
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir David Norgrove

William Wragg MP
Chair, Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

29 May 2020

Dear William,

I was glad we had the chance to speak last month. I said then that I would write and set out the further actions the UK Statistics Authority has taken in response to the Committee's 2019 Governance of Statistics report.¹ Our full response to the report² made a number of commitments and this letter describes our progress against them.

The Committee made separate recommendations in relation to the Authority, Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR), the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the Government Statistical Service (GSS), and this letter responds to them separately where possible.

UK Statistics Authority

Reporting to Parliament

(Recommendations 11, 14, 22, 23, 24)

As discussed in our response, the Authority is of course always happy to give evidence to PACAC, and I was glad to see the National Statistician and Director General for Regulation appear in front of the Committee earlier this month. We have also aimed to keep the Committee informed of our statistical interventions and other progress of note via correspondence. I will continue to write to you with regular updates on the work of the Authority, and am always happy to meet to discuss these.

OSR have kept the relevant departmental select committees abreast of statistical interventions since September 2019, and this is now built into ways of working. Both OSR and the ONS regularly give evidence to a wide range of select committees, most recently the Women and Equalities Committee; the Science and Technology Committee; and the Treasury Committee.

Transparency

(Recommendations 11, 14, 18, 20, 25, 26, 34)

An updated framework document, setting out these roles and responsibilities and those across the statistical system more broadly, will be published with our forthcoming strategy. The Board agreed at its March meeting to pause the launch of a new strategy due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The opportunities for new data and analysis were already tremendous, supported by the Digital Economy Act. The response of statisticians to the epidemic has

¹ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmpubadm/1820/1820.pdf>

² <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmpubadm/2656/2656.pdf>

accelerated change as I hope the Committee saw at its recent evidence session. We aim to publish the new strategy later in the year.

Regarding Authority Board minutes, we have ensured these are published in a timely way and reflect the key points of non-executive discussion³. In addition, we have recruited two new non-executive directors, Richard Dobbs and Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter, to work a minimum of two days per month⁴.

We committed to publishing the Regulation Committee's minutes and future meeting dates, and updated the terms of reference. This work was completed and published on the Authority website⁵ in October 2019.

We have considered options for developing the Authority website, to emphasise and make clearer the separation that exists between the ONS and OSR, and these improvements are underway. To illustrate separation further, OSR launched their own Twitter account (@StatsRegulation) in November 2019.

We will continue to publish a separate Annual Report for OSR, distinct from the work of the ONS, and the publication of both is planned for July 2020. The OSR Annual Report will be an annex in the Authority Annual Report and Accounts as well as a separate document on the OSR website.

RPI

(Recommendation 30)

The Retail Prices Index (RPI), uniquely out of all ONS statistics, requires the Authority to seek consent from the Chancellor of the Exchequer to make certain methodological changes. As the Committee are aware, I wrote on behalf of the Board to the then Chancellor in March 2019 to recommend that the publication of the RPI should be stopped at a point in future and that, in the interim, the shortcomings of the RPI should be addressed by bringing the methods of the CPIH into it. In September the next Chancellor announced his intention to consult on whether to bring the methods in CPIH into RPI between 2025 and 2030, effectively aligning the measures. At the same time, the Authority said it would consult about the methods of making the change. This joint consultation was launched on 11 March alongside the Budget and has, in light of the pandemic, since been extended to be open for responses until 21 August. In the meantime we continue to urge the Government and others to cease to use the RPI. As I said in our response to the Committee's report, it would be wrong for the Government to continue to use a measure of inflation which it itself accepts is flawed, where it has the opportunity to change.

We will update the Committee again on the RPI following the conclusion of the joint consultation.

Office for Statistics Regulation

Protecting the role of statistics in public debate

(Recommendations 1,4,11)

OSR sent the Annual Review of Casework to the Committee in September 2019, and since then the casework function has been developed further, with the programme managed by

³ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publications-list/?keyword&type=minutes-and-papers>

⁴ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/appointment-of-two-new-non-executive-directors-to-the-uk-statistics-authority-board/>

⁵ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Regulation-Committee-ToR-Oct-2019.pdf>

the Deputy Director for Regulation. A specific blog on approach and casework during the pre-election period was also sent to the Committee in January 2020. This blog summarised a particularly active period for OSR, more so than in previous pre-election periods. In the 2019 election campaign, public interventions were made to clarify statistics on a range of topics including violent crime, homelessness, education funding and youth unemployment. During the current COVID-19 pandemic OSR has continued to protect the role of statistics in public debate by responding to a range of concerns around the publication of data on COVID-19 cases, deaths and testing across the four countries of the UK. Following these interventions, there have been improvements in the information provided by Government though there is still more to do.

OSR has also outlined its expectations on the use of management information by government and other official bodies⁶, strongly advocating for information to be presented to the public in a way that promotes transparency and clarity. OSR will continue to take appropriate action directly and through the Committee if necessary where Ministers and others refer to unpublished information.

Longer-term developments

(Recommendations 13, 14, 15, 16, 22, 38)

OSR resourcing has been considered at Regulation Committee in October 2019 and February 2020, and the options will be considered fully after the development of the Authority strategy. Meanwhile, responsibility for budget has been clarified in the new Regulation Committee Terms of Reference, and an MoU between OSR and the ONS has made the Director General for Regulation a Secondary Accounting Officer with responsibility for OSR.

Recommendations on separation of OSR regarding physical location were discussed at the Authority Board and the Regulation Committee, where the aim is to ensure OSR's physical location is consistent with OSR's status as being part of the Authority but separate in decision-making terms from the ONS and the National Statistician. These plans involve looking at each of OSR's three physical sites and ensuring that the physical space is aligned with this overall status. Progress will resume as and when we return to office-based working, although our first priority here will of course be the health and safety of our staff.

OSR's systemic review of statistical leadership was discussed at Regulation Committee in February. A series of reports are planned on different aspects of the review. A blog in March 2020 outlined the work on this to date⁷.

Finally, the Regulation Committee is actively considering the co-option of external members in their latest round of recruitment.

As noted throughout this update, the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that long-term actions have had reduced priority while focus turns to shorter term needs. Further detail on resource and location issues will be provided in a future update.

Office for National Statistics and Government Statistical Service

User engagement and accessibility of outputs

(Recommendations 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7)

⁶ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/covid-19-production-and-use-of-management-information-by-government-and-other-official-bodies/>

⁷ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/statistical-leadership-making-analytical-insight-count/>

The ONS committed to producing a stakeholder engagement strategy and implementation plan across the GSS. A cross government steering group and working group were set up in December 2019. The ONS is working closely with Heads of Profession across the GSS, and digital and communications experts, to identify best practice, build capability in user engagement and to collaborate fully in the development of the engagement strategy. The engagement plan will be launched after the Authority strategy; good user engagement is a cornerstone of the Authority strategy and will be sent to the Committee.

Statistical leadership

(Recommendations 32,34,38)

The office has considered thoroughly and implemented processes to ensure succession planning, talent management and workforce planning. These are a consistent priority and there have been regular reports to the National Statistician since he took up post in October 2019. To aid in leadership of the GSS, the ONS Head of Profession for Statistics (HoP) role has been made into a more senior post, at Director General level. Our new HoP, Iain Bell, has begun holding career development discussions with HoPs from across the GSS.

Data capability and innovation

(Recommendations 36,37)

Within strategy conversations, the Board are continuing to discuss the Authority and ONS's stronger role across data ethics and data science. Meanwhile, the ONS have explored what new work the Data Science Campus could do with additional funding, which can be provided to the Committee if this would be useful. The Campus are continuing to strengthen and expand their work, including through partnerships with DFID and the new Joint Biosecurity Centre.

I look forward to meeting you in person I hope before too long.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Sir David Norgrove