
Sam Beckett | Second Permanent Secretary and Deputy
Chief Executive of the UK Statistics Authority

Julian Knight MP
Chair, Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Sub-committee on Online Harms and Disinformation
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

21 September 2022

Dear Mr Knight,

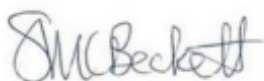
I write in response to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Sub-committee on Online Harms and Disinformation's call for evidence for its inquiry, '*misinformation and trusted voices*'.

As the Committee may be aware, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) is the UK's National Statistical Institute and largest producer of official statistics. We place an enormous value on being a trusted source of information. We work tirelessly to ensure that our engagement with the public is not only trusted, but actively combats misinformation by making our communications clear, and providing statistics with context.

The Office for Statistics Regulation complements our work. They assess official statistics against the Code of Practice for Statistics, assigning them National Statistics status if they meet the requirements. This makes the public aware which statistics can be trusted.

This submission goes into further detail on these points. I hope this is useful, and please do let me know if we can provide further evidence or discuss directly with the Committee.

Yours sincerely,



Sam Beckett

**Office for National Statistics written evidence ‘*misinformation and trusted voices*’,
September 2022**

Summary

1. It is of the utmost importance that the Office for National Statistics (ONS) is regarded as a trusted voice in the UK. The growing use of data in public debate in recent years has emphasised the need for official statistics and analysis that can be relied upon. As the UK’s National Statistical Institute, our role is to provide trusted and accurate data.
2. According to the Public Confidence in Office Statistics (PCOS) 2021 report, the ONS had high levels of trust from respondents (89%), which rises if they are a frequent user of our statistics (97%). The public trust us with their data and our statistical outputs, at 90% and 87% respectively. Compared to other institutions in public life, including Government and the media, we have the highest levels of trust.
3. With this trust comes a large responsibility to ensure firstly that we are meeting the data needs of the public, identifying and responding to any data gaps rapidly, and secondly, that our statistics are communicated well, to reduce the risk of misinterpretation.
4. On the latter point, we do this by proactively engaging with the public directly and through media to improve the clarity and messaging of analysis, building our own trusted social media presence, and using innovative engagement methods to increase the public’s use of our statistics, highlighted during the census and recently with our Personal Inflation Calculator.
5. Misinformation can still occasionally occur. We actively monitor media channels and respond rapidly to provide clarity where it is needed, for example during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic regarding the number of COVID-19 deaths. We also have strong relationships with media outlets to ensure corrections happen swiftly.

Trusted data sources and institutions

6. As the UK’s National Statistical Institute, our outputs are regularly assessed by the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) against the Code of Practice for Statistics. If fully compliant, they are accredited as National Statistics, with the quality mark on all associated releases on our website to reassure users that they can be trusted.

Public Confidence in Official Statistics Survey

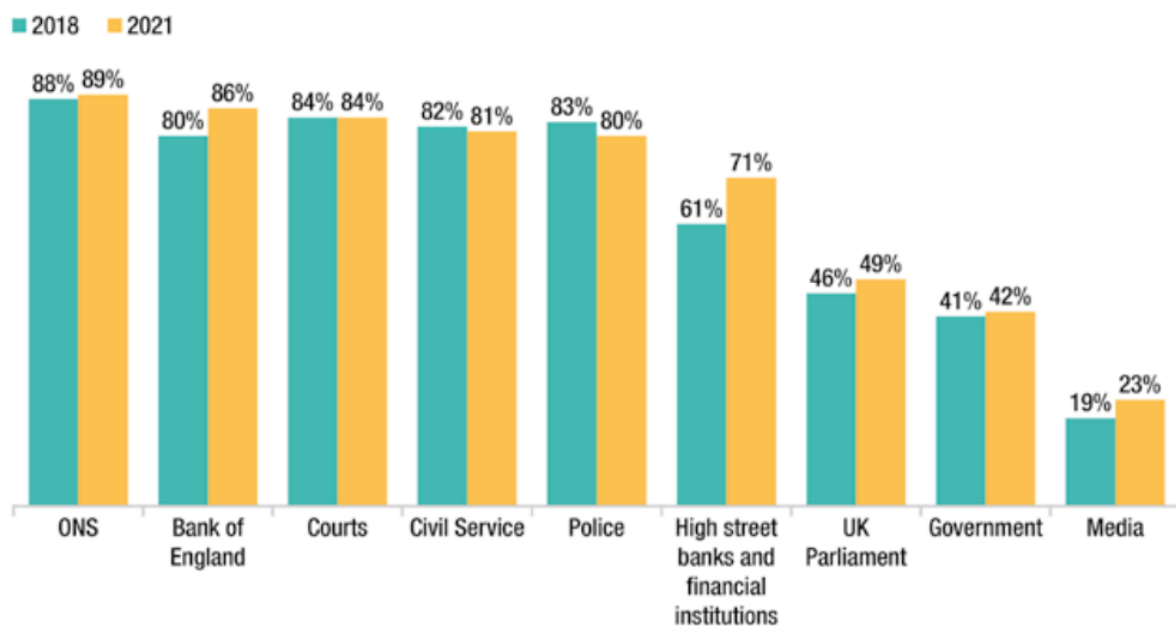
7. Since 2004, the UK Statistics Authority has commissioned research from the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) on levels of trust in, and the awareness and use of official statistics in Britain. The latest results of this research were published in April 2022, in the Public Confidence in Office Statistics (PCOS) 2021 report¹.
8. Respondents reported high levels of trust (89%) in the ONS. Trust is high regardless of whether people were previously aware of the ONS or not. However, those who have used official statistics are more likely to trust the ONS than those who have not used

¹ https://natcen.ac.uk/media/2202247/NatCen_Public-Confidence-in-official-statistics_2021.pdf

them, with 84% of non-users saying they trusted the ONS compared with 97% of frequent users of ONS statistics.

9. In 2021, 87% of people surveyed said they trusted statistics produced by the ONS. 90% also agreed that they trusted the ONS with data the provided them, and that it would be kept confidential.
10. PCOS also asked respondents about their level of trust in the ONS compared to other institutions in British public life. Of the institutions listed on the survey, the ONS has the highest levels of trust, similar to that of the Bank of England and the courts system. Figure 1 shows a comparison of levels of trust in different institutions, as reported in 2018 and 2021.

Figure 1: Proportion of people that trust different institutions in British public life



Source: *Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021, National Centre for Social Research*

Responding to data gaps

11. In line with the Authority’s five-year strategy ‘Statistics for the Public Good’², (launched in 2020), we are radical and ambitious in providing analysis in a timely way. For example, during the pandemic, we set up and adapted surveys at pace to inform policy decisions and the public: the Business Impacts of Coronavirus Survey (BICS) (now known as the ‘Business Insights and Conditions Survey’), the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) and the COVID-19 Infection Survey (CIS). These assessed the impacts on the economy, businesses, society and on the UK’s health. More recently, we have set up new surveys to assess Over-50s in the labour market, and the experiences of Ukrainian nationals arriving in the UK.

² <https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/statistics-for-the-public-good/>

12. Our agility to respond to emerging demands for evidence means we go some way in avoiding speculation, and therefore potential misinformation, on an issue.

Building trust and tackling misinformation

Proactive Communication - Media and Public Engagement

13. To avoid misinterpretation, each statistical publication from the ONS is expressed in clear, concise language with summarised findings. Contextual background and commentary are provided when they support wider public understanding of the data and its significance. In recent years, we have focused our efforts on ensuring key findings are reported accurately and lead the coverage, with an emphasis on the use of trusted ONS spokespeople.
14. We build relations with media producers, editors, lead reporters and subject matter experts in targeted media outlets to encourage clear reporting of our statistics and analysis. This also provides a direct channel back for media to confirm details for immediate deadlines.
15. The ONS identifies areas where insight could be misrepresented or misunderstood and mitigate through our presentation such as creating reusable and shareable social media posts and content.
16. The direct contact details of the statisticians are provided with each release so they can be contacted directly for guidance by any member of the public. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ONS has answered more than 12,000 different queries from the media.
17. While the majority of audiences will engage with ONS content through media channels, we also raise the ONS profile directly with public audiences. Our main social media presence is the @ONS Twitter account with 343,000 followers, which achieves good comparable engagement and reach, with threads created to support outputs and to respond to specific trends on social media.
18. We have created a network of statisticians who converse in dialogue on particular issues, themes, and releases on social channels, providing clarity where discussions take place. In recent months, we have also trialled material and commentary on LinkedIn to better understand opportunities to reach out to business audiences.
19. We seek creative opportunities to increase the public's engagement in ONS statistics and analysis as the trusted source, including personalised tools and data visualisations. For example, the ONS Personal Inflation Calculator³, a collaboration between the ONS and the BBC, enables individuals to see how increases in the cost of living have affected them. This has resulted in ONS data being more accessible, as well as extending our reach to new audiences. For the first results of the 2021 Census of England and Wales, we developed interactive articles and a game to encourage

³<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/articles/howisinflationaffectingyourhouseholdcosts/2022-03-23>

individuals to actively engage with our data and to discover what the results meant for the population of their local area⁴.

Reactive Communication - Challenging Disinformation

20. In response to the challenge of disinformation and misinformation on social media, we set up an online monitoring and reporting capability. This proved particularly effective during the 2021 Census. We monitored social channels, to identify misinformation and disinformation, and work directly with social media companies to remove content and accounts.
21. Where inaccuracy and misrepresentation of ONS statistics are spotted in the media we will seek to challenge them immediately whenever possible. News organisations are typically highly cooperative in amending their online articles or publishing corrections of ONS statistics and analysis. There have been no significant instances when a 'mainstream', regulated UK news organisation has refused to engage with us when factual inaccuracy has been drawn to their attention.
22. We are frequently consulted by both the Office for Statistics Regulation and fact-checking organisations outside of government when others use our statistics. Where there are false and misleading impressions of ONS statistics, we will rebut them: for example, in January 2022 we published a media statement and article explaining why some claims regarding the number of COVID-19 deaths were highly misleading. The rebuttal was itself reported in the news media and attracted wide engagement to social channels, illustrating the impact we can have.

OFFICE FOR NATIONAL STATISTICS

SEPTEMBER 2022

⁴ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/interactivecontentfromcensus2021firstresults>