UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY

Regulation Committee

Thursday 6 June 2024
London Boardroom/ Hybrid Meeting
13:00-16:00

Members Present
Penny Young (Chair)
Sir Robert Chote
Ed Humpherson
Professor Dame Carol Propper
Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter

Other Attendees
Helen Miller-Bakewell
Catherine Davies (for item 8)
Mark Pont
Isaac Spring (observing)
Gail Rankin
Vicky Stone (for item 8)
Rishi Vaidya (for item 4)
Prof. Arkadiusz Wiśniowski (for item 5)

Secretariat
Sally Jones
Fran Wigley-Jones

Apologies
Rob Kent-Smith
Elise Rohan

1.   Apologies, Minutes and Matters Arising
1.1   The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were received from Rob Kent-Smith and Helen Miller-Bakewell.

1.2   The minutes of the meeting on 11 April were approved and actions were reviewed.

2.   Update from the Director General for Regulation SA(RC)(24)20
2.1   The Director General (DG) for Regulation provided the Committee with an overview of the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) priorities and activities and highlighted some of the key areas of focus since the last meeting.

2.2   The Committee heard that preparation for the general election was a main area of focus for OSR. An election webpage had been created with framework and explainers around the interpretation of statistics. OSR would be publishing a statement pointing out that statistics must be backed up with evidence. The Committee also heard that OSR were acting on the recommendations in the Lievesley Review and the separation of OSR was being communicated more clearly. Intelligent transparency in the OSR report on comparability of statistics across the UK had been commended in a recent Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee report on 'Transforming the UK's Evidence Base' and the next UK Government would be asked to adopt this approach and report annually.

2.3   Members discussed the update. The following comments were made in discussion:

    i.   the importance of intelligent transparency and evidence backed statistics to ensure that the public could trust statements made by political parties during the election period; and

    ii.   OSR would respond to complaints made during the general election period.

2.4   The Committee noted the update.

3.   Interventions Policy Update – General Election SA(RC)(24)21
3.1   The Director General for Regulation presented an update on the Intervention Policy as part of the OSR's work around Election preparedness noting that OSR considered the policy regularly to ensure it reflected current practice.

3.2   Members discussed the suggested changes to the interventions policy. The following comments were made in discussion:

    i.   the phrase 'outside of our remit' should be replaced with 'outside of our core activities';

    3.3   there should be reference to the presentation of official forecast of statistics if OSR wished to continue commenting on these;

    i.   the introduction should be expanded to reflect the broader function of OSR; and

    ii.   all cases raised were responded to by OSR but for many cases or complaints raised it was appropriate to deal with them privately with no requirement for public intervention.

3.4   The Committee approved changes to the Intervention Policy. The DG for Regulation would approve final sign off and the Policy would be noted at the Authority Board June meeting.

4.   Economic Statistics Update SA(RC)(24)22
4.1   OSR provided an update on activities relating to the regulation of Economic Statistics, including the draft report on the review on Ensuring Confidence in the Public Sector Classifications process, the ongoing review of economic statistics and the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and Transformed Labour Force Survey (TLFS).

4.2   The Committee heard that the review on Ensuring Confidence in the Public Sector Classifications process had led to the development of six requirements. Subject to

views of the Committee and final comments from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) the final report would be signed off by the DG for Regulation. As part of the review of economic statistics produced by the ONS terms of reference would be published following the General Election and the Committee would be provided with a further update following emerging findings in the autumn.

4.3   Members noted the activities relating to the regulation of Economic Statistics. The following comments were made in discussion:

i.   the draft review report on the Ensuring Confidence in the Public Sector Classifications process should be shared with the Office for Budget Responsibility as a key stakeholder in the classifications process;

ii.   the report should include examples of key topics on which classifications decisions had been made; and

iii.   there may be benefit in comparing different approaches that ONS has taken to transformation work.

4.4   The Committee noted the programme of work relating to the regulation of Economic Statistics and the update on the LFS and TLFS.

5.   Admin Based Population Estimates SA(RC)(24)23

5.1   OSR provided an update on the OSR assessment findings of the Admin-Based Population Estimates (ABPE) produced by the ONS.

5.2   The Committee heard that the ONS had demonstrated strong ambition to drive the work forward towards meeting the standards of the Code, and while progress was being made, more work was needed to document and implement processes to support sustainable delivery of population estimates. A Local Authority engagement strategy was being developed, and further engagement was due to take place in the autumn. ONS's plans to publish ABPEs had been delayed due to data quality issues, with the mid-year estimates planned to be published along with the OSR ABPE review report on 15 July.

5.3   Professor Arkadiusz Wiśniowski provided an overview of his findings from his review on ONS ABPE and how they had been produced. He noted the following

5.4   the review focused on the quality of data, potential biases and inaccuracies, and documentation and reproducibility of the work;

i.   ONS had implemented a Dynamic Population Model (DPM) with Bayesian inference which is an application of research on Bayesian demographic accounting into practice, one of the key advantages of the model is its flexibility in integrating data from various sources;

5.5   the DPM was still in development but there was clear evidence of ONS learning about various aspects of the model and limitations that may arise;

i.   the DPM was theoretically sound but relied heavily on the quality of data inputs and how data are produced at sources. Data sources needed to be understood in terms of the potential bias and accuracy, this needed to be well communicated between different ONS stakeholders;

ii.   there was more room for work on demographic assumptions and how that would impact final ABPEs; and

iii.   there should be more engagement with stakeholders to understand uses of the data and improve trust in ABPEs.

5.6   The following comments were made in discussion:

i.   Bayesian methods were a natural way to synthesis multiple sources of evidence together and quantify uncertainty;

ii.   there needed to be a clear distinction between bias and precision, and reasons for over-coverage and under-coverage in data sources also need to be distinguished;

iii.   there were limitations in ONS resource and timings, the report should highlight the most important priorities and uncertainties;

iv.   the ability of ONS to access the computational power needed and whether the ONS had the resource or power to work around this issue;

v.   in terms of governance, the Bayesian model ensured accountability in that transparency of assumptions and biases needed to be accurately and explicitly recorded;

vi.   the methodology in this approach forced transparency about uncertainty which would be a benefit;

vii.   it is not easy to explain the approach simply, and that could raise issues of public trust;

viii.   the importance of a bench mark; and

ix.   the ABPE work spanned two directorates, members queried which other ONS projects spanned a number of directorates and the issues this may cause in coordination.

5.7   The Committee welcomed the work on ABPEs and agreed that Professor Wiśniowski's findings were valuable to the process and issues around quality needed to be drawn into OSR's assessment report.

6.   Annual Report SA(RC)(24)24

6.1   The Director General for Regulation presented a draft of the OSR Annual Report for 2023/24.

6.2   The Committee heard that publication of the report had been delayed until after the General Election. Election activity would be included in the 2023/24 report. At face value, 2023/24 had been a lighter year for outputs as a lot of time had been spent looking at single large topics such as LFS and ABPE, this would be made clear in the report. The report would include a 'change we want to see' section following feedback from the previous year.

6.3   Members discussed the report. The following comments were made in discussion:

i.   members requested that website analytics were published quarterly and shared with the committee;

ii.   wording in the report should be updated to include regulatory judgments 'and advice';

iii.   the statistical assembly recommended in the Lievesley Review should be mentioned within the report;

iv.   a question about whether OSR should consider bringing reports together into one package or alternatively consider the interface to improve coherence ahead of the next annual report; and

v.   it was important for the public to see a definitive statement on what the OSR do and why they do it, a single platform for this would be useful.

6.4   The Committee noted the draft Annual Report.

7.   Data Sharing and Linkage SA(RC)(24)25

7.1   OSR provided an overview on the draft follow up report to the OSR 2023 review, Data Sharing and Linkage for the Public Good. The report was a good opportunity to champion and publicise how people could use data sharing and linkage, and to address areas for improvement.

7.2   Members discussed the report. The following comments were made in discussion:

i.   data sharing and linkage is vital to the UK economic and social development and members welcomed OSR's report but agreed overall progress on data sharing and linkage had been slow, and this should be addressed more firmly in the report;

ii. it was important for the report to frame how important data sharing and linkage was to the UK and how more needs to be done;

iii. the report should be clearer when referring to government whether the reference was to government officials or politicians and where political decisions needed to be driven;

iv. formatting of the report should ensure consistency in how recommendations were laid out;

v. members questioned the options for the Data Masterclass going forward and asked for an update at the next Authority Board meeting; and

vi. asked for a report as part of the IDS update at the next Authority Board meeting into the psychological reasons behind barriers to data sharing.

7.3 The Committee approved the report. Publication of the final report was planned for mid-July.

8. Horizon Scanning

8.1 The Director General for Regulation raised two issues:

i. the prior source for measuring rental prices in CPI (Consumer Prices Index) and CPIH (Consumer Prices Index, including owner occupiers' housing costs) had been providing different estimates of rental prices which had led some users to ask whether backward revisions of CPIH were necessary; and

ii. supermarket scanner data was due to be added to CPI and CPIH, this would be a big change in data and methodology.

8.2 Members discussed that following the General Election it would be important to understand what the next Government looked like and priorities that may affect work of the Committee. Members agreed that it would be important for a new Government to understand transparency and expectations of OSR.

9. Any Other Business

9.1 The Committee noted that the OSR response to the Lievesley Review, and the State of the Statistical System Review Report would be delayed until after the General Election, scheduling of publishing for both would be coordinated to deconflict timings.

9.2 The Committee would next meet on Thursday 11 July.