you have been following the situation between Sir Michael Scholar and Boris Johnson. There is some dispute, and Sir Michael Scholar has been sending letters to Boris Johnson, whose response has been to describe Sir Michael as a socialist or left-wing, or something along those lines. How would you deal with that situation, if you had a response from Boris?

Andrew Dilnot: I think the phrase used was "Labour stooge".

Paul Flynn: "Labour stooge", yes; that is right.

Andrew Dilnot: I was subjected to that kind of experience frequently, from all sides, when I was the director of the IFS. I have been accused of being clearly left-wing, clearly right-wing and also clearly a member of the Liberal Democrats. You make very sure that you are right. If you are wrong, you have to say, "Actually, we were wrong," and if you are right you do not engage with the political discussion; you simply say, "These are the data." I have had that even in this context.

Q29 Paul Flynn: Knife crime is an example; when knife crime falls, the perception of the *Daily Mail* is that knife crime is going up—exactly the opposite. There is no truth behind it, and no rational basis for it. There are other subjects on which public prejudice points in one direction and the facts point in the other. How far do you go in standing up for truth and justice against the almighty voice of the *Daily Mail*?

Andrew Dilnot: I think you always stand up for truth. In the end, truth and a reputation for independence are very powerful, but you cannot create them overnight.

Certainly my experience at the IFS was that it takes many years of being shown to be independent, impartial, outside the political debate and simply concerned with professionalism, and I think that the first four years of the UK Statistics Authority have been so impressive because that reputation has been built rather quickly. You just go on saying, "This is what it is." What Sir Michael and his colleagues have done for this institution is that they have created that reputation already, so if the current chairman of the UK Statistics Authority says, "Actually, not so," that attracts a fair amount of attention and clearly is something that is uncomfortable for those thus told off.

Paul Flynn: Thank you.

Q30 Robert Halfon: Can we turn to the website issue? I was very excited by what you said in your opening remarks, and in some of your replies to Mr Flynn, about how you see statistics. I admit that I am a simple person—I am not very numerate—but I have been trying to work out how to use your ONS website while you have been speaking, on this BlackBerry tablet. I have had about eight clicks and have not been able to find any statistics yet. Why is it so user-unfriendly, and what are you going to do about that?

Andrew Dilnot: Why is it so user-unfriendly? There is a truly vast amount of data on it, and my perception is that the particular difficulty at the moment is the search function.

Q31 Robert Halfon: It is almost as bad as the House of Commons website, and that's saying something.

Andrew Dilnot: What you and I want to do is type in "unemployment" on the front page and we want to go immediately to a chart that shows us what has happened to the core measure of unemployment over the last 15 years, and which then allows us, if we want more detail, to click on it and go to youth unemployment, male unemployment, female unemployment, and be able to download the data.

Q32 Robert Halfon: And local.

Andrew Dilnot: And local, and all those neighbourhood statistics. At the moment, you type in "unemployment" and you get thousands of options. There is a desperate need to get that sorted out. The ONS has a web recovery programme in place. They have allocated some of their most senior staff to it and they are getting on with it. My own view is that I want to see this given an even higher priority. My feeling is that too much weight is given to the needs of official users.

Official users do not mind so much about the website, because, by and large, official users in Departments know that there are particular data sets that they want. They can get to them because they know exactly where they are. The people I care about even more are the citizen users. At the moment, the citizen user is essentially held away from all this data by the difficulty of access, so one of the things I will argue for very strongly is a new prioritisation for all forms of communication.

Q33 Robert Halfon: Why not go one stage further and democratise the statistics service and turn it into an open source? Obviously, you will have your links to the official stuff, but let people comment and provide their own statistics. Citizens who are in the know and those who are not could actually comment on what they think of the statistics and offer alternative models. At the moment, there is no interaction at all between the individual and this very bland, boring website.

Andrew Dilnot: I think more democratisation is a very good thing. As chairman of the statistics user forum for the last couple of years, that is the kind of thing we have been trying to get going. It is not terribly easy, but it is a good thing to do.

I think the Open Government website is another good initiative. That is data, and I am all for as much data as possible. Information is always good, as is interaction and comment on it. It is something different. The ONS website itself is trying to present statistics with some interpretation. We need both those things. In the Open Government website, we need as much data as we can get out there. Let us get it out there and let people talk about it, think about it and analyse it.

We also need for the mass citizen user, the 60 million of us, something where they can go and find out the numbers. We are collecting all these numbers. This stuff should be available to them in ways that are interpretable.

Q34 Robert Halfon: What I am trying to say is that your website should be more Wikipedia rather than encyclopaedia. At the moment, it is not even an encyclopaedia. It should be really interactive. Although you are the experts, you are not the all-seeing truth, so therefore people outside may have alternative models. Yours will still be the official statistics, but let us have real interaction. I do not just mean a better website that is easier to use, but offering people a real say in what they think you are saying, and having blogs, twitters and Facebooks, and being really interactive and saying, “What are your thoughts on our statistical announcement we made today? Please put them here.”

Andrew Dilnot: I am all in favour of that. At the statistics users forum and at the Royal Statistical Society, we are about to put up in the new year a thing called StatsUserNet, which will try to encourage exactly that kind of thing for people to interact, have discussions and all that kind of stuff. I am a bit agnostic about whether that is the right location for it or whether it should be independent like the Royal Statistical Society or as part of the ONS website. I would like to talk about that some more. Perhaps we might even meet up about that.

Q35 Robert Halfon: For example, there could be a blog on there, and people could at least comment on the blogs.

Andrew Dilnot: That is something I would just like a bit of notice on, because one of the things about an official site is that there are all kinds of moderation and things that need to be thought about quite carefully. I am certainly not opposed to it, but it is

something that I would like to think about some more, and maybe we could even talk about it.

Q36 Robert Halfon: Will you give us a guarantee that in, say, a year’s time, we will at least have a better website?

Andrew Dilnot: Yes—if I am appointed. If I am not appointed, that would elude my grasp. If I were to be appointed and the website was not better, I would certainly have failed. We must make an improvement. We really must, not least because the stuff is so brilliant. If you know how to get around it, there is no subject of public policy where in two or three hours you could not produce a really compelling presentation that shows what has happened over the last 15 or 20 years and what the big issues are. It was just inaccessible to the population as a whole.

Q37 Priti Patel: In light of your desire to have more engagement with the public on all matters statistics and the piece around education, everything that we have seen thus far indicates that public trust in official statistics is quite low. What is your own assessment of that? You touched on your vision in your opening statement, but how far are you prepared to go, in terms of active engagement? I would not mind hearing a bit more about your vision for schools, in particular.

Andrew Dilnot: Trust is low, and my own view is that it is unfairly low. There is a common perception that statistics are manipulated either by civil servants or politicians. I have worked in this area for 30 years, and I have never seen evidence of the statistics themselves being manipulated. There is common evidence about publication times and the selective release of stuff, but the idea that the numbers themselves might be mucked around with I have not seen evidence of. However, because of the way in which we do these things—because of the issues around publication, which I am sure we are going to come to—there is that perception that it is controlled. The only way we can improve that is by demonstrating that it is not thus, which is why the guardian role is so important.

How might we engage? In particular, let us talk about youngsters. One of the things that made me most unhappy in the past couple of years was when, a couple of years ago, a friend of one of my teenage daughters, who was doing economics A-level, had an essay to do about unemployment, and he said, “Could I talk to you about that?” I said, “Of course; I would love to talk to you about it, but”—he was in our house—“just go and get the unemployment data, print them off, have a look at them and then we’ll talk about them.” He came back an hour later and, rather as with Mr Halfon, he could not find them. I thought, “No, no!” Here was somebody who wanted to go and engage with them, and he could not.

You may have heard of the “Target Two Point Zero” competition that the Bank of England runs with schools, where they encourage sixth-formers to form pretend versions of the Monetary Policy Committee. They then compete against one another in a national competition, and the winners come to meet the Monetary Policy Committee. I would love to have a similar competition for schools that was just called

6 December 2011 Andrew Dilnot CBE

“Tell Me a Story”, where we said to groups of schoolchildren, “Go to the Office for National Statistics website, go to the Government Statistical Service website, and tell us a story about any aspect of the country in which you live, using statistics. You’ll compete against one another, and we will bring you together at the end of the year.” We would see if we could persuade the BBC to give us 10 minutes on the “Today” programme for the winner—just to start people realising how much you can do, if you actually go and start looking at the world that we live in. That is the kind of thing that I would love to do. Whether we can do that, I have no idea, but that is the sort of thing that I would love to get going, to use this rich treasure that we have.

Q38 Priti Patel: What about wider public engagement? You have referred to that several times. There are normal citizens who probably feel quite cynical about statistics and—dare I say it—even the way that politicians and newspapers present statistics, and incorrect statistics as well.

Andrew Dilnot: They are right to feel cynical about the way newspapers and, sometimes, politicians use statistics. I have in my bag my favourite newspaper of the last two years—I shall not name the newspaper. Less than two years ago, one of our big broadsheet newspapers had a great big headline—a 36-point font headline—“Public pensions to cost you £4,000 a year”. They had divided £9.4 billion by 26 million and got an answer of nearly £4,000. The answer is nearly £400, but it was the absolute banner headline on a broadsheet quality newspaper, and goodness knows how many people that has to go through. That shows you what is wrong with our statistics.

How do we get better public engagement? The way in which most of us, most of the time, engage with statistics is through the media. That is the way in which most of us consume most of the statistics we consume, and we are consuming statistics every day as readers of newspapers, listeners to the radio and watchers of the television news. You cannot not be a consumer of statistics—that is what we all are. There is work to be done training journalists and engaging more with the media. That is something that the Statistics Authority and the GSS are already doing. I think that there is much more to be done there.

I think that it would be possible for statisticians to be better at engaging with the media—to be a bit more adventurous, to be a bit more bold—and then we could have people consuming statistics without realising it. Often, when you see a really good piece of journalism on the television or in a newspaper, you are consuming statistics without realising it, because the statistics are integrated into the story rather than being used rhetorically, as they so often are.

We need to go on working—training journalists, training politicians and training civil servants. I continue to feel that, at the highest levels of the civil service, analysis is not given the significance that it should be. All too often, statistics are what you put in after you have worked out what the policy should be. That is something we need to work really hard at with the Cabinet Secretary and the Permanent Secretaries. It is a very, very serious matter. There is a sense that

statistics are what come afterwards, and that is quite wrong. How can you possibly make policy if you do not know what it is you are making policy on? I would like to work with Jeremy Heywood and others to try to boost the sense of confidence of analysts and statisticians within the civil service.

Q39 Chair: I confess that I have drafted a speech and then asked for the statistics afterwards. I then found that I could not say what I had been intending to say, which is very instructive. May we go on to pre-release? Do you think pre-release is necessary for good government?

Andrew Dilnot: No. My personal opinion is that I would like to see all pre-release access removed. A reasonable person could reasonably believe that some limited pre-release of, for example, data that might move markets might be appropriate. It might be sensible for data that was likely to move markets to be available to the Bank of England and some Treasury Ministers for an hour or two or three before release. But I simply cannot understand why in the case of, for example, reoffending statistics, pre-release access to the last adult convictions release was granted to 23 people. I just do not understand how a reasonable person could reasonably say that that was necessary. My view is that the view that has traditionally been taken by political parties when in opposition, which was admirably articulated by Mr Vince Cable in the run-up to the last election, is the right one: pre-release is bad. When you read through the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007, you read a great deal of material that is extremely strong about independence and the significance of independence. Then you get to section 11—“Pre-release access”—and it is a little bit like reading Augustine’s confessions, “Make me chaste, but not yet.” We are in favour of independence, independence, independence, except in the area where we think it might be awkward for us.

I do not think that pre-release is a good idea. I can see that some people might reasonably think that some limited pre-release might be appropriate, but that should be much more limited than what we have at the moment. My view is that some of the arrangements we have at the moment are part of bringing the game into disrepute. One way in which the Government could help the authority and help themselves is by being brave enough to say, “Actually, we can see that the authority is trustworthy. We are trusting the authority to champion and guard our statistics. We will trust it, under the tutelage of the Public Administration Select Committee and Parliament, to act sensibly as far as pre-release is concerned.”

Q40 Robert Halfon: What about if it is market sensitive—the argument that you need to give the Government time to prepare because of sensitivities in the market?

Andrew Dilnot: I can see how a reasonable person could reasonably think that. My own experience—perhaps I am speaking from personal bitterness—is that I had to comment on 23 consecutive British Budgets without any pre-release access. I can see that

6 December 2011 Andrew Dilnot CBE

there might be cases where a very limited period of pre-release access might help and I would be perfectly willing to discuss that matter with Treasury Ministers and officials and Bank of England officials. But the idea that 24 hours is necessary seems absurd. Even if you believe that, in the case of market-sensitive issues, we need pre-release, three hours seems to me at the absolute outside of what could possibly be necessary.

Chair: I do not think we need to spend any more time on that.

Q41 Paul Flynn: As a Swansea boy, you must regard the move to Newport as like being upgraded on a plane, especially as you will be under the benign watchfulness of the quality local MP. How much time do you expect to spend in Newport?

Andrew Dilnot: As a Swansea boy, I would have thought of a move to Swansea as being upgraded, Mr Flynn. I do not know how much time I expect to spend in Newport. I certainly expect to be there regularly. I expect to be in London regularly; I expect to be in Titchfield regularly; I expect to visit the devolved Administrations. Until I am doing it, I do not know. I have talked with Michael Scholar and looked at his travel programme. He seems to have been in London significantly more frequently than in Newport and Titchfield; I do not know. One thing that I can say is that I have looked at the way Sir Michael has run his time, and he has not come to London very frequently—a couple of times a month.

My preference would be to come to London on a fixed day every week at least, so that there is one day a week when all of the authority staff who are based in London would know that they could get at me, and then to be in Newport and Titchfield and elsewhere as seems to be appropriate, but I just do not know the answer to that.

Q42 Paul Flynn: The Royal Statistical Society is concerned about the status of statisticians and points out that, 30 years ago, senior statisticians in Government Departments were at director level, whereas none of them are at that level now. Do you think there has been a falling away in the status of statisticians in Government?

Andrew Dilnot: I think there has, but I have to say that I have not been inside Government enough to know that. I am also aware that there are some very senior figures who are not statisticians, but who care passionately about the use of statistics. That is what matters to me most of all. If none of the permanent secretaries was a statistician, but if all of the permanent secretaries really cared about the use of statistics and analysis, I would be content.

It seems to me that in general across the Government Statistical Service and the whole of the Government service analysis and statistics are not given the weight that they should be. I cannot speak with real knowledge about whether things have got significantly worse over the last 30 years, but given that the scope for the use of analysis and statistical data has increased so much, I do regret that we do not see that having a higher profile, and I would dearly love to see it have a higher profile.

Q43 Paul Flynn: In 1988, a group of statisticians came to me to complain that the supervision of their Department in government was moving from one Department to the other; it was from the Cabinet Office to the Treasury. Their complaint was that they were being moved to the office that had the greatest interest in distorting the figures.

I wrote to Mrs Thatcher at the time, who was greatly shocked by this unworthy suggestion that any Government Department would want to distort figures in any way. The statisticians were, quite reasonably, worried and were saying that if the wonderful, pristine figures that they turned out were being turned into garbage by the Government machine, it was lowering their professional status and the whole point of their existence. Who was right: the statisticians or Margaret Thatcher?

Andrew Dilnot: I do not know. I would need to know what the particular issue was.

Q44 Paul Flynn: In general, who should—

Andrew Dilnot: My general view is that our whole political system—civil service and politicians—does not pay adequate attention to the matter of statistics and does not look, as it should, to statistics to help form policy judgments. Part of the responsibility for that must lie with the statistical service itself. The statistical services need to do a better job of presenting material in a way that makes it compelling, so that it will be better used.

Q45 Chair: Can I express some disappointment with Budget Red Books? Twenty years ago, I was able to make some sense of them, but they have become compendiums of adventure and description, and the tables seem to be arbitrary these days. The comparisons with previous Red Books seem impossible to make. Is this something that you are going to be looking at?

Andrew Dilnot: It is something that I certainly have looked at. Indeed, one of the things that the IFS did in the early 1980s was first produce the “Green Budget”—the precursor to the pre-Budget report—and, in January 1982, I can remember sitting over back copies of the then Red Book, which was uninterpretable. It was just numbers, and it was very hard to reconcile them. I thought that in the 1980s and 1990s very considerable progress was made towards documents where it was quite easy to reconcile the various tables. You could actually see the information that you wanted. They related to one another.

Then there was a shift, under both parties of both Governments, towards stuff that tries to put a narrative that fits in with particular political statements being made. We have rather lost the neatness and coherence of the tables. I will not promise that that is something we would look at; I would need to look to make sure it was in our remit. It certainly seems to me that it is an example of how statistics can stop being useful. Certainly, when I look at a Red Book these days, I find it much harder to trace the numbers through.

Q46 Chair: Do you think the narrative, as presented in the Budget Red Book, moves many points on the opinion polls?

6 December 2011 Andrew Dilnot CBE

Andrew Dilnot: This is not a party political comment, and I will not identify the individuals concerned, but I think the best joke about tax in my 30 years was made the day after a Budget—I will not say which one—when the Leader of the Opposition stood up and challenged the then Chancellor about a particular set of figures. The Chancellor rejected the challenge, and the Leader of the Opposition said, “But it says in the Red Book—or, as it appears to be in your case, the unread book—a, b and c.” I do not think many people read the Red Book. In fact, Chairman, I suspect that you and I may be part of a small group that would even be willing to admit ever having done so.

Q47 Alun Cairns: Can I just press the point about consistency, in relation not only to the Red Book but to statistics across the board? If they are to be valid—we go back to your competition in schools, where individuals would want to compare different times in the output of data—do you not accept that there needs to be consistency in terms of the reporting as well, although the measuring might change?

Andrew Dilnot: Consistency, particularly consistency in time series, is absolutely vital. One of the other things that I slightly regret is that our whole statistical culture has moved almost to an obsession with whatever the latest data, released at 9.30 this morning, tell us. Almost all the interesting statistical material is that which looks over a longer time period. Consistent time series are really vital, which is one of the things that we must not lose. We have developed in the appendix tables in the Red Book some marvellous long runs of data on tax as a share of national income, public spending and public sector borrowing. Those are all really valuable, and we need to be able to hold on to them.

Q48 Paul Flynn: Michael Scholar complained about the lack of fast-stream entrants in the civil service who are statisticians. He compared the membership of the Government Statistical Service with that of the Economic Service, and the Statistical Service is very much out-numbered by the Economic Service. That deterioration is apparently continuing. Shouldn't it be the other way round? Isn't this something that you should tackle?

Andrew Dilnot: Statistical skills are really important, so it is very important that we have plenty of statisticians, but it is also very important that generalists, economists and others are statistically alert. I almost care more about that. Of course we need lots of statisticians, because statistics is beautiful and powerful. However, we could have lots of great statistics, but if nobody is taking any notice we are wasting our breath. I am as passionate about the need to get non-statistical professionals to recognise the importance of the statistics as I am about just getting more statisticians.

Q49 Paul Flynn: When or if a professional statistician in the Department is being leaned on to break the code in order to serve his Department head rather than to obey the code, what can you do to help?

Andrew Dilnot: If such a person were to write to me or contact me in any way, which I hope she or he

would, I would leap very strongly to their defence, because that seems to me entirely wrong and inappropriate. How that should be done, and whether it would be appropriately done through their head of profession, their Permanent Secretary, the Cabinet Secretary or in public, I do not know. That would be a matter for judgment.

Q50 Paul Flynn: Is there anything else you can do to raise the standing of statisticians?

Andrew Dilnot: I hope that we can boost confidence by the array of reaching-out measures that we have described. I hope that we can continue to build the relationship, if I am appointed, with this Committee, to make the Statistical Service feel that it has an unusual privilege of having direct access to Parliament. There are very few other bits of the civil service where you have direct access to Parliament, and that is a pearl of great price. A lot of it, I think, is about building confidence so that people recognise the treasure they have got, and I hope other people will recognise it too.

Chair: We move on to cuts in the Statistical Service.

Q51 Priti Patel: In light of your earlier comment that you felt there was not enough focus from public policy officials and perhaps Ministers as well in Government Departments on statistics and official statistics, do you have any concerns or observations around departmental budget cuts and the impact that will possibly have on the collation of statistical information?

Andrew Dilnot: The public finances do not look pretty. In the 30 years I have been working in this area, I do not remember the public finances ever being this problematic. It would be naïve and rather wrong for the Statistical Service broadly to think that it can escape the consequences of those. It does seem to me that it is very important that, as reductions in spending come through, they are managed effectively and, ideally, that they are managed across the whole piece. I know one of the things that Sir Michael Scholar has emphasised is that he would like to see discussions about cuts in particular statistical areas—particularly areas of the Government Statistical Service and Departments—at least brought to the consideration of the authority.

The authority has conducted a series of expenditure reviews. In some cases, in particular some of the health statistics, the authority has expressed regret that reductions in spending—decided in that case I think by the Department of Health—will lead to the loss of long-running time series on matters related to health. Some of it might even have included some smoking statistics. Those are matters where, in an ideal world, we would have some cross-Government consultation, so that we can optimally choose where to make the savings. There will have to be savings.

This is perhaps a controversial thing to say, but at the margin there are less valuable data series that we collect—I do not want to try to identify one now. There are some data series that are absolutely crucial. There will be a distribution, and there will be some data series that are less valuable than others and, when there is less money around, it may be appropriate to

lose them. We just want to ensure that we are losing the least valuable across the whole piece. That would seem to argue for some cross-Government consultation.

Q52 Robert Halfon: Do you envisage having to make redundancies at the Statistics Authority in order to save funds?

Andrew Dilnot: My impression is that total staff numbers have been declining. They will decline anyway because of the census. There is a big jump in numbers every 10 years because of the census. There have been some, though a relatively small number—about 60—compulsory redundancies in the past year. The expectation is that that will tail off. Thereafter, I hope it would not be necessary to make redundancies, but I couldn't promise that.

Q53 Priti Patel: Do you think there is new potential in this role to get more involved in budget round discussions with each Department around statistical information gathering, if there is going to be a significant hit? To your point about losing valuable information, how bad would it have to be for you to say enough is enough?

Andrew Dilnot: It would be over-ambitious for the Statistics Authority to try to get involved in the budget round negotiations with every Department, but I do not think it would be over-ambitious for the authority to be consulted where a Department was proposing to cut the spending for a particular significant data set. I think I would characterise it in that way.

When would one say enough is enough? In the end, budgets are set by Government. I think my sense would be that if the authority felt that something really damaging was going ahead, that it was hard to justify, then my natural first port of call would probably be to get in touch with the Chairman of this Committee and say that we have gone through this set of processes and discussions, we feel that this is sufficiently worrying that it is important for us to approach Parliament about it, and then seek the advice of the Chairman and the Committee.

Q54 Chair: Remembering the heady days of May 2010 when we all expected the economy to grow by 13% or more over the lifetime of the Parliament, and the Government wanted to consider that prosperity alone does not deliver happiness, the coalition committed itself to promoting quality of life as well as economic growth, which are all very good things. The ONS established the National Well-being Project to try to measure what people feel about their well-being. The ONS is currently consulting on the domains and headline indicators for measuring national well-being. We know that this has become very fashionable across many other countries and bodies throughout the world. Are you optimistic about the success of this project?

Andrew Dilnot: Well, I am optimistic that it will remind us that there are valuable things other than simply measuring GDP that can tell us about what is going on in a country. Simply measuring GDP does not provide us with an adequate way of understanding what is going on in the economy, even if looked at

just as the economy. People have often said that the recession we have just had was the worst since the 1930s. It is true that GDP fell by more than it did during the past two recessions, but unemployment rose by significantly less. Somebody who might be unemployed might think that the level of unemployment was a better way of measuring the seriousness of a recession. In part, the project is a reminder that there are many different ways of measuring all sorts of things, and GDP is one relatively easy to understand—I will not say it is easy to measure because it is actually very complicated. There are other measures such as per capita GDP, per capita net income, or health—we would all recognise that people's health status is relatively measurable, although less easily than GDP, and that is another important aspect.

Much of the attention has not focused on the idea that we might want to look at a wider range of indicators—we would all recognise that is a sensible thing to do—particularly on more subjective indicators. We all think that we can measure somebody's health or income, but we are—rightly—anxious about whether asking me how happy I feel will produce data that are comparable with asking the Chair how happy he feels. I am an economist, so I am always optimistic. My sense is that this area is not uninteresting, and as we get richer and richer as a society, it is important to look at a wider range of indicators to assess what is going on.

Some of the data published at the end of October—a wide range of information—were news to me and I thought they were interesting. The thing I liked most, which I printed out last night by accident, was a table showing the distribution of hours of work. I printed out the Excel spreadsheet and I then realised that I was printing 79 pages of numbers. After 25, I stopped and turned it into a picture, which makes it quite a lot more useful. It shows that the proportion of the total labour force working more than 45 hours a week has fallen from a peak of about 26% in 1997, to about 19% now. I did not know that, and although I have been immersed in statistics, I was caught up in the widespread prejudice that we are working harder and harder—well, apparently not; fewer and fewer of us are working more than 45 hours a week.

There is merit in that, and we will get interesting information from some of the subjective data. They do not, however, tell us how happy we are, and one thing I am really clear about is that I hate with a deep loathing composite indices and attempts to take more than one source of data and multiply them together with weights to come up with rankings.

Q55 Chair: So, the well-being index—

Andrew Dilnot: This is a pile of nonsense. They are always a pile of nonsense. Some lovely work was done by some academics in York which showed that a country's performance in the World cup was a perfect indicator of the quality of its health service. You could change the weights in the World Health Organisation health indices so that they precisely mimicked how your country did in the World cup. It is just nonsense. There is great value in getting more than one source of information, and we can learn something by asking

6 December 2011 Andrew Dilnot CBE

people how they feel. Because we are British, we will tend to say that we feel a bit miserable, and we can learn about how that changes over time. We might even be able to learn something about how it varies across the country—the week after Shane Williams has scored another brilliant try, the Welsh among us will feel very happy. We should not, however, invest too much interest in it.

Q56 Chair: Is it something that should guide spending and policy decisions, or is it just a quirky, interesting thing?

Andrew Dilnot: Looking at a wider range of indicators should guide spending and policy decisions. Simply looking at GDP rather than life expectancy, health experience and so on—those are relatively measurable, important, clear and objective elements of our lives, and it is good to look at the wider range of stuff.

I am, as yet, unsure about what we can learn from the more subjective stuff, but I certainly think it is worth looking at. We know that a non-negligible group of the population experience mild to moderate mental health difficulties or depression, and we should look at whether there are aspects of that that we can learn more about. That seems to me valuable, but we are a long way from knowing what to do about it. In particular, we are not going to get to a happiness index. I want to say very loudly now: the idea of a happiness index seems to me, frankly, really rather silly for the population.

Q57 Paul Flynn: During an election, I felt outgunned in a forum by a candidate who promised that, if he was elected, the whole population of Newport would be suffused with bubbling bliss—I had the minimum wage to offer. As it turned out, the voters tended to believe me rather than what the Natural Law party said—

Chair: But that might not be cause and effect.

Paul Flynn: This gives me a sense of well-being because the work on well-being is being done in Newport. But what do you expect that the Government will do when they have the statistics? Will they have a Happiness Bill? What will they do?

Andrew Dilnot: I imagine that what they will do when they have these statistics is say, “These will be interesting as we see them build up over the next 10 years.” Until we have a reasonably long time series, I do not think that there will be very much that is very striking about them. I also do not think that they will be terribly expensive.

Q58 Chair: Well, it is costing £2 million. Is that too expensive?

Andrew Dilnot: The programme is costing £2 million at the moment. I do not know. The programme has been set up—let us see what it produces and see whether there is something interesting. In general, I think we should not be opposed to innovation. Let us see whether we get something interesting out of it.

Q59 Chair: Is this not something of an exercise to prove that we heartless GDP-driven politicians actually do think about things other than money? Is

the interest of politicians in a happiness or well-being index about ingratiation, rather than in anything of real statistical value?

Andrew Dilnot: I am not sure. To the extent that we have got any information out of it so far, it is that young people and older people describe themselves as being happier than those of us in the middle. I think that that is quite surprising. Many of us might have thought that young people would describe themselves as happy but are rather surprised—I am rather surprised—that we see that among those over state retirement age. So it is not impossible that insights will flow from this that are quite important—what might be said, for example, is that perhaps what that shows is that forms of community interaction that are easier when you are not in full-time paid employment actually turn out to be really important to people. That does not mean that we should therefore say, “Well, stop working”, but it might mean that we can think about ways of facilitating those kinds of interactions for people of working age. I do not know, I speculate, but would be wary of saying, “It’s unhelpful”, because we might learn things from it. At the moment, I would not want to say that I thought it was the most important thing that we were doing.

Q60 Paul Flynn: Is not the experience of communities living in the war—as I did, and have vivid memories of—or under communism and then a democratic system that, in general, they prefer the equality of misery, whether warfare or communism, rather than the inequalities of prosperity? It is the sense of fairness that matters.

Andrew Dilnot: It is just possible, Mr Flynn, that that could drag me away from statistical matters into political matters, which I choose to eschew.

Paul Flynn: They are more interesting though, aren’t they?

Q61 Robert Halfon: May I just go back to the schools issue? I have just read a pamphlet that said that roughly around 50% of children do not get grades A to C in maths or English, which to me is a criminal statistic, if accurate. What would you do to improve the teaching of maths and statistics in schools?

Chair: Sounds like an education question to me.

Andrew Dilnot: I think that that is largely beyond my remit, but let me say one thing. People are far too scared of numbers. You do not have to be mathematically gifted to work out when a number is big or little. An example I use is of, many years ago now, a Government who announced that they were going to transform child care by allocating an extra £300 million to provide 1 million child care places over five years, and this was widely described as being fantastic. Well, £300 million to provide 1 million child care places—you do not need to be good at maths to work out that that is £300 per child care place. Three-hundred pounds per child care place over five years—again, you do not need to be good at maths to realise that that is £60 a year. Sixty divided by 52 is more difficult, but it is clearly between £1 and £2 a week. You didn’t need to be any kind of mathematician as long as you had the confidence,

6 December 2011 Andrew Dilnot CBE

when faced with a serious-looking, smartly dressed person telling you something, to say, "Really?"

That's what I would love to see in our schools. Rather than numbers coming at people in an aggressive way, people should feel released to say, "Well, does that make sense?" You do not have to be able to do a simultaneous equation; you just need to be able to do a little bit of simple arithmetic and not be frightened. People are much more capable than they believe. That's the world that I'd love to get to.

Q62 Chair: One final and rather brutal question. Were we not to recommend your approval for the post

and the Government went ahead with your appointment, would you accept it?

Andrew Dilnot: I think it would depend why you did not recommend that I be appointed. If you were to recommend that I were not appointed, I would want to look at why. If I thought you had good points, I would say, "Well, actually, they're right, I shouldn't do this." If I thought you did not want me for reasons that I thought were not really relevant, then I would be happy to go ahead.

Chair: Thank you very much for your time. We will decide whether you have made us happy or not.

Written evidence

Written evidence submitted by Sir Michael Scholar KCB, Chair, UK Statistics Authority

The Authority believes that the 2007 Act is working well, but would work even better if further non-legislative steps were taken by the Government. In this context, I wrote to the Prime Minister in May 2010 setting out these steps, and our reasons for proposing them. To date, Ministers have not felt able to support these proposals, but they remain the considered advice of the Authority. We recently drew them to the attention of the Cabinet Office, in connection with their post-legislative scrutiny of the 2007 Act.

On a personal note, may I thank the Select Committee and its staff for their scrutiny of our work since the creation of the Authority in 2008? The relationship between the Authority's non-executive Board and your Committee is, as we see it, a pivotal one in setting the direction for official statistics. We believe that our reporting and accountability to the Committee and through it to Parliament more generally is crucial to the long term success of the statutory framework established by the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*.

SUMMARY

- The UK Statistics Authority was established by the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007* as an independent body, at arm's length from government, reporting to Parliament.
- The Act came into force on 1 April 2008 and gives the Authority the statutory objective of promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good.
- The Authority believes that the provisions of the Act have proved to be effective in allowing it independence of action, although there are further non-legislative steps which would assist the Authority in its role.
- The Authority continues to discharge its statutory functions in respect of independent scrutiny (monitoring and assessment) of all official statistics produced in the UK, and governance of the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

1. The *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007* established the UK Statistics Authority as an independent body at arm's length from government; with the statutory objective of promoting and safeguarding the production of official statistics that "serve the public good"; and with direct reporting to Parliament and the devolved legislatures rather than through Ministers.

2. Since its creation, the Authority's independence of action in seeking to fulfil our objectives has not been compromised or challenged. The Authority believes that the provisions of the Act have proved to be effective in allowing this independence of action, which has, on occasion, required direct challenge by the Authority to government Departments and Ministers. However, in some areas we believe that some further non-legislative steps would assist the Authority in its role, and these are set out in more detail below.

3. The Authority understands the provisions of the 2007 Act to require that official statistics are for the benefit of society and the economy generally; not just in the formulation and monitoring of government policy, but also through assisting the direction of economic and commercial activities, by providing valuable information for analysts, researchers, public and voluntary bodies, and enabling the public to hold to account all organisations that spend public money. The great bulk of quantified information about public expenditure is recorded through the medium of official statistics, whether in central or local government, non-departmental bodies or the NHS. These statistics are fundamental to both efficient management and the democratic process. We are acutely aware of the obligation this places on the Office for National Statistics, and on the statistical service as a whole, to produce and publish statistics which are of maximum quality and utility. The Statistics Authority will continue to scrutinise and monitor this closely.

4. By their nature official statistics are not unassailable facts but estimates which are derived from a wide variety of sources and methodologies. The Authority's aim is that they should be the best estimates that can be produced at the time. We aim to make sure that the right statistics are produced, that high and consistent professional standards are maintained, and that the statistics are well communicated and explained, including a frank summary of their strengths and weaknesses. By doing so, we hope both to enhance the value of the statistical product and to encourage public trust in the statistical service.

5. The Authority has shown its readiness to operate and speak independently on matters of statistical controversy, including those where there are suspicions of political interference with the statistics. Our interventions on knife crime statistics in December 2008, on UK- and non-UK born migration in February 2009, on the gender pay gap in June 2009, and on violent crime and immigration statistics in February 2010, were examples that your predecessor Committee was aware of. The Authority has also intervened on a number of occasions since May 2010. It recently undertook, at the request of the House of Commons Transport Committee, a statistical investigation into the extent of divergence in the trends in the published statistics between the numbers killed and seriously injured in road accidents. These examples are an illustration of the role the Authority can, and will continue to, play especially where there are concerns about political involvement in the production or publication of official statistics, or about damage to the integrity of official statistics through misunderstanding or misrepresentation by those outside government.

6. The Authority welcomed the Cabinet Secretary's 2009 guidance on statistical practice, in response to our action on knife crime statistics, reminding all officials and advisors, not just government statisticians, of the need to observe the Code of Practice for Official Statistics; to consult professional statisticians when preparing publications; not to quote selectively from unpublished datasets; and to raise any concerns with their professional statistical advisers. More recently, the Ministerial Code has been updated, and now advises Ministers to be mindful of statistical propriety, and the provisions of the Code of Practice and the pre-release access Orders. Both of these non-legislative actions have helped to strengthen the operation of the Act and ensure the independence of official statistics.

7. The Authority has also laid before the UK Parliament and the devolved legislatures its annual reports under section 27 of the Act, and formally written to Ministers under section 16 so as to make various requests to undertake Assessments of official statistics produced by their Departments that were not currently designated as National Statistics. The Authority has also discharged its responsibility under section 18 of the 2007 Act to publish each financial year a list of statistics designated as National Statistics, and this has been supplemented with additional lists of official statistics produced by those non-Crown bodies that are regarded as producers of official statistics for the purposes of the Act.

8. The Statistics Authority continues to seek active engagement with the Devolved Administrations and the devolved legislatures. To date, the majority of our interactions with the Devolved Administrations have been in the context of our Assessment programme. The Authority also engaged with the Devolved Administrations during the drafting of their statutory arrangements for pre-release access to wholly devolved statistics, and we set out our views where we believed that the proposed arrangements were unsatisfactory and inconsistent with the arrangements elsewhere. The Authority has also written to the relevant scrutiny committees in the devolved legislatures to set out issues that may be of interest to them.

Code of Practice for Official Statistics and Assessment

9. In January 2009 the Authority published a revised and clarified Code of Practice for Official Statistics as required by section 10 of the 2007 Act. The Code was drafted with the aim of codifying the existing high quality and political impartiality of official statistics, but also to raise the standards of service to the users of official statistics, for example, by requiring good written commentary to be presented alongside the statistics at the time of first publication. In this and other respects we believe the Code is exceptionally challenging by international standards and that the process of statutory assessment against the Code is one of our main levers to ensure steady improvement.

10. The Authority has published over 110 Assessment Reports reviewing some 500 sets of National Statistics outputs (approaching one-half of the sum total of National Statistics outputs, but already including most of the more high profile National Statistics series). All assessments so far have identified some further steps that the statistical producers concerned need to take to meet the "National Statistics" standard. We believe that this is indicative of the fact that the Code has "raised the bar". In practice, a "conditional designation" as National Statistics has, so far, normally, been given, and a timetable agreed with the producers for the extra steps that need to be taken. These mechanisms help to ensure that Assessment is a powerful influence on the development of UK official statistics.

11. The Authority's Assessment programme has, so far, identified three main recommendations that occur repeatedly in our Assessment Reports:

- (a) *Improve commentary*: For official statistics to be understood and used in ways that justify the costs of their collection and publication, it is important that appropriate written advice (commentary) is published alongside the figures. Informative and impartial commentary should be seen as the heart of every statistical release, not just a desirable extra. The Authority set out its detailed views in this area in a published note in October 2010.
- (b) *Improve engagement with users*: Statistics are most valuable when they are used in ways that most serve the public good. To achieve this, more systematic engagement by producers of official statistics with organisations and individuals whose analysis, research, decisions or actions are informed by official statistics is required. The Authority's recommendations relating to engagement with users were set out in our Monitoring Report, *Strengthening User Engagement*, published in June 2010.
- (c) *Improve documentation*: The Code of Practice requires the publication of supporting documents intended to improve understanding of different aspects of the statistics—including details of methods and sources used to provide the statistics, the uses made of, and the limitations of, the statistics and a statement detailing the use of administrative sources for statistical purposes. Although in many cases such documentation is already available for internal use, this is an area where Code compliance needs to be strengthened.

12. The Authority will keep the Code and Assessment process under review to see that they do not impose unreasonable demands on the producers of statistics and those who manage the many parts of the UK statistical service.

Independent monitoring and reporting

13. Alongside the Authority's Assessment work, we are required by the 2007 Act to monitor the production and publication of official statistics and to report on any concerns we might have about quality, good practice or comprehensiveness. We have so far published five *Monitoring Reports* on substantive topics—overcoming barriers to trust in crime statistics, reviewing the statutory arrangements for pre-release access to official statistics, strengthening user engagement, migration statistics, and reviewing the public consultation on the new Code of Practice for Official Statistics. The Authority has also prepared and published 15 shorter notes in its *Monitoring Brief* series on a range of particular statistical issues that have arisen, for example on trends in violent crime, the gender pay gap, communicating estimates of inflation, volatility of the retail sales index, and regular reports summarising the emerging findings of the Authority's Assessment programme.

14. The current economic climate and the public expenditure restrictions have brought with them new pressures on the UK's statistical service. The Authority recognises that the UK's well-established decentralised and devolved statistical system, confirmed by the 2007 Act, means that decisions about future statistical budgets will remain in large measure the responsibility of departmental Ministers.

15. The Authority has sought to draw attention to the many interdependencies in the statistical work produced across government. Decisions about statistical outputs and statistical capability made in one Department may have a significant impact on statistical work in others. In October 2010 we published a short report on the subject, providing a number of different examples of where statistical work in particular topic areas involves a range of different producer Departments. The Authority's considered view is that where Departments are proposing substantial changes to statistical work, it is important that they take full account of the implications for other bodies, both inside and outside government.

16. While the Authority does not seek to challenge the present arrangements under which some 200 organisations across the four UK administrations are responsible for producing official statistics, we see scope for stronger co-ordination of the publication and communication of these statistics in the interests of all users of the statistics. From a user perspective, it cannot be satisfactory that each Department decides unilaterally in what form and style to publish its own statistics. Users do not fall neatly in to the same "stovepipes" as departmental responsibilities.

17. The present round of expenditure cuts is, it is becoming clear, having the effect of reducing the range of statistical outputs in an un-coordinated way. Past efforts, over many years to encourage a common approach to the production and release of statistics have had only limited influence. The Statistics Authority introduced the Publication Hub in 2008 which provides central access to most statistical releases but there is a strong case for going now further than this. The Authority has now instigated a Monitoring review of the portfolio of statistical publications across government and this will report around March 2012. In the light of that it is likely that the Authority will put forward specific further proposals for further standardisation of, and improved accessibility to, statistical outputs.

18. The Authority will also continue to take up concerns about individual departmental plans for statistical expenditure, directly with Ministers and through a new series of published *Statistical Expenditure Reports*. These are targeted reviews looking at particular proposals from Departments, examining the needs of users, the extent of consultation, the effects on other Departments or on other statistical series, and the overall rationale for the proposed reduction in expenditure and capability.

Strategic oversight of the Office for National Statistics

19. The 2007 Act gave the Authority responsibility for, and oversight of, the work of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), although the management of the office is delegated to the National Statistician and, since 2009, the day to day management of the Office has been the responsibility of the Director General for ONS.

20. ONS is a substantial non-ministerial government Department in its own right and in order to achieve effective oversight of the ONS, the Authority established the ONS Board, under the chairmanship of Lord Rowe-Beddoe, one of the two deputy chairs of the Authority. The non-executive members of the ONS Board have a strong background in business and public service.

21. In our oversight role the Authority is involved in setting strategy for, and reviewing the major decisions facing, ONS as an organisation. Detailed accounts of these activities have been published in our successive annual reports. In short, we believe that the ONS are operating in a highly professional way in many complex and controversial statistical fields, from measuring economic activity, inflation and employment to their social and demographic work, most notably in the 2011 Census and also their development of measures of well-being. The role of the Authority is to provide protection to the ONS from unwarranted political attack and from the suspicion of political interference, and to provide them with overall direction and with vigorous challenge.

22. In our regulatory role we treat ONS on exactly the same basis as any other producer of official statistics. For example, in 2009 we commented on, and made recommendations in relation to, an ONS statistical release on the nationality of foreign-born workers in employment in the UK, which was the subject of political controversy. This case was the subject of an inquiry by your predecessor Committee and helped, we believe, to demonstrate that the complex statutory regime is functioning properly.

Further non-legislative steps

23. During the passage of the legislation, a number of criticisms were made in Parliament of its provisions. The Authority believes that these have either been, or could be, satisfactorily addressed without any need to amend the legislation.¹ These include:

- *Pre-release access to official statistics:* The Act (section 11) precludes the Authority from determining the rules on pre-release access. This has led to inconsistent, and in some respect unsatisfactory, practices being established. The Authority published its own review of the pre-release arrangements in March 2010. The Authority remains of the view that it would be preferable if Ministers were to commit themselves to following the advice and recommendations of the Authority in respect of pre-release access, as proposed in the Authority's report. This action, which would not require legislation, would enable the Authority to reassure Parliament and the public that these issues were being addressed independently and consistently with international best practice.
- *Dual responsibilities:* The Act, in effect, gives the Statistics Authority two, sometimes conflicting, sets of responsibilities—one relating to the National Statistician and the Office for National Statistics (ss. 5, 30–32) and the other relating to monitoring and assessment of the production and publication of official statistics (ss. 8, 10, 12–19). The Act is not in detail prescriptive about how the Authority should operate in monitoring the work of ONS. In practice, the Monitoring and Assessment functions are managed separately by the Head of Assessment and supervised by one of the two non-executive Deputy Chairs of the Authority Board. Decisions on Assessment are taken entirely independently of producers of statistics. As noted above, the Authority's functions relating to ONS are separately overseen by the ONS Board chaired by the second Deputy Chair. These non-statutory arrangements provide as much separation of the two sets of responsibilities as can be achieved within the terms of the Act.
- *Oversight of the Statistical System and statistical capability:* The Act gives the Statistics Authority oversight over all UK official statistics wherever they are produced. The Statistics Authority has proposed that it be consulted on decisions, before they are reached, about significant changes to statistical expenditure plans or statistical outputs, in order to fulfil its statutory obligation to safeguard official statistics for the public good. The Authority's statutory functions, in relation to the scope and coherence of official statistics, can be fully exercised only if it has the knowledge of what is being planned in Departments, and if it is given the opportunity to register with Parliament and with Ministers its views, including its views on the value for money of different statistical series, before action is taken.
- *Role of the National Statistician and Government Statistical Service:* The Act defines the role of the National Statistician in respect of her duties as chief executive of the Authority and the Authority's principal adviser on the quality, good practice and comprehensiveness of official statistics. However, the Act does not define the National Statistician's role as Head of the Government Statistical Service (GSS) and as the Government's principal adviser on statistical matters, nor does it give any statutory recognition to the GSS. The Authority has proposed that greater independence for statistics be achieved by giving more weight to the role of departmental Heads of Profession for Statistics reporting to the National Statistician as their manager on professional matters. The Authority has also proposed that Departments should seek the National Statistician's involvement before making decisions about the performance, grading, placement and numbers of departmental statistical staff. These initiatives would help to recognise the professional leadership role of the National Statistician, and thus further taking professional statistical matters out of the political arena.

April 2011

Supplementary written evidence submitted by Sir Michael Scholar KCB, Chair, UK Statistics Authority

NATIONAL ADDRESS REGISTER

Given the absence of a population register in the United Kingdom, the National Address Gazetteer is a welcome development. It will have wide utility for government and for business. In the context of establishing a statistical frame for survey taking and alternative models to the traditional census, it is crucial. The UK Statistics Authority has proposed an address register for several years, and strongly supports the establishment of this initiative. We welcome the progress now being made, with Government backing.

GeoPlace, a joint venture partnership between Ordnance Survey and the Local Government Group, was launched in December 2010. The National Address Gazetteer database will be produced by GeoPlace to provide one definitive source of accurate spatial address data, through combining the best features of the National Land

¹ *Policy Priorities of the UK Statistics Authority*, 12 May 2010
<http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/reports—correspondence/correspondence/letter-from-sir-michael-scholar-to-prime-minister-12052010.pdf>

and Property Gazetteer (NLPG) and the Address Layer 2 from which spatial address products will be created. In April 2011 GeoPlace released sample data and dataset specifications for comments.

Our census experience is that bringing together address lists is not currently sufficient for a high quality register. The Census experience in combining together these two sources of address data showed that this was both problematic and did not result in a comprehensive unduplicated data file. Investment is required both to develop and maintain a register. Using other address products in the Census work also demonstrated differences, some of which need validating with local visits. As part of our Census quality assurance, ONS will be working with GeoPlace to help improve the quality of the National Address Gazetteer.

For efficient statistical use, the Address Gazetteer should distinguish between addresses and households, recognising that an address may or may not be related to any household (a business address), to a single household, to multiple households, or to more complex establishments which house people (retirement homes, prisons, etc). The National Address Gazetteer has to have this level of detail to provide real value for statistical purposes and this may also be necessary for other uses.

From a statistical point of view, we need to have a high quality National Address Register that has the right scope and content for statistical use, is regularly maintained, has a strong quality assurance/audit regime, is operational, and has secure funding and governance in the present and the future.

Requiring GeoPlace to report their progress to the Committee would provide an opportunity for the Committee to understand how the National Address Gazetteer will meet the needs of users, including those of statistics.

STAFFING

The following table demonstrates the staff changes for the Office for National Statistics (ONS) from 31 March 2005 (prior to the relocation programme), and projected to 31 March 2015.

The UK Statistics Authority was established in April 2008. Staffing numbers for the UK Statistics Authority are included in these tables from this date.

In summary:

- The total workforce has reduced by 16% since 31 March 2005 (to 31 March 2011), and we project a further 16% reduction by 31 March 2015.
- The London workforce has reduced by 95% since 31 March 2005 (to 31 March 2011) as a result of the relocation programme, and efficiency savings.
- The Newport workforce has increased by 14% since 31 March 2005 (to 31 March 2011) as a result of the relocation of posts from London. While it is projected that this will reduce by 2015 as a result of efficiency savings (by 6%), the projected staffing figure for Newport by 31 March 2015 will still be higher than it was on 31 March 2005.
- The Titchfield workforce has increased by 14% since 31 March 2005 (to 31 March 2011) primarily to support the 2011 Census—through the use of fixed-term contracts. A programme is in place, to effectively manage these appointments and end them as the Census activities draw to a close.

June 2011

Changes to the staffing profile for the Office for National Statistics

Table 1 below demonstrates how the staffing profile for the Office for National Statistics has changed since March 2005 (prior to the start of the relocation programme), and provides the projected staffing profile to March 2015.

All figures are shown as the Headcount (actual numbers of individual members of staff) as at, or projected to, 31 March for each year shown.

The “Change” columns show percentage increases or decreases from the previous period.

Table 1

	Headcount					% Change	
	March 2005	March 2008	March 2011	March 2013	March 2015	March 2005 to March 2011	March 2008 to March 2011
London	1,033	337	50	48	46	-95.1	-85.2
Newport	1,432	1,478	1,629	1,593	1,528	+13.8	+10.2
Titchfield	902	711	1,026	664	605	+13.7	+44.3
Interviewers	1,358	1,249	1,265	1,213	1,141	-6.8	+1.3
Total	4,725	3,775	3,970	3,518	3,320	-16.0	+5.2

Notes:

1. March 2005 and March 2008 figures do not show the staffing profile for the ONS Southport site, for comparison purposes (staff in Southport moved out of the ONS as part of a Machinery of Government Transfer on 1 April 2008).
2. Reductions in the London workforce are as a result of the relocation programme and efficiency savings.
3. Increases to the Newport workforce are as a result of the relocation of posts from London.
4. Increases to the Titchfield workforce are as a result of the build-up of staff (through fixed term appointments) in preparation for the 2011 Census (the projections show the numbers declining post-Census).
5. The UK Statistics Authority was established in April 2008. Staffing numbers for the UK Statistics Authority are included in these tables from this date. The non-ONS UK Statistics Authority staffing headcount in March 2011 was 27.

Written evidence submitted by Royal Statistical Society (RSS)

SUMMARY

1. The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) considers that priorities for the new UK Statistics Authority Chair are:
 - Promoting the need for coordination in the decentralised and devolved UK statistical system; this includes keeping under review current cuts in spending and “sounding the alarm” if any cuts appear to damage the overall integrity of the system;
 - Ensuring that government statisticians pay more attention to all actual and potential users, not just those in central government departments;
 - Supporting the National Statistician in improving the status of official statisticians and in enhancing their professional development;
 - Dealing satisfactorily with the UKSA’s dual role in both producing and scrutinising official statistics;
 and above all
 - Taking all possible steps to improve public confidence in official statistics.
2. We note though that the UKSA cannot achieve these aims, particularly the last one, on its own. It needs the cooperation of departments and UK governments and the support of PASC and Parliaments to ensure that this happens.
3. The main changes we see needed to the official statistical system are:
 - The cultural change of paying more attention to all actual and potential users.
 - Recognition throughout UK governments of the disadvantages, as well as the advantages, of a decentralised and a devolved statistical system and active consideration of how to offset these disadvantages including paying more attention to the UKSA and the National Statistician.
4. The RSS considers that the reduction in nominal time commitment for the new Chair is acceptable but is concerned over the implicit message concerning the status and importance of the post that the reduction in salary sends.

ABOUT THE ROYAL STATISTICAL SOCIETY

5. The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) is the UK’s only professional and learned society devoted to the interests of statistics and statisticians. It is also one of the most influential and prestigious statistical societies in the world with an international membership. It is active in a wide range of areas both directly and indirectly pertaining to the study and application of statistics. The role of statistics in monitoring the economic and social conditions of the nation and their use in public policy has been a concern of the Society since its earliest days. It engaged actively in the process of reform undertaken by the previous government playing a particularly active role in the consultation, discussions and legislative process that led to the 2007 Statistics and Registration Service Act.

BACKGROUND

6. Valid and accurate statistics are critical in understanding society and the economy. To be effective, and to meet the objective in the 2007 Statistics and Registration Service Act of “serving the public good”, official statistics must be relevant, respond to current and future user needs, be produced cost effectively to high standards with high integrity, and must command public confidence. Prior to the 2007 Act UK official statistics, while generally being produced to high technical and professional standards, only met the rest of these criteria partially; public confidence in them was (and remains) very low.

7. We believe that the United Kingdom Statistics Authority (UKSA) under Sir Michael Scholar has made an excellent start in its role. The Code of Practice was introduced, the Assessment Programme is well under way, timely and well-informed reports have been produced. The UKSA practice in the Assessment reports of usually giving the statistics concerned conditional “national statistics” designation (with certain requirements which have to be fulfilled before the designation is confirmed) has proved an effective method of improving statistical handling by official statisticians. Sir Michael and the Authority have made a number of well-judged and balanced public interventions, some of which have attracted significant media interest. Together the UKSA actions have resulted in noticeable improvements to the statistical process and, importantly, to the handling of statistics by government departments. In particular the guidance on statistics handling, including confirmation that the statistics Code of Practice applied to all civil servants, issued in early 2009 by Sir Gus O’Donnell, following Sir Michael’s intervention in the “knife crime” affair (coupled with PASC’s interest in the issue), was a significant step forwards.

8. The goal is a statistical system which is relevant, responsive to current and future user needs and produced cost effectively to high standards, with high integrity and commanding public confidence. However, attaining such a system is a long-term goal; it cannot be fully reached in one term since it often involves changes in culture and procedures. More importantly, since the UK statistical system is both decentralised and devolved, the UKSA and the National Statistician cannot, by themselves, bring about all the changes needed. They require

cooperation from departments and from devolved administrations and we believe that this is not yet sufficient (see paras 10, 12 and 19 below). They also need the influence of Parliament, and in particular of PASC, in helping to ensure that needed changes happen.

9. Official statistics have a profound influence on decision making across society—whether by central government, local government, government agencies, business, academic researchers or individuals. Whether it is informing democratic processes such as local elections, providing information on the state of the NHS, influencing resource allocation in the state and voluntary sector, guiding business decisions, shaping academic research which in turn shapes policy, annual uplifting of pension payments, influencing individuals' choice of school for their children or many, many more examples—statistics matter. Thus official statistics must not just be the by-product of government; they must be carefully designed to reflect the needs of a wide range of users, produced well in a coordinated way, fully and carefully explained, and easily accessible when needed. These imperatives are as yet only partially acknowledged by government departments and other producer bodies; raising recognition of these facts is an essential task that the UKSA has started on but where it has a huge mass of departmental inertia or outright resistance still to overcome.

PRIORITY ISSUES FACING THE NEW CHAIR OF UKSA

10. *Uncoordinated cuts to official statistics.* We fully accept, as does the UKSA, that official statistics have to bear their share of the cuts in government spending. But cuts should not be done without relevant departments consulting or dialoguing with users and considering actual and potential needs other than their own. Otherwise there is a real danger of an uncoordinated and ineffective statistical system. However while some departments have discussed proposed changes with users the UKSA has already had to protest formally² about two announced cuts. The first was the decision by the NHS information service to discontinue its share of the funding of the Lifestyle Survey (subject to ratification by the Department of Health)—a decision apparently taken without any consultation of users. The second is the proposed discontinuation of the Citizenship survey by the Department of Communities and Local Government despite a consultation which showed strong need for it, including by other government departments and in support of current government policies (such as measuring national wellbeing and the “Big Society” initiative), without any substantive discussion as to how needed information could be obtained through other means. With detailed decisions on cuts by government departments still in their early stages we fear that these two instances might be only the tip of the iceberg.

11. *Developing a more coordinated statistical service generally.* The problem mentioned in the preceding paragraph is an acute example of a more general problem—that of balancing departmental autonomy with the need to produce a coordinated statistical system. While departmental autonomy needs to be respected there should be an obligation on departments and devolved administrations to consult and pay attention to the UKSA and/or the National Statistician as appropriate. The benefits of a decentralised and devolved system can only be realised if there is a strong centre to ensure coordination. We greatly regret that the Cabinet Office has not seen fit to endorse this view.

12. Issues can also arise regarding coordination between the devolved legislatures or between devolved legislatures and the UK as a whole. While we recognise the need to ensure that statistics support individual countries' needs, efforts must also be maintained to produce harmonised statistics for the UK as a whole.

13. *Supporting the National Statistician in improving the status of official statisticians and in enhancing their professional development.* Thirty years ago senior statisticians in major government departments were at least at Director level. None of them are now, while in some smaller departments the Head of Profession is not even in the Senior Civil Service. At a time when statistical understanding is ever more important to the political judgements that have to be made this loss of capability is alarming. This requires both greater recognition of the value of statistical skills and enabling statisticians to develop the broader skill sets needed for higher level analytical posts. It is also necessary that the National Statistician has sufficient influence over the training and professional development of government statisticians.

14. *Greater attention to the needs of all users; enhanced commentary and presentation.* The UKSA recently published a summary of the findings from its first 100 Assessment reports covering 450 sets of statistics.³ In many ways the statistics assessed already met the requirements of the code of practice. However the UKSA has found three areas where statistics frequently fall short: communication including commentary and presentation; improving engagement with all users (not just those in central government whose needs were in practice heavily prioritised); and improving documentation. Encouraging official statisticians to improve these areas of their work and supporting the National Statistician in these endeavours will remain a key priority of the new Chair. The RSS is ready to play a full part in this work to improve the understanding and use of statistics

² Letters from Sir Michael Scholar to the Rt. Hon. Eric Pickles MP (8 April 2011) and to the Rt. Hon. Andrew Lansley MP (23 March 2011); both can be accessed from <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/reports—correspondence/correspondence/index.html> See also the UKSA press notice on reductions in government statistical functions <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/reductions-in-government-statistical-functions.html>

³ See the press notice at <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/100th-assessment-report.html> The full report can be accessed from <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-briefs/index.html>

across UK society. The ten year RSS Getstats campaign launched in 2010 provides a real opportunity for the world of official statistics to engage with wider audiences.

15. *Dealing with the UKSA's dual role.* While we do not think it ideal that the UKSA is both a “producer” of official statistics, via its responsibility for the ONS, and responsible for scrutiny, in practice the arrangements put in place by Sir Michael go a long way to overcoming this problem. The new chair will need to review the system to see if further enhancements are needed.

16. *Improving public confidence in official statistics.* While we have put this factor last in the list in practice it is perhaps the most important long-term priority and was a clear aim of the 2007 Act. It is a very long-term goal which will not depend solely on the work of the UKSA but also on other factors including the attitude of governments more generally. We believe that the work being done by the UKSA, provided its efforts continue, will ultimately facilitate an improvement in confidence although it will not on its own be sufficient. The causes of low public confidence in official statistics are multiple but perceptions of government interference and control are clearly one of the key elements. (In the latest survey into confidence in official statistics⁴ carried out in 2009, only 32% of respondents agreed that “official figures are generally accurate” while 40% disagreed, the remainder not expressing an opinion. Only 16% agreed that “official figures are produced without political interference”.) As paragraphs 10 to 12 and 19 below demonstrate, while deliberate and malevolent instances of political interference are very rare, in practice ministers and Whitehall still have too much “soft” influence over the official statistical process. The new Chair will need both to seek to reduce, or at least balance, this influence and to continue to grow public recognition of statistical independence. We also regret that the Coalition government (and the devolved administrations where it is within their power) has not seen fit to endorse the UKSA's recommendations on further restricting pre-release access to statistics.

17. An essential step in improving confidence, particularly among users, is to ensure that official statistics are “carefully designed to reflect the needs of a wide range of users, produced well in a coordinated way, fully and carefully explained, and easily accessible when needed”—as paragraph 9 explains.

CHANGES WHICH MAY BE REQUIRED TO THE OFFICIAL STATISTICS SYSTEM

18. Paragraph 14 above indicates some changes in practice which official statisticians generally need to adopt. We would like to highlight the need to listen to, and engage with, all actual and potential users of statistics. The decade prior to the 2007 Act saw an increase in the effective influence of Whitehall departments over official statistics, partly as a result of changes within departments which have seen statisticians increasingly “bedded out” in policy sections. Meanwhile the work of the Office for National Statistics has in practice become influenced by the “service agreements” it has with organisations such as the Treasury and the Bank of England. As a result even professional users of statistics outside central government often found it hard to have their voice heard and their needs paid attention to. In recent years the tide has turned but much progress remains to be done not just as regards actual professional statistics users but also with potential users. We accept that engaging with users, who are usually themselves busy people with little time, is not always easy but efforts must continue if official statistics are “to serve the public good”. And there must be more recognition by official statisticians of how they are in practice still overly subject to central government influence.

19. *Changes in organisation.* The decision to remove publication of crime statistics from the Home Office highlights the perennial debate over the advantages of a centralised statistical system versus the decentralised and devolved system that the UK has. There is no perfect system since the advantages in perceived independence and coordination of a centralised system means that government functions generally, including policy making, have less input from statisticians. There is also the danger of an “ivory tower” mentality developing in a fully centralised service. Further, devolution enshrined the rights of devolved administrations over relevant statistics. For the moment, therefore, the RSS continues to support the principle of a decentralised system but we recognise that the “costs” of this system in terms of the lack of coordination and the perceived lack of independence are becoming more apparent. It is imperative that there is greater recognition of its disadvantages and that additional consideration is given to what checks and balances could be put in place to counter them (including ensuring that harmonised statistical outputs can be presented for the whole of the UK). This highlights in particular the need mentioned in paragraphs 11 and 12 for departments and governments to pay more attention to the UK Statistics Authority.

WHETHER A TWO-DAY WEEK IS SUFFICIENT TIME COMMITMENT

20. We feel that the proportional reduction in time from a notional three to a notional two day week for the Chair of the UKSA is not a problem. The role is non-executive and the initial notional three-day week reflected the need to set up the system. It remains the case that the effective time required is likely to be greater than two days a week just as Sir Michael in practice devoted more than three days a week.

21. We are more concerned with the reduction in salary. At the time of writing we do not know whether there have been sufficient applications from credible candidates to justify the reduction. We are particularly

⁴ Carried out by NatCen for the UK Statistics Authority and reported in Annex A of the UKSA monitoring report on “Strengthening User Engagement” accessible from page <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-reports/index.html>

concerned about the implicit message that the reduction sends regarding the importance of the post, which is regrettable. We note that the recent Hutton “Fair Pay Review” provided comprehensive arguments rebutting the notion that pay should not exceed, pro rata, that of the prime minister. The pay of the UKSA Chair should be comparable with other public sector appointments of similar importance and responsibility.

April 2011

Written evidence submitted by Royal Statistical Society Statistics Users Forum

1. SUF is an umbrella organisation for a growing number of groups and networks of users of official statistics and is the means through which the Royal Statistical Society promotes the needs of users, building on the work of the predecessor Statistics User Council.

2. SUF wishes to associate itself with the views expressed in the submission made by the Royal Statistical Society. In particular we agree that one of the highest priority issues for the incoming Chair is how to ensure that greater attention is given to the needs of all users of statistics. We would like assurance that the Chair will be willing and able to exert pressure on the National Statistician and the Government Statistical Service so that the system delivers the service that users need and expect. For statistics to have value, they must be used, and used by the widest possible audience.

3. The Code of Practice for Statistics, developed and published by the UK Statistics Authority, is a significant achievement. It underpins both quality and integrity, and this is strengthened by its statutory footing. Principle 1 of the Code sets out clearly the importance of engaging with all users—not just those in government departments—and understanding their needs. However, it is clear from the assessments of National Statistics carried out to date that user engagement is an area in which many producers fall short. The assessments have usefully identified this as an area for improvement. However, although many in the producer community pay lip service to what these developments imply, we are not convinced that the producer community as a whole has yet acknowledged or embraced the culture shift required.

4. SUF welcomed the UK Statistics Authority Monitoring Report “Strengthening User Engagement”, published in June 2010, and supported all its recommendations which chimed well with what the Forum has been trying to achieve over the last few years. However, SUF is concerned that there seems to have been very little follow-up to this report. We hope that the incoming Chair will pursue the recommendations with vigour and we will be happy to do anything we can to support them in this.

5. We are currently working on producing a set of best practice guidelines for user engagement that we hope will be adopted throughout government, based on the experiences of our members. Much of this work arises from our unhappiness with the rash of user consultation exercises on priorities and plans for national statistics that are taking place in response to the Comprehensive Spending Review. SUF has always advocated the need for continuous user-producer dialogue rather than producers relying on one-off consultation exercises, while recognising that both have their place and should, ideally, be complementary.

6. The web provides considerable potential for continuous dialogue between users and producers. With support from the ESRC the RSS is developing a new on-line communications hub to facilitate this. StatsUserNet will be an online user engagement tool using social networking software. It is designed to give users a one stop shop for advice, discussion and information, and allow producers direct access to a large user community. The UK Statistics Authority supported this development through a recommendation in the “Strengthening User Engagement” report and is represented on the Project Board. Heads of profession in government departments have also been supportive, but we hope that the Authority will be able to bring pressure to bear to ensure that this support carries through into the embedding of the web hub into all user engagement activity.

7. While recognising the constraints on public finances and the need to make budgetary cuts, users are concerned that the implications of decisions that affect statistics should be seen in the context of the output of statistics across government as a whole. Otherwise there is real danger of the law of unintended consequences operating. We feel that the UK Statistics Authority is uniquely placed to analyse the consequences of changes in statistical outputs to the statistical system as a whole. The statistical expenditure reports are a useful first step in this analysis.

8. Given the centrality of user engagement to the Code of Practice, and the recommendations of the Authority’s report on Strengthening User Engagement, it could be argued that if SUF had not already existed the Authority would now have to invent it. In recognition of this, the Authority has supported SUF through the secondment of a member of staff over the last 18 months, to a new post of User Engagement Programme Manager. This secondment has made a real difference to the way in which we can support user groups, and indeed reach out beyond the traditional user group structures. The arrangement has just been renewed for a further two years and we hope that it will be possible to put this support onto a long term basis.

April 2011

Written evidence submitted by Ian Maclean MBE

Ian Maclean was Chairman of the Statistics Users' Council from 1989–2004.

1. SUMMARY

- Legislation to amend the 2007 Act is essential if official statistics are to meet the needs of a participating democracy in the 21st century.
- Departmental statistics that are in the public domain are an integral part of “national statistics” and should be under the control of UKSA.
- Pre-release requirements are out of line with other developed democracies and should be strengthened.
- The role and scope of official statistics requires clarification. Does serving the “public good” just mean making statistics collected for government freely available or is the broader concept of providing a service that considers the needs of society on equal terms with those of the government.
- A marketing based structure should be adopted that starts with identifying the needs of all customers/users and then determines the best way of meeting those needs within approved budgets.
- An effective user consultation mechanism is still lacking. Consultation with users is widely debated, but inadequate in practice. A formal structure is needed.
- Take statistics directly to the public through a packaging programme that will ensure that the statistics that will initiate and inform debate on key policy issues are in the public domain alongside the RPI, National Income and the Balance of Payments.
- The Rayner cutbacks in detailed business statistics should be restored.
- The relationship between UKSA and the ONS, in particular that of the Chairman and National Statistician, should be reviewed as again their roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined.
- A vote of thanks is due to Sir Michael Scholar for his active intervention against the misuse of statistics by Ministers and the threatened cutbacks to Health and other key statistics. He will be a hard act to follow.

2. LEGISLATION

The 2007 legislation was long overdue as the UK was the only developed country without a statistics law. The debate on legislation had started as long ago as 1966 with the House of Commons Report on Statistics; been the subject of my paper at the 1978 Statistics Users' Council annual conference; the basis of the 1990 RSS report on “Counting with Confidence”, included in the Labour Party manifestos of 1992 [which I helped write] and 1997, leading to the Framework Document for National Statistics in 2000, setting up the Statistics Commission and their report in 2003 on the justification for legislation—which I prepared. Interspersed were several Green and White Papers and Treasury Select Committee hearings. All supported by the 1991 UN listing of The Fundamental Principles for Official Statistics and their 2004 publication providing in detail the statistical laws of over 50 countries. Given this background it would have been reasonable to assume that the legislation when it finally arrived would have set world beating standards for the role and scope of official statistics as a window on the performance of the Government and the basis for informed debate on key public issues by society at large, or in the more emotive French term—the citizen. Not so, the announcement in November 2006 was sudden and unexpected and the Bill was drafted rapidly and rushed through. Only the House of Lords with their strenuous efforts in the committee stage emerge with any credit. The emphasis on “building trust” was a distraction from what should have been the real aim of the legislation—modernising the scope and role of official statistics for the participating democracy that we all hope we are living in. The UK is the only developed country where the public mistrust of official statistics is a live political issue, all other statistical legislation is concerned with building an official statistics system to serve democratic debate. Paradoxically unless the position of the Statistics Authority is strengthened it cannot even fully fulfil the building trust function, let alone fully embrace the wider issues of transparent government and ways of engaging in a meaningful dialogue with citizens.

3. DEPARTMENTAL STATISTICS AND EARLY RELEASE

3.1 These two are linked by the common theme of conflicting views between Ministers and UKSA. The battle lines have already been drawn and while Ministers continue to act virtually as feudal barons, legislation is the only solution if democracy is regarded as preferable to autocracy. Many of the Ministers' claims do not stand up to close examination. Is the Treasury handicapped by the fact that it does not control National Income and the other statistics it uses? The question of funding is a real issue, but the answer is to provide a mechanism for the costs to be included in the UKSA budget?

3.2 On early release the question that has to be answered is do we want to be in the backward or leading group of countries?

4. ROLE AND SCOPE

4.1 There are numerous references to “the public good”, but while that is not defined in legislation there is the continuing prospect of widely different interpretations. If our “participating democracy” is to operate effectively, the role of official statistics has to be to meet the needs of society at large, not just Government, and scope has to be defined as providing the statistics needed by society even if Government has no need for them. There is a precedent in the 1968–69 revision of business statistic. It is a sad thought that the UK was then in the vanguard, not the rearguard, of official statistics developments.

5. MARKETING, USER CONSULTATION AND ENGAGING WITH THE PUBLIC

5.1 UK official statistics are production orientated. They represent a vast and greatly underused resource that should be much more fully exploited. In the business sector marketing is the answer to meeting customer needs and it applies equally to official statistics. A marketing department was introduced under Bill McLelland, but it was an alien philosophy and did not survive his departure. The basic question posed by marketing is “what market are we in”? If the answer is society at large, Government, business, academia and the public, then the next question is “do we have the right products to serve this market”?

5.2 The elements of the marketing plan include:

- a product audit to establish who and what use is made of each statistical series or report;
- market research to identify the need of each sector of the market;
- a product development facility to modify or produce “new” statistics;
- a dissemination programme that concentrates on raising awareness of the value of statistics for decision making and improving accessibility; and
- Making full use of the internet a potentially powerful tool for the mass dissemination of statistics. It would be interesting to see the impact of the National Statistician’s Twitter and the Chairman’s Facebook.

5.3 The term “user” has overtones of just relating to existing outputs and should eventually be replaced by “customer”, but for the moment the term “user” will be assumed to cover both.

Users can be divided into many sectors, but broadly there are two main categories, expert and the rest including the public. The former are well catered for by the Statistics Users’ Forum, the successor to the Statistics Users’ Council set up by Claus Moser in 1970 as a *de facto* solution when the 1966 House of Commons Report on Statistics did not lead to legislation. The practice in virtually all statistics legislation is to incorporate a Statistics Council to represent the views of users, but there is no common format, they vary widely in scope and size. The EU is probably the best model, starting in 1991 with an advisory committee of eventually over 100 members revised down to 25 in the 2009 Statistics Law. The exiting features—for users—of this law apart from the advisory committee are the express references to user requirements and reporting lines.

“The ESAC (European Statistical Advisory Committee) shall assist the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission in ensuring that user requirements and the costs borne by information providers and producers are taken into account in coordinating the strategic objectives and priorities of the Union’s statistical information policy.”

The EU law was the part of a much wider programme, Democracy Dialogue and Debate that was launched in 2006–07.

5.4 Given the existence of the Statistics Authority, incidentally the only body of its kind in the world, it would not be realistic to raise the SUF to the ESAC status at this stage, but there are good grounds for bringing the SUF into a formal reporting relationship with the Authority, including a seat for the SUF Chair on the Board.

5.5 This still leaves the difficult task of meeting the needs of a largely statistically inarticulate public. The best solution would be for UKSA to set up a committee to identify issues of public concern and ensure that existing statistics were made available in an easily accessible form with missing gaps filled where appropriate. Packaging is one of the solutions as relevant statistics are widely scattered and need an experienced hand to be brought together in order to fully inform issues such as child poverty or public sector pensions that are under debate. It is not enough to regard official statistics, in the memorable words of a previous National Statistician, “as a quarry” in which users were free to dig at their leisure.

6. BUSINESS STATISTICS

Given their own heading as they are a special case. Following the reforms of 1969 the UK had the excellent, highly detailed, quarterly Business Monitors covering over 5000 product headings. They were widely appreciated, selling over 600,000 reports annually in the 1970s. Sadly they fell victim to the Rayner statistical massacre. It is ironic that the form filling burden argument was refuted by Armstrong Rees Report which, although instructed by Francis Maude to deliver the final blow to the Business Monitors, noted that the average time taken to complete the return was just two hours. So a valuable business asset was sacrificed to what the late Jack Hibbert described as political dogma. As manufacturing industry was increasingly being seen as a

dinosaur it didn't seem to matter too much, but our over-dependence on the financial sector was exposed by the credit crunch and we have the example of the German recovery based on manufacturing as an extra reminder that perhaps we should seek to rebuild our manufacturing sector. Better short term statistics would help and could be easily and cheaply collected by using the monthly Intrastat returns. Again the UK is unique among large developed economies in not having a short term detailed product series. Incidentally a Treasury Select Committee hearing on statistics in 1998 recommended that the ONS should develop such a series.

7. UKSA AND THE ONS

7.1 As an outsider it is difficult to know who is responsible for what. UKSA would appear to have the overriding responsibility for ensuring that user views are taken into account, but most of the face to face meetings are with the ONS or Departments and bodies such as PUG—Producer User Group—appear virtually unannounced and do not widely publicise either their meetings or the results.

7.2 In terms of governance a casual observer would regard the Authority as the policy making board and the ONS as the production unit, but life is not that simple. The assessment function of the Authority looks remarkably like the quality control department normally associated with the production function and the National Statistician has developed her own Office which looks like a policy unit, so what policies fall within the purview of each organisation? The relationship between the Chairman of the Authority and the National Statistician is again not clear. The National Statistician appears to be the managing director of “UK Statistics Ltd” while the Authority, in addition to assessment, is responsible for combating the misuse of statistics by Ministers and ensuring adequate funding. Yet who is actually the public face of National Statistics? The term National Statistician has a ring about it, as Michael Fallon observed in one of the debates on the Bill. “*It should become one of the big offices of state. I should like the National Statistician to become a household name—a key public figure in leading the profession and championing the public interest in statistics*”. Perhaps he was influenced by the practice in Australia where the National Statistician is fourth in line. Certainly with just two days a week for the new chairman you do not need to be clairvoyant to see where the balance will swing.

May 2011

Written evidence submitted by Academy of Social Sciences

The Academy of Social Sciences, which numbers over 700 distinguished social science Academicians and 41 learned societies covering 85,000 members in academia, government, consultancy and private practice, together with the *Campaign for Social Science*, which it sponsors, wishes to be associated with and supports the submission to the PASC by the Royal Statistical Society (which is itself in membership of the Academy) dated 26 April 2011.

In particular, the Academy and the Campaign are both concerned to see the perceived reduction in the standing of the Chair of the UKSA as adjudged by level of salary. This comes after the decision last year not to replace the Chief Social Scientist (following the resignation of Professor Paul Wiles) and to further diminish the role by dividing it between two heads of function, with themselves other, wider responsibilities to fulfil.

These reductions in standing, focus and the attendant ability of statisticians and social scientists to influence at the most senior (including ministerial) levels within government, are regrettable and should be further reviewed as a matter of priority.

April 2011

Written evidence submitted by Equality and Human Rights Commission

KEY POINTS

1. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (the Commission) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Public Administration Committee's inquiry into priorities for the UK Statistics Authority. Our submission is provided in the context of our statutory duty to promote, enforce and monitor the effectiveness of equality and human rights enactments.⁵

2. The Commission wishes to propose that the following issues are addressed by the new Chair of the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA):

- The loss of statistical outputs on equality issues as a result of spending reductions and/or cancellation of surveys. This will reduce the information available to the public and so reduce transparency. In addition, it will reduce the ability of the Commission, government and other public bodies to:
 - develop and improve policy,

⁵ Sections 8 and 9, Equality Act 2006

- understand the effect of policies and practices on equality groups as required by the public sector equality duty⁶ (PSED),
- identify disparities and target resources effectively, and
- measure progress generally towards equality, human rights and good relations and respond promptly to changing situations.

We are particularly concerned that appropriate, high-quality data may not be available to allow public bodies to target their resources well, to deliver services effectively and to publish information on outcomes as required by the PSED.

- The need to harmonise outputs which provide information on equality groups. The Commission considers this may improve transparency for the public by ensuring that statistics from different sources are based on consistent concepts and standards. These can then be used together to assess trends and identify priorities in an area, thus reducing costs from the need to collect additional data for such purposes.

INTRODUCTION

3. The Commission is an independent statutory body established under the Equality Act 2006. The Commission works to reduce inequality, eliminate discrimination, strengthen good relations, and promote and protect human rights. This includes a specific role in relation to the regulation of, and where necessary the enforcement of, the public sector equality duty.⁷

4. The single equality duty was introduced by the Equality Act 2010 and came into force on 5 April 2011, replacing the previous three equality duties. This requires public bodies to show due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity, to eliminate discrimination and harassment and to foster good relations across the groups protected by the Act.⁸

5. The recent Policy Review Paper⁹ published by the Government Equalities Office proposes that publication of information to demonstrate compliance will form an important element of the specific duties and that those bodies covered by the specific duties will be required to “publish information relating to their employees and others affected by their policies and practices (such as service users)” on an annual basis.

6. The Commission’s statutory role¹⁰ also includes reporting to Parliament, at present every three years, on the progress that society is making towards becoming equality outcomes. The Commission’s first Triennial Review, “How fair is Britain?” was published in 2010.¹¹

7. Consequently, the Commission has worked with government departments and other stakeholders to develop measurement frameworks that can be used to measure progress towards equality, human rights and good relations in Britain and which can provide a basis for reporting. Extensive consultation has taken place over the last three years with the general public, as well as individuals and groups at risk of discrimination and disadvantage in developing these frameworks.

EQUALITY STATISTICS—THE LOSSES

8. The Commission values the range and quality of official statistics produced in the UK which, despite gaps in some areas, provide a rich source of information on equality, human rights and good relations.

9. The Commission is therefore concerned that cancellations of official surveys will reduce the ability of the Commission, government and other public bodies to:

- develop and improve policy,
- understand the effect of policies and practices on equality groups as required by the public sector equality duty (PSED),
- identify disparities and target resources effectively, and
- measure progress generally towards equality, human rights and good relations and respond promptly to changing situations.

We are particularly concerned that appropriate, high-quality data may not be available to allow public bodies to target their resources well, to deliver services effectively and to publish information on outcomes as required by the PSED.

⁶ Equality Act 2010, clause 149

⁷ Equality Act 2010, clause 149.

⁸ Protected groups under the Equality Act 2010: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation

⁹ GEO, Equality Act 2010: the public sector equality duty: reducing bureaucracy, March 2011.

¹⁰ Section 12 Equality Act 2006

¹¹ EHRC, 2010, How fair is Britain? Equality, human rights and good relations in 2010: The first Triennial Review. London: EHRC. See Chapter 15: Improving the evidence base.

10. In addition, the Commission is concerned that it will reduce the information available to the public and so have a negative effect on transparency at a time when public accountability plays a key role in delivering equality in the public sector.

11. More specifically, the Commission considers that reductions in the statistics available will hamper its ability to provide comprehensive reports to Parliament on equality, human rights and good relations in Britain, as it is required to do by law. Therefore, the Commission is concerned about the reductions to many of the sources identified as providing data for our measurement frameworks, which have been developed to measure progress towards equality, human rights and good relations in Britain.

12. The cancellation of the Citizenship Survey was announced by the Department for Communities and Local Government on 25 January 2011 and fieldwork stopped on 31 March 2011.¹² This survey was a key source for the 2010 Triennial Review and its loss will have a substantial impact on the equality measurement framework,¹³ for which it provides the data source for seven measures.

13. In addition, the Commission considers it will threaten our framework to measure good relations,¹⁴ since it had been identified as the source for seven of the measures proposed. It will also affect our children's measurement framework¹⁵ and human rights measurement framework.¹⁶

14. It was announced by the Department for Education in June 2010 that the Tellus survey¹⁷ was to be discontinued from August 2010. The Commission considers this will have a particular impact on the children's measurement framework through the loss of information on, for example, healthy living, bullying and fear of crime, transport and leisure activities, planning for the future and children's influence over their own lives.

15. As noted above, all public bodies are required to show due regard to equality in order to comply with the public sector equality duty. For that reason, the Commission considers that the impact of any reductions or cancellations of official surveys should, in every case, be assessed and taken fully into consideration in coming to a final decision.

EQUALITY STATISTICS—PROGRESS STALLED

16. The Commission is concerned to note the lack of progress towards harmonising official statistics, particularly statistics on key equality groups. The government's transparency agenda, via the Transparency Board and data.gov.uk, aims to make public data available to help people understand how government works and how policies are made. However, the Commission considers that such transparency will not be achieved unless data can be compared over time, for different areas, and from different sources, and this requires consistent concepts and standards to be adopted.

17. The Equality Data Review,¹⁸ carried out by ONS in 2007, made several recommendations in relation to the harmonisation of equality classifications for the National Statistics Harmonisation Group¹⁹ (NSHG) to take forward. The Commission's Triennial Review (page 628) also noted some of the positive results from this programme of work. For example, the establishment of standards for greater consistency in the way data is collected and the introduction of a sexual identity question.

18. However, this ONS report also identified a need for the continued development of harmonised questions that define the equality groups. It suggested the inclusion of such questions on all relevant surveys would greatly improve data availability. For example, there is no reliable population data on transgender or transsexual people. Thus, the Commission considers there is a need for harmonised questions to be developed and added to appropriate official surveys in a way that safeguards the confidentiality of the respondent.

19. There are also other instances where equality statistics are not currently collected on a consistent and comparable basis across Britain, although the NSHG has been developing proposals for harmonised questions for each of the following.

Ethnic groups

20. Here difficulties stem from the adoption of different 2011 Census questions in England and Wales and in Scotland. The current harmonised ethnic group questions²⁰ are based on the 2001 Census questions, which were sufficiently similar to allow outputs to be produced for Great Britain. This is not the case with the 2011

¹² Announcement of cancellation by CLG: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/research/citizenshipsurvey/surveyscancellation/>

¹³ Alkire et al, 2009, Developing the Equality Measurement Framework: selecting the indicators. Manchester:EHRC.

¹⁴ Wigfield, A and Turner, R, 2010, Good relations measurement framework. Manchester: EHRC.

¹⁵ Holder, H, Tsang, T and Vizard, P, Developing the Children's Measurement Framework: Selecting the indicators, to be published by the EHRC later in 2011.

¹⁶ A report on developing the Human Rights Measurement Framework is also to be published later in 2011.

¹⁷ Tellus survey was developed by Ofsted and the Department for Education and gathered the views of children and young people and was used by inspectors to identify potential aspects to investigate.

¹⁸ ONS, 2007, Report from the review of equality data.

¹⁹ For details see: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/harmonisation/index.html>

²⁰ ONS, 2008, Harmonised concepts and questions for social data sources, primary standards: ethnic group. <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/harmonisation/primary-concepts-and-questions/P3.pdf>

Census questions and the Commission is concerned that possibilities for harmonisation may be limited to some ethnic groups only.

Religion or belief

21. Questions in the 2011 Census in England and Wales and in Scotland use different concepts and wording which do not allow the responses to be combined. This was also the case in 2001. The existing harmonised questions²¹ avoid this problem of comparability as they are based on social survey questions. However any change from this approach to use of the 2011 Census questions would create a problem for harmonisation.

Disability

22. The Commission has been pleased to work with the Office for National Statistics and the Office for Disability Issues on a project to develop and test new harmonised questions on disability. We hope to see the results influencing the future collection of disability data, in particular, the disaggregation by type of impairment. This was identified in the Commission's Triennial Review as a key means to improve the evidence base and the Commission would like to see this information collected more extensively and consistently.

23. The Commission is aware that, in each of the three cases above, harmonised questions have been proposed by the NSHG for consideration by the Government Statistical Service (GSS). In view of our GB-wide remit, the Commission would welcome the implementation of GSS of harmonised questions, which can also be adopted in major surveys such as the Integrated Household Survey.

24. In view of the future importance of major official surveys, including the Integrated Household Survey, as a source of up-to-date equality statistics, the Commission strongly supports implementation of harmonised questions on all equality issues. This information will allow public bodies to understand the needs of different groups and the impact of new policies and will save unnecessary costs which would arise from the need to collect additional data for such purposes.

25. The Commission would thus wish to see the UK Statistics Authority aiding transparency and helping to reduce costs by supporting the implementation of harmonised standards across Britain and giving greater emphasis to harmonisation in the assessment process.

May 2011

Further written evidence submitted by the Royal Statistical Society

The next Chair of the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA) need not be a professional statistician, but must have a profound grasp of the system of delivering accurate and reliable statistical information, courage, a willingness to put the needs of all users at the heart of the official statistics system, and imaginative understanding of how best to get numbers over to the public. Since its establishment three years ago, the UKSA has added significant value to the way statistics are prepared and communicated, but more needs to be done if the UK is to have relevant official statistics and if public confidence in them is to improve from its current low level. The appointment now being made is critical.

Official statistics underpin decision making—in business, in central and local government, in parliament and by individuals. Accurate figures help deepen our collective understanding of social and economic dynamics. The promise of the 2007 Statistics and Registration Service Act has yet to be fully realised and the choice of a Chair for the UKSA—a post of national significance—could make a big difference.

Priorities for the new Chair are:

- Ensuring that the collection and dissemination of official statistics meet the needs of all users—not just those in central government. Before the 2007 Act the needs of central government were overly prioritised. That is now less true, but further broadening of the audience is required if statistics are “to serve the public good” as specified in the Act. The UK official statistics system needs to be better at identifying and delivering the data that will help improve choices made across our society and economy.
- Attempting, together with the National Statistician, to ensure that the official statistics produced by the UK's decentralised and devolved system are coherent; in particular, that coherence is not jeopardised by individual departments' decisions during the current round of spending cuts. We regret that ministers have not yet accepted the need for departments to consult and pay attention to the UKSA and the National Statistician when making statistical plans.

²¹ ONS, 2008, Harmonised concepts and questions for social data sources, secondary standards: national, religious and sexual identity.
<http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/harmonisation/secondary-concepts-and-questions/S11.pdf>

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- Supporting the National Statistician in forming a more coherent Government Statistical Service, developing a stronger “esprit de corps”, and maintaining high professional standards. Increased departmental control over budgets, outbedding of statisticians into policy sections and the reduced number of high-level statistical posts in government have weakened the overall ethos of the service and the ability of official statisticians to gain wide experience.
 - Acting as an advocate for official statistics and speaking out against misuse of them by politicians (inside or outside government), public bodies or other major entities, or any plans or practices which devalue them.
 - Maintaining, and where necessary strengthening, the UKSA’s function of scrutinizing the output of official statistics but enabling this to become more flexible and proactive.
 - Coping with the different, and sometimes conflicting, responsibilities of the Authority. The UKSA has responsibility for both delivery and oversight of statistics. It is the governing body of the Office for National Statistics, but also the body with responsibility for scrutiny and overall quality across the official statistics system. The separation between delivery and oversight could be strengthened, and the new Chair should consider these issues and what changes may be necessary.

The Chair of the UKSA will deal with professional statisticians in the Government Statistical Service, with other civil servants and with ministers as well as interested parties elsewhere. The post holder will have to continue Sir Michael Scholar’s record in exercising discretion, avoiding grandstanding, having the courage to stand up to pressure and the judgment to know when to speak out openly.

There is a growing appreciation across society that accurate information about the state of our country and communities is needed to improve personal and business decision-making and public policy. The chair of the UKSA must, both via powers in the 2007 Act and more generally, be a champion of this movement. While the Chair does not need to be a statistician, the postholder must be capable of understanding detailed issues that arise and the interaction between statistical technicalities and policy or other issues.

It is also crucial that the Chair has the full confidence of Parliament, specifically the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee to which the UKSA reports. The UKSA has limited formal powers and needs the support of Parliament to meet its objectives.

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