

# UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY

**Minutes**  
**Thursday 25 March 2021**  
**Via Videoconference**

## **Present**

### **UK Statistics Authority**

Sir David Norgrove (Chair)  
Sian Jones (Deputy Chair)  
Sam Beckett  
Helen Boaden  
Professor Sir Ian Diamond  
Richard Dobbs  
Professor David Hand  
Professor Jonathan Haskel  
Ed Humpherson  
Nora Nanayakkara  
Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter  
Professor Anne Trefethen

## **Also in attendance**

Jonathan Athow  
Nick Bateson  
Iain Bell  
Owen Brace  
Robert Bumpstead  
Sally-Ann Jones (Secretariat)  
Darren Morgan (for item 10)  
Louisa Nolan (for item 10)  
Emily Poskett (for item 9)  
Alison Pritchard  
Emma Rourke (for item 11)  
Nicola Tyson-Payne (for item 12)  
Amy Williams (Secretariat)

## **Apologies**

None

## **1. Apologies**

- 1.1 There were no apologies received.

## **2. Declarations of interest**

- 2.1 Richard Dobbs had noted a conflict of interest regarding the COVID-19 Infection Survey agenda item in advance of the meeting.

## **3. Minutes and matters arising from previous meeting**

- 3.1 The minutes of the previous meeting held on 25 February were agreed.

## **4. Report from the Authority Chair**

- 4.1 Non-executive directors had met prior to the Board meeting. They had discussed the Census.
- 4.2 The Chair reported on his recent activity since the Board last met:
- i. on 26 February Sir David had joined an all staff Census call with Professor Sir Ian Diamond, Iain Bell and Nicola Tyson-Payne;
  - ii. on 24 March Sir David had met the Office for Statistics (OSR) health domain team regarding the health statistical landscape; and
  - iii. the report by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee on Government transparency and accountability during COVID-19 had been published.
- 4.3 The Board noted that former National Statistician, John Pullinger, had been appointed as the new Chair of the Electoral Commission.

## **5. Report from the Chief Executive [SA(21)15]**

- 5.1 Sir Ian provided the Board with an overview of activity and issues since the last meeting, highlighting the following:
- i. the work by ONS with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development on lessons learned from the pandemic. This linked to the work with different health organisations on the development of a public health data asset;
  - ii. Owen Brace, as Director of Communications, was engaging with the review of the Government Communications Service.
  - iii. a number of releases on COVID-19 statistical release scheduled for publication early in April, regarding the prevalence of ongoing symptoms following coronavirus infection and vaccine hesitancy; and
  - iv. the publication on 23 March of experimental analysis on 'Coronavirus and the impact on payroll employment'.
- 5.2 Sir Ian informed the Board of an error in the February 2021 Public Sector Finances release. Following publication of the release on 19 March, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) had identified an issue with their tax receipts statistics publication. HMRC were currently investigating the issue and expected to provide corrected data to ONS in time for the Public Sector Finances release on 25 May.

## **6. Report from the Director General for Regulation [SA(21)16]**

- 6.1 Ed Humpherson provided an update on regulation activity highlighting that following a meeting with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, NHS England had started to publish more data on COVID-19 vaccinations. OSR were continuing to liaise with NHS England regarding gaps in the data, for example the need for more granular data on ethnicity.
- 6.2 OSR were in the final stages of business planning for 2021/22. The Regulation Committee would consider the draft plan at its next meeting.

## **7. Report from the Chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee**

- 7.1 Nora Nanayakkara reported on the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee which had met on 11 March.
- 7.2 Committee members had considered:
- i. the financial position for 2020/21 and budget planning for 2021/22;
  - ii. a number of Internal Audit reports;
  - iii. the draft Internal Audit Programme of Assurance for 2021/22; and
  - iv. the development of the risk and assurance function.
- 7.3 The Committee had received an update delivery on the quality assurance framework underpinning the statistical quality plan. The Committee commended the significant progress made by Jonathan Athow and the team in taking forward the quality plan.
- 7.4 The Committee had heard that the review of enabling functions would support the Executive in considering how best to address cross-organisational accountability and responsibility.

## **8. Integrated Data Programme [SA(21)17]**

- 8.1 Alison Pritchard introduced a paper which provided an update on progress of the Integrated Data Programme (IDP). The Infrastructure and Projects Authority had endorsed the IDP following a Gateway review in February. An action plan had been put in place to address the recommendations of the review. The IDP Full Business Case had been submitted to HM Treasury (25 March), following the approval by the IDP Programme Board on 24 March.
- 8.2 The Board discussed the update and highlighted the importance of cross government senior stakeholder support.
- 8.3 The Board would continue to remain engaged in the IDP as the work progressed.

## **9. ONS International Development [SA(21)18]**

- 9.1 Robert Bumpstead and Emily Poskett introduced a paper which provided an update on ONS international development work. The work was funded by the UK's Official Development Assistance budget, and aligned with broader UK international development objectives. The activities of the International Development team linked directly to the aims and objectives of the strategy, 'Statistics for the Public Good'.
- 9.2 The Board heard how the work of the team supported National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) in key partner countries to modernise, improving quality, availability, and impact of data. The areas in which ONS expertise were a particular strength included: technical assistance, strategic advice to develop data science capability and training and mentoring to develop strong statistical leadership.
- 9.3 The Board welcomed the update and discussed whether there were any lessons learned from the impact of the pandemic on ways of working. The technology in place had enabled the team to continue to work remotely with NSIs, which provided the opportunity for engagement and training by a wider pool of experts within ONS, albeit time differences had the potential to be challenging.

## **10. ONS Partnership with Turing**

- 10.1 Louisa Nolan and Darren Morgan gave a presentation on ONS's partnership with the Turing Institute, which was due to launch in April for a two year period. The Board heard about the areas of focus for the programme which included: economic nowcasting; economic networks; and synthetic data. The partnership would provide the opportunity for shared learning and innovation.

**11. COVID-19 Infection Survey and Surveillance Studies [SA(21)19]**

11.1 Iain Bell and Emma Rourke introduced a paper which provided an update on the COVID-19 Infection Survey programme. The survey had maintained performance, with swab testing targets consistently being met, or exceeded across the UK. Following schools reopening the CIS team had launched round four of the schools infection survey.

**12. Census and Data Collection Transformation Programme [SA(21)20]**

12.1 Iain Bell and Nicola Tyson-Payne introduced a paper which provided an update on progress on Census delivery and a summary assessment of progress of the wider transformation.

12.2 Iain Bell reported that the Census collection operation was progressing well with a higher than expected response rate at this point. The field operation had commenced on 23 March. Processing had begun on the Census electronic questionnaire response data with full statistical processing scheduled in September. The media coverage over the Census weekend had helped to raise awareness and overall had been positive. The Census Coverage Survey was on track to complete as planned.

12.3 Board members commended the team on the Census collection operation.

**13. Business Plan Update [SA(21)21]**

13.1 Nick Bateson introduced a paper which provided the supporting narrative to explain progress in the delivery of the business plan at 28 February 2021.

13.2 The business planning process was ongoing. The conclusion of the review of enabling functions would ensure the effective use of resources across the organisation to support the delivery of the strategy.

**14. Any other business**

14.1 The Authority Board would meet next on 29 April 2021 by videoconference.

# UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY

## Agenda

25 March 2021, 10:30 to 14:00 via videoconference

**Chair:** Sir David Norgrove

**Apologies:**

**Attendees:** Darren Morgan (for item 8), Louisa Nolan (for item 8), Emily Poskett (for item 7), Emma Rourke (for item 9), Nicola Tyson-Payne (for item 10)

**NED Session: 10:30-11:00**

1 11.00-11.05 5 mins	Minutes and matters arising from previous meetings Declarations of interest	Meeting of 25 February 2021
2 11.05-11.15 10 mins	Report from the Authority Chair	Oral report Sir David Norgrove
3 11.15-11.35 20 mins	Report from the Chief Executive	SA(21)15 Prof. Sir Ian Diamond
4 11.35-11.50 15 mins	Report from the Director-General for Regulation	SA(21)16 Ed Humpherson
5 11.50-11.55 5 mins	Report from Committee Chair <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Audit and Risk Assurance Committee</li></ul>	Oral report Nora Nanayakkara
6 11.55-12.15 20 mins	Integrated Data Programme	SA(21)17 Alison Pritchard
12.15-12.25 10 mins	Break 10 mins	
7 12.25-12.45 20 mins	ONS International Development	SA(21)18 Rob Bumpstead Emily Poskett
8 12.45-13.10 25 mins	ONS Partnership with Turing	Louisa Nolan Darren Morgan
9 13.10-13.30 20 mins	COVID-19 Infection Survey and Surveillance Studies	SA(21)19 Iain Bell Emma Rourke
10 13.30-13.45 15 mins	Census and Data Collection Transformation Programme	SA(21)20 Iain Bell Nicola Tyson-Payne
11 13.45-13.55 10 mins	Business Plan update	SA(21)21 Nick Bateson
12 13.55-14.00 5 mins	Any Other Business	

***Chief Executive's Report, March 2020***

**Purpose**

1. This report provides the Board with an overview of activity and issues for March.

**Summary**

2. The Census is now operational, and we are working to ensure successful delivery of a truly brilliant Census. We continue monitor the pandemic, with our data being central to understanding the course of the pandemic as restrictions are lifted, as well as the wider societal and economic impacts such as disparities in deaths and the impact of long COVID.

**Review of recent activities**

3. The 52<sup>nd</sup> United Nations Statistical Commission was held between 1-5 March 2021. I was invited by Stefan Schweinfest, Head of UN Statistical Division, to present at the High-level event: "The COVID-19 Pandemic: How the Data and Statistical community stepped up to the new challenges." Here I highlighted the work ONS has done to develop faster economic indicators; the COVID-19 infection survey; and work done to regarding vaccine take-up.
4. On 18 March, I was part of a panel on "Sustainable Development Goals and COVID: how data and statistics can help build back better", as part of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe's regional forum. Here I discussed ONS's experience as it shifted into a position where it could respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.
5. On Tuesday 9 March I provided the keynote to the GSS conference on the role of the GSS in responding to a pandemic. This included showcasing work from across the GSS from the first lockdown last year to the present day. I also provided the closing remarks at the end of the conference the following day.
6. On 9 March ONS met with Tera Allas CBE, Director of Research and Economics at McKinsey, to discuss some of the challenges she had faced when accessing ONS data and shared the work ONS is undertaking to improve usability issues.
7. On 15 March the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) published their report '*Government transparency and accountability during COVID-19: the data underpinning decisions*'. Ed and I gave evidence for this inquiry in September, and we provided written evidence in January this year, too, which is all referenced throughout the report. They commend the work of the ONS, GSS and analysts in local government and the NHS during the COVID-19 pandemic. Notable recommendations include strengthening the Ministerial Code so Ministers must abide by the Code of Practice, that the Department for Health and Social Care undertake a review of health data systems in England, supported by the Authority, and that Government briefings should meet the GSS good practice guidelines on data visualisation. There are no recommendations directed to the ONS or the Authority.
8. The IDP Gateway 3 review was held week commencing 22 February, with thorough scrutiny of Programme artefacts and an extensive series of interviews, with Programme and workstream staff and stakeholders. The review concluded that delivery of proposed Initial Operating Capability in March 2022 is feasible, providing sufficient focus is given to four key areas (Cross-Government senior stakeholder buy-in for the Integrated Data Service (IDS)); Critical path of the delivery plan; Technical design challenges and Benefits narrative.

9. At the last Board meeting, there were discussions on the potential need for something akin to the VOICES survey (Survey of the Bereaved). The last time this survey was undertaken was in 2015, with results published in 2016. ONS undertook the survey via commission from NHS England (NHSE). ONS will be looking at the feasibility of replicating this survey over the coming months by engaging with NHSE, who owned the survey and as part of using their expertise on End of Life Care. We will keep the Board posted of any developments.
10. We held the third cross Government Senior Steering Group on Subnational Data, with good engagement from Departments. Cabinet Office are finalising the Government's key outcomes and metrics with the Prime Minister, setting out how Government will measure and assess the performance of towns and cities.
11. We continue to progress the Brilliant, Aligned, Sustainable and Enabling (BASE) Review of Enabling Functions with a view to complete the work by Easter. Since my last update we have we have surveyed the entire organisation to assess the relationship between the enabling functions and the output areas. Additionally, we have completed a review of enabling capacity which is embedded in the analytical areas themselves. This provides a good set of data upon which to base our recommendations to ensure the resource is balance correctly across the organisation.
12. ONS's ranging analysis over the course of the pandemic have continued to be recognised and published within academic journals.

**Professor Sir Ian Diamond, 18 March 2021**

*Update from the Director General for Regulation*

**Purpose**

1. This paper provides an update on regulation activity for the Board.

**Discussion**

2. Our main areas of focus in recent weeks have been:
  - i. Casework: The most notable case in the last month related to a rebuttal by the Cabinet Office of claims made by the Road Hauliers Association about Brexit impacts. The rebuttal contained unpublished information. My letter to the Cabinet Office, encouraging publication of the underlying data, received a fair amount of media coverage. The data have now been published. The head of profession in the Cabinet Office has written a blog using this case to reiterate the importance of not using unpublished information in public responses.
  - ii. Vaccines: Following a meeting Sir David and I had with the Secretary of State, NHS England have started to publish more data on vaccination roll-out, though there are still gaps, for example, more granular data on ethnicity. In Northern Ireland, the Department of Health has now put its vaccines data on a more regular basis, but there are still concerns with the data and gaps remain in what is published. I plan to write to the Permanent Secretary in the next few days.
  - iii. Infection Survey: We published our second review of the Infection survey on 17 March. The review highlighted the strength of the ONS's work, and recommended a range of improvements around user engagement and explanation of methods.
  - iv. Exams Review: We published on 2 March. The report was positively received by the decision-maker audience we wanted to reach. We are following up by presenting the report widely. We have given, or are planning, presentations to the GSS conference, the Committee on Standards in Public Life, the Government Economic Service, the Analysis in Government month, the Ada Lovelace Institute, the Government Actuaries Department, and the Centre for AI at the University of Exeter.
  - v. Statistical leadership: As with exams, we continue to advocate our statistical leadership report, through an article in the RSS Significance magazine and through speaking engagements. We also published blogs to support the report, including from [Will Moy](#), the director of Full Fact.
  - vi. Population estimates: We are making good progress with the review of population estimates, which was initiated following complaints by stakeholders in the Coventry area. We have had a lot of constructive conversations with relevant parties, including ONS. We plan to publish early findings in May.
  - vii. National Statistics review: we are now drawing together the main messages from Heads of Profession and other analysts in Government. We will report to the steering group chaired by Helen Boaden in April, and then update the Board.
  - viii. Business planning: We are in the final stages of our business planning for 2021/22. The pandemic has highlighted lots of issues that we should explore around statistics serving the public good. The key challenge is ensuring that we can address these issues, and we need clear priorities so that we do not over-commit. The current outline of the Business Plan was shared with the February Regulation Committee. We have not yet incorporated the Committee's feedback, including setting out our ambitions for improved health statistics.
3. The main challenge facing OSR this month is developing an ambitious, yet deliverable, business plan, as noted above.



**Ed Humpherson, UK Statistics Authority Regulation, 16 March 2021**

**List of Annexes**

**Annex A      Regulatory dashboard**

### Regulatory Activities March 2021 - AB

Health and Social Care	Crime and Security	Population and Society	Agriculture, Energy and Environment	Children, Education and Skills
<p><b>Rapid review:</b> COVID-19 Infection Survey statistics: Letter due to be published 17 March.</p> <p><b>Assessments:</b> Prescription Cost Analysis (PCA) reviewing evidence for meeting requirements. Started the assessment of General Pharmaceutical Services statistics published by NHS Business Services Authority.</p> <p><b>Casework:</b> Continues to focus mainly on COVID-19, primarily on evidence to support the <a href="#">vaccination programme</a>, including the publication of vaccine data in Northern Ireland, and Lateral Flow tests. Our public interventions can be viewed on our <a href="#">COVID-19 webpage</a> and <a href="#">correspondence page</a>.</p> <p><b>Systemic Review: Mental Health (NI):</b> Currently gathering evidence and engaging with stakeholders and users</p>	<p><b>Rapid Reviews:</b> Published letter to Scottish Government about the Scottish Victimization Telephone Survey on 26 February.</p> <p><b>Assessments:</b> Draft report for Home Office's police funding statistics will be shared at the April Regulation Committee meeting.</p> <p><b>Guidance on data about sex:</b> Draft guidance published on 25 February.</p> <p><b>Casework:</b> Sex in Crime Statistics - Investigated concerns on recording and reporting of data. Discussed issues with Home Office, Ministry of Justice and ONS statisticians.</p>	<p><b>Assessments:</b> Census evidence review including user meetings are underway. Producer meeting with census offices are planned for April/May to discuss initial findings.</p> <p><b>Casework:</b> EU Settlement Scheme applications and Scotland COVID deaths.</p> <p><b>Systemic Review: Loneliness</b> User engagement now complete. Currently developing a reporting structure for findings.</p> <p><b>Population projections</b> Meetings with expert users and complainants completed. Met producer team. Aim to publish initial findings end March/April.</p> <p><b>Migration</b> Engaging with ONS on plans for future migration publications, and the production of administrative based migration estimates, following suspension of the international passenger survey in 2020.</p>	<p><b>Casework:</b> No publication for the estimated impacts of EU exit on fisheries casework but action to follow up with Defra HoP.</p> <p><b>Compliance checks:</b> Defra's flood defence spending statistics delayed (due to delay in the publication). Initial meeting held for CC of natural capital accounts.</p> <p><b>Systemic reviews:</b></p> <p><b>Climate change statistics</b> Scoping identified that ONS/GSS development is planned on these statistics, initial meeting held with head of ONS team to discuss their planned work.</p> <p><b>Food statistics</b> Initial scoping of review underway.</p>	<p><b>Exam Results Review:</b> Report published. Follow up activities include a presentation at the GSS conference and DDANs.</p> <p><b>Casework: Skills toolkit</b> Letter to DfE published following two instances of unpublished data used in PQs.</p> <p><b>TEF</b> Independent review and govt response has been published. Met with Guy Nason and due to meet Jonathan Forster from the RSS to discuss OSR response.</p> <p><b>Compliance Check:</b> Graduate Outcomes: letter drafted and due for publication w/c 15 March.</p> <p><b>Systemic Reviews:</b></p> <p><b>Children and Young People</b> Planning underway to complete phase one of this review.</p> <p><b>Skills review (follow up):</b> Planning underway on follow up to this review.</p>
Economy	Labour Market and Welfare	Business, Trade and International Development	Travel, Transport and Tourism	Housing, Planning and Local Services
<p><b>Assessments: ONS Productivity statistics.</b> On track to report to Regulation Committee in April</p> <p><b>Compliance Checks:</b> Published letter to HMRC regarding the compliance check of its Child and Working Tax Credits</p> <p>Intend to publish findings in letter to DIT and ONS on CC about FDI statistics around Easter</p>	<p><b>Assessment:</b> Northern Ireland's <b>Personal Independence Payment Statistics</b>, draft report is due to be shared at April Regulation Committee.</p> <p><b>Systemic Review: Poverty Statistics:</b> Interviews and desk research are complete. Drafting the report which will be shared with producers and Regulation Committee in April.</p>	<p><b>Assessments: Annual Business Survey.</b> Continuing with stakeholder engagement. Looking to engage with strategic bodies such as the IFS and NIESR.</p> <p><b>UK Trade</b> ESCoE paper on the construction of a balanced trade asymmetry dataset published on the 24 February. Analytical results confirm that ONS measure UK exports well, although further work is required in measuring UK Imports.</p>	<p><b>Casework:</b> Responded publicly to concerns about the Cabinet Office's use of unpublished data to rebut a story about the impact of Brexit on trade</p> <p><b>Scoping:</b> Scoping work for future domain projects continues.</p>	<p><b>Compliance checks:</b> Findings of compliance check for LA social housing statistics transferred from MHCLG to the Regulator for Social Housing will be published 23 February. Initiating compliance checks on National Records of Scotland, NISRA and Welsh Government, Household projections.</p>

*Integrated Data Programme*

**Purpose**

1. This paper provides an update for the Authority Board on progress of the Integrated Data Programme (IDP).

**Recommendations**

2. Members of the Authority Board are invited to note and discuss:
  - i. progress since the last update, in all areas of the Programme;
  - ii. completion of the Gateway 3 Review, which gave a positive endorsement of the Programme; and
  - iii. progress towards submission of the Full Business Case (FBC) to HM Treasury (HMT) on 25 March, and extensive engagement (internal and external) to strengthen case and build support.

**Background**

3. The Programme was refocused towards the end of 2020, with some changes to structure and priorities, in order to maximise the chances of a successful response from HMT to the FBC.

**Discussion**

Programme progress

4. The Programme has been restructured, to strengthen leadership, improve accountability, identify and resolve gaps in delivery, and drive progress. Specific changes include:
  - i. appointment of an interim Director for the next 12 months;
  - ii. formal integration of the Secure Research Service (SRS) into the Programme, to leverage experience and expertise in shaping the “Service” workstream;
  - iii. dedicated “Business Change and Benefits” team established, driving development of Benefits Map and Realisation Plan; and
  - iv. agreed set of Level 0 Milestones, to deliver a Public Beta of the new service in March 2022, supported by detailed workstream plans.

Gateway Review

5. A Gateway 3 Review was held the week commencing 22 February, with thorough scrutiny of Programme artefacts and an extensive series of interviews, with Programme and workstream staff and stakeholders.
6. The concluding that delivery of proposed Initial Operating Capability in March 2022 is feasible, provided sufficient focus is given to four key areas:
  - i. cross-Government senior stakeholder buy-in for the Integrated Data Service (IDS) – Ensuring other government departments (large and small) understand the significant step change this service offers for faster, cross-government, data exploitation to support cross-cutting issues and policy and provide re-assurance over data security concerns;
  - ii. technical design challenges - maturing the thinking on data virtualisation, how data will be combined (virtual rather than new data stores) and role-based access control; and
  - iii. benefits narrative - ensure all stakeholders understand that benefits will be measured on a case-by-case basis (i.e., Analytical Lighthouse Projects (ALP) / project) rather than through a set of overarching measures.

7. The review team made a series of recommendations on how to address each of these areas and concluded that, with appropriate attention, the delivery confidence assessment will track towards green, “given the existing coherence in the wider programme approach/solution and the sound foundation of existing ONS enablers (e.g. data policy and information assurance)”.
8. The Programme team have produced a comprehensive action plan to address the areas identified during the review, with good progress already made against this.

#### Full Business Case

9. During development, a series of briefing sessions were held with HMT and the Authority Board, to present the case, identify and clarify any points of confusion and seek advice on where and how it could be strengthened.
10. Each of the five individual cases (Strategic, Economic, Commercial, Financial and Management) have been updated based on advice given during those sessions and the Gateway Review, and to incorporate content and comments from workstream leads and the Programme Board.
11. The overall case is close to being finalised, with activity now primarily on ensuring consistency between the cases, and HMT are reviewing the current draft. The review is being supported by four “Teach in” events between 8-21 March, to provide a forum for a focussed discussion between HMT and Cabinet Office; and relevant Programme and Workstream leads, on specific areas of interest.
12. These meetings will cover: Data Sharing; Cross-Government Engagement; Technical Build; and Legal and Policy Landscape.
13. The case has been reviewed and approved by the Investment and Delivery Assurance Group (IDAG) and Portfolio and Investment Committee (PIC) and is on schedule to be signed off by the Programme Board on 24 March, before final submission to HMT on 25 March.
14. The case will be supported by an annex, being prepared by Nick Bateson, to set out the links between IDP and ONS’ wider funding strategy, to improve economic statistics systems; provide the underpinning economic and population data that will support the analysis of IDP; and enhance access to broader economic statistics data.

**Alison Pritchard, Deputy National Statistician for Data Capability, ONS, 16 March 2021**

***ONS International Development Team Update***

**Purpose**

1. This paper provides the board with an update on ONS international development work. As background the board members may wish to watch [this six minute video](#), which gives a flavour for this work.

**Recommendations**

2. Members of the Authority Board are invited to:
  - i. review the direction of travel for this programme; and
  - ii. provide any comments or advice on the challenges highlighted.

**Background**

3. In 2016 the ONS established an international development team to meet increasing demand from other parts of UK government, and from developing countries themselves for ONS to support statistical development. Funded by the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget, and aligned with broader UK international development objectives, the team support statistical modernisation, in countries in the developing world, by drawing proportionately on the strategic and technical expertise of ONS staff.
4. The activities in this team are directly linked to the aims and objectives of the Authority Strategy which says we *will "continue to work with, and learn from, our partners in the developing world to ensure statistics and data are at the heart of the UK's development policies and agenda, and provide help to those most in need."* It is also part of the ONS commitment to deliver the National Data Strategy, via the commitment to *"collaborate with our international partners to build strong national statistical systems to drive economic growth and help to deliver inclusive, effective services"*.
5. The ONS received a small ODA allocation from HM Treasury (HMT) in the 2015 spending review to start up the team, but additional funding was required in order to deliver results at scale. Since 2017 we have been further funded by the then Department for International Development (DFID) – now the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), to deliver a large-scale pilot programme, to support to statistical modernization to some key African partners<sup>1</sup>. This has the ambition to build ONS capability to manage ODA and to deliver high quality technical assistance programmes stated clearly up front. In the latest annual review in October 2020, FCDO awarded this programme [an A+ grade](#) – a recognition that despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, we continue to deliver effective results.
6. During the 2020 spending review, colleagues in FCDO strongly supported us in bidding for our own ODA budget, with the High Commissioner to Rwanda, as an example confirming that *"we have been delighted with the work [the ONS] have been able to do here in Rwanda and the relationship which the offices have managed to build."* In February 2020 we received confirmation that for the first time, the ONS has its own, significant ODA allocation of £3 million for the financial year 2021/22.
7. In the context of major ODA reductions across other HMG departments, this is a recognition of the value of our partnerships. It is however a cut to our budget in real terms, allowing us to just about maintain our existing partnerships, but not to grow them or add others. It also means that this work is currently only funded until March 2022.

---

<sup>1</sup> See <https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-300443> for more details and project documentation

## Discussion

8. Our work supports National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) in key UK Government partner countries to modernise – improving quality, availability and impact of data. Our respected technical and policy advice leverages the UK's comparative advantage, increasing impact and putting us at the forefront of the global debate on digitalisation, data and evidence-based decision making. We collaborate with other international partners, including other developed country NSIs, for example Sweden, Canada and Denmark, who have similar programmes, in order to make the most of our respective areas of strength.
9. Over the past four years we have identified crucial areas in which ONS expertise can make a difference. These areas include:
  - i. technical assistance on key statistical products to improve the quality of data (key areas have included censuses, reporting of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators, measurement of employment, and quality assurance and use of admin data);
  - ii. mentoring and strategic advice to build data science capability and approaches;
  - iii. advice, technical assistance and capacity building to improve communications, dissemination and stakeholder engagement;
  - iv. training and mentoring to develop strong statistical leadership; and
  - v. capacity building and advice on 'soft' skills such as time management, planning, governance, independence.
10. There are three ways in which we work:
  - i. Tier 1 partnerships: these take a broad strategic approach to supporting statistical modernisation in the partner organisation: partners are selected based on a combination of UK desire to see progress in the country, clear demands to learn from the NSI, which match up to areas of ONS strength. A rigorous scoping exercise then identifies key outcomes for the partnership, multiyear MoUs are then signed; detailed results frameworks and workplans are developed and implemented; there are dedicated staff allocated to implementing the partnership;
  - ii. Tier 2 partnerships, with a much narrower scope, often alongside FCDO or other donor (e.g. World Bank) projects in country – with the ONS bringing in specific peer to peer experiences in an area where we can add value. These may start off ad hoc but we aim to establish an MoU and agreeing deliverables if the partnership lasts beyond the first year; and
  - iii. global programmes where we are open to support any other (ODA eligible) countries (checking with FCDO) – prioritising commonwealth and ex-DFID focus countries, with ONS skills or 'products' which are in global demand. This includes establishing an international development focussed Hub of the Data Science Campus, support to developing countries on monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and some dedicated resource to improve the guidance for monitoring employment in developing countries.
11. Our current Tier 1 partnerships are with Kenya (where our support was fundamental to the success of their first digital census), Rwanda (where we have assisted them in all aspects of building a new sustainable data science team, leading the way in Africa) and Ghana (where we have supported the development and launch of their 2020-2024 strategy, ensuring an increased focus on users and on use of their data). We also have a partnership with the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), with their Africa Centre for Statistics. By supporting the UNECA, as well as three leading NSIs in Africa, we have been able to ensure ideas and progress can be shared and have a multiplier effect, this has particularly been evident in our work to support censuses across the continent.



12. The Data Science Hub has delivered mentoring to analysts within partner countries - helping to automate the production of statistics and shape projects including data science techniques and new sources of data. It is also working with FCDO colleagues and other development organisations - for example using global shipping data to explore port efficiency in East Africa and measuring livestock numbers using satellite imagery in South Sudan. The SDG team have co-developed [Open SDG](#), an open source, free-to-reuse multilingual tool for collecting and reporting disaggregated SDG data, with the ODA funding they also support developing countries to set up their own data websites using Open SDG. Globally the tool is being used by at least 22 countries, regions and cities, ten of which are developing countries.
13. We have established dedicated teams, with a deep understanding of working in developing countries, who are then able to further draw upon the in-depth technical expertise that ONS holds across the organisation. We hope to further develop mechanisms to be able to draw on staff from the wider Government Statistical Service. ONS experts who participate in our work are overwhelmingly positive about their experience, with more than 70 per cent of those surveyed agreeing or strongly agreeing that they picked up ideas which will benefit the ONS, and 90 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing that they personally learned a great deal from their involvement<sup>2</sup>. We are conscious of ONS priorities and try to minimize the burden on business areas whilst maximizing opportunities and benefits. For example, in areas where there are more frequent demands for expertise, we have funded full time posts, either in the international development team or in the business areas to take forwards this work. During the COVID-19 pandemic we have looked at ways to engage experts remotely and make the best use of their time, for example we recently worked with OSR to run a showcase for partners on the UK Code of Practice, and have already re-used the videos of the presentations in facilitated discussions with additional partners.
14. Key challenges for the period ahead are to:
- i. maintain our current partnerships on statistical modernisation. Continue to review where we can have most impact whilst working largely remotely. We may have to take difficult decisions on what to prioritise, given our limited resources focussing on what can make most impact;
  - ii. secure enough technical resources from business areas across ONS. We will continue to make the most of opportunities of remote working, to engage a wider pool of people. But we face challenges in getting people to ring fence their time for voluntary tasks such as this, when there is no physical change in location for the work or opportunity to step away from the day job;
  - iii. ensure that we fulfil all requirements as we take on more of the responsibilities in spending ODA, which were previously managed by FCDO;
  - iv. improve coordination with other parts of UK government working internationally, both at the country and global level. With the DFID and FCO merger, and the development of single HMG plans in each country led by FCDO, there are opportunities for ONS international work to gain prominence and traction, but we will need to monitor risks to independence and continue to work on blockers such as incompatible IT systems. Data and digital agendas are becoming more important within FCDO, and there are opportunities for ONS to share its expertise in a number of areas – and we will need to prioritise where we can engage;
  - v. prioritise other opportunities as they arise (e.g. there are a number of funded opportunities which we could take up, in order to mitigate risks of further cuts to the

---

<sup>2</sup> IDT undertook a survey of the experts from across ONS who participated in their work in 2019 and had 30 responses

- ODA budget), within the resource constraints and in line with FCDO and ONS priorities; and
- vi. prepare for a new ODA bid for the next spending review, building up the evidence of what works and determine whether to expand the regional approach into the Middle East and/or South Asia when funding permits.

**Emily Poskett, Central Policy Secretariat, 16 March 2021**



***COVID-19 Infection Survey and associated surveillance studies***

**Purpose**

1. This paper provides an update on the COVID-19 Infection Survey (CIS) programme.

**Recommendations**

2. Members of the Authority Board are invited to note:
  - i. the continued successful delivery and high impact of the CIS;
  - ii. recent successful milestones, including the successful pilot of the vaccine effectiveness project; the launch of Round 4 of the schools infection survey and further analysis to support urgent policy decisions; and
  - iii. that the CIS programme remains at Amber, with considerable progress made in addressing key risks on the programme.

**Discussion**

Survey Performance

3. The survey has maintained performance at its highest standard, with swab testing targets consistently being met, or exceeded across the UK.
4. The successful pilot for the Vaccine Effectiveness Monitoring work concluded in early March, enabling the launch of a first tranche of upscaled antibody testing from 22 March. This will enable CIS to play an increased role in vaccine monitoring, unlocks the ability to increase the volume of antibody blood tests and provides the opportunity for efficiency savings across the survey through the reduced reliance on phlebotomists. Our existing blood cohort and swab cohort respondents on the survey will be invited to consent to regular finger prick antibody testing to enable the scaling up to 150,000 tests per month.
5. Following Cabinet Office approval, the re-competition of the CIS was launched at the end of January and closed 1 March. Evaluation will conclude on 17 March with further process of Moderation and Internal Approval by 6 April. External approval is expected by the end of May.

Analytical Impact

6. Recent influential outputs from CIS and wider health analysis include:
  - i. weekly infection rate [bulletin](#) continues to get wide coverage with accurate reporting. This was reduced and simplified earlier this year, which has helped accurate reporting;
  - ii. fortnightly [antibodies](#) publications have received wide coverage since January and illustrate the impact of the vaccination programme. Our latest analysis on antibodies, published on 16 March shows about one in three people in England tested positive for antibodies, suggesting they had the infection in the past or have been vaccinated. This rate is growing rapidly in response to the vaccination programme, and is particularly noticeable in those aged over 80, where three quarters tested positive for antibodies. The overall rates for Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland were one in three, one in three and one in four respectively. The next update on antibodies in the population is due on 30 March. This is particularly important piece of work and continues to gain significant media coverage;
  - iii. the [Coronavirus and higher education students](#) publication received extensive media coverage and gave rise to calls for more support for Higher Education (HE) students.

- iv. we are contributing to the evidence and associated questions underpinning the government's four tests, as set out in their roadmap;
- v. we are currently updating our COVID-19 International Comparisons analysis which is due to be published on 19 March. This will compare excess all-cause mortality across the pandemic period; and
- vi. we will publish a new long-COVID prevalence estimate on 1 April. This will utilise the new long-COVID question that has been developed on the CIS. It covers 21 symptoms associated with long-COVID and will enable a more precise estimate than we have previously produced. This work has been well received by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and patient groups representing those living with long-COVID.

#### Schools infection study

- 7. The Statistical Bulletin for Round 2 results was published on 1 March 2021, with a press launch hosted by the Science Media Centre and subsequent positive coverage.
- 8. Following school reopening, the team has launched Round 4 of the schools infection survey. Testing will begin in schools from 15 March, with the initial focus being on primary schools.
- 9. The study is navigating the introduction of mass testing in secondary schools and the proximity to the Easter holidays, i.e. participant reluctance to have a test that could lead to the need to isolate. The team have implemented new methods to boost engagement and participation as well as utilising new communication materials. Participation levels will be closely monitored.

#### Monitoring COVID-19 in other settings

- 10. Care Homes:
  - i. ingest of Vivaldi data to the Secure Research Service has been held up with data sharing agreements. Meeting due to take place between Chief Data Officers at Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), University College London and lawyers to see what can be done to work around this problem, we can't proceed until this conversation has taken place; and
  - ii. we are developing our analytical plans and research questions, to be shared with key stakeholders Friday 12 March.
- 11. Universities:
  - i. the team have negotiated a regular ingest of weekly student/staff positive case totals at HE provider level from Department for Education/Office for Students to enable rapid analysis of outbreaks and linkage Higher Education Statistics Agency/CIS;
  - ii. the Student COVID-19 Insight Survey focused on student behaviour, attitudes, and wellbeing is transitioning to a fortnightly product for the next six months with support from DHSC; and
  - iii. following the success of deep dives on student transmission and wellbeing in December 2020, the team are currently preparing follow-up reports on both topics, including data pertinent to new variants.

#### Opinions Survey on Behaviours

- 12. Recent priorities have reflected vaccine roll out, refusals and hesitancy, where the survey tracks well against Public Health England data for different age groups. We have published analysis of hesitancy by demographics, finding that younger people, black adults, mothers with young children and those trying to get pregnant and those living in the most deprived places are more hesitant.
- 13. The survey is starting to show some slight loosening in behaviours around social distancing, meeting up with people and leaving the house for reasons other than those

specified in the lockdown guidance. We are monitoring in line with the roadmap steps and continue to provide weekly data to Number Ten and through our publication.

#### Vaccine rollout

14. Analysis of CIS linked to vaccine rollout administrative data is being undertaken by CIS analysts. The initial analysis is focusing on updating vaccination status in CIS cases and comparing reported and actual vaccination via a modelling-based approach to estimate vaccination rates. The results will feed into the model of vaccine cover over time, which is scheduled to be part of the weekly slide pack from 24 March.
15. Following this, initial analysis of vaccine take-up across a variety of characteristics, including CIS by ethnicity will be undertaken.
16. Initial linkage with the ONS Public Health Data Asset is being carried out, focusing on mortality, although numbers are very small. Linkage with hospitalisations is planned for April.
17. This month, we are working on updating prevalence estimates of self-reported long-COVID in the UK, then monthly updates, broken down by a range of characteristics including vaccine status.
18. The Board will receive a presentation showcasing our latest insights from this portfolio of work on 25 March.

#### Next Steps

19. We are continuing our plans to develop a clear strategic vision for population health surveillance and longitudinal study design.
20. We have also begun planning our winter preparedness response, ensuring that ONS is in the best position to provide evidence for decisions in the late summer through to the lead up to winter and throughout the winter period. We are discussing with DHSC colleagues how we might enhance the CIS to best effect during this period.

**Iain Bell, Director General, Population and Public Policy**  
**Emma Rourke, Director, Health Analysis and Pandemic Insight**  
**16 March 2021**

## ***Census and Data Collection Transformation Programme***

### **Purpose**

1. This paper provides an update on progress on Census delivery and remaining build, with a summary assessment of progress of the wider transformation.

### **Recommendations**

2. Members of the Authority Board are invited to note:
  - i. that the programme retains an amber rating, and significant progress is being made across all areas;
  - ii. the Census Collection operation has started well, with the main door to door field operation commencing on 23 March;
  - iii. Census data pre-processing is now live, and processing has begun on the Census electronic questionnaire (eQ) response data. Good progress is being made to ensure full statistical processing will commence in September after final receipt of all paper forms;
  - iv. Census outputs and dissemination work is also progressing well, with the first of a three stage build due for completion in April 2021. Further user consultation on outputs will take place over the summer; and
  - v. as previously described, the wider transformation continues to make good progress. However, it retains an amber rating as we continue to manage acquisition of administrative data, and the planning required for the remaining technical build making better use of cloud-based solutions to process data.

### **Discussion**

#### **Programme update**

3. The programme remains at amber. This is a reflection of the work still needed on statistical processing and the wider transformation needed over the next couple of years. The main Census collection operation is now live and responses to the online questionnaire are meeting our expectations. We are continuing to complete the build of remaining elements (e.g. statistical processing) and are on track for delivery of all components.

### **Census**

#### **Census Collection Operation**

4. The Census eQ went live on the 23 February, and letters (with a unique access code) inviting household to take part were dispatched from the 1 March. All households should have received a letter by Friday 12 March,
5. The first tranche of field operations has begun, with contacts established in Communal Establishments and officers checking addresses. Our main field operation to follow up with households yet to complete will start on 23 March. We continue to actively monitor all risk around this operation, adjusting details as required.
6. We continue to work through the recruitment process issues with Adecco, however we remain confident that we can recruit sufficient field staff to ensure a successful operation.
7. The build for the Census Coverage (CCS) and Non-Compliance surveys and are on track to complete as planned. This includes regression testing new functionality and reviewing the field design to ensure they are COVID-19 safe, specifically CCS to ensure it does not involve crossing the threshold. The non-compliance operation starts at the

end of May and it is likely that crossing of the threshold, in a COVID-19 safe way and in line with government guidelines, will be possible to give interviews under caution.

#### Census data processing

8. Alongside Census data collection, Census data pre-processing is now live and beginning to process the Census electronic questionnaire (eQ) response data. This involves taking the raw, submitted responses and preparing them for statistical data processing. The pre-processing systems have been built on the elements successfully tested during the rehearsal.
9. Statistical data processing will commence in September following completion of the final pre-processing tasks, and receipt of the last paper questionnaire data (due end-August). Further development is underway to ensure the new methods and functionality are in place ready to commence this processing. Good progress is being made on all elements of this build.

#### Census outputs and dissemination

10. The build of output production and capabilities for the digital publishing of Census outputs is on track.

#### Assurance and Go Live

11. Following the Programme Board's "Go/No Go" meeting for Households and Communal Establishment, an ongoing series of assurance check points continues to be monitored closely. These ensure all services can go live, and then be maintained, as planned. A further "Go/No Go" meeting covering the launch of the Census Coverage Survey (CCS) and Non-Compliance (NC) operations will take place on 21 April.
12. As agreed, we will be keeping the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee updated with detailed progress on the processing, outputs and dissemination build.

#### **Wider Transformation**

13. As described over the previous months we are making good progress with the wider transformation. However, there are two areas which contribute to the ongoing amber delivery confidence assessment.
14. Firstly, despite the improved position with administrative data, it will take considerable ongoing work to ensure we have the right sources delivered frequently enough.
15. Second, there is still a large amount of technology build required to deliver the remaining elements of the programme (beyond Census), making better use of cloud-based solutions. Planning is underway to ensure a comprehensive picture can be drawn up between all key teams to get to a shared plan and roadmap.
16. To support this planning, an enhanced one-page transformation plan is currently being produced, with input from all, to ensure focus on the remainder of the programme and its benefits. This will take us to the 2023 recommendation and includes the steps that we will take to ensure the information and data needed for a robust evidence base is available.

**Iain Bell, Deputy National Statistician for Population and Public Policy**  
**Nicola Tyson-Payne, Director of Transformation, Population and Public Policy**  
**15 March 2020**

***February Business Plan Update***

**Purpose**

1. This paper provides the supporting narrative to explain progress in the delivery of the business plan at 28 February 2021.

**Recommendations**

2. Members of the Authority Board are invited to:
  - i. note the key messages and mitigating actions; and
  - ii. note the Business Plan Deliverables update.

**Key Messages**

*Strategic Objectives*

3. Two of the 12 current Strategic Objectives are now reporting the target of 70 per cent green, compared to zero last month, indicating an upward trend. Action has been taken since the end of February to move more Accountability Framework Objectives (AFOs) towards green which will continue this trend in the lead up to the end of the financial year.

*Programme portfolio*

4. Good progress is being made in the development of business cases for our Tier 1 Programmes:
  - i. the Integrated Data Platform (IDP) received an amber rating from the Infrastructure Projects Authority external assurance review (Gateway 3) with a positive write-up and recommendations that are being addressed ahead of formal submission of the Full Business Case (FBC) to HM Treasury (HMT) on 26 March. The case was reviewed by Portfolio and Investment Committee (PIC) on 12 March and will be signed-off by the IDP Programme Board on 24 March;
  - ii. the Economic Statistics Transformation Programme (ESTP) is on track to deliver 93 per cent of the expected financial benefits by the time the programme closes at the end of March 2021. The strategic outline business case for the new programme is on track for discussion at PIC in April 2021; and
  - iii. the FBC for COVID-19 Infection Survey (CIS), detailing the outcome of the re-procurement of services, is being considered at Commercial Approvals Group (CAG) in March ahead of submission to Cabinet Office in April.
5. The 2021 Census collection operation has commenced, and good progress is being made. .
6. CIS continues to deliver at pace. The Vaccine Effectiveness Monitoring pilot is underway, with a go/no go decision on the main stage on 10 March

*Mitigating actions to ensure that the strategic business plan remains on track*

7. Strategic focus and ambition:
  - i. 2021/22 Strategic Business Planning round has commenced with cross-ONS workshops to develop the AFOs for 2021/22. This will be informed by the outcome of the operational prioritisation work, the BASE Review and recent Internal Audit activity. This activity will be announced by the National Statistician at the business planning event on 23 March and will be reflected in the Strategic Business Plan and 2021/22 Accountability Framework.

8. Managing resource and people constraints:
  - i. BASE Review – we are progressing the BASE Review of our enabling functions to assess how they are delivering services to the wider organisation. This includes a detailed function by function review of eight areas – People and Business Services; Finance, Planning and Performance; Digital Services and Technology; Methods, Data, Research; Population and Public Policy Operations; Communications and Digital Publishing; Security and Information Management; and the Central Policy Secretariat. The findings of the Review are due at the end of March – and will then be discussed throughout the organisation in April.
  - ii. Resource Management – the in-year net financial position continues to improve with a forecast surplus of £23.7 million including the impacts of the financial pressures and opportunities.
9. Governance, risk management and control:
  - i. Governance Framework – The revised executive governance framework will underpin the organisation's approach to the Strategic Business Plan Review in the context of the Spending Review. A paper from Rob Bumpstead and Will Laffan was well received by the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) earlier in March.
  - ii. Risk Management – Strategic and Corporate risks remain static, with a reduction in exposure on Strategic Risk 1 with appropriate revisions for owners and mitigations. Both strategic and corporate risk mitigations are reporting a mixture of amber and green. ARAC recognised a good shift to risk management and welcomed the next phase to understand the assurance framework underpinning key risks.
  - iii. Quality – ARAC in March received a presentation on the quality assurance framework. This showed significant improvement to the quality and resilience of the plan, addressing quality risks and outlining the development of the three lines of defence.
  - iv. System Resilience – Following an update on the plans for addressing our legacy recovery to ARAC in January, an internal audit report was presented in March, which supported a level of confidence around delivery of the plan and its leadership to drive this forward within the plans of CDCTP and ESTP.
  - v. Data Acquisition and Usage – ARAC were provided with an update on progress with data acquisition and usage in March, which noted the risks to delivery. The Strategic Business Plan review will include prioritisation of data acquisition resources across CDCTP; ESTP; IDP and CIS and associated analysis.

**Nick Bateson, Director of Finance, Planning and Performance, 15 March 2021**