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**Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation**

Julian Knight MP  
Chair, Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

15 September 2022

Dear Mr Knight,

I write in response to the inquiry *Misinformation and trusted voices*, as conducted by the DCMS Sub-committee on Online Harms and Disinformation.

**Which organisations are the most trusted sources of information in the UK?**

The Office for Statistics Regulation is the independent regulatory arm of the UK Statistics Authority and provides independent regulation of all official statistics produced in the UK. It aims to enhance public confidence in the trustworthiness, quality and value of statistics produced by government through setting, and assessing compliance with, the Code of Practice for Statistics<sup>1</sup>. In addition, one of our key roles is to use our voice to stand up for statistics and to represent the public, monitoring and reporting publicly where we have concerns about the dissemination and use of statistics and highlighting good practice.

The Code of Practice for Statistics has three pillars: Trustworthiness, Quality and Value. The three pillars work together to provide the conditions to support public confidence in statistics, which relates directly to the question the Committee is asking. In particular, we distinguish trust – a belief on the part of individuals – from trustworthiness – a property of organisations. Trustworthiness is about providing evidence that the systems, processes and governance surrounding statistics are effective. However, we never consider trustworthiness in isolation. We consider all three pillars to determine whether statistics are fully compliant with the Code of Practice and can be designated as National Statistics. This designation demonstrates to users that they can have confidence in the relevant official statistics.

One source that can give some insight into levels of trust in official statistics is the 2021 study of public confidence in official statistics<sup>2</sup>. It found that, amongst people who responded, there was high confidence in the statistical system. While respondents did not necessarily know about the Authority or the OSR, there was strong support for our role, with 96% of respondents agreeing there should be an independent body to speak out against the misuse of statistics and 94% agreeing that such a body should ensure that

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<sup>1</sup> <https://code.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://natcen.ac.uk/media/2202247/NatCen\\_Public-Confidence-in-official-statistics\\_2021.pdf](https://natcen.ac.uk/media/2202247/NatCen_Public-Confidence-in-official-statistics_2021.pdf)

statistics are produced free from political interference. Regarding the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the largest producer of official statistics in the UK, 87% of respondents reported that they trusted ONS statistics. The public value of statistics has also been shown through 92% of respondents who had used COVID-19 data reporting them being useful. Although this is only one source, and we are careful not to place too much weight on a single survey result, we do consider that this provides some reassurance around public confidence in official statistics.

In addition to official statistics producers, there is a wider ecosystem of statistics and data. Many of these other sources of statistics and data inform policy and public debate and it is important that they are used for the public good. We encourage producers outside of the official statistics producer community to apply the Code of Practice for Statistics on a voluntary basis. Our annual award for Statistical Excellence in Trustworthiness, Quality and Value recognises those who voluntarily apply the core pillars of the Code of Practice for Statistics.

### **Is the provision of authoritative information responsive enough to meet the challenge of misinformation that is spread on social media?**

Our view is that the best way to combat misinformation is to ensure that information that is trustworthy, high quality and high value is made available to the public. In this way, the good information can drive out the bad.

However, we recognise that it is hard to live up to this ideal. The experience of the pandemic is instructive. As we noted in our recent State of the Statistical System report<sup>3</sup>, there are a variety of organisations and individuals commenting on the use of statistics by government. The COVID-19 pandemic in particular was associated with an increase in the role of citizens as ‘armchair epidemiologists’. We wrote a blog<sup>4</sup> highlighting how open data enabled great work to be done to communicate data on COVID-19 publicly from outside the official statistics system, including on social media. This demonstrated the changing statistical landscape of increased commentary around official statistics at its best.

Since the pandemic there has continued to be an increased interest in and scrutiny of statistics. This is a positive for the statistics system but also brings risk. Much discussion of statistics takes place on social media with increased risks around misuse, misinterpretation and ‘echo chambers’. Official statistics producers need to be aware of these changes in the use of statistics.

Areas that we highlight in our report that can help official statistics producers meet the challenge of misinformation that is spread on social media include:

- improving how uncertainty in statistics is communicated to bring effective insight;
- an increase in government statisticians challenging the inappropriate use of statistics and engaging directly with users to support understanding of statistics; and
- intelligent transparency around statistics, data and wider analysis.

Intelligent transparency means proactively taking an open, clear and accessible approach to the release and use of data, statistics and wider analysis. As set out in our regulatory guidance on transparency<sup>5</sup>, intelligent transparency is informed by three core principles:

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<sup>3</sup> <https://osr.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/the-state-of-the-statistical-system-2021-22/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://osr.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/an-army-of-armchair-epidemiologists/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://osr.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/regulatory-guidance-for-the-transparent-release-and-use-of-statistics-and-data/>

equality of access, enhancing understanding and analytical leadership. It is about more than just getting the data out there. Intelligent transparency is about thinking about transparency from the outset of policy development, getting data and statistics out at the right time to support thinking and decisions on an issue, supporting the wider public need for information and presenting the data and statistics in a way that aids understanding and prevents misinterpretation.

In conclusion, a constant refrain of the OSR is that it is important to ensure that the bad data does not drive out the good. However, as long as producers have the right approach, based on trustworthiness, quality and value, good statistics can thrive.

Please let me know if any questions or if I can support the Committee further in its inquiry.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Humpherson', enclosed in a thin black rectangular border.

Ed Humpherson  
Director General for Regulation