



House of Commons
Public Administration
and Constitutional Affairs
Committee (PACAC)

**Governance of official
statistics: redefining
the dual role of the UK
Statistics Authority;
and re-evaluating the
Statistics and Registration
Service Act 2007**

Eighteenth Report of Session 2017–19

*Report, together with formal minutes
relating to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 9 July 2019*

HC 1820
Published on 18 July 2019
by authority of the House of Commons

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

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Summary

The UK Statistics Authority (UKSA) was created in 2008 as a statutory body to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. Serving the public good is understood to mean that users of statistics have the data they need to make informed decisions, whether they be in government, business, the third sector or the general public. There are indications that public trust in official statistics has improved since UKSA was created, but UKSA does not understand who all of today's users of official statistics are or how they use statistics. UKSA must engage more effectively with existing and potential users, ensuring the Government Statistical Service is producing statistics that are easy to access and relevant, while closing gaps in data.

UKSA has a dual role, which presents UKSA with challenges about the governance of statistics and of its own governance. UKSA is both the UK's largest single producer of official statistics through its Office for National Statistics (ONS), and also the independent assessor of all official statistics, through its Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR). The governance challenges arising from this dual role would be best resolved by giving responsibility for production and regulation to separate bodies. This would require changes to the legislation.

Without fresh legislation, much can still be done to improve the governance of UKSA. UKSA should separate OSR from ONS into a different location and distinct functions. It must also be better resourced to be proactive; exercising effective and timely regulation across the whole statistical system. It should use its power to lay reports in Parliament to highlight the most significant concerns about statistical practice.

UKSA has banned the pre-release of ONS statistics; this ban should be extended to all official statistics across government. UKSA must clarify the roles and accountability structures of all players in the statistical system, to be in line with international best practice which has now overtaken the UK. UKSA should have greater transparency of decision making, should publish work plans for the whole statistical service and must report to this Committee on progress in improving governance and addressing the big issues facing the statistical system.

The long-running issue of RPI has exposed the weakness in UKSA's governance of official statistics. UKSA's response to the Lords inquiry on measuring inflation, promised in April, has still not been delivered, raising doubts about UKSA's independence from the Government as the regulator. UKSA should publish its recommendation for addressing the shortcomings of RPI immediately.

Since the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 led to the creation of UKSA, emerging digital technologies have led to a wealth of new sources of data to inform the nation. New sources also bring new risks to be managed, such as protecting personal data and assuring trustworthy sources of data. Strong leadership at all levels of the statistical system is needed to exploit the potential of data to transform government and to shape a statistical service that is responsive to users and informs decision-makers in a changing world.

UKSA is due to appoint a new National Statistician. This appointment and UKSA's next 5 year strategy will be crucial to addressing the important governance issues raised in this report and to shape a world class statistical system that is fit to serve the future needs of the UK.

1 Introduction

The UK's statistical system

1. Official statistics are produced by public bodies to inform a variety of users about many aspects of public life. Statistics, such as inflation measures and unemployment figures, crime levels and hospital waiting times build a picture of the UK's economy and social context. Official statistics often determine policy. Policy-makers in government depend upon these figures to design and evaluate policy; others use the figures in research, planning and decision-making; citizens draw on official statistics to understand the world and the society that they live in.

2. The UK Statistics Authority (UKSA) is a statutory body which is the UK's largest single producer of official statistics, through its executive office, the Office for National Statistics (ONS). There are over 150 other producers of official statistics,¹ including central government departments and their agencies, non-departmental public bodies and devolved governments so that much of the statistical system is disaggregated. UKSA was established to regulate both ONS statistics and the wider statistical community, which it currently does through its Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR).

Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007

3. UKSA was established by the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 ("the Act"). The Act was the first major statistical legislation for 60 years. It provided for the creation of a new body, "the Statistics Board", and this was subsequently given the working name of "the UK Statistics Authority", with the statutory objective of "promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good".² The Act established "the Board" as a non-ministerial department, with a majority of non-executive members.³ The Board is set up to act as an arm's length public body. However, the Minister for the Cabinet Office appoints the non-executive members of the Board.⁴ The Board's responsibilities cover the whole of the UK, including England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland even though many statistics are produced by devolved authorities.⁵

4. The Act defines two executive roles within UKSA; the "National Statistician" and the "Head of Assessment".⁶ The National Statistician is "principal adviser" to the Board on the "quality", "good practice" and "comprehensiveness" of official statistics; is head of ONS, UKSA's executive office, responsible for producing statistics; and sits on the Board as UKSA's Chief Executive.⁷ The National Statistician is a civil servant and appointed in the same way as other permanent secretaries. The Head of Assessment is appointed by the Board and is its "principal adviser"⁸ on the assessment of official statistics against the Code of Practice.⁹ The Head of Assessment leads the Office for Statistics Regulation

1 [Q384](#)

2 [S7, Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007](#)

3 [Explanatory notes, Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007](#)

4 [S3\(4b\), Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007](#)

5 [Explanatory notes, Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007](#)

6 [S5\(1\), Statistics and Regulation Service Act 2007](#)

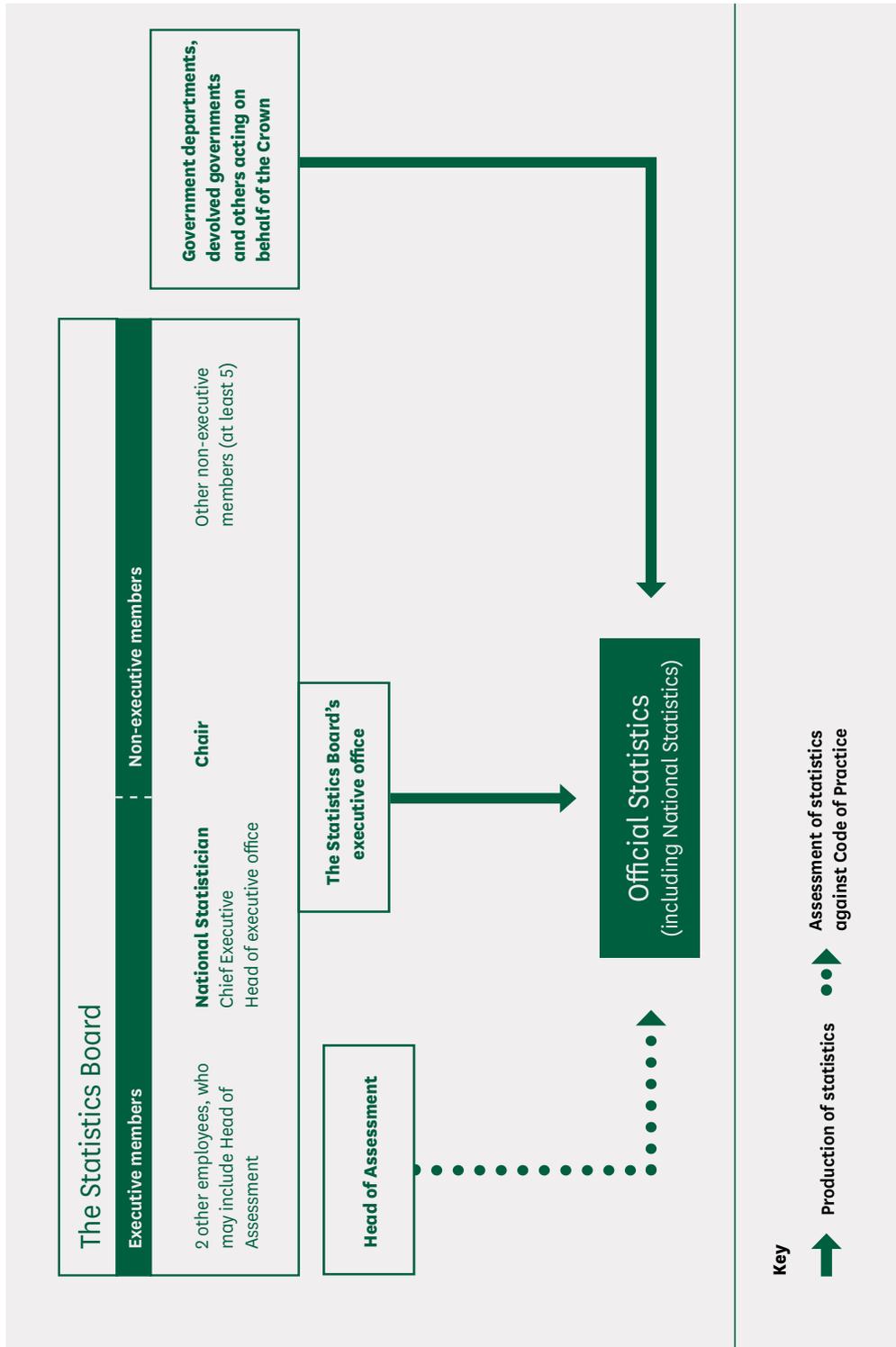
7 [S7\(3\), Statistics and Regulation Service Act 2007](#)

8 [S33\(1\), Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007](#)

9 [S12, Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007](#)

(OSR). Official statistics that comply with the Code of Practice are designated National Statistics.¹⁰ The Act describes the separation of these two roles¹¹ and states that the UKSA Board should have a chair and at least five other non-executive members (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. The UK's statistical system as described by the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007



10 S12(2), Statistics and registration Service Act 2007

11 S31-34, Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007

5. The Act was limited to the governance of its executive office (ONS) and replacing the Statistics Commission with the assessment function (in OSR). Other aspects of the statistical system were unchanged by the Act, including the Government Statistical Service (GSS), led by the National Statistician.¹² The GSS is a cross-government, multi-disciplinary network of over 8,000 people, working together to provide the UK's official statistical evidence base; in 2018 there were 1,810 statisticians in the Civil Service.¹³ Government departments have Heads of Profession for Statistics whose primary duty is to “safeguard the professional integrity of the ‘National Statistics’ and other ‘official statistics’ produced by their own organisation.”¹⁴ The departmental reporting lines for Heads of Profession lie within their own organisations, but they have a professional reporting line to the National Statistician.¹⁵

Current UKSA roles

6. The occupants of the key roles are as follows. The role of National Statistician is currently vacant, since John Pullinger ended his term at the end of June 2019. At the time of agreeing this report, UKSA has not found a replacement. The Deputy National Statistician for Economic Statistics, Jonathan Athow, is interim National Statistician. Ed Humpherson is the Head of Assessment and is operationally known as the Director General for Regulation, heading up OSR. The current Chair of the UKSA Board is Sir David Norgrove who was appointed in 2017 for a five-year term.¹⁶ UKSA had total resource expenditure of £305.6m in 2018/19 and its total staff FTE as at 31st March 2019 was 3,953.¹⁷ It is worth noting that the increase in expenditure from £279.3m in 2017/18 is mostly due to activity preparing for the census in 2021.¹⁸

12 <https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/about-us/>

13 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/publicsectorpersonnel/bulletins/civilservicestatistics/2018>

14 <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Roles-and-Responsibilities-of-Heads-of-Profession.pdf>

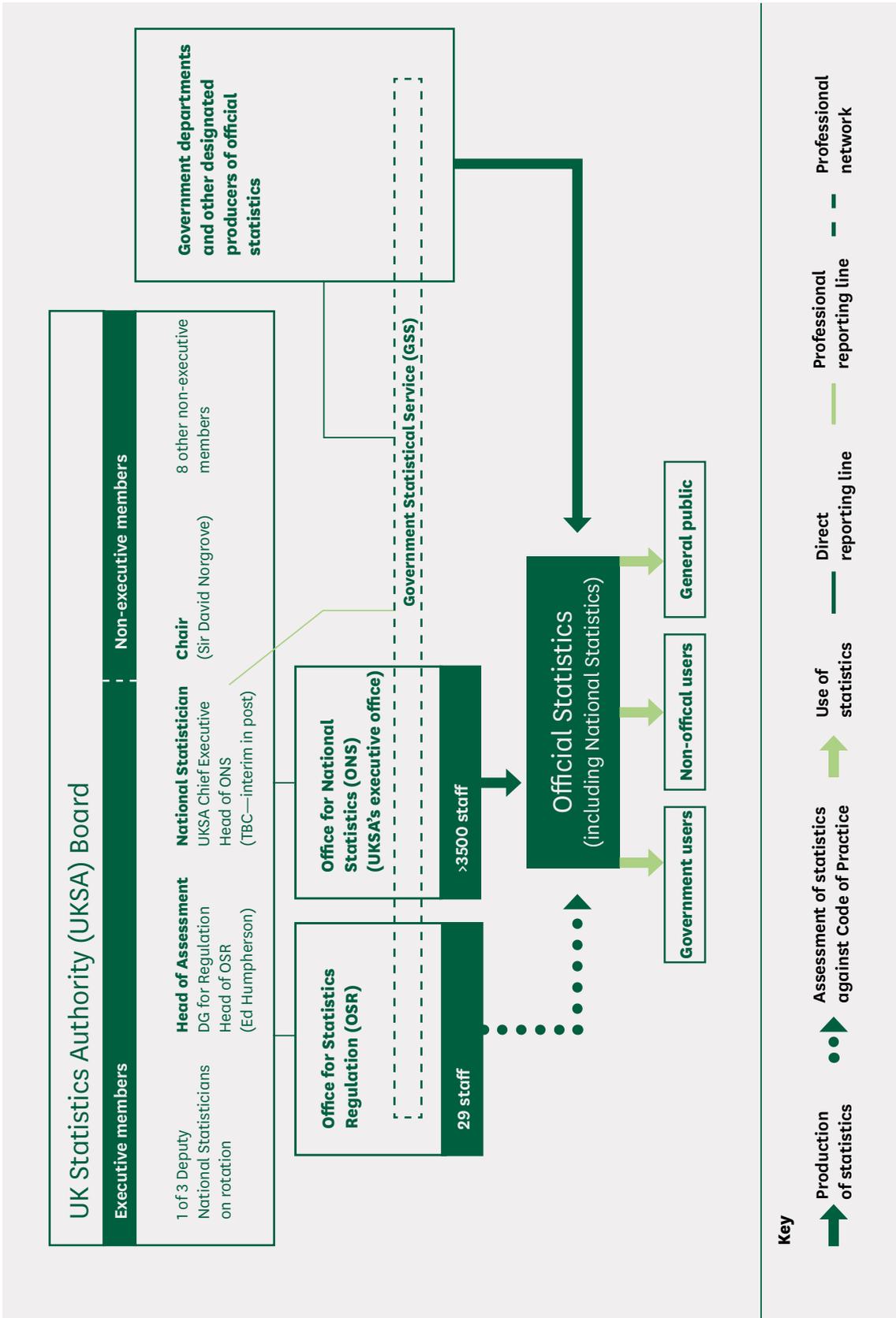
15 <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/UK-Statistics-Authority-organisation-chart-July-2019.pdf>

16 <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/about-the-authority/meet-the-board/sir-david-norgrove/>

17 Pages 32 & 76, [UKSA Annual Report 2018–19](#)

18 Page 32, [UKSA Annual Report 2018–19](#)

Figure 2. The current UK statistical system



Key

- Production of statistics
- ↔ Assessment of statistics against Code of Practice
- Use of statistics
- Direct reporting line
- - - Professional reporting line
- - - Professional network

Statistics in a changing world

7. In July 2015, Professor Sir Charles Bean, former Deputy Governor at the Bank of England, was commissioned by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rt Hon George Osborne, and the then Minister for the Cabinet Office, Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP, to undertake an independent review of UK economic statistics (the Bean Review).¹⁹ Sir Charles stated that “The review was prompted by concerns that the UK’s economic statistics were failing to keep up with developments in the modern economy and that the Office for National Statistics was not operating as effectively as it should.”²⁰ The Bean Review was published in March 2016, its report containing 24 specific recommendations for improvement in the three areas described by Sir Charles as: measuring the economy; ONS capability and performance; and governance of statistics.²¹

8. Official statistics derived from surveys and registers were once the dominant sources of data but now there are many new and alternative sources. The Digital Economy Act 2017 sought to facilitate the sharing of the increasing amount of data held in government departments for statistical purposes.²² The intention was for traditional statistics to be supplemented, and in some cases replaced, by administrative data to provide more timely, accurate and detailed statistics. Additionally, in the private sector, companies formed on the foundation of digital technologies have created new data sources, and new techniques have made it possible to analyse such examples of ‘big data’. Meanwhile the spread of ‘fake news’ and misuse of data have highlighted the need for official statistics that give the public information they can trust.²³ Since 1 April 2018, the Government has transferred the responsibility for data policy for both government and the wider economy from Cabinet Office to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.²⁴

9. In December 2016, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) published its Generic Law on Official Statistics (GLOS), based on the UN’s Fundamental Principles of Statistics.²⁵ It is the first internationally agreed generic statistical legislation. A number of countries have already indicated they will implement GLOS when updating their statistical legislation.²⁶ The UK’s current statistical legislation which predates GLOS, differs from it in a number of ways. However, the UK is one of 60 UNECE countries to adopt the guidance on the Generic Law that UNECE has subsequently developed.²⁷

19 [Independent review of UK economic statistics: final report](#), Professor Sir Charles Bean, 11 March 2016.

20 Sir Charles Bean ([GOS0012](#))

21 Recommendations can be found on pages 8–15 of the [Independent Review of UK Economic Statistics](#), Professor Sir Charles Bean, 11 March 2016.

22 <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Data-Linkage-Joining-Up-Data.pdf>

23 Royal Statistical Society ([GOS0013](#))

24 <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/dcms-becomes-department-data>

25 <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=45114>

26 Mr Mike Hughes ([GOS0027](#))

27 Mr Mike Hughes ([GOS0027](#))

Figure 3. Official Statistics timeline since 2000

Year	Activity
2000	Framework for National Statistics - creation of the Statistics Commission
2007	Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007
2008	UK Statistics Authority established
2009	Code of Practice for Official Statistics published by UKSA
2012	Public Administration Select Committee commences range of sector-specific statistics inquiries, including on migration and crime
2015	Paul Johnson publishes "UK Consumer Price Statistics: A Review"
2015	UKSA publishes "Better statistics, better decisions", its 5 year strategy
2016	Sir Charles Bean publishes independent review of economic statistics (Bean Review)
2016	UNECE publishes Generic Law on Official Statistics
2016	Creation of Office for Statistics Regulation
2017	Digital Economy Act gives powers to share and link data across government

The Committee's inquiry

10. We have focussed our inquiry, and this report, on the governance of official statistics. By this, we intend to cover the governance of the statistical system, as well as the governance of UKSA itself. The term governance is often used interchangeably with matters concerned with regulation, or compliance with codes, oversight, or accountability. They are all important aspects of governance, but effective governance is so much more than these things. The term 'governance' covers leadership, values and the instilling of public and stakeholder confidence. This reflects the Committee's core purpose, which is "to conduct robust and effective scrutiny in order to help create conditions where the public can have justified confidence in public services/ government".²⁸ This inquiry has been preoccupied with factors that indicate the vulnerability of the governance of the statistical system and of UKSA itself.

11. This inquiry assesses how successful UKSA has been in fulfilling the intention of the Act to ensure an effective statistical system for the UK. It considers what led to the serious issues that the office has faced surrounding, among other things, economic statistics, inflation and student loans, and what it has changed in response to the recommendations of our predecessor committee, the Public Administration and Select Committee (PASC) which reported on statistics between 2012 and 2014. Also, given the changes in technology and availability of data over the last 12 years and the new standards set out by the UNECE, the inquiry explores whether the Act sets the right statutory framework to underpin the UK's statistical and data needs for the future.

12. PASC conducted a programme of studies on statistics from 2012 to 2014.²⁹ The inquiries covered a wide range of data-related issues and showed that the Government had much to do to deliver statistics for the public good, as set out in the 2007 Act. Since the

28 <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/public-administration-and-constitutional-affairs-committee/role/>

29 See Annex 1 and the Committee's archived website for more details of its work: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/public-administration-select-committee/>

creation of PACAC, we have held a pre-appointment hearing with the Chair of UKSA in January 2017,³⁰ conducted a brief inquiry into the work of UKSA in November 2017³¹ and announced this inquiry in December 2018.³²

13. We launched this inquiry on 18 December 2018 and received 33 submissions of written evidence and we held five evidence sessions. We would like to thank all those who gave evidence to our inquiry.

14. Chapter 2 of this report looks at who uses statistics and whether official statistics are meeting their needs. Chapter 3 examines how effectively UKSA is providing governance to the statistical system. Chapter 4 explores more specifically the governance of UKSA itself and how it is held to account for its role. Chapter 5 looks at UKSA's governance of the Retail Prices Index (RPI) as a case study of the governance of official statistics. Finally, Chapter 6 explores UKSA's role in providing governance to the statistical system in order that it meets future needs and challenges.

30 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmpubadm/941/941.pdf>

31 <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/public-administration-and-constitutional-affairs-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/work-uk-statistics-authority-17-19/publications/>

32 <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/public-administration-and-constitutional-affairs-committee/news-parliament-2017/governance-of-statistics-inquiry-launch-17-19/>

2 Use of statistics

Statistics in public life

15. Official statistics are used for a variety of purposes by many different audiences. UKSA's statutory objective commits it to "informing the public about social and economic matters" and "assisting in the development and evaluation of public policy."³³ The Statistics User Forum gave some examples of the breadth of uses for statistics: "Whether it is management decisions in the health service, targeting crime prevention initiatives, identifying the most deprived and vulnerable communities, or in business investment, marketing, or other commercial decision-making, official statistics are used way beyond the world of policy."³⁴

16. Statistics are produced for the benefit of users, including the Government and those wishing to hold it to account for its actions, including Parliament. As Hetan Shah, Executive Director of the Royal Statistical Society (RSS), put it, "The value of statistics comes from their use and statisticians always need to go out and talk to their users."³⁵ UKSA also has a responsibility to meet the needs of users through its statutory duty to ensure official statistics serve the public good.³⁶ Sir David Norgrove, Chair of UKSA, told us that he interpreted UKSA's role in promoting the public good as "maintaining trust in official statistics" and "ensuring that official statistics are best placed to support understanding and decision-making".³⁷

17. Ed Humpherson, UKSA's Director General for Regulation, defined the public good, in oral evidence, in terms of the different types of users, saying UKSA serves policymakers, other organisations and the public. He first described government as a user: "statistics serve the public good by providing policymakers with sound evidence on which to base their decisions". Secondly, he described a wide range of other actors as users: "businesses, trade unions, trade associations, community groups and charities, who all make active decisions about the things that they focus on using statistics". His final description of serving the public good was through "helping inform the perceptions that citizens have of the world and the society that they live in".³⁸

18. The importance of meeting the needs of users is also highlighted by UKSA in its Code of Practice for Statistics which states that: "Users of statistics and data should be at the centre of statistical production; their needs should be understood, their views sought and acted upon, and their use of statistics supported."³⁹ However, the Statistics User Forum told us that this was "a promise that so far has only been realised in a limited number of places".⁴⁰

33 [S7\(2\), SRSA 2007](#)

34 [Para 6, Annex 1, Statistics User Forum \(SUF\) \(GOS0024\)](#)

35 [Q5](#)

36 [S7\(1\), SRSA 2007](#)

37 [Q345](#)

38 [Q345](#)

39 <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/code-of-practice/>

40 [Statistics User Forum \(SUF\) \(GOS0024\)](#)

19. The Statistics Commission, predecessor to UKSA, carried out research into users and published its report entitled “The Use Made of Official Statistics” in March 2007.⁴¹ The main conclusions of that report were that the statistics authority for the UK should improve statistical planning across government, improve communication and consultation with users, and enhance the accessibility of data.⁴²

Understanding how statistics are used

20. We have discovered from our inquiry that it is not well understood why people use statistics and how, and why some people do not use them. As Will Moy, director of Full Fact, told us “Nobody knows how well statistics are serving users and we do not know for two reasons. First, there is no mechanism for finding out in any systematic way and the second is that there is no agreement on what is meant by users.”⁴³ Responding to this criticism, John Pullinger, the National Statistician, expressed his desire to understand how well statistics are serving users in a way that is “broad-based and involving all citizens” but he acknowledged that there was more to be done to help this filter down through the statistics system, saying “It is a matter of step-by-step, continuous improvement ... I think we are radically better at doing that now than we were five years ago. Have we finished the job? No, we have not.”⁴⁴

21. Will Moy called for “an evidence base for how these things are used in practice and how they can be presented in ways that can make them more useful to people.”⁴⁵ He said he would like to see “a serious commitment to research into how statistics are understood and used, both by decision makers in Government and by the public as democratic decision makers”.⁴⁶ Hetan Shah highlighted the need to understand “How do those statistics land with the public and the policymakers?” to inform future communication.⁴⁷

22. We agree with the evidence we received that those producing official statistics do not understand all of today’s users and potential users of statistics and how statistics are used. It is surprising that UKSA and the GSS more generally seem not to have carried out research into users such as that produced by the Statistics Commission in 2007 or actively followed up the main conclusions of that report. Producers are, therefore, not able to close statistical gaps or appropriately refine the presentation of existing statistics so they are more useful. Similarly, with only a modest sense of how the public uses data and no evidence of the unmet needs, UKSA is not delivering public good as required under the legislation. *We recommend that UKSA should lead cross-government research to build an evidence base of how statistics are used in practice, taking into account the full breadth of stakeholders (not just users) and to establish where data gaps persist. We also recommend that UKSA should conduct sector by sector reviews, to understand what stakeholders need or want, and to make statistics more relevant.*

41 <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/tempdocs/report-33--the-use-made-of-official-statistics--march-2007-.pdf>

42 *Ibid*, para 9.

43 [Q144](#)

44 [Q494](#)

45 [Q166](#)

46 [Q144](#)

47 [Q5](#)

User engagement

23. User engagement is important so that the statistical system continuously improves in order to produce statistics that are more relevant, accessible and better meet the needs of users. UKSA has some mechanisms for engaging with users. Sir David Norgrove told us that “ONS runs and backs over 20 user groups for different kinds of statistics”.⁴⁸ The Statistics Users Forum, an ‘umbrella’ organisation which helps to bring together these user groups,⁴⁹ receives organisational and administrative support from ONS, previously provided by the Royal Statistical Society (RSS).⁵⁰ There are also more formal advisory bodies.⁵¹ John Pullinger, National Statistician, told the Committee in oral evidence about the existence of two of them which are advisory bodies to him on prices:

One is a stakeholder advisory committee. That brings together the various interest groups who are users of prices statistics, so the Government, the Bank of England, the trade unions and various other organisations that have a particular interest in the pensions’ industry, for example. In parallel to that there is a technical advisory committee that brings together experts who can help advise me on the right formula and methodology to use for the prices statistics.⁵²

24. Witnesses described some positive examples they had observed: Professor Guy Nason, Professor of Statistics at the University of Bristol, spoke of “fantastic processes for engaging with users” in the Ministry of Justice,⁵³ and Matt Leach, Chief Executive of the Local Trust described how sitting on ONS’s Data Science Campus Advisory Board was a form of engagement that allowed him to discuss how data might be presented better to local communities.⁵⁴ Paul Allin, Chair of the Statistics User Forum, said that there were “pockets of good practice and user engagement”⁵⁵ However, he went on to describe “a real need to improve overall the use and usefulness of official statistics”.⁵⁶

25. There was other evidence of poor engagement by UKSA with users. The RSS said that “engaging with users” was one of the big themes that UKSA needed to address.⁵⁷ The RSS stated that “there is an assumption that UKSA produces statistics relevant to the public, media, government and Parliament. It is necessary to build public trust and interest in statistics by their involvement.”⁵⁸ Hetan Shah of the RSS, discussing the need for statisticians to get out and speak to users, said “Not only do individual statisticians need to do that, I think the Board of the Statistics Authority needs to do that too.”⁵⁹ Mike Hughes, former Director of Policy at ONS, recounted that after its creation, UKSA was tasked with carrying out hundreds of reviews of statistics and “of the vast number of assessments that were done, the recurring comment in virtually all of them was a lack of

48 [Q390](#)

49 [Statistics User Forum \(SUF\) \(GOS0024\)](#)

50 [Statistics User Forum \(SUF\) \(GOS0024\)](#)

51 <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/about-the-authority/committees/>

52 [Q404](#)

53 [Q63](#)

54 [Q212](#)

55 [Q140](#)

56 [Q140](#)

57 [Royal Statistical Society \(GOS0013\)](#)

58 [Royal Statistical Society \(GOS0013\)](#)

59 [Q5](#)

engagement or not sufficiently adequate engagement with users”.⁶⁰ Some evidence also criticised UKSA’s mechanisms for engaging users and how the system is organised. The RSS stated that “UKSA needs to have better mechanisms to understand the needs of the various users of statistics”.⁶¹ According to Dr Andrew Sentance, former member of the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England, “It is a little bit spasmodic and it is not particularly well-structured. It tends to be around specific issues rather than an ongoing process.”⁶² Professor Guy Nason said that “much more could be done on the relationships between users and UKSA”.⁶³

26. UKSA has also been criticised for not listening and responding to the concerns of users. Dr Sentance described engagement by UKSA and ONS as a “box-ticking exercise”⁶⁴ and that users attending forums feel they are not listened to.⁶⁵ Chris Giles, Economics Editor of the Financial Times, described how, when he raised a specific issue with ONS, that users are “swamped” with lots of releases on particular days, he felt, “no one is taking any notice at all”.⁶⁶ Professor John Salt, of the Migration Research Unit at University College London said that he would feel better engaged if there was more information published on “what requests have been made to statistical authorities and what the results have been”.⁶⁷

27. Another area highlighted in evidence as in need of improvement was how UKSA should give fair and proportionate attention to the different types of users. As Dr Sentance said, “there is quite a diversity of user interest so you are going to need different types of channels for different types of groups”.⁶⁸ Paul Allin stated that “One of the key issues is around balancing Government policy needs and wider user needs”, even though other users in aggregate exceed government use.⁶⁹ Will Moy spoke of “Thinking about user engagement as a means of ensuring independence within the GSS” to ensure that government departments hear from “other people who might care about what is being collected, who might have desires that go beyond what Ministers want to know or want to be widely known.”⁷⁰

28. In response, Sir David Norgrove acknowledged that user responsiveness does not yet run, “through the organisation like a stick of rock, in the way that it really needs to”.⁷¹ John Pullinger described how he values feedback from decision makers, such as the Treasury and the Bank of England but said that he is also interested in feedback from the public on its understanding:

rather than consulting people on our statistics, we look at measures of how well informed the public feels. A particular example of that: Ipsos MORI does a study that it describes as the Index of Ignorance, which actually measures the gap between people’s perceptions of reality on issues like

60 [Q171](#) & [Q142](#)

61 Royal Statistical Society ([GOS0013](#))

62 [Q263](#)

63 [Q60](#)

64 Dr Andrew Sentance ([GOS0032](#))

65 [Q264](#)

66 [Q263](#)

67 [Q215](#)

68 [Q275](#)

69 [Q140](#)

70 [Q171](#)

71 [Q390](#)

immigration, for example, and how close they are to our statistics. What I say inside the office is, “Our job isn’t done until we close that gap”, so we need to look at which groups in the community, for example, are misunderstanding immigration, and try to find ways where we can help them understand it better.⁷²

User engagement strategy

29. UKSA needs to take a more strategic approach to engaging with users. Hetan Shah suggested “Creating some kind of central team within the ONS focused on user engagement and insight”.⁷³ Dr Sentance suggested “a more structured process of consultation with users and stakeholders on an ongoing basis.”⁷⁴ The Statistics User Forum (SUF) recommended that UKSA develop “an effective user engagement strategy, with the aim of substantially improving the use and the usefulness of official statistics.”⁷⁵ SUF’s view was that a strategic framework for ONS and the rest of the GSS, “would also provide ways of identifying, rewarding and sharing best practice in user engagement. Implementing the framework might, among other things, cover best practice for engaging with users and prospective users, along with guidance on how and when to do this. It should recognise that some uses span different sets of statistics and that users vary widely in their knowledge and skills.”⁷⁶

30. Paul Allin of SUF said that UKSA’s strategy needs to include how to get statistics into the hands of people who will benefit from having them.⁷⁷ In written evidence, the SUF also suggested that a user engagement strategy should embrace “not only the existing users of current statistical outputs, but also recognise that there are unmet demands and potential new users.”⁷⁸ The Royal Statistical Society added that “it is not clear that policymakers are using data as much as they should to inform the policy process. UKSA and the GSS should be indispensable across government for statistical evidence although they can’t expect to be the only source of analysis, so need to work closely with the other professions.”⁷⁹

31. UKSA needs to take a more strategic approach to engaging with users. The government statistical system’s engagement with users is an issue that still has not been effectively addressed, despite being highlighted many times and even in the Office for Statistics Regulation’s (OSR) own assessment reports. Some mechanisms exist to engage users and there are pockets of good practice, but the evidence suggests there is a real need to improve overall use and usefulness of official statistics in order to deliver the public good as defined by the Act. UKSA should develop a strategy for engaging all users of official statistics that works for the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and for other producers across government over whom it does not have direct control. It must, at a minimum, report annually on progress against that strategy. Departments that do not make sufficient and rapid progress on engagement with users of statistics must expect to be held accountable in Parliament.

72 [Q390](#)

73 [Q60](#)

74 [Q274](#)

75 Statistics User Forum (SUF) ([GOS0024](#))

76 Statistics User Forum (SUF) ([GOS0024](#))

77 [Q166](#)

78 Statistics User Forum (SUF) ([GOS0024](#))

79 Royal Statistical Society ([GOS0013](#))

32. *The National Statistician should make every effort to encourage individuals at all levels in ONS and the Government Statistical Service (GSS) to actively engaging with users so that the user perspective is central. Above all, UKSA must set the best possible example of engagement with users of statistics, as part of its overall governance of the statistics system, in order to increase public confidence. Government statisticians must also work with the media to ensure that the correct interpretation of the statistics and trends is found in their outputs.*

Statistics that serve the public good

33. UKSA has the statutory objective of “promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good.”⁸⁰ The public good is defined in the Act as including:

- a) the quality of official statistics, including their impartiality, accuracy and relevance, and their coherence with other official statistics;
- b) good practice in relation to official statistics, including ensuring their accessibility; and
- c) the comprehensiveness of official statistics.⁸¹

Relevance of statistics to users

34. Our evidence shows that UKSA has not always given sufficient attention to the relevance of statistics to the people using them. Robert Chote, Chair of the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), observed that early on, regulatory activity was not focused on “delivering the numbers that you need to understand as best you can what is going on in the real world”.⁸² Mike Hughes commented on the fact that UKSA “was tasked with reviewing 350 statistical series and that, for the first four or five years, took all their energy and all their resource.”⁸³ The focus was on statistical robustness and reliability, rather than whether “those statistics meet a need and that they are relevant and they cohere”.⁸⁴

35. We heard that the wider statistical system is a victim of inertia and finds itself producing statistics mainly because it has always produced them. This means that gaps can open up in the understanding of the world as it is. Will Moy gave the example of employment statistics: “The Labour Force Survey is recognised as a robust source of employment data but we also know that the labour force has undergone a lot of change in the last 10 years.”⁸⁵ He went on to say, “We find whenever we quote official statistics on employment we get a lot of push back and people saying, ‘Well, what about part-time work?’ ‘What about zero-hour contracts?’ Frankly, I think the Office for National Statistics ought to be doing much more to justify that its statistics relate to the real world.”⁸⁶

80 [S7, Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007](#)

81 [S7, Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007](#)

82 [Q287](#)

83 [Q171](#)

84 [Q150](#)

85 [Q150](#)

86 [Q150](#)

36. Gaps also open up where data is not collected in areas of genuine public interest, either because public interest has shifted or new forms of activity are taking place. The Institute for Government, in its report published in 2018, pointed to examples of what is missing, some of which reflected areas where this Committee has conducted inquiries and found itself short of hard evidence:⁸⁷

- a) A list of all the datasets that government departments are responsible for producing;
- b) More comprehensible data on government spending, including better annual accounts from government departments;
- c) Better outsourcing data;
- d) More comprehensive performance data on public services; and
- e) Better data on the public sector workforce.

Accessibility

37. For people to be able to use statistics, they need to be able to find them and understand how to use them. The RSS described the importance of statistics being developed in forms that are usable, and make sense to non-expert users, adding, “In a world that is concerned with misinformation and so called ‘fake news’ the official statistics system needs to cut through and give people and local communities the information they need, in a format they find helpful.”⁸⁸ The RSS stated that “One of the fundamental tests for the official statistics system is whether the public has the information that it needs. It’s not clear that the system currently meets that test.”⁸⁹

38. There were a number of specific criticisms of the accessibility of statistics. Paul Allin said that “There is certainly more that could be done. If you know your way around the system then it generally works”, however, “For people who do not know official statistics then there is a real job to be done.”⁹⁰ He explained that the ONS website had improved greatly but that ONS have struggled to provide a user-friendly front end that enables people to access what is such an extensive system. Chris Giles described “making sure that the website is fit for purpose” as a priority for UKSA: “It is a lot better than it was, but it still could do with quite a lot of further improvements.”⁹¹ He described how using the website can be “quite an arcane process”, making it difficult for non-experts to find what they want.⁹²

39. Several users described the former annual Social Trends publication as a way of getting the big picture of what is happening across the economy and across society. Chris Giles described how “ONS used to produce Social Trends every year, which had pretty much every important statistic well-curated in a simple red book”⁹³ which had enabled him to find information simply and quickly, particularly in fields outside his specialism,

87 G Freeguard [Gaps in government data](#), Institute for Government, 2018

88 Royal Statistical Society ([GOS0013](#))

89 Royal Statistical Society ([GOS0013](#))

90 [Q155](#)

91 [Q278](#)

92 [Q269](#)

93 [Q266](#)

trusting that ONS had picked out what was important. The absence of such a resource “is to the detriment of understanding”⁹⁴ and tends to keep people “well-siloed”, making it harder to be cross-cutting.⁹⁵ Hetan Shah added that quick releases were necessary but did not always help people to see longer term trends: “Something to counteract that, such as an annual snapshot of “This is the big picture”, might be useful.”⁹⁶

40. UKSA says it is working to pull key statistics together, to perform a similar function to the former Social Trends publications but has not yet achieved this goal.⁹⁷ John Pullinger said “I think we have significantly improved the website in recent years. We have done a lot on visualisation in telling the story, but we have not yet hit that sweet spot as well as I would like to yet. We need to keep working on it.”⁹⁸ He went on to say, “I hope that what we are doing, including with our visualisations in telling the story, is creating Social Trends for the modern era. We can go onto a phone and find the kind of things that you would have found in Social Trends in a very straightforward way.”⁹⁹ He concluded, “In some areas we are getting there, but it is still a work in progress.”¹⁰⁰

Presenting statistics with advice and guidance for users

41. Advice and guidance can help people make best use of statistics. Richard Aldritt, former Chief Executive of the Statistics Commission, referencing the Bean Review, said that statisticians need to move “from just producing figures to engaging with the people who use them constructively and giving them support and guidance.”¹⁰¹ He went on to say that might include corroborating statistics with other sources of evidence. He said that it is not just about whether the public are getting the right statistics, but whether they’re getting “the right advice about their interpretation and use”.¹⁰² He said this should take into account the ways the statistics are most commonly used: “Rather than just publish the figures and say, ‘Here they are’, there is a great deal of scope for saying, ‘These are the ways these statistics are typically used and if you are a typical user, here are some points you need to bear in mind’”.¹⁰³ Paul Allin described how statistics used to be presented with descriptions of their strengths and their weaknesses: “We seem to have lost all that in the modern world. It is much more about getting the figures out and looking at them. There is very little guidance on how they should be used and how they should not be used.”¹⁰⁴

42. The Statistics Commission produced a report on data access in 2007, shortly before it was replaced by UKSA, which included a number of principles which still apply today. It said (in Principles 7 and 8) that “data should be presented in a layered or hierarchical way to allow users to drill down to the level of detail they desire” and “there should be one point of entry giving access to official statistics across the UK government and those of the devolved authorities.”¹⁰⁵

94 [Q266](#)

95 [Q267](#)

96 [Q61](#)

97 [Q489](#)

98 [Q488](#)

99 [Q489](#)

100 [Q489](#)

101 [Q81](#)

102 Mr Richard Aldritt ([GOS0001](#))

103 [Q114](#)

104 [Q158](#)

105 <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/report-34-data-on-demand-access-to-official-statistics-june-2007/>

43. Official statistics must be presented in a way that is easy for non-experts to use. We heard evidence of improvements to the ONS website in recent years but it is clear that there is much more to be done to make ONS data accessible. *We recommend that UKSA conducts a review of how official statistics are published and presented and develops a plan to address any weaknesses found. We also recommend that UKSA conducts a programme of user research to see how easy it really is to find the basic core statistical series.*

44. UKSA has not yet done enough to bring important data together in one place, giving users the big picture across a domain, as used to happen in, for example, the now-defunct annual Social Trends and monthly Economic Trends and Financial Statistics publications. *We recommend that UKSA resumes publication of compendia, albeit in a modern format consistent with accessing data via the internet, that allow related data to be found and are not limited to ONS statistics.*

45. There is also evidence that gaps in data of many shapes and forms have arisen for different reasons, with the result that users are not getting data that is relevant to them. *We recommend that UKSA takes note of the Institute for Government report on data gaps, of other third-party reports highlighting gaps in data and of the user consultation recommended above. It should identify the most significant data gaps and use its influence across the public sector, and by engaging with Parliament and international organisations, to set out a plan to close them.*

46. *GSS and ONS statisticians should also do more to guide users how to use their statistics, explain how they are typically used, outlining their strengths and weaknesses, providing commentary and advice.*

3 Governance of official statistics

47. The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 established UKSA as a body at arms-length from government to provide independent oversight of the UK’s statistical system (see Chapter 1 above). The Statistics Commission, UKSA’s non-statutory predecessor body, had “identified the value of a genuinely independent voice investigating issues of public concern relating to statistics”.¹⁰⁶ Richard Aldritt explained that the Commission’s intention in proposing new statistical legislation was:

to engage top flight non-executives from a wide range of fields in keeping a close eye on official statistics on behalf of all those people who are affected by their use. And to make robust public challenges when the public interest does not seem to be the uppermost concern of Ministers and officials responsible for statistics.¹⁰⁷

The dual roles of production and regulation

48. The Act combines the regulatory role with the functions of the former ONS in a single organisation. The pros and cons of combining the regulation and production of statistics in this way were much debated by Parliament.¹⁰⁸ Richard Aldritt’s view was that the Board was created to “consume its own smoke” and avoid “public shouting matches” between the National Statistician and Government on one side and an independent regulator on the other.¹⁰⁹ Although opposed to the dual role he recognised the risk that “Public disagreements on the adequacy of vital statistical data can, and do, feed controversy at a political and media level and damage both trust in the product and the international reputation of UK official statistics.”¹¹⁰

49. Further perspectives were given on the value of combining the regulation and production functions. Robert Chote said it gave UKSA the ability “to know exactly what is going on and to be engaged in that on a timely basis”.¹¹¹ Dr Ben Broadbent, Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, drawing on his experience of the Independent Evaluation Office at the Bank, said “good regulation involves someone who is independent and disinterested in whether the management is feeling good or the wellbeing of the thing they are overseeing and interested in the output, but equally the regulator has to be informed enough, as Robert says, to understand what the issues are.”¹¹²

The dual role has weaknesses and presents challenges

50. The decision to combine the two functions in one organisation went against the proposals of the Statistics Commission and was described by Richard Aldritt as a “fundamental weakness of the legislation”.¹¹³ He recalled constitutional lawyers saying “Be very wary of regulatory capture.’ If you put a regulatory function inside a production

106 [Q84](#)

107 Mr Richard Aldritt ([GOS0001](#))

108 For example, the [House of Commons Second Reading debate](#): HC Deb, 8 January 2007, Col 24 [Commons Chamber] and the [House of Lords Second Reading debate](#): HL Deb, 26 Mar 2007, Col 1444.

109 Mr Richard Aldritt ([GOS0001](#))

110 Mr Richard Aldritt ([GOS0001](#))

111 [Q298](#)

112 [Q301](#)

113 Mr Richard Aldritt ([GOS0001](#))

organisation, there is a long history of the regulatory function getting squeezed down into something less than it might be”.¹¹⁴ Dr Sentance expressed his concerns as to whether UKSA is providing independent regulation of ONS: “ONS and UKSA are very close and views permeate out from ONS and sort of get rubberstamped, to some extent, by UKSA.”¹¹⁵

How UKSA has separated the functions of production and regulation

51. UKSA has attempted to separate out its functions in a number of ways over its eleven-year history. Initially there were two separate sub-committees, one assigned to managing ONS, the other to regulation. Richard Aldritt described how in his experience, as Head of Assessment at UKSA, the dual role threatened the cohesion of the Board.¹¹⁶ When discussion of issues came back up to the Board, people found it difficult to stick with their roles and preferred to work together on issues.¹¹⁷ The Act initially strengthened management of ONS, but limited capacity for regulation.¹¹⁸ Other sub-committees have come and gone.

The creation of the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR)

52. In 2016, following the Bean Review’s recommendation to create an “Independent Regulation and Evaluation Office”, UKSA aimed to make the separation of its production and regulation functions more visible by splitting out its regulatory arm as the OSR.¹¹⁹ Ed Humpherson told us that OSR now operates as a separate executive office headed by him as “chief executive of the regulator”.¹²⁰ Sir David Norgove described OSR as having, “a separate strategy, a separate budgeting process and very separate staffing”.¹²¹ There are some visible differences on the website but it is not clear how significant these are and how practices have changed. OSR still shares office space with ONS, still reports through the UKSA Board (of which the National Statistician is the Chief Executive), and still has the National Statistician as accounting officer.

How effective has UKSA been?

53. A number of witnesses described how the current statistical system is better than what existed prior to the Act. The RSS said “UK official statistics would almost certainly be a lot weaker if UKSA had not existed over the last 10 years”.¹²² Chris Giles described UKSA as “a statistical arbiter of good practice. It has been somewhat of a bulwark against malpractice”.¹²³ UKSA has also made progress in establishing public trust in official statistics. Professor Guy Nason quoted survey data demonstrating that, “the population

114 [Q88](#)

115 [Q242](#)

116 Mr Richard Alldritt ([GOS0001](#))

117 [Q93](#)

118 [Q81](#)

119 Para 1.49, [Independent review of UK economic statistics: final report](#), Professor Sir Charles Bean, 11 March 2016

120 [Q388](#)

121 [Q349](#)

122 Royal Statistical Society ([GOS0013](#))

123 [Q229](#)

feels that there is much less interference by Government in official statistics.”¹²⁴ Richard Aldritt said that UKSA, “has become a trusted voice”¹²⁵ and Robert Chote said, “you get the sense of the overall trust in the statistics system”.¹²⁶

54. The UK statistical system is well regarded internationally. Richard Aldritt said, “We are seen as a leading statistical system, very much one of the top end ones, and a lot of our procedures and processes are to some extent replicated.”¹²⁷ UKSA’s independence and ability to criticise politicians is close to unique.¹²⁸ Hetan Shah said, “Others look at our system and think, ‘Wow, how do you have a system that allows you to do that?’”¹²⁹ Sir David Norgrove described the UK system as, “close to being unique around the world and is widely admired.”¹³⁰

Code of Practice for Statistics

55. Some people giving evidence described how the Code of Practice for Statistics, introduced in 2009, has improved the quality of statistics. UKSA, in its early years, was tasked with “a systematic review of every single major area of statistics”, with over 300 assessment reports.¹³¹ Jill Leyland, former Chair of the RSS’s National Statistics Advisory Group, said, “I have seen many examples of good and improving statistical practice over past years from the Government Statistical Service. I believe, although I cannot prove, that the post SRS [Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007] structure, and notably the assessment/regulation process and the Code of Practice, has helped to deliver the improvements I have seen”.¹³² Mike Hughes observed that UKSA exercises the principles in the Code of Practice well¹³³ and Richard Aldritt added that the “Code of Practice has to some extent been adopted as a model by other countries as well.”¹³⁴

56. There was some discussion of the limitations of the Code of Practice and how it is applied. Richard Aldritt described how the emphasis of the Act on the Code of Practice can draw attention away from what is most important as it “talks at some length about the assessment process and says not one word about looking at the big issues.”¹³⁵ He added that “compliance with the Code of Practice does not mean it is a good statistic. It just means it is being done as well as it reasonably can be.”¹³⁶ Similarly he said that “Code of Practice compliance is not the same as you using all your resources in the best possible way.”¹³⁷ Mike Hughes questioned why de-designation of National Statistic status “has occurred with statistics that had already passed the initial assessment”¹³⁸ against the Code of Practice.

124 [Q3](#)

125 [Q80](#)

126 [Q286](#)

127 [Q134](#)

128 [Q407](#)

129 [Q4](#)

130 [Q407](#)

131 [Q80](#)

132 Mrs Jill Leyland ([GOS0010](#))

133 [Q147](#)

134 [Q80](#)

135 [Q109](#)

136 [Q126](#)

137 [Q80](#)

138 [Q147](#)

Public interventions

57. UKSA has made some tough decisions, unpopular with government, and intervened in some instances where statistics have been misused. Chris Giles described how UKSA has made interventions and “prevented some clear attempts by the Government for politically-motivated statistical decisions.”¹³⁹ Dr Ben Broadbent shared the view, saying “I am quite impressed by the way that UKSA has defended the correct use of statistics externally, which is also part of its job. It is not simply a matter of making sure that the production is free of interference.”¹⁴⁰ Richard Aldritt added that when UKSA intervenes publicly “it does carry very considerable weight”.¹⁴¹

58. However, we heard that UKSA has been too slow to act on issues regarding the classification of items impacting key public finances. Robert Chote gave the classification of housing associations and the change in treatment of student loans as examples of ONS taking independent decisions, “neither of which are obviously advantageous to the Government and the presentation of the public finances”.¹⁴² Nevertheless, as Chris Giles pointed out, it took UKSA seven years to act on student loans.¹⁴³ Robert Chote also acknowledged that UKSA only acted on student loans following work by the Office for Budget Responsibility that was followed up by Treasury and Lords committees.¹⁴⁴

59. There was some discussion in evidence received of UKSA’s lack of authority over departments. Hetan Shah suggested that this may hold it back from making recommendations if it does not believe they will be taken up.¹⁴⁵ Richard Aldritt’s view was that “the regulatory function needs a bit more structure and a bit more muscle than it currently seems to have”.¹⁴⁶ UKSA does have powers, given to it by the Act, to lay a report before Parliament “about any matter relating to the exercise of its functions”.¹⁴⁷ However, Sir David Norgrove was not aware that UKSA has ever used those powers.¹⁴⁸

60. We heard from Ed Humpherson that he is sometimes slow to challenge producers of statistics, preferring to exert influence more indirectly. He described a process of notifying departments with a broad outline of what had been found in an assessment before writing publicly to them.¹⁴⁹ He explained that “the outcome I really want is that statistics serve the public”.¹⁵⁰ He went on to say that “If those initial representations don’t secure the outcome, I will then make our representations public as a further lever on them, to indicate that this matters, that it is important that they serve the public in ways that we think are important.”¹⁵¹ Sir David Norgrove, however, wanted to make clear to the Committee “that this is not a warm and cuddly process. This is a process of rigorous thought against criteria and then robust challenge.”¹⁵²

139 [Q229](#)

140 [Q289](#)

141 [Q80](#)

142 [Q320](#)

143 [Q230](#)

144 [Q320](#)

145 [Q50](#)

146 [Q94](#)

147 [S27\(3\)](#), [Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007](#)

148 [Q409](#)

149 [Q373](#)

150 [Q416](#)

151 [Q416](#)

152 [Q416](#)

Pre-release of official statistics

61. In July 2017, the National Statistician banned the practice of granting Ministers pre-release access to ONS outputs.¹⁵³ The ending of pre-release access to ONS statistics has been widely welcomed. However, witnesses described how the same principle needs to be extended across the statistical system.¹⁵⁴ Sir David Norgrove acknowledged that “there is still a lot further to go”¹⁵⁵ in preventing the pre-release of statistics and described the need for changes to the Act: “the legislation prescribes that the relevant Secretaries of State can determine pre-release access for the statistics produced by their departments, so that is one thing that I think is potentially damaging to trust.”¹⁵⁶ The RSS suggested that UKSA collates and publishes data on the average number of people with pre-release access, for each department, and updates this annually to establish what if any progress is being made to reduce the extent of pre-release access across government.”¹⁵⁷

Independence in engaging with powerful users

62. Questions have been raised regarding the influence that the Treasury and the Bank of England have on UKSA,¹⁵⁸ impacting its independence. Dr Sentance said that “In the general consultative groups that I have been involved with, you do get the feeling that a lot of things are discussed between those stakeholders and therefore do not necessarily always come out in the broader consultative discussion. In that sense, it is a little bit lacking in transparency and secretive.”¹⁵⁹ The RPI CPI User Group was concerned about the existence of the Inflation Tetrapartite Group which “provides a forum for discussing how well ONS’s range of price inflation statistics is meeting user needs, for sharing progress on current developments and for identifying areas for future development.”¹⁶⁰ Membership of the group consists solely of Treasury, Bank of England, OBR and ONS officials.¹⁶¹ The RPI CPI user group said “It is not clear why there is a need for the separate Tetrapartite Group, whose minutes are not published, especially when it is possible for these organisations to be represented on the Stakeholder panel as is currently the case for the Treasury and the Bank of England.”¹⁶² The Statistics User Forum described this as exemplifying a more general issue of “What appears to be disproportionate weight given to government users and voices, rather than seeking to meet the needs of a broader set of users”.¹⁶³

63. Representatives of the participating organisations explained that the Tetrapartite Group is one of many technical groups at a relatively junior level. Dr Ben Broadbent explained that the Tetrapartite Group has nothing to do with policy but provides “information exchange basically from the ONS to us about how these indices are compiled”.¹⁶⁴ Clare Lombardelli, Chief Economic Adviser at the Treasury, described it as “the sensible business of Government you would expect to be going on” to make sure

153 UK Statistics Authority ([GOS0017](#))

154 A 1 ([GOS0003](#)), Royal Statistical Society ([GOS0013](#))

155 [Q478](#)

156 [Q406](#)

157 Royal Statistical Society ([GOS0013](#))

158 [Q96](#)

159 [Q273](#)

160 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/methodologies/inflationtetrapartitegrouptermsreference2018>

161 RPI CPI User Group ([GOS0022](#))

162 RPI CPI User Group ([GOS0022](#))

163 Statistics User Forum (SUF) ([GOS0024](#))

164 [Q309](#)

everyone understands what is actually happening.¹⁶⁵ Robert Chote saw it as a group that helps OBR produce its “short to medium-term inflation forecasts and knowing whether there is something strange going on” regarding pricing in particular sectors.¹⁶⁶

64. UKSA representatives gave their perspective on the Tetrapartite Group and on other meetings with the Treasury. John Pullinger described the Group as “a space where colleagues from ONS can share with the Treasury, the Bank and the OBR some of the changes that will be coming through in our prices statistics, many of which are commercially sensitive or potentially market moving”.¹⁶⁷ Sir David Norgrove referred to meetings he has had with senior Treasury officials and with the Chancellor.¹⁶⁸ These are not minuted,¹⁶⁹ but he made it very clear that “The main conversations on statistical aspects are within UKSA and ONS. We are very clear that the statistical decision-making on statistical integrity lies with ONS and UKSA with OSR.”¹⁷⁰

Retail Prices Index

65. UKSA has been widely criticised for its handling of the Retail Prices Index (RPI). The Economic Affairs Committee of the House of Lords reported in 2019 that “In publishing an index which it admits is flawed but refuses to fix, the Authority could be accused of failing in its statutory duties.”¹⁷¹ The RPI CPI User Group described this as a measure of UKSA’s failure as an independent regulator. In Chapter 5 we discuss UKSA’s handling of RPI as a case study of the governance of statistics. Hetan Shah described UKSA’s handling of RPI “as probably the big failure, among other things that are going relatively well.”¹⁷²

66. Opinion is divided on the effectiveness of the current UK statistical system. The system is considered by some to be better than what went before; and survey data suggests it has strengthened public trust. The UK system is also well regarded internationally. We have heard evidence that the Code of Practice has improved the quality of statistics but there has been criticism that its detailed application has distracted UKSA from big strategic issues.

67. UKSA has made some tough public interventions that were unpopular with government but has been too slow to act on serious statistical and methodological issues such as the classification of items on the national balance sheet and has seemed to have acted only when under pressure from others. We praise ONS for ending the pre-release of ONS statistics to Ministers and the Bank of England, but the practice of pre-release of data across the GSS remains. While we recognise the need for a safe space for UKSA to discuss complex and important issues with Government, UKSA has not been transparent about the meetings it has with Government and significant stakeholders and the purpose of those meetings, for example, in the way policy towards RPI was developed.

165 [Q312](#)

166 [Q311](#)

167 [Q434](#)

168 [Qq445–446](#)

169 [Q448](#)

170 [Q445](#)

171 <https://www.parliament.uk/the-use-of-rpi>

172 [Q25](#)

68. UKSA has been too reluctant to make recommendations if it does not think they will be acted on. It has not used its powers to lay reports before Parliament where it disagrees with a department. It prefers to take a more collaborative approach. UKSA's most significant failure has been in its handling of RPI, which we discuss further in Chapter 5.

69. *We recommend that UKSA should demonstrate more proactive, quicker responses to concerns about the accuracy and misuse of statistics and should more clearly demonstrate its independence from key stakeholders, when it has significant disagreements with producers of statistics. UKSA should engage with Parliament, including using its powers to lay reports before Parliament to highlight concerns about statistical practice. UKSA should make recommendations to Government, regardless of whether it considers they will be taken up. UKSA should be transparent about meetings with external bodies, such as with the Treasury and the Bank of England, and about the purpose of those meetings. The Chair of UKSA should make more strident efforts to encourage Ministers to end the practice of pre-release access to data across the public sector by referring departments that continue with the practice to Parliament.*

Does statistical legislation need to change?

70. There was much discussion, during the course of the inquiry, about whether there needs to be a change in legislation to separate the functions of UKSA as producer and regulator, or whether sufficient improvements can be made within the current legislative framework.¹⁷³ Richard Aldritt's view was that "Continuing to mix the two roles together risks a lot of effort being expended to achieve limited benefit."¹⁷⁴ Robert Chote described the combining of UKSA with ONS as "an odd structure that you probably would not design this way if you were starting with a blank sheet of paper",¹⁷⁵ comparing it with the BBC Trust's difficult role, "where the blurring of the responsibility for regulation and for championing gets stuck together".¹⁷⁶ Mike Hughes expressed a view, shared by others, when he said "I think Parliament has better things to be doing with its time" than to be revisiting the legislation. However, he went on to say "That is my only reluctance. In a perfect world we could have another go at it."¹⁷⁷

71. Richard Aldritt pointed to the Act being more focused on assessment against the Code than on the big issues facing the statistical system but said this imbalance could be addressed. He also observed that other countries' legislation is often a lot clearer and that the UK's legislation could be tidied up.¹⁷⁸ He described confusion when references to the Board seemed to mean different things in different parts of the legislation.¹⁷⁹ The revision of legislation would present an opportunity, not only to split producer and regulator, but also enable other changes to be made. Changes to the Act could also address the power of Secretaries of State to determine pre-release access to the statistics produced by their Departments.¹⁸⁰

173 [Q284](#)

174 Mr Richard Aldritt ([GOS0001](#))

175 [Q287](#)

176 [Q297](#)

177 [Q187](#)

178 [Q134](#), [Q138](#)

179 [Q131](#), Mr Richard Aldritt ([GOS0025](#))

180 [Q406](#)

72. Mike Hughes, who has experience of implementing the UN’s Generic Law on Statistics (GLOS) in a number of countries, identified a number of elements of GLOS that are absent from the Act, including: a description of the statistical system or its various players; a statement of accountability; programmes of work; a mandate for data collection; and a description of what it means to assess the quality of official statistics.¹⁸¹ However, Mike Hughes recognised, as other witnesses have, that the existing Act is broad enough to allow different structures to be tried over time and said “The legislation is just a device to put things in place to enable these things to happen. You do not need new legislation.”¹⁸²

73. The legislation presents significant challenges to UKSA in exercising the dual functions of production and regulation of statistics and does not give clarity to those roles. The Committee believes that combining regulation and production in a single organisation was misconceived since it placed a higher value on avoiding public disagreements than improving statistics for the public good. UKSA, set up as a non-ministerial department, does not have the independence, for example, of an independent regulator, such as a parliamentary body. There is a risk of direct interference from government departments and other stakeholders or indirect interference as they seek outcomes that favour themselves rather than the public good as defined by the Act.

74. The Committee believes that the dual role has created a conflict and recommends that the legislation should be changed to create a separate and independent Office for Statistics Regulation: guardian of government-produced numbers, reporting to Parliament, regulating a central statistical institute and the disaggregated producers of statistics across government. This would also provide the opportunity to tidy up other parts of the legislation and align UK law better with best international practice.

75. We recognise that, in the current climate, legislation is unlikely to be revisited within the next three years and so have made recommendations throughout this report to promote improvements without the need for legislation. We believe a lack of legislative change should not impede necessary change in UKSA and therefore we recommend that UKSA take steps, starting immediately, to improve and demonstrate its independence and to minimise the vulnerabilities of having production and regulation within one body. We call on UKSA to report to this Committee each year on progress with the implementation of the recommendations presented in this report. If early improvement is not forthcoming, we will press for time to be found to replace or improve the legislation.

Improving the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) under the present Act

76. Questions have been raised about whether OSR is independent of ONS. Richard Aldritt’s view was that OSR staff are “for all practical purposes accountable through the same channels as ONS officials; and share ONS office space and services”.¹⁸³ Sir David Norgrove confirmed that “Physically, most of the staff of the OSR sit in the same building

181 Mr Mike Hughes ([GOS0027](#))

182 [Q181](#)

183 Mr Richard Alldritt ([GOS0001](#))

as John Pullinger and the senior staff of ONS”,¹⁸⁴ although Ed Humpherson qualified this by saying, “in numerical terms our largest office is in Edinburgh, which is entirely separately located”.¹⁸⁵

77. Sir David Norgrove, the current Chair of UKSA described how he manages tension between the roles of production and regulation. He explained that for him, regulation always comes first “because my primary objective is to try to increase trust in official statistics”.¹⁸⁶ Sir David Norgrove sees regulation as his primary responsibility and in Ed Humpherson, since November 2016, has a chief executive dedicated to regulation. He explained that “The way I think of it, regardless of what the Act says, is that we have two chief executives. One is the chief executive for regulation and the other person is the chief executive for ONS and the Government Statistical Service, and I regard them as both critical to the success of the UKSA.”¹⁸⁷ Sir David Norgrove sees the system this way, despite the legislation defining the National Statistician as chief executive of the Statistics Board and there being no specific mention of the role of UKSA overseeing GSS in the Act.¹⁸⁸

78. OSR is overseen by UKSA’s Regulation Committee. Sir David Norgrove described how, in his view, the Regulation Committee demonstrates separation between production and regulation: “The Regulation Committee—which is chaired by one of the non-executive directors and has four non-executive directors and the head of OSR on it—meets separately from the rest of the organisation. It is not attended by any member of the production teams and it takes those decisions in an entirely independent way”. It is not clear when these meetings have taken place or what has been discussed as the minutes of the Regulation Committee are not published on UKSA’s website.¹⁸⁹

79. Sir David Norgrove told us that ONS is treated just like any other producer of statistics; and Ed Humpherson confirmed that ONS statistics are assessed against the Code of Practice like other producers.¹⁹⁰ Ed Humpherson said “there is plenty of evidence of me saying things that are quite uncomfortable for ONS: sharp, critical letters of the way ONS has done things, like income and earnings, crime, migration, and its inflation statistics.”¹⁹¹ Sir David Norgrove, referring to the heads of ONS and OSR, said “it has not always been sweetness and light between the two of them”.¹⁹² However, as the Chair of this Committee observed, OSR is not always quick to act. Our predecessor committee, in 2014, produced a report on police recorded crime, yet OSR only wrote to advise ONS on the side by side publication of police recorded crime and the Crime Survey for England and Wales more than three years later in November 2017.¹⁹³

80. In oral evidence, Ed Humpherson set out how OSR differs in practice from the monitoring and assessment team it replaced. He described firstly how assessments have a

184 [Q360](#)

185 [Q361](#)

186 [Q392](#)

187 [Q388](#)

188 [S31\(1\)](#), [SRSA 2007](#)

189 <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publications-list/?keyword&type=minutes-and-papers>

190 [Q359](#)

191 [Q359](#)

192 [Q359](#)

193 [Q370](#)

wider focus on the quality and value of statistics and how they are informing the public,¹⁹⁴ and secondly a more systemic perspective: how statistics come together to create a rounded picture.¹⁹⁵ Hetan Shah described evidence of that:

One of the things that I think the OSR has done well is focus on the systems of statistics. They do systemic reviews now, for example of housing statistics or income and earning statistics. In the past, the focus was perhaps too much on, “Is this individual statistic being produced well?” rather than, “Does this family of statistics tell the people, you and me, what is happening in hospitals today?”¹⁹⁶

81. Hetan Shah also described OSR as being more proactive and having a stronger media presence, giving a recent example of a Minister being taken to task over a series of failures at the Department for Education.¹⁹⁷ Mike Hughes, however, observed that OSR’s reviews do not match the in-depth quality reviews that existed previously, with external experts brought in to assist, including what users want.¹⁹⁸

82. OSR relies on departments to adhere to its principle of “duty of candour” as set out on its website:

All public bodies that produce National Statistics, including ONS, have a statutory duty to ensure that their National Statistics comply with the Code. There is a duty of candour incumbent on producer bodies to inform the Director General for Regulation, without delay, of any material issue affecting the trustworthiness, quality or public value of their National Statistics.¹⁹⁹

Future role and resourcing of OSR

83. Since its creation in 2016, OSR has expanded from 20 to 29 staff to cover the main domains of statistics.²⁰⁰ Sir David Norgrove stated that, “OSR proposes its own budget to the Regulation Committee, and that budget, as far as I know, has never been refused.”²⁰¹ Richard Aldritt observed that, “One of the reasons the Office for Statistics Regulation is not bigger than it is is because it is extremely difficult to find the people with the skills to do that work.”²⁰² He suggested that OSR commissions different sets of people based on the subject or sector it is looking at.²⁰³ Professor Guy Nason said that he would like to see more resources going towards OSR.²⁰⁴

84. Views were expressed that OSR is a relatively new structure and needs to be given time to prove itself. Dr Ben Broadbent said “this new structure seeks to strike some sort of balance. There is this separate OSR and I think it is probably too early to say whether it

194 [Q379](#)

195 [Q382](#)

196 [Q14](#)

197 [Q37](#)

198 [Q168](#)

199 <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/osr/relationship-with-the-rest-of-the-authority/>

200 [Q382](#)

201 [Q395](#)

202 [Q90](#)

203 [Q90](#)

204 [Q40](#)

could work or not, frankly. It has not been around for long enough.”²⁰⁵ Clare Lombardelli said “I think given the time it takes for these systems to bed in and show their impact, it is a bit soon to make a judgment on the Office for Statistics Regulation one way or the other.”²⁰⁶ Professor Guy Nason said now was not the right time to change structures again: “OSR, as I said, is a very new organisation within the structure. Personally, I would like to see it continue for the foreseeable future.”²⁰⁷

85. It is welcome that UKSA has sought to distinguish OSR from the rest of UKSA and has expanded its capability. However, with only 29 staff, it is under-resourced when set against the Office for National Statistics with over 3000 staff, and the thousands of GSS statisticians working across the system that OSR is required to regulate. We do not believe that OSR can effectively regulate the UK’s statistical system with the level of resources it has. This is evidenced in the lack of action in key areas like RPI and student loans, and the reliance that OSR has on departments presenting their mistakes and failings to OSR, rather than OSR actively seeking problems. The Committee concludes that OSR is not being sufficiently ambitious in its role and should be more proactive in safeguarding statistics for the public good. *We believe that UKSA must do more to promote a proactive, ambitious and better resourced OSR, with a higher profile and ability to act as a champion of good quality and useful, independently produced, statistics. We therefore recommend that OSR sets out what more it could achieve if it doubled or trebled in size. We recommend that the non-executive members of the UKSA Board, who comprise the Regulation Committee, should have a special responsibility to examine the budget of OSR and the balance of resourcing between OSR and ONS.*

86. Despite the creation of the Office for Statistics Regulation, the Committee believes that the UKSA Board has still not sufficiently separated its dual functions. Staff responsible for production and regulation of statistics remain co-located in the same office space. The National Statistician is Chief Executive, Accounting Officer and Permanent Secretary of UKSA and nominal Head of the GSS. We believe this makes it unclear to external observers whether OSR staff are independent and separate from these reporting lines. OSR can only claim independence if it demonstrates more clearly that it is operating independently of ONS. This needs active support from the non-executives on the Board. *The Committee therefore reiterates previous recommendations that UKSA should take more concrete and visible steps to separate its roles of producer and regulator. The only way to secure public confidence is to ensure that OSR has a separate role and is independent. We recommend that OSR relocates its offices to separate premises from ONS.*

87. OSR has produced two annual reports since it was established in November 2016. *The Committee recommends that OSR produces its own annual report every year.*

88. We believe that the accountability structures for OSR need to be more transparent. *We therefore recommend that UKSA takes steps to ensure its non-executive members, sitting on the Regulation Committee, operate more transparently by, for example, announcing when meetings will be held, and publishing agendas and minutes as soon as possible afterwards.*

205 [Q301](#)

206 [Q301](#)

207 [Q59](#)

4 Governance of UKSA

Accountability of UKSA

89. There are a number of ways in which UKSA’s executive members and the UKSA Board are held accountable for their actions, including through its Board, to Parliament and the devolved governments, to users of statistics and to the public. In this Chapter we will discuss the effectiveness of each of UKSA’s lines of accountability.

Accountability to the UKSA Board

90. UKSA’s executive members are accountable to its Board, and more specifically to the six or more non-executive members, who include the Chair, over whose appointment Parliament now exercises a veto. This is not prescribed by the Act but has become the practice since it was agreed between the Cabinet Office and PASC. Non-executives also provide accountability for OSR through the Regulation Committee.²⁰⁸ The expectation is that OSR is accountable to Parliament through the UKSA Chair. Dr Sentance criticised the UKSA Board for being passive rather than proactive and not providing coherent oversight.²⁰⁹ He gave the example that the Board has not addressed measurement of inflation as an issue, but rather, “They have tended to take piecemeal decisions.”²¹⁰ Chris Giles referred to the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee’s very strong criticism of UKSA’s handling of RPI as an indicator that “something has gone wrong in the oversight of the UKSA from the Board” and that “the Board as a body has clearly not protected the institution from that sort of criticism”.²¹¹ Jill Leyland similarly said, “Overall the Board appeared to be unaware of the sensitivity and importance of the RPI issue.”²¹² We look at UKSA’s handling of RPI in more detail in chapter 5 of this report.

91. For some witnesses, the Bean Review was another indicator of weaknesses in governance of UKSA by the Board. Hetan Shah asked why it was necessary for the Chancellor of the Exchequer to say that “‘We need our statistics around the economy reviewed.’ That was a function for the Board.”²¹³ He attributed this to, “a lack of foresight and a lack of engagement with their users”.²¹⁴ Mike Hughes said “It was one of the failings of the Board that it did not anticipate the issue sufficiently well to pre-empt the need for the Bean Review.”²¹⁵ Chris Giles described another possible motivation for the review: “The Bean Review in many ways was an elegant way of finding grounds for necessary improvements in ONS budgets which otherwise would have been impossible given government spending constraints.”²¹⁶ Similarly, Robert Chote did not see the Bean Review as “an indication that the governance structures failed”.²¹⁷ He described the value, “of having periodically an external view of an organisation”²¹⁸ and referred to a process of international peer and expert reviews to which OBR is subject.

208 [Q399](#)

209 [Q243](#), [Q244](#)

210 [Q243](#)

211 [Q247](#)

212 Mrs Jill Leyland ([GOS0010](#))

213 [Q6](#)

214 [Q8](#)

215 [Q174](#)

216 Mr Chris Giles ([GOS0031](#))

217 [Q288](#)

218 [Q288](#)

The role of non-executive members

92. Concerns have been raised in evidence to this inquiry about the skills, experience and time commitment of non-executives to fulfil their role effectively. Jill Leyland stated that “The Board’s non-executive directors do not include sufficient people with adequate knowledge of and experience of official statistics to be fully effective.”²¹⁹ Richard Aldritt referred to the time commitment of non-executives: “Most of those non-executives are two days a month. That is their commitment. The chair is getting close to half of full-time.”²²⁰ His view was that the problem stemmed not from the quality of the individuals on the Board but from what the Board was being asked to do.²²¹ In his experience, as discussed in Chapter 3, if there were ONS management issues to deal with, little capacity remained for dealing with other issues.²²²

93. We heard that non-executives could be doing more to hold UKSA’s executive to account in addressing the biggest issues facing official statistics. Richard Aldritt stated that the “very considerable abilities of the non-executive Board members”²²³ should be focused on taking forward the “big issues in official statistics that are live at this time that require attention.”²²⁴ He would like to see the non-executives be “external facing, talking to people about what the issues are, pinning down what needs to be addressed”²²⁵ rather than taking the lead from ONS or OSR.

94. The Committee agrees with witnesses who highlighted the lack of appropriate oversight by the UKSA Board in dealing with RPI. This was an example of the UKSA Board being too passive and not taking sufficient action to protect its reputation as an independent regulator. The fact that there was a need for the Treasury to commission its own external review of economic statistics on ONS highlighted limited foresight and engagement from the UKSA Board.

95. It is clear that the Board should do more to demonstrate how it is holding the statistical system to account, addressing the big issues and doing its best to ensure that official statistics serve the public good, as defined in the Act. The Board’s lack of action on RPI, student loans and economic statistics, raises concerns about how issues are being managed in other areas. Even when mistakes were highlighted by external observers, the actions of the UKSA Board have often been slow or non-existent. We recommend that UKSA reports, for example through Board minutes, on how non-executive members provide accountability and challenge to the executive staff of UKSA and statistics producers in other bodies. We are told that meetings of non-executives take place but there are no publicly available agendas or minutes for those meetings. We recommend that UKSA reports publicly, using agendas and minutes, all committee meetings of non-executives. We also recommend that when new non-executives are recruited, it is with the expectation of working more hours than they currently do, so that they can give more time and attention to their role.

219 Mrs Jill Leyland ([GOS0010](#))

220 [Q81](#)

221 [Q92](#)

222 Mr Richard Aldritt ([GOS0001](#))

223 [Q107](#)

224 [Q107](#)

225 [Q110](#)

Accountability to Parliament

96. The UKSA Board is accountable to Parliament. The Act requires UKSA to lay an annual report before Parliament.²²⁶ UKSA is also held to account by Parliamentary committees. However, this is not explicit in the legislation but only implied by UKSA's power to lay reports before Parliament and it is not clear which part of UKSA - the Chair, the Board, the National Statistician, or OSR - should be accountable for what.²²⁷ Our predecessor committee, the Public Administration Select Committee (PASC), conducted a programme of short studies on statistics from 2012 to 2014.²²⁸ Our ongoing scrutiny of UKSA includes this inquiry as well as holding the pre-appointment hearing for the Chair of UKSA and regular correspondence with the UKSA Chair.²²⁹ Scrutiny from other Parliamentary committees can address statistical issues in specific policy areas. A recent good example was the Lords Economic Affairs Committee's inquiry into the use of RPI.²³⁰ UKSA is also accountable to the devolved governments of the UK. Ed Humpherson reminded the Committee "I am clearly accountable here to Parliament, but not just to this Parliament, to all four Parliaments of the UK."²³¹

97. A key role for Parliament is to challenge UKSA to demonstrate that it is operating independently of government. Hetan Shah described the current structure as being much better than what existed previously, when ONS was accountable to Treasury.²³² Chris Giles argued that, in the absence of changes in legislation to separate UKSA's production and regulation functions, there should be "scrutiny by Committees like yours to try to put pressure on the organisations to show that they are more independent and the functions are independent".²³³

98. Owing perhaps to confusion about accountability, UKSA has a mixed record in responding to the recommendations made by PASC. Professor John Salt contributed to UKSA's first report on migration statistics in 2009 and participated in PASC's inquiry in 2013. His view was that since that time, "the data we have are immeasurably better on international migration but they are a long way from being ideal or perfect." Others are more modest in their assessment of progress. Will Moy described some progress on migration statistics, "Work on the migration system statistics does seem to have had more of a programme of both explaining what the Authority is doing and talking to people about it, although I think it is probably true that that is still limited to a relatively small group of people."²³⁴

99. Witnesses suggested ways that Parliament could hold UKSA to account. Hetan Shah suggested "Some kind of annual meeting with the Chair of the authority and the National Statistician, Director General of Regulation, scrutinising their annual reports."²³⁵ Richard Aldritt argued that many of the big statistical issues have been around a long time and that Parliament should give sustained attention to them: "My recommendation to this Committee would be to ask and keep asking for a clear statement of what the dozen really

226 S27(2), [Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007](#)

227 [Ibid](#)

228 See Annex A for further details of these reports.

229 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmpubadm/941/941.pdf>

230 <https://www.parliament.uk/the-use-of-rpi>

231 [Q399](#)

232 [Q32](#)

233 [Q248](#)

234 [Q166](#)

235²³³ [Q34](#)

big issues facing the statistical service are and what they are going to do about them”.²³⁶ He suggested the Committee could then monitor progress on these issues through structured engagement over time.

100. Scrutiny of UKSA by Parliament is important and the results of that scrutiny are something that the UKSA Board should take seriously and act upon. Our evidence underlines that UKSA has not been sufficiently quick, thorough or transparent about its progress in responding to PASC recommendations. Nor has UKSA responded as readily as hoped, to requests from PACAC.

101. The Committee will call UKSA for an annual hearing to be held after the publication of the annual report of UKSA. In addition to the UKSA annual report, the Committee requests the following documents to consider at that session: an annual report of OSR agreed by the non-executive members (through the Regulation Committee); a report identifying the most significant issues facing the statistical community, including a plan to address them; and an update on UKSA’s progress against recommendations from this Committee. We also ask the UKSA Chair to write to the Committee on a quarterly basis to update it on progress against Committee recommendations and results achieved, and on any other major statistical issues.

102. We recommend that the Director General for Regulation keep the Committee informed of OSR actions by copying correspondence relating to interventions in the statistical system. In addition, we recommend that OSR write to Departmental Select Committees at least annually to update them on the data and statistical issues that OSR has identified in their remit.

Accountability to Government

103. Although UKSA was set up as a non-ministerial department to operate independently of government, there are ways in which it is accountable to government. Sir David Norgrove described “a degree of accountability to the Cabinet Office, as the sponsoring department and, through them, to the Treasury for the proper use of public resources.”²³⁷ John Pullinger added that he has responsibilities as a permanent secretary and civil servant, “for upholding the civil service values of honesty, integrity, impartiality and objectivity”.²³⁸ Moreover, the National Statistician is a civil service appointment.

Accountability through external reviews

104. UKSA and its constituent parts have been subject to a number of external reviews, such as the Bean Review. As discussed above, external reviews can be a valuable opportunity to draw on independent expertise but can indicate weakness if they serve a role the organisation should have been performing itself. The Bean Review of economic statistics was commissioned by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Minister for the Cabinet Office. However, UKSA has commissioned other reviews itself, such as the Johnson review of price statistics.

236 [Q136](#)

237 [Q401](#)

238 [Ibid](#)

The Bean Review

105. UKSA's response to the Bean Review has been well received by many. Mike Hughes said that the review, "covers a lot of good things, and the great news is that ONS has picked up and run with most of them."²³⁹ Professor Sir Charles Bean commented on UKSA's response to his recommendations as follows: "Most of these have since either been implemented or else are the subject of ongoing actions. However, in some cases it is too soon to form a firm judgement as to their success or whether further/different actions are needed."²⁴⁰ UKSA described the value it had gained from Bean setting out "a compelling vision for UK economic statistics and his recommendations have been enormously helpful as we transform as an organisation."²⁴¹ John Pullinger confirmed that both the Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence and the Data Science Campus were financed following the Bean Review.²⁴²

106. Concerns have been raised that the Bean Review has increased the influence of powerful users, including economists, at the expense of others. From the Trade Union Congress (TUC)'s perspective, "the Bean Review led to a massive boost to the deployment of economists in the ONS and parallel initiatives around the 'economic experts working group' and the 'economic statistics centre of excellence'. There is a sense that governance on the economic statistics side has moved further away from the UKSA, and these new processes might merit further investigation."²⁴³

107. The Bean Review helped UKSA to secure additional resources and we welcome initiatives such as the Data Science Campus and Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence. However, we do not think UKSA should have to be subjected to an external review for it to secure what it needs. If the UKSA Chair, National Statistician and Head of Assessment were fulfilling their roles, they would be less dependent on external reviews. This is why we have called for an increase in OSR funding and a more dynamic set of actions by the UKSA Chair. However, we question whether UKSA has done enough to communicate its response to external reviews in the medium to longer term. It still remains unclear whether all the recommendations from external reviews have been accepted and what changes have been implemented. UKSA should report annually on its progress in implementing the recommendations of external reviews, including Parliamentary Select Committee inquiries, after its initial timely response. If it decides not to implement a recommendation, it should publicly explain the reasons for that decision.

Accountability to users

108. UKSA is also accountable to users of statistics. Ed Humpherson described "accountability to the people who use statistics", as one of the three key tiers of accountability for UKSA.²⁴⁴ Robert Chote described how the use of ONS figures by independent organisations such as the Bank of England and OBR provides an important

239 [Q174](#)

240 Sir Charles Bean ([GOS0012](#))

241 UK Statistics Authority ([GOS0017](#))

242 [Q453](#)

243 Trades Union Congress ([GOS0021](#))

244 [Q399](#)

check: “I can tell you that if we had a sense that we were not getting kosher numbers because the Government were interfering with ONS and getting it to produce them in strange ways, you would certainly be hearing about it from us.”²⁴⁵

109. Advisory panels can play an important role in accountability. John Pullinger explained how advisory groups inform him as National Statistician in his role as advisor to the Board. He described how experts on the technical advisory committee on consumer prices help him understand the “diversity of opinion” and that, “Hearing those views helps me to judge what the most appropriate way forward is and I give my advice to the Board accordingly.”²⁴⁶ However, UKSA is not always transparent when it disagrees with the views of its advisory panels, as discussed in Chapter 5.

110. High expectations from users could drive change in the statistical system. However, Will Moy said “The thing that I think is worst for the statistical system is the low expectations of users, starting from the Prime Minister down. We ought to have much higher expectations of what can be achieved now than we do. That needs to be felt from Parliament. It needs to be felt from Government. It needs to be felt from all of us and the Authority should feel carried on that wave of high expectations.”²⁴⁷

Accountability to the public

Transparency

111. Transparency should support accountability in UKSA by enabling the public and others to scrutinise what UKSA is doing. The RSS, however, observed that, “One problem in assessing how effective the UKSA Board is that it is not as transparent as it could be. Board minutes are not always published quickly”.²⁴⁸ Chris Giles also commented on Board minutes not being published for four or five months.²⁴⁹ At the time of the RSS submitting its evidence in February 2019, it commented that, “The last set of published Board minutes are from July 2018.”²⁵⁰ Prior to UKSA representatives appearing to give evidence on 2 April 2019, UKSA published Board minutes up to 31 January 2019. Sir David Norgrove acknowledged that, “we dropped the ball in the second half of last year” and assured the Committee that, “we are now back to publishing once the minutes have been approved by the following meeting.”²⁵¹ This is, however, not the only instance of minutes being published late.

112. Professor Guy Nason commented that the information UKSA publishes tends to be quite high level and that it is difficult to get to the detail and “sometimes it is difficult to figure out what is going on”.²⁵² Hetan Shah observed that UKSA has said very little about Brexit “There has been virtually nothing on the website saying what its approach would be. From a user perspective, more formal transparency would be helpful.”²⁵³

245 [Q333](#)

246 [Q404](#)

247 [Q175](#)

248 Royal Statistical Society ([GOS0013](#))

249 [Q242](#)

250 Royal Statistical Society ([GOS0013](#))

251 [Q427](#)

252 [Q36](#)

253 [Ibid](#)

113. Evidence to this inquiry suggests that UKSA is not as transparent about its decision making as it should be. For example, publication of Board minutes has not been regular and timely and has not provided sufficient detail. *We recommend that UKSA should publish its Board meeting agendas and papers, and its minutes as soon as they are approved. Minutes should be more informative about the nature of the questions under discussion.*

Clarity of structures

114. Witnesses, though regular users of official statistics, described how they find it hard to understand and to explain existing terminology and structures. Professor Guy Nason said that, “the lines of management and responsibility are not clear to me.”²⁵⁴ Chris Giles described how:

The public, commentators and even statistical experts do not understand the separate functions of UKSA, its Board, the ONS, the Office of Statistical Regulation, official statistics or National Statistics. I am a close follower of economic statistics and find I have to explain these terms regularly. Often I struggle to be explain them accurately.²⁵⁵

As Robert Chote remarked, “In this room are the majority of people who could tell you that the ONS is the executive office of UKSA and this is not widely understood outside.”²⁵⁶

115. The UK’s statistical system does not currently have a framework document, as existed previously, to describe the elements of the system and to provide clarity. Mike Hughes said such a document should include “a generic description of the statistical system, all its players, their roles and responsibilities, so that anybody would clearly understand it.”²⁵⁷ He suggested that this framework could also include who UKSA is accountable to.²⁵⁸ The UK’s legislation is lacking in this regard compared to the internationally recognised standard: “GLOS [UN’s Generic Law of Statistics] defines the concept of a National Statistical System (NSS) and the components of it”.²⁵⁹

116. A framework document, as described above, would be beneficial to clarify the drafting of the legislation, which has led to confusion for some, particularly regarding UKSA’s dual role. Richard Aldritt gave the following examples:

When the UKSA Board makes a statement about the work of ONS, it is thus unclear whether the body making the statement is the Board in its regulatory role, or the Board in its capacity as the supervisory management level of ONS. And equally, when the UKSA Board makes a statement about the statistical work of a government department other than ONS, it is open to interpretation as to whether it is the National Statistician speaking as the government’s chief adviser on statistics, or the non-executive Board of the UKSA in its regulatory role.²⁶⁰

254 [Q27](#)

255 Mr Chris Giles ([GOS0031](#))

256 [Q298](#)

257 [Q181](#)

258 [Q182](#)

259 Mr Mike Hughes ([GOS0027](#))

260 Mr Richard Aldritt ([GOS0025](#))

117. Evidence to this inquiry was unequivocal: the governance of the statistical system is unclear, even to those who work closely with it. This reflects a fundamental shortcoming of the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007: that the term “Board” can mean different things, depending on whether it relates to its production, or assessment functions. *UKSA is not to blame for confusion arising from the Act, but it should address it. UKSA should produce a framework document which sets out clear roles and responsibilities of the different parts of the statistical system, including the different elements of the UKSA Board, ONS, OSR, GSS, and departmental Heads of Profession to whom UKSA intends each of these parties to be accountable. A clear description of the framework should bring clarity where there is ambiguity in the legislation and should strengthen public confidence in the accountability of these bodies.*

5 RPI - a case study

118. In this chapter we look at UKSA's handling of the Retail Prices Index (RPI). The Measuring Inflation report from the Economic Affairs Committee of the House of Lords covered issues relating to RPI in a lot of detail.²⁶¹ We do not revisit the substance of the issues around the calculation of Retail Prices Index (RPI). This chapter explores UKSA's handling of the RPI as a case study of governance practices.

Background to RPI

119. RPI is a measure of household inflation produced by the Office for National Statistics. It was introduced in the UK in 1947 and made official in 1956. The Act requires UKSA to produce and publish RPI every month; RPI is the only statistic that is singled out in that way in the Act. The Act also specifies that before UKSA makes any changes to RPI it must consult the Bank of England as to whether the change would be "materially detrimental to the interests of the holders of relevant index-linked gilt-edged securities"²⁶² and, if so, UKSA "may not make the change without the consent of the Chancellor of the Exchequer."²⁶³ Although this may seem like an invitation to Ministers to interfere in what should be an impartial measure of inflation, it recognises that changes in the rate of inflation affect the incomes and expenditures of many households, companies and others due to indexation. As government income and spending are similarly affected, the Treasury argues that it must be able to veto any changes.

120. In recent years there has been controversy surrounding RPI as a measure. Changes in 2010 to the way prices for clothing were collected as part of RPI led to a widening of the gap between the two main inflation measures: the RPI and the Consumer Prices Index (CPI). RPI is a measure of inflation that matters more significantly than other statistics because, as Chris Giles told us "Index-linked gilts, student loans and rail fares are all pegged to the RPI" and said that "the continued use of an index known to be wrong, takes money from recent graduates, commuters and taxpayers, and hands it as a windfall to longstanding owners of index-linked government bonds".²⁶⁴

121. When the larger gap between RPI and CPI first became apparent during 2010, ONS was slow to explain publicly what was happening. It decided against an immediate correction and eventually held a consultation in 2012/13. ONS decided not to make wholesale changes, going against the views of many members of its own advisory group. In March 2013, UKSA's monitoring and assessment team de-designated RPI as a National Statistic,²⁶⁵ despite having given RPI National Statistic status in 2010.²⁶⁶ In May 2013, Sir Andrew Dilnot, the then Chair of UKSA, invited Paul Johnson, Director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, to conduct a review to consider how UK consumer price statistics could best meet current and future user needs.²⁶⁷ The review reported in January 2015. UKSA

261 <https://www.parliament.uk/the-use-of-rpi>

262 S21 (2), [SRSA 2007](#)

263 S21 (3), [SRSA 2007](#)

264 Chris Giles, <https://www.ft.com/content/f3c0fada-2eac-11e9-ba00-0251022932c8>, 12 February 2019

265 https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/images-assessmentreport246theretailpricesinde_tcm97-42695.pdf

266 <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/archive/assessment/assessment/assessment-reports/assessment-report-79---consumer-price-indices.pdf>

267 <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/archive/reports---correspondence/current-reviews/uk-consumer-price-statistics---a-review.pdf>

conducted other internal reviews, including a review of governance by Adrian Smith, which came to a conclusion in late 2016.²⁶⁸ The Economic Affairs Committee of the House of Lords began taking evidence on the RPI in June 2018 and reported in January 2019.²⁶⁹ The responses from UKSA and the government are overdue, despite assurances that they would be published by now.

UKSA's approach to RPI

122. There has been much criticism of the position that UKSA has taken at many stages during the last nine years and the position is not resolved. The Economic Affairs Committee of the House of Lords was critical of UKSA's failure to correct errors in RPI, stating that, "In publishing an index which it admits is flawed but refuses to fix, the Authority could be accused of failing in its statutory duties."²⁷⁰ Evidence to this inquiry from the RPI CPI User Group was similarly critical, stating: "It is a measure of the UKSA failure as an independent regulator that such an inquiry was necessary in the first place and produced such a damning report."²⁷¹

Governance of RPI

123. The importance of the RPI means that it has always been subject to specific governance in contrast to other statistics. There was an RPI Advisory Committee that operated for 50 years from 1947.²⁷² It had a broad-based membership and produced 15 reports in that time charting all the changes to the index. However the group was not convened from 1997, meaning there was in effect no independent scrutiny or governance for a decade. In 2009, after growing concerns and criticism about the lack of transparency, UKSA (which was established in 2007) set up the Consumer Prices Advisory Committee (CPAC)²⁷³ to advise UKSA on methodological issues relating to the measurement of inflation. Initially this was no more transparent than before as the minutes of the meetings were not published. Therefore its role in the decision to change the clothing prices, for example, was unknown at the time. Chris Giles, who sat on that committee,²⁷⁴ described how the committee advised ONS to act, once it had identified the widening gap between CPI and RPI that was emerging after the change in the way clothing prices were collected in 2010. In Chris Giles' view, "that is what led to ONS's consultation on changing the RPI". The consultation was however followed by "the ONS decision not to do anything".²⁷⁵

124. Following the ONS decision, CPAC met and "there was an almost unanimous view at that CPAC meeting that ONS had taken the wrong decision".²⁷⁶ Chris Giles expressed concerns about transparency, describing how "The minutes or the record of that meeting were essentially buried in the communication of the decision afterwards".²⁷⁷ His reflection on that experience was that "the ONS found it helpful that there was an advisory committee

268 [Q420](#)

269 <https://www.parliament.uk/the-use-of-rpi>

270 <https://www.parliament.uk/the-use-of-rpi>

271 RPI CPI User Group ([GOS0022](#))

272 <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160108054350/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/prices/cpi-and-rpi/rpi-advisory-committee-historic-reports-1947-1994/index.html>

273 RPI CPI User Group ([GOS0022](#))

274 [Q232](#)

275 [Ibid](#)

276 [Q232](#)

277 [Ibid](#)

when it was doing things that ONS thought were a good idea. When it was disagreeing with ONS's view, it found it to be deeply unhelpful and therefore buried it.”²⁷⁸ CPAC was disbanded following a review of the governance of prices statistics published on 12 February 2014.²⁷⁹

125. ONS was without an advisory panel on consumer prices for more than two years. During this time, Sir Adrian Smith, a non-executive member of the UKSA Board conducted a review of the governance of prices statistics, leading to the creation of two advisory panels—a technical advisory panel and a panel representing key stakeholders. However, Arthur Barnett, a member of the RPI CPI user group, described a similar experience in 2017 when ONS published its view on the shortcomings of RPI without mentioning the issues raised by the Advisory Panel on Consumer Prices– Technical.²⁸⁰

126. Reflecting on his experience of CPAC, Chris Giles suggested that an advisory body, could be given powers of recommendation to a parliamentary body such as PACAC.²⁸¹ He also recommended that discussions with advisory groups should be clearly minuted and that in his experience it would have been better if ONS had a formal duty to respond to such groups.²⁸²

127. The RPI CPI user group referred to a paper, “Shortcomings of the Retail Price Index as a Measure of Inflation”, published by ONS in March 2018, saying that:

The reaction of many users to this paper led directly to an event hosted by the RSS on 13 June 2018 at which many criticisms of the paper were voiced. At the time of writing [11 February 2019], the ONS has still not responded to the many points that were raised at that meeting, but the paper remains on the ONS web-site without qualification or even acknowledgement of the many concerns that were raised.²⁸³

128. Some have argued that the UKSA Board has not taken the RPI issue seriously enough. Chris Giles referred to the limited references to RPI in UKSA's Board minutes: “It is potentially one of the most existential threats to UKSA if they get this wrong, because it is one of the most important statistics, and yet as far as the minutes are concerned—I have no idea what has happened in the Board meeting itself—it is as if the Board is not taking this very seriously at all.”²⁸⁴ In response, Sir David Norgrove said that, “seven out of ten of the board meetings last year discussed the RPI”.²⁸⁵

129. UKSA designated RPI as a National Statistic in 2010,²⁸⁶ but cancelled the designation in 2013.²⁸⁷ Ed Humpherson said that his predecessor took action in removing the National Statistic designation from RPI because “it was clearly not the best available estimate. It clearly failed that test. It was probably misleading and above all there was no strategy for

278 [Ibid](#)

279 <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160111032628/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/who-ons-are/programmes-and-projects/other-development-work/consumer-prices-advisory-committee--cpac-/index.html>

280 Mr Arthur Barnett ([GOS0035](#))

281 [Q233](#)

282 [Q234](#)

283 RPI CPI User Group ([GOS0022](#))

284 [Q242](#)

285 [Q426](#)

286 <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/measures-of-inflation/>

287 [Assessment report 79, UKSA, December 2010](#)

improvement.”²⁸⁸ Ed Humpherson later de-designated CPIH, ONS’s preferred measure, as a National Statistic. He gave this as an illustration of the Head of Assessment being prepared to intervene to address issues in ONS. However, he said:

I have reflected on this. It is important to think about things that one could have done differently. I think that what I have just outlined to you, I hope with some force, about the regulatory stance on both RPI and CPIH I think it is apparent from the evidence you have had from others that that was not stated clearly and unequivocally enough. My reflection is that we should have stated more clearly the things that I have just outlined to you throughout the process.²⁸⁹

CPIH was re-designated as a National Statistic in July 2017 following action by ONS.

130. Concerns have been raised about the Treasury and the Bank of England’s influence over UKSA regarding inflation measures. The RPI CPI user group said that “the UKSA can be said to have been asleep at the wheel and too ready to recognise the inputs it receives from the Bank of England and the Treasury, but far less prepared to take on the needs and concerns of the man and woman on the street.”²⁹⁰ Arthur Barnett, a member of the RPI CPI user group, said that ONS’s current arrangements for seeking stakeholder and technical advice “are secretive and arguably biased towards excessive Treasury and Bank influence”.²⁹¹ UKSA’s engagement with the Treasury and the Bank of England has been discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Current position

131. In evidence to our inquiry Sir David Norgrove stated that UKSA was planning to respond to the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee report in April 2019.²⁹² This did not happen. Instead, the Rt Hon Philip Hammond wrote to the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee on 30 April 2019, to explain that the Government was continuing to discuss the relevant issues from the report on measuring inflation with UKSA and would respond as soon as was practicable.²⁹³ On the following day, Sir David Norgrove wrote to the Lords Economic Affairs Committee to confirm that “the Government and UK Statistics Authority continue to discuss the issues raised by the Committee. We will respond to the Committee as soon as is practicable.”²⁹⁴ On 1 July 2019, a debate on the Committee’s report was held in the House of Lords; Lord Forsyth of Drumlean spoke on behalf of the Committee and concluded his speech by saying “The report cannot remain unanswered. It raises serious questions about decision-making by the statistics authorities. The Government and the UK Statistics Authority need to address the challenges highlighted by our report”.²⁹⁵ At the time of agreeing this report, neither UKSA nor the Treasury have responded to the Lords Economic Affairs Committee’s report, despite promising to do so by now.

288 [Q463](#)

289 [Q465](#)

290 RPI CPI User Group ([GOS0022](#))

291 Arthur Barnett ([GOS0007](#))

292 [Q423](#)

293 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/798987/Letter_to_Lord_Forsyth.pdf

294 <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/letter-lord-forsyth-leac-measuring-inflation/>

295 [HL Deb, 1 July 2019, Col 1245](#) [Lords Chamber]

132. The evidence about the mishandling of RPI, the influence that HM Treasury and the Bank of England have exercised, and the reluctance of UKSA to confront them, raises the most serious questions about the effectiveness of the governance of statistics, which is the primary responsibility of UKSA as a regulator. UKSA has allowed what was originally a simple mistake in price collection of inflation data to snowball into a major unresolved issue for a decade. It is clear that UKSA does not exercise consistent governance to ensure that the public can have confidence that it is safeguarding the measurement of inflation - either in the production of the numbers or the assessment and regulation of them, despite the production of RPI being primarily a duty prescribed by the Act.

133. The Committee acknowledges that the legislation gives UKSA a dual role which is confusing but agrees with the conclusion of the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee that “In publishing an index which it admits is flawed but refuses to fix, the Authority could be accused of failing in its statutory duties”.²⁹⁶ We are concerned that UKSA’s response to the report, promised but still not delivered, has been held up by its deference to the Treasury. This demonstrates a continued lack of independence on the part of UKSA from the influence of the Treasury.

134. The handling of RPI resonates with other findings in this report, that the governance of statistics provided under the present statutory framework is inadequate. UKSA commissioned reports but did not follow through with recommendations and failed to resolve the various conflicts, demonstrating the inherent shortcomings of the statutory arrangements that have established a body with the twin roles of producer and regulator. We believe that in this case, UKSA has not fulfilled its responsibility to ensure the quality of statistics, but has become drawn into concerns about the consequences, which should be left to the Treasury and others.

135. *We recommend that UKSA publishes its recommendation for addressing the shortcomings in RPI immediately. This will enable Parliament to hold the Government to account for the mishandling of RPI and provide Parliament with an opportunity potentially to support UKSA’s recommendation.*

296 <https://www.parliament.uk/the-use-of-rpi>

6 Governance of the statistical system

136. Governance of statistics depends not only on a legislative framework and accountability arrangements but also on the leadership, capability and culture of the organisations in the statistical system. As the RSS highlighted in its evidence:

Governance is about how decisions are made, and legislation is only part of this. What is also important is how the UKSA Board makes decisions, and how decisions are made and implemented across the GSS. Effective decision-making is dependent on good leadership at all levels, and a culture that is aligned with the strategic direction.²⁹⁷

This chapter explores leadership, capability and culture within UKSA and the wider statistical system.

Leadership and culture

137. A number of witnesses commented on the strong leadership at present across both UKSA and ONS.²⁹⁸ John Pullinger was identified, for example, as being strong on technology and innovation.²⁹⁹ Robert Chote recognised the importance of finding a suitable replacement for John Pullinger: “Clearly a near-term very important decision is who the new National Statistician is going to be. I think John has been very effective as a leader. It is a hell of a combination of things to be responsible for in that job, in a governance and in a leadership sense.”³⁰⁰

138. We heard in evidence the importance of UKSA ensuring that the statistical system continues to have the leadership and culture it will need to meet the challenges it faces. The Royal Statistical Society, talking about the UKSA Board and “leaders working in the statistical system including the National Statistician, Deputy National Statisticians, Heads of Profession and the Director General for Regulation”, posed the question:

Do they have the skills not just to produce the numbers, but to build relationships with policymakers and other users, talk to the media, help their colleagues innovate, etc. We think this is a systemic capability challenge which ought to be a key part of the next UKSA strategy.³⁰¹

139. UKSA has failed in its first attempt to recruit a replacement for John Pullinger, who left his post as National Statistician on 30 June, 2019. The UKSA Board has, therefore, asked the Deputy National Statistician for Economic Statistics, Jonathan Athow, to cover the role in the interim whilst it continues the recruitment process and has said it plans to announce a new National Statistician “later in the summer”.³⁰²

140. John Pullinger has demonstrated strong leadership of the Office for National Statistics over the last five years. The next National Statistician is a vital appointment to lead ONS and the GSS in developing a culture of listening to users and innovating

297 Royal Statistical Society ([GOS0013](#))

298 [Q286](#), [Q2](#), [Q343](#)

299 [Q71](#)

300 [Q343](#)

301 Royal Statistical Society ([GOS0013](#))

302 <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/announcement-of-an-interim-national-statistician/>

in order to secure a statistical system that meets the current and future needs of the country. Ambitious leadership is needed to unleash the power of data to transform government and bring widespread benefits to society. User focus and innovation need to permeate all levels of the statistical system. We agree with the Royal Statistical Society that there is a systemic capability challenge to combine the technical skills required to produce numbers with skills in listening, communicating, influencing and innovating.

141. The Committee is concerned that UKSA has not been successful in identifying a new National Statistician. This job requires a rare combination of skills, including a high level of understanding of statistics along with leadership and management ability. *We recommend that UKSA should consider how to separate elements of the National Statistician’s role to make it possible to find suitable candidates. We recommend that UKSA produces a note for PACAC setting out a strategic approach to succession planning and how it is developing a sufficient talent pool to fill senior roles, including that of National Statistician, in the future.*

Government Statistical Service

142. UK statistics are produced through a hybrid system combining a central statistical institute, ONS, with statisticians spread across government bodies producing statistics in the GSS.³⁰³ The intention of the system is that members of the GSS report to managers in their own organisations but look to the National Statistician for statistical leadership. John Pullinger described his view of the system: “The fact we have good quality professional statisticians in large numbers in each of the main Ministries of State and indeed 160 organisations across the country is a great strength that many other countries do not have and the fact we have a common professional cadre of people who are following the same Code of Practice is a great strength.”³⁰⁴ Hetan Shah highlighted the risk of an alternative model that centralises statisticians “is that you then lose the link to policy.”³⁰⁵

143. The hybrid system presents challenges in maintaining integrity and standards and the independence of statistics beyond ONS.³⁰⁶ The RSS stated that “the discharge of the National Statistician’s functions through the ONS has been more effective than in the rest of the GSS where the National Statistician has little direct management control.”³⁰⁷ Robert Chote added that:

There is clearly more of a challenge establishing confidence in what is coming out of government departments as distinct from what is coming out from ONS, and UKSA has less of a role directly in responsibility for that. It is harder for them to help the statistical profession nested in individual departments’ set strategies and work programmes than it is for ONS as well.³⁰⁸

303 [Q474](#)

304 [Ibid](#)

305 [Q55](#)

306 [Q134](#), [Q293](#), Royal Statistical Society ([GOS0013](#))

307 Royal Statistical Society ([GOS0013](#))

308 [Q293](#)

144. Mike Hughes described the weakness of the Act regarding the GSS in that it “does not even acknowledge the existence of the Government Statistical Service, the bedrock of the UK’s statistical system.” He went on to say:

At implementation of the SRSA [the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007], there was a perception across government that the SRSA only applied to ONS and it required a directive from the then Cabinet Secretary to all Permanent Secretaries that the SRSA applied universally across government. Many of the problems with official statistics arise in other government departments where, in the author’s opinion, the principles underlying the SRSA still do not have sufficient recognition amongst departmental staff and the status of Heads of Profession has been diminished.³⁰⁹

Technical and communication skills

145. Witnesses commented on the high quality of staff across the GSS but said that they could be more outward looking. Mike Hughes said that “Statisticians have a big job in explaining the numbers. That is very often where things fall down ... my definition of a statistician is actually using the numbers to engage in the policy development and so on”.³¹⁰ Will Moy agreed, saying, “The statisticians spend too long explaining what is happening to the numbers when they should be explaining what is going on in the real world and why, using the numbers. The Statistics Authority needs to give a very clear steer to the whole of the Government Statistical Service saying that that is the expectation.”³¹¹ Hetan Shah had some specific suggestions for UKSA to improve the effectiveness of the GSS: “One option might be to have a Board member specifically tasked with thinking about the role of the GSS”.³¹²

Heads of Profession

146. As described in Chapter 1 of this report, the UK has a disaggregated system of official statistics, meaning many official statistics are produced in government departments, overseen by Heads of Profession. We heard evidence of the potential difficult position of the Heads of Profession, as the leaders of statisticians within government departments, who often have to navigate difficult waters because, “Ministers don’t like you putting out uncomfortable truths about the success of a policy”.³¹³ As Robert Chote said, Heads of Profession “obviously have a conflict of interest between their responsibility to produce data that is appropriate for the public good and also as civil servants to serve their Ministers and their Department”³¹⁴ and argued they needed to be provided with a network of support and assistance by the National Statistician.

147. It was also argued that Heads of Profession need to have sufficient seniority to influence Ministers and their departments, yet it was noted that their seniority has diminished over time. As Hetan Shah described:

309 Mr Mike Hughes ([GOS0027](#))

310 [Q155](#)

311 [Q155](#)

312 [Q55](#)

313 [Q468](#)

314 [Q295](#)

One of the things we have noticed is that with the Heads of Professions, over time, the status of that post has become lower and lower. We would like to see those Heads of Professions have a much stronger post within their Department, much more seniority, and we think that would cascade through. If you have senior statisticians in departments they will be taken more seriously. We certainly see a correlation between those departments where the Head of Profession is more senior and the quality of statistics that come out of that department.³¹⁵

The Bean Review recommended that, “the independence of departmental statistics Heads of Profession should be reinforced” and that “there should be a formal role for the National Statistician in the appointment and performance management of the Heads of Profession”.³¹⁶

148. UKSA provided data on the seniority of Heads of Profession in the 18 major Whitehall departments and the devolved administrations: 2 at director level and 13 at deputy director level within the senior civil service; and 6 below senior civil service level.³¹⁷ John Pullinger acknowledged that, despite substantial increases in the number of statisticians in government over recent decades, numbers at the most senior level have diminished.³¹⁸ He argued, however, that Heads of Profession “while they are not necessarily at the most senior place in the organisation they certainly have a very senior voice because they alone have the responsibility for the form, content and timing of every official statistic that comes out from that department.”³¹⁹

149. UKSA is seeking to strengthen the GSS by giving system-wide leadership to senior roles in ONS. John Pullinger claimed that for this reason “we now have as much influence or seniority in the civil service as has ever been the case, even though Heads of Profession as individuals are often lower down.”³²⁰ One such role is the Head of Communications who influences Heads of Communications in departments to report the statistics honestly.³²¹ He also referred to the creation of the analysis function within government, which brings him together with the Government’s Chief Economist, Chief Social Scientist and Chief Scientific Adviser, “looking at whether we have the collective capability to bring truth to power”.³²²

150. Heads of Profession could be further supported by UKSA producing a programme of work across the statistical system. Mike Hughes described the programme of work as too “ONS-centric”, not giving sufficient attention to the rest of the GSS.³²³ He described this as the most important deviation of the UK system from the UN’s Generic Law of Statistics. Robert Chote spoke of how UKSA’s input into the work programmes within a particular department could “strengthen the hand of the statistical professions in departments.”³²⁴

315 [Q40](#)

316 Para 1.54, [Independent Review of UK Economic Statistics](#), Professor Sir Charles Bean, 11 March 2016.

317 UK Statistics Authority ([GOS0026](#))

318 [Q470](#)

319 [Ibid](#)

320 [Ibid](#)

321 [Q468](#)

322 [Q470](#)

323 [Q181](#)

324 [Q334](#)

151. The Committee agrees with John Pullinger that having professional statisticians in large numbers across government, following a common code of practice, is a strength of the UK system. However, this disaggregated system needs to be able to maintain its independence from inevitable pressure from Ministers and senior officials about the way any data is presented. This has been made more difficult by the decline in seniority of statistical Heads of Profession in departments and the lack of influence that UKSA has over the GSS.

152. *The UK Statistics Authority should strengthen the governance of the wider statistical system. It should:*

- a) *bolster the statistical Heads of Profession in departments by recommending they are given a more appropriate level of seniority in their departments;*
- b) *report on the effectiveness of senior ONS roles with system-wide responsibilities (e.g. Head of Communications) in supporting the independence of GSS personnel across government;*
- c) *publish a programme of work to tackle the big statistical issues across the GSS;*
- d) *consult with users to invite external challenge and contributions to that programme; and*
- e) *appoint a Board member to be responsible for monitoring and encouraging the independence of GSS personnel in departments.*

Technology and use of data

153. UKSA has invested in technology in recent years, both in response to the Bean Review, and to improve its website and IT systems. The Government recently announced that, “ONS will receive a funding boost of £9m to develop cutting-edge methodologies for measuring how the UK economy is performing”.³²⁵ Hetan Shah described how the platform being developed for the census, rather than being thrown away afterwards, will be used for the future work of the ONS and the GSS.³²⁶ Robert Chote also referred to “a reasonably successful upgrading of their IT system”.³²⁷ Will Moy acknowledged that the ONS website “formerly labelled as a national disgrace” is now “on its way to becoming world class”.³²⁸ He went on to say that genuinely world-class communication, presentation and sharing of statistics and use of statistics are “only going to be delivered and delivered for the country if that work continues, if it accelerates and if it focuses on how we can link data between different places.”³²⁹

154. This inquiry heard that ambitious leadership is needed to transform government through more effective use of data; Will Moy said that:

When John Pullinger came in as National Statistician he said that radical change was needed and was coming. Radical change is still needed. The right question is not: how do we take what we have and make it slightly

325 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ons-funding-boost>

326 [Q71](#)

327 [Q286](#)

328 [Q150](#)

329 [Ibid](#)

better? The right question is: what do we need now as a country? It probably is one of the biggest opportunities for public administration in the next 10 to 20 years to use data more effectively. We have seen data transforming every other part of our lives. We must assume that it will transform government and make it possible to do things much more efficiently and much more effectively.³³⁰

Administrative data and new data sources

155. Hetan Shah described how the Digital Economy Act “will give the ONS much greater powers of access to data across government”,³³¹ for example in creating and updating the census from sources such as medical data, not just a survey once a decade. Some of these benefits are being realised. Chris Giles described how the ONS Data Science Campus was making progress in addressing longstanding problems with using administrative data.³³² He used the example of the Spring Statement, and how the Office for Budget Responsibility was able to draw on real-time HMRC income data to explain surprising increases in income tax revenue.³³³ He also described how the use of VAT data is beginning to seep into the national accounts, which he expected to improve quality.³³⁴

156. However, barriers to effective data sharing remain. The National Audit Office reported that, “The Digital Economy Act has so far not given departments the reassurance they need to be confident about sharing data legally.”³³⁵ John Pullinger acknowledged that it is taking longer than he would have wished to access and use data from across government but explained that he felt that “there is only so far you can push it without it then being counterproductive”.³³⁶ As Sir David Norgrove explained, “We could lay notices—and, in fact, in one case we have—to require the production of statistics. That is an undesirable thing to do because forcing people to give you their data means they would incur costs in doing that and you need their help to understand the data and to maintain them. Unless you do it with full co-operation you are likely to lose out.”³³⁷

Innovation

157. Some witnesses argued that innovation will be key to taking advantage of new technologies, exploiting the power of data and transforming the statistical system. For example, Mike Hughes described the analysis techniques that the Data Science Campus provides as a big improvement, “but that innovation has to continue.”³³⁸ Matt Leach described how “it is clear there that it is trying to think 10 years off at the new sorts of data that might emerge and, as that data emerges, how it might be applied and presented in ways that are relevant to communities.”³³⁹ Hetan Shah praised the Data Science Campus and added that “One of the key questions for the future is: can you use that Data Science Campus knowledge, not just to stay in-house for 70 people, or whatever they have, but to

330 [Q166](#)

331 [Q2](#)

332 [Q283](#)

333 [Ibid](#)

334 [Q257](#)

335 Paragraph 4.20, [Challenges in using data across government, NAO, June 2019](#)

336 [Q498](#)

337 [Q413](#)

338 [Q162](#)

339 [Q212](#)

transform the whole of the ONS and GSS, because in 10 years' time any statistician needs to be using these ways of working?"³⁴⁰ He pointed to the comprehensive spending review and the need for further investment.³⁴¹

158. The world is changing fast and it is important that statisticians are looking to how statistics may be used in the future. Will Moy called for "a process of looking forward to the future needs of people who need to make decisions with statistics."³⁴² He said that statisticians across ONS and the GSS, "need to recognise that they are the experts in what statistics will be capable of doing in five years' time, which is radically different to what is currently available."³⁴³ Robert Chote, however, identified the challenge of getting an innovative spirit to "permeate its way down through the organisation. In addition to the innovative spirit, those people need to have the capacity in addition to the day job".³⁴⁴

Data literacy and data ethics

159. Hetan Shah explained that UKSA needs to "work with other bodies who believe in the power of data for public good".³⁴⁵ It needs to make the argument to the public because, following the Cambridge Analytica scandal, "the public really now want to know what is being done with their data".³⁴⁶ He also said that the National Statistician's Data Ethics Advisory Committee, set up by John Pullinger, is doing a great job of assessing internal projects for their ethics but could now be more proactive as a voice to the public about how ONS uses their data.³⁴⁷ He also felt that ONS, GSS and OSR could play more of a leadership role in data governance alongside organisations such as the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Open Data Institute.³⁴⁸

160. Will Moy said that "In terms of engaging with public debate and public awareness that is an area where the Authority has been largely absent, and that is deeply regrettable. There has been far too little focus on understanding the impacts statistics have on public debate and how that can be improved."³⁴⁹ UKSA could also do more to close the gap between public understanding of particular issues and what the official statistics are saying. The RSS expressed the view that "UKSA could and should take much more of a role on promoting and enhancing statistical literacy among the public."³⁵⁰

161. We recognise that UKSA has made good investments in technology, including changes to its website, and the platform for the next census, but there is much more to be done. Innovation is key. The Data Science Campus has been recognised for making good progress, but UKSA should ensure that the outcomes of the Campus's work are more transformative in ONS and across the whole of government. We have heard that some progress is being made in making use of administrative data, for example by use of tax data in analysis of changes to the economy, but this has been slower than hoped.

340 [Q70](#)

341 [Ibid](#)

342 [Q144](#)

343 [Ibid](#)

344 [Q343](#)

345 [Q5](#)

346 [Ibid](#)

347 [Q72](#)

348 [Q76](#)

349 [Q144](#)

350 Royal Statistical Society ([GOS0013](#))

162. *UKSA should be requesting data sets so that it can take a lead in using the potential of data to transform government, at the same time demonstrating how the public will be protected from misuse of data. Statisticians should also anticipate the future needs of decision-makers, so that UKSA can shape the statistical system to meet those needs.*

163. *We recommend that UKSA takes a stronger leading role across technology, data science, data ethics and influencing improved sharing of data which recognises UKSA's role in the governance of the whole system. We would like to see UKSA highlight to Parliament where public bodies are not sharing data in the spirit of the Digital Economy Act. UKSA must make efforts to ensure that innovation in technology and data science, for example through the Data Science Campus, impacts the whole statistical system. UKSA must sufficiently resource continued activities to bring about further innovation with data. We call on UKSA to report to this Committee on how much it spends on the Data Science Campus and what it could achieve with varying levels of additional funding.*

Next UKSA Strategy

164. 'Better statistics, better decisions', UKSA's 2015 to 2020 strategy, was praised by Hetan Shah for making the link between statistics and decisions, "so statistics are not just there floating in the ether".³⁵¹ He said that if PACAC were to help shape UKSA's next strategy, that was Parliament fulfilling its role.³⁵² The RSS observed that UKSA's current strategy, "does not explicitly anchor itself in the objectives set out in the legislation" and that the new strategy would be an opportunity to do so.³⁵³

165. Chris Giles described the priorities for UKSA's next strategy as: improving trust in overall statistics by finding, "a route out of the mess in price statistics"; keeping up-to-date with the changing economy to avoid, "another Bean-style review"; "to make sure that communication is first rate"; and for UKSA to be, "more visible as a champion of good statistical practice in the country as a whole and be as visible as possible in doing so."³⁵⁴ The RSS said,

Looking ahead, some of the big themes which it needs to grapple with are systemic: developing capable leadership; strengthening innovation for data science; engaging with users; improved communication and take up of statistics amongst public and policymakers; maintaining confidence in the system including through good data governance, ethics and public engagement.

The RSS also referred to the need to meet growing demand for more granular data, and for statistics to be produced more quickly.³⁵⁵

166. Several witnesses called on UKSA to have more foresight to anticipate the needs of users and emerging issues. The RSS said, "it is not clear whether the UKSA Board adequately surveys the statistical landscape to identify emerging issues. It is also unclear

351 [Q2](#)

352 [Q77](#)

353 Royal Statistical Society ([GOS0013](#))

354 [Q276](#)

355 Royal Statistical Society ([GOS0013](#))

whether the UKSA Board has the structures it needs to pick up user issues early enough.”³⁵⁶ Dr Sentance observed that what was lacking in the current structure was, “strategic oversight of some of the big issues and continually worrying about keeping on top of those big issues”.³⁵⁷ This echoed Richard Aldritt’s call for UKSA to identify what it considers the issues facing the statistics system and to give strategic focus to those over time.³⁵⁸

167. Will Moy asked:

Where is the foresight, the farsighted, ambitious sense of where we could be in 10 years’ time if we invested in this? Where is the case being made enthusiastically and committedly—in the Spending Review, for example—that this country and its citizens could be better off if we invest in better understanding of our economy, of our healthcare system and of our education system?”³⁵⁹

He expressed his hope that UKSA’s next five-year plan would reflect this kind of ambition.³⁶⁰

168. UKSA has the opportunity, in developing its strategy for the next five years, to address the main points that have been raised in this report. *The Committee believes that the UKSA strategy for the next five years must focus on UKSA’s role in the governance of the statistical system so that it seeks the public good and supports good statistical practice. OSR must be resourced to provide consistent regulation across the entire GSS and must have clearer separation from ONS; the UKSA Board must make this happen. The strategy must be more outward looking, providing the mechanics of how UKSA will listen to and be responsive to all types of users and engage with others across the public sector working with data. It must also be more forward looking, with a comprehensive programme of work to address known strategic issues and a process for identifying and anticipating future requirements, to shape a world-leading statistical system that meets the future needs of the UK. UKSA must also identify what resources it requires in order to carry out its role and functions to ensure the effective governance of UK statistics.*

356 Royal Statistical Society ([GOS0013](#))

357 [Q280](#)

358 [Q83](#), [Q90](#)

359 [Q175](#)

360 [Q176](#)

Conclusions and recommendations

Use of statistics

1. We agree with the evidence we received that those producing official statistics do not understand all of today's users and potential users of statistics and how statistics are used. It is surprising that UKSA and the GSS more generally seem not to have carried out research into users such as that produced by the Statistics Commission in 2007 or actively followed up the main conclusions of that report. Producers are, therefore, not able to close statistical gaps or appropriately refine the presentation of existing statistics so they are more useful. Similarly, with only a modest sense of how the public uses data and no evidence of the unmet needs, UKSA is not delivering public good as required under the legislation. *We recommend that UKSA should lead cross-government research to build an evidence base of how statistics are used in practice, taking into account the full breadth of stakeholders (not just users) and to establish where data gaps persist. We also recommend that UKSA should conduct sector by sector reviews, to understand what stakeholders need or want, and to make statistics more relevant.* (Paragraph 22)
2. UKSA needs to take a more strategic approach to engaging with users. The government statistical system's engagement with users is an issue that still has not been effectively addressed, despite being highlighted many times and even in the Office for Statistics Regulation's (OSR) own assessment reports. Some mechanisms exist to engage users and there are pockets of good practice, but the evidence suggests there is a real need to improve overall use and usefulness of official statistics in order to deliver the public good as defined by the Act. UKSA should develop a strategy for engaging all users of official statistics that works for the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and for other producers across government over whom it does not have direct control. It must, at a minimum, report annually on progress against that strategy. Departments that do not make sufficient and rapid progress on engagement with users of statistics must expect to be held accountable in Parliament. *UKSA should develop a strategy for engaging all users of official statistics that works for the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and for other producers across government over whom it does not have direct control. It must, at a minimum, report annually on progress against that strategy. Departments that do not make sufficient and rapid progress on engagement with users of statistics must expect to be held accountable in Parliament.* (Paragraph 31)
3. *The National Statistician should make every effort to encourage individuals at all levels in ONS and the Government Statistical Service (GSS) to actively engaging with users so that the user perspective is central. Above all, UKSA must set the best possible example of engagement with users of statistics, as part of its overall governance of the statistics system, in order to increase public confidence. Government statisticians must also work with the media to ensure that the correct interpretation of the statistics and trends is found in their outputs.* (Paragraph 32)
4. Official statistics must be presented in a way that is easy for non-experts to use. We heard evidence of improvements to the ONS website in recent years but it is clear that there is much more to be done to make ONS data accessible. *We recommend*

that UKSA conducts a review of how official statistics are published and presented and develops a plan to address any weaknesses found. We also recommend that UKSA conducts a programme of user research to see how easy it really is to find the basic core statistical series. (Paragraph 43)

5. UKSA has not yet done enough to bring important data together in one place, giving users the big picture across a domain, as used to happen in, for example, the now-defunct annual Social Trends and monthly Economic Trends and Financial Statistics publications. *We recommend that UKSA resumes publication of compendia, albeit in a modern format consistent with accessing data via the internet, that allow related data to be found and are not limited to ONS statistics.* (Paragraph 44)
6. There is also evidence that gaps in data of many shapes and forms have arisen for different reasons, with the result that users are not getting data that is relevant to them. *We recommend that UKSA takes note of the Institute for Government report on data gaps, of other third-party reports highlighting gaps in data and of the user consultation recommended above. It should identify the most significant data gaps and use its influence across the public sector, and by engaging with Parliament and international organisations, to set out a plan to close them.* (Paragraph 45)
7. *GSS and ONS statisticians should also do more to guide users how to use their statistics, explain how they are typically used, outlining their strengths and weaknesses, providing commentary and advice.* (Paragraph 46)

Governance of official statistics

8. Opinion is divided on the effectiveness of the current UK statistical system. The system is considered by some to be better than what went before; and survey data suggests it has strengthened public trust. The UK system is also well regarded internationally. We have heard evidence that the Code of Practice has improved the quality of statistics but there has been criticism that its detailed application has distracted UKSA from big strategic issues. (Paragraph 66)
9. UKSA has made some tough public interventions that were unpopular with government but has been too slow to act on serious statistical and methodological issues such as the classification of items on the national balance sheet and has seemed to have acted only when under pressure from others. We praise ONS for ending the pre-release of ONS statistics to Ministers and the Bank of England, but the practice of pre-release of data across the GSS remains. While we recognise the need for a safe space for UKSA to discuss complex and important issues with Government, UKSA has not been transparent about the meetings it has with Government and significant stakeholders and the purpose of those meetings, for example, in the way policy towards RPI was developed. (Paragraph 67)
10. UKSA has been too reluctant to make recommendations if it does not think they will be acted on. It has not used its powers to lay reports before Parliament where it disagrees with a department. It prefers to take a more collaborative approach. UKSA's most significant failure has been in its handling of RPI, which we discuss further in Chapter 5. (Paragraph 68)

11. *We recommend that UKSA should demonstrate more proactive, quicker responses to concerns about the accuracy and misuse of statistics and should more clearly demonstrate its independence from key stakeholders, when it has significant disagreements with producers of statistics. UKSA should engage with Parliament, including using its powers to lay reports before Parliament to highlight concerns about statistical practice. UKSA should make recommendations to Government, regardless of whether it considers they will be taken up. UKSA should be transparent about meetings with external bodies, such as with the Treasury and the Bank of England, and about the purpose of those meetings. The Chair of UKSA should make more strident efforts to encourage Ministers to end the practice of pre-release access to data across the public sector by referring departments that continue with the practice to Parliament. (Paragraph 69)*
12. The legislation presents significant challenges to UKSA in exercising the dual functions of production and regulation of statistics and does not give clarity to those roles. The Committee believes that combining regulation and production in a single organisation was misconceived since it placed a higher value on avoiding public disagreements than improving statistics for the public good. UKSA, set up as a non-ministerial department, does not have the independence, for example, of an independent regulator, such as a parliamentary body. There is a risk of direct interference from government departments and other stakeholders or indirect interference as they seek outcomes that favour themselves rather than the public good as defined by the Act. (Paragraph 73)
13. *The Committee believes that the dual role has created a conflict and recommends that the legislation should be changed to create a separate and independent Office for Statistics Regulation: guardian of government-produced numbers, reporting to Parliament, regulating a central statistical institute and the disaggregated producers of statistics across government. This would also provide the opportunity to tidy up other parts of the legislation and align UK law better with best international practice. (Paragraph 74)*
14. We recognise that, in the current climate, legislation is unlikely to be revisited within the next three years and so have made recommendations throughout this report to promote improvements without the need for legislation. *We believe a lack of legislative change should not impede necessary change in UKSA and therefore we recommend that UKSA take steps, starting immediately, to improve and demonstrate its independence and to minimise the vulnerabilities of having production and regulation within one body. We call on UKSA to report to this Committee each year on progress with the implementation of the recommendations presented in this report. If early improvement is not forthcoming, we will press for time to be found to replace or improve the legislation. (Paragraph 75)*
15. It is welcome that UKSA has sought to distinguish OSR from the rest of UKSA and has expanded its capability. However, with only 29 staff, it is under-resourced when set against the Office for National Statistics with over 3000 staff, and the thousands of GSS statisticians working across the system that OSR is required to regulate. We do not believe that OSR can effectively regulate the UK's statistical system with the level of resources it has. This is evidenced in the lack of action in key areas like RPI and student loans, and the reliance that OSR has on departments presenting

their mistakes and failings to OSR, rather than OSR actively seeking problems. The Committee concludes that OSR is not being sufficiently ambitious in its role and should be more proactive in safeguarding statistics for the public good. *We believe that UKSA must do more to promote a proactive, ambitious and better resourced OSR, with a higher profile and ability to act as a champion of good quality and useful, independently produced, statistics. We therefore recommend that OSR sets out what more it could achieve if it doubled or trebled in size. We recommend that the non-executive members of the UKSA Board, who comprise the Regulation Committee, should have a special responsibility to examine the budget of OSR and the balance of resourcing between OSR and ONS.* (Paragraph 85)

16. Despite the creation of the Office for Statistics Regulation, the Committee believes that the UKSA Board has still not sufficiently separated its dual functions. Staff responsible for production and regulation of statistics remain co-located in the same office space. The National Statistician is Chief Executive, Accounting Officer and Permanent Secretary of UKSA and nominal Head of the GSS. We believe this makes it unclear to external observers whether OSR staff are independent and separate from these reporting lines. OSR can only claim independence if it demonstrates more clearly that it is operating independently of ONS. This needs active support from the non-executives on the Board. *The Committee therefore reiterates previous recommendations that UKSA should take more concrete and visible steps to separate its roles of producer and regulator. The only way to secure public confidence is to ensure that OSR has a separate role and is independent. We recommend that OSR relocates its offices to separate premises from ONS.* (Paragraph 86)
17. OSR has produced two annual reports since it was established in November 2016. *The Committee recommends that OSR produces its own annual report every year.* (Paragraph 87)
18. We believe that the accountability structures for OSR need to be more transparent. *We therefore recommend that UKSA takes steps to ensure its non-executive members, sitting on the Regulation Committee, operate more transparently by, for example, announcing when meetings will be held, and publishing agendas and minutes as soon as possible afterwards.* (Paragraph 88)

Governance of UKSA

19. The Committee agrees with witnesses who highlighted the lack of appropriate oversight by the UKSA Board in dealing with RPI. This was an example of the UKSA Board being too passive and not taking sufficient action to protect its reputation as an independent regulator. The fact that there was a need for the Treasury to commission its own external review of economic statistics on ONS highlighted limited foresight and engagement from the UKSA Board. (Paragraph 94)
20. It is clear that the Board should do more to demonstrate how it is holding the statistical system to account, addressing the big issues and doing its best to ensure that official statistics serve the public good, as defined in the Act. The Board's lack of action on RPI, student loans and economic statistics, raises concerns about how issues are being managed in other areas. Even when mistakes were highlighted by external observers, the actions of the UKSA Board have often been slow or non-

existent. *We recommend that UKSA reports, for example through Board minutes, on how non-executive members provide accountability and challenge to the executive staff of UKSA and statistics producers in other bodies. We are told that meetings of non-executives take place but there are no publicly available agendas or minutes for those meetings. We recommend that UKSA reports publicly, using agendas and minutes, all committee meetings of non-executives. We also recommend that when new non-executives are recruited, it is with the expectation of working more hours than they currently do, so that they can give more time and attention to their role.* (Paragraph 95)

21. Scrutiny of UKSA by Parliament is important and the results of that scrutiny are something that the UKSA Board should take seriously and act upon. Our evidence underlines that UKSA has not been sufficiently quick, thorough or transparent about its progress in responding to PASC recommendations. Nor has UKSA responded as readily as hoped, to requests from PACAC. (Paragraph 100)
22. *The Committee will call UKSA for an annual hearing to be held after the publication of the annual report of UKSA. In addition to the UKSA annual report, the Committee requests the following documents to consider at that session: an annual report of OSR agreed by the non-executive members (through the Regulation Committee); a report identifying the most significant issues facing the statistical community, including a plan to address them; and an update on UKSA's progress against recommendations from this Committee. We also ask the UKSA Chair to write to the Committee on a quarterly basis to update it on progress against Committee recommendations and results achieved, and on any other major statistical issues.* (Paragraph 101)
23. *We recommend that the Director General for Regulation keep the Committee informed of OSR actions by copying correspondence relating to interventions in the statistical system. In addition, we recommend that OSR write to Departmental Select Committees at least annually to update them on the data and statistical issues that OSR has identified in their remit.* (Paragraph 102)
24. The Bean Review helped UKSA to secure additional resources and we welcome initiatives such as the Data Science Campus and Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence. However, we do not think UKSA should have to be subjected to an external review for it to secure what it needs. If the UKSA Chair, National Statistician and Head of Assessment were fulfilling their roles, they would be less dependent on external reviews. This is why we have called for an increase in OSR funding and a more dynamic set of actions by the UKSA Chair. However, we question whether UKSA has done enough to communicate its response to external reviews in the medium to longer term. It still remains unclear whether all the recommendations from external reviews have been accepted and what changes have been implemented. *UKSA should report annually on its progress in implementing the recommendations of external reviews, including Parliamentary Select Committee inquiries, after its initial timely response. If it decides not to implement a recommendation, it should publicly explain the reasons for that decision.* (Paragraph 107)
25. Evidence to this inquiry suggests that UKSA is not as transparent about its decision making as it should be. For example, publication of Board minutes has not been regular and timely and has not provided sufficient detail. *We recommend that UKSA*

should publish its Board meeting agendas and papers, and its minutes as soon as they are approved. Minutes should be more informative about the nature of the questions under discussion. (Paragraph 113)

26. Evidence to this inquiry was unequivocal: the governance of the statistical system is unclear, even to those who work closely with it. This reflects a fundamental shortcoming of the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007: that the term “Board” can mean different things, depending on whether it relates to its production, or assessment functions. *UKSA is not to blame for confusion arising from the Act, but it should address it. UKSA should produce a framework document which sets out clear roles and responsibilities of the different parts of the statistical system, including the different elements of the UKSA Board, ONS, OSR, GSS, and departmental Heads of Profession to whom UKSA intends each of these parties to be accountable. A clear description of the framework should bring clarity where there is ambiguity in the legislation and should strengthen public confidence in the accountability of these bodies. (Paragraph 117)*

RPI—a case study

27. The evidence about the mishandling of RPI, the influence that HM Treasury and the Bank of England have exercised, and the reluctance of UKSA to confront them, raises the most serious questions about the effectiveness of the governance of statistics, which is the primary responsibility of UKSA as a regulator. UKSA has allowed what was originally a simple mistake in price collection of inflation data to snowball into a major unresolved issue for a decade. It is clear that UKSA does not exercise consistent governance to ensure that the public can have confidence that it is safeguarding the measurement of inflation - either in the production of the numbers or the assessment and regulation of them, despite the production of RPI being primarily a duty prescribed by the Act. (Paragraph 132)
28. The Committee acknowledges that the legislation gives UKSA a dual role which is confusing but agrees with the conclusion of the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee that “In publishing an index which it admits is flawed but refuses to fix, the Authority could be accused of failing in its statutory duties”. We are concerned that UKSA’s response to the report, promised but still not delivered, has been held up by its deference to the Treasury. This demonstrates a continued lack of independence on the part of UKSA from the influence of the Treasury. (Paragraph 133)
29. The handling of RPI resonates with other findings in this report, that the governance of statistics provided under the present statutory framework is inadequate. UKSA commissioned reports but did not follow through with recommendations and failed to resolve the various conflicts, demonstrating the inherent shortcomings of the statutory arrangements that have established a body with the twin roles of producer and regulator. We believe that in this case, UKSA has not fulfilled its responsibility to ensure the quality of statistics, but has become drawn into concerns about the consequences, which should be left to the Treasury and others. (Paragraph 134)

30. *We recommend that UKSA publishes its recommendation for addressing the shortcomings in RPI immediately. This will enable Parliament to hold the Government to account for the mishandling of RPI and provide Parliament with an opportunity potentially to support UKSA's recommendation.* (Paragraph 135)

Governance of the statistical system

31. John Pullinger has demonstrated strong leadership of the Office for National Statistics over the last five years. The next National Statistician is a vital appointment to lead ONS and the GSS in developing a culture of listening to users and innovating in order to secure a statistical system that meets the current and future needs of the country. Ambitious leadership is needed to unleash the power of data to transform government and bring widespread benefits to society. User focus and innovation need to permeate all levels of the statistical system. We agree with the Royal Statistical Society that there is a systemic capability challenge to combine the technical skills required to produce numbers with skills in listening, communicating, influencing and innovating. (Paragraph 140)
32. The Committee is concerned that UKSA has not been successful in identifying a new National Statistician. This job requires a rare combination of skills, including a high level of understanding of statistics along with leadership and management ability. *We recommend that UKSA should consider how to separate elements of the National Statistician's role to make it possible to find suitable candidates. We recommend that UKSA produces a note for PACAC setting out a strategic approach to succession planning and how it is developing a sufficient talent pool to fill senior roles, including that of National Statistician, in the future.* (Paragraph 141)
33. The Committee agrees with John Pullinger that having professional statisticians in large numbers across government, following a common code of practice, is a strength of the UK system. However, this disaggregated system needs to be able to maintain its independence from inevitable pressure from Ministers and senior officials about the way any data is presented. This has been made more difficult by the decline in seniority of statistical Heads of Profession in departments and the lack of influence that UKSA has over the GSS. (Paragraph 151)
34. *The UK Statistics Authority should strengthen the governance of the wider statistical system. It should:*
- a) *bolster the statistical Heads of Profession in departments by recommending they are given a more appropriate level of seniority in their departments;*
 - b) *report on the effectiveness of senior ONS roles with system-wide responsibilities (e.g. Head of Communications) in supporting the independence of GSS personnel across government;*
 - c) *publish a programme of work to tackle the big statistical issues across the GSS;*
 - d) *consult with users to invite external challenge and contributions to that programme; and*
 - e) *appoint a Board member to be responsible for monitoring and encouraging the independence of GSS personnel in departments.*

35. We recognise that UKSA has made good investments in technology, including changes to its website, and the platform for the next census, but there is much more to be done. Innovation is key. The Data Science Campus has been recognised for making good progress, but UKSA should ensure that the outcomes of the Campus's work are more transformative in ONS and across the whole of government. We have heard that some progress is being made in making use of administrative data, for example by use of tax data in analysis of changes to the economy, but this has been slower than hoped. (Paragraph 161)
36. *UKSA should be requesting data sets so that it can take a lead in using the potential of data to transform government, at the same time demonstrating how the public will be protected from misuse of data. Statisticians should also anticipate the future needs of decision-makers, so that UKSA can shape the statistical system to meet those needs.* (Paragraph 162)
37. *We recommend that UKSA takes a stronger leading role across technology, data science, data ethics and influencing improved sharing of data which recognises UKSA's role in the governance of the whole system. We would like to see UKSA highlight to Parliament where public bodies are not sharing data in the spirit of the Digital Economy Act. UKSA must make efforts to ensure that innovation in technology and data science, for example through the Data Science Campus, impacts the whole statistical system. UKSA must sufficiently resource continued activities to bring about further innovation with data. We call on UKSA to report to this Committee on how much it spends on the Data Science Campus and what it could achieve with varying levels of additional funding.* (Paragraph 163)
38. UKSA has the opportunity, in developing its strategy for the next five years, to address the main points that have been raised in this report. *The Committee believes that the UKSA strategy for the next five years must focus on UKSA's role in the governance of the statistical system so that it seeks the public good and supports good statistical practice. OSR must be resourced to provide consistent regulation across the entire GSS and must have clearer separation from ONS; the UKSA Board must make this happen. The strategy must be more outward looking, providing the mechanics of how UKSA will listen to and be responsive to all types of users and engage with others across the public sector working with data. It must also be more forward looking, with a comprehensive programme of work to address known strategic issues and a process for identifying and anticipating future requirements, to shape a world-leading statistical system that meets the future needs of the UK. UKSA must also identify what resources it requires in order to carry out its role and functions to ensure the effective governance of UK statistics.* (Paragraph 168)

Annex 1: Previous PASC and PACAC work on statistics

PASC report	Date	UKSA response	Government response
The work of the Office for National Statistics	Letter to UKSA, June 2012	August 2012	
The operation of the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007	February 2013	May 2013	May 2013
Communicating and publishing statistics	May 2013	October 2013	October 2013
Migration statistics	July 2013	December 2013	April 2014
Statistics and the regions and nations of the UK	Letter to UKSA, September 2013	Oct 2013	
Budgeting for statistics across Government	September 2013	October 2013	Correspondence with 19 govt depts published
Statistics and open data	March 2014		September 2014
The census	April 2014	July 2014	July 2014
Crime statistics	April 2014	September 2014	July 2014
Statistics for the economy and public finances	Letter to UKSA, March 2015		
PACAC report	Date	UKSA response	Government response
EU migration statistics	Oral evidence April 2016		
Appointment of the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority	January 2017		
The work of the UK Statistics Authority	February 2018	Letter from UKSA February 2018	

Formal minutes

Tuesday 9 July 2019

Members Present

Sir Bernard Jenkin, in the Chair

Dame Cheryl Gillan Mr David Jones
Kelvin Hopkins Eleanor Smith
Dr Rupa Huq

Draft Report (*Governance of official statistics: redefining the dual role of the UK Statistics Authority; and re-evaluating the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 168 read and agreed to.

Annex agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Eighteenth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order 134.

[Adjourned till Tuesday 16 July 2019 at 09.30am]

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Tuesday 5 February 2019

Hetan Shah, Executive Director, Royal Statistical Society, **Professor Guy Nason**, Professor of Statistics, University of Bristol [Q1–77](#)

Richard Aldritt, formerly of Statistics Commission and UK Statistics Authority [Q78–138](#)

Tuesday 5 March 2019

Paul Allin, Chair, Statistics Users Forum, **Mike Hughes**, formerly Director of Policy, Office for National Statistics and **Will Moy**, Director, Full Fact [Q139–195](#)

Professor John Salt, Migration Unit, UCL and **Matt Leach**, Chief Executive, Local Trust [Q196–227](#)

Tuesday 19 March 2019

Chris Giles, Economics Editor, Financial Times and **Dr Andrew Sentance**, former member of Monetary Policy Committee of Bank of England [Q228–284](#)

Tuesday 26 March 2019

Clare Lombardelli, Director General, Chief Economic Adviser, HM Treasury, **Dr Ben Broadbent**, Deputy Governor, Bank of England, and **Robert Chote**, Chairman, Office for Budget Responsibility [Q285–343](#)

Tuesday 2 April 2019

Sir David Norgrove, Chair, UK Statistics Authority, **John Pullinger**, National Statistician, UK Statistics Authority, and **Ed Humpherson**, Director General for Regulation, UK Statistics Authority [Q344–500](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

GOS numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 1, A ([GOS0003](#))
- 2 Aldritt, Mr Richard ([GOS0025](#))
- 3 Alldritt, Mr Richard ([GOS0001](#))
- 4 Astin, Mr John ([GOS0023](#))
- 5 Barnett, Arthur ([GOS0007](#)), ([GOS0033](#)), ([GOS0035](#))
- 6 Baxter, Mr Michael ([GOS0002](#))
- 7 Bean, Sir Charles ([GOS0012](#))
- 8 Cabinet Office ([GOS0014](#))
- 9 Consumer Data Research Centre ([GOS0005](#))
- 10 Courtney, Dr Mark ([GOS0016](#))
- 11 Cytun (Churches Together in Wales) ([GOS0015](#))
- 12 Full Fact ([GOS0028](#))
- 13 Giles, Mr Chris ([GOS0031](#))
- 14 Goodwin, Mr Guy ([GOS0008](#))
- 15 Gunnell, Gary ([GOS0034](#))
- 16 Hughes, Mr Mike ([GOS0027](#))
- 17 Information Commissioner's Office ([GOS0036](#))
- 18 Lewis, Dr Harvey ([GOS0004](#))
- 19 Leyland, Mrs Jill ([GOS0010](#))
- 20 Market Research Society ([GOS0019](#))
- 21 Richards, Mr Shaun ([GOS0009](#))
- 22 Royal Statistical Society ([GOS0013](#))
- 23 RPI CPI User Group ([GOS0022](#))
- 24 SAS Institute ([GOS0018](#))
- 25 Sentance, Dr Andrew ([GOS0032](#))
- 26 Statistics User Forum ([GOS0030](#))
- 27 Statistics User Forum (SUF) ([GOS0024](#))
- 28 Trades Union Congress ([GOS0021](#))
- 29 UK Data Service ([GOS0020](#))
- 30 UK Statistics Authority ([GOS0017](#))
- 31 UK Statistics Authority ([GOS0026](#))
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