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**Professor Sir Ian Diamond | National Statistician**

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

10 August 2021

Dear Mr Wragg,

I wanted to write to you and your Committee regarding the UK Statistics Authority's recent establishment of the Centre for Applied Data Ethics<sup>1</sup>, which provides practical support and thought leadership in the application of data ethics by the research and statistical community. This was a direct result from a recommendation from your Committee in 2019<sup>2</sup>, to meet a clear need from stakeholders for leadership in data ethics, both across Government and beyond:

*"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."*

The importance of data ethics cannot be understated as we enable data to be used in ever more radical, ambitious, inclusive and sustainable ways, as set out in our strategy<sup>3</sup>. It is also crucial that the Authority guarantees public trust and acceptability and reduces potential harm to individuals involved in research; both of which can only be ensured through the application of ethical principles.

The Centre empowers researchers to apply ethical principles independently, and we have created an ethics self-assessment tool<sup>4</sup> to that end. This tool has been widely used since its inception, with more than 100 projects this year alone, including those from academia, the Office for National Statistics (ONS), other Government Departments, and Devolved Administrations. We continue to provide expert ethical advice through my independent Data Ethics Advisory Committee (NSDEC)<sup>5</sup>, such as for the COVID-19 Infection Survey<sup>6</sup>: which demonstrates how data can be used in an ambitious and timely manner while still being ethical.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/what-we-do/data-ethics/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmpublicadm/1820/182002.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/statistics-for-the-public-good/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/the-authority-board/committees/national-statisticians-advisory-committees-and-panels/national-statisticians-data-ethics-advisory-committee/ethics-self-assessment-tool/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/the-authority-board/committees/national-statisticians-advisory-committees-and-panels/national-statisticians-data-ethics-advisory-committee/meet-nsdec/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/nsdec-minute-april-2020-2/#pid-meeting-minute>

The Centre builds on this foundation, providing openly available, practical guidance on a range of cross-cutting ethics topics, as well as developing a new ethics user support service for the research and statistics community and online ethics training for researchers and statisticians across Government, academia and the commercial sector to encourage an ethics-by-design approach to research and statistics. This work is overseen by an independent advisory group consisting of representation from academia and government, who advise on the strategic direction and activities of the Centre<sup>7</sup>.

As part of the Centre's initial work, we have undertaken a landscape review<sup>8</sup> to situate the work of the Centre within the wider data ethics landscape in the UK. We have also recently released our first piece of guidance on ethical considerations in the use of geospatial data for research and statistics<sup>9</sup>. This guidance was co-created with our user community in response to user needs, and involved engagement and collaboration with a range of professional societies and organisations operating in this area.

As with our plans for all of our guidance, this has initially been released as an early open draft for wider feedback from the user community. It has received positive feedback so far, emphasising the current need for practical guidance, support and resources that can be easily accessed and applied to a range of project types. We also intend to release guidance related to ethical issues in the use of machine learning in research and statistics, considering public good in project applications, and ethical considerations in the use of third-party data later this year, all of which have been developed in response to the needs of, and in partnership with, the user community.

We have a statutory remit to provide support and assurance on data ethics, and our extensive experience means we are regarded as a leader, both in the UK and internationally. We currently lead a workstream on ethics related to the use of machine learning in the production of official statistics on behalf of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Machine Learning 2021 group<sup>10</sup>. This involves engaging with collaborating partners from eight countries, as well as with experts in our Data Science Campus, to develop ethical principles and guidance in this area.

I hope this letter is informative about our progress on data ethics in recent years, and of interest to the Committee. The topic is one of growing importance and interest, and I would be happy to discuss further either via correspondence or in person.

Yours sincerely,



**Professor Sir Ian Diamond**

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<sup>7</sup> <https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/what-we-do/data-ethics/centre-for-applied-data-ethics/uk-statistics-authority-centre-for-applied-data-ethics-advisory-committee/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/identifying-gaps-opportunities-and-priorities-in-the-applied-data-ethics-guidance-landscape/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/ethical-considerations-in-the-use-of-geospatial-data-for-research-and-statistics/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://statswiki.unece.org/pages/viewpage.action?spaceKey=ML&title=Machine+Learning+Group+2021>