

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR THE UK STATISTICAL SYSTEM

Executive Summary

The UK Statistics Authority has the statutory objective of promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. This letter sets out the Board's priorities for the statistical system and formally supersedes the 2020-2025 strategy *Statistics for the Public Good*. The priorities in this letter will be delivered by the Government Statistical Service (GSS), including the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR), and will be developed further by their respective business plans and visions.

The Code of Practice for Statistics sets standards for statistics against its pillars of trustworthiness, quality and value. We are determined that official statistics should live up to these standards and, to that end, we will ground our work in the following values:

- **Openness**, in engaging with users of statistics, with a willingness to listen, respond and collaborate.
- **Innovation**, where this is a means to better serve our core purpose.
- **Efficiency**, in how we prioritise, use and share resources and data.
- **Rigour**, in our analysis, assessment and quality assurance.

Office for National Statistics

It has been a challenging period for the UK's national statistics institute. The Authority Board accepts its share of responsibility and is acting urgently to restore trust. Changes are underway in how the ONS is led, with increased focus on improving quality and restoring trust, and the ONS has adopted a new mission statement: 'to deliver trustworthy, independent, high-quality statistics that underpin the UK's most critical economic and societal decisions and inform the public'. The Board will require the ONS to prioritise its statistical outputs, deliver the improvement plans for economic statistics and surveys which are at the heart of this recovery, build on the successes and lessons learned from the 2021 Census to prepare for the 2031 Census and provide unvarnished updates to the Board on any risks to delivery of those plans and how they are being mitigated.

Government Statistical Service

The Authority is acting on the recommendations of the Lievesley Review and will spend more time considering and supporting work from the GSS, including across the devolved governments, and empowering the next National Statistician to take a more active role in leading the wider GSS community. The Board will champion work to identify and nurture talent across the GSS and fully supports the current strategic vision for the GSS, *Strength in Numbers*. Working closely with the National Statistician, GSS Deputy Heads and Chief Statisticians, the Board will promote statistical best practice and identify and overcome barriers to delivery.

Office for Statistics Regulation

The Board expects OSR to uphold and promote the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality, and value in official statistics, as embodied in the new edition of the Code of Practice for Statistics. This includes challenging the misuse of statistics robustly through OSR's casework function. The Board will monitor the work of the OSR to ensure that it is rigorous in its assessments and direct in how it communicates its expectations of producers. The OSR is well placed to identify systemic obstacles and to work in partnership with the National Statistician to ensure they are addressed. The Board values OSR's role in both celebrating best practice and highlighting areas for improvement.

15 October 2025

To colleagues working across the Government Statistical Service, including the UK Statistics Authority, Office for National Statistics and Office for Statistics Regulation,

Introduction

The UK Statistics Authority has the statutory objective of promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. In introducing her independent review of the UK Statistics Authority, Professor Denise Lievesley described the importance of this task:

'Statistics we can trust are essential for a healthy society as they help to ensure well-informed decisions by putting the best available evidence at the heart of policy development and implementation. They also enlighten through making explicit what is known through scientific evidence and, importantly, what is not known. It is critical to appreciate that official statistics have an even broader role: they also serve to empower, enabling citizens to call governments to account and providing a window on society. As such they are an indispensable part of a democratic society'.

The Authority Board last set out its vision for the statistical system in 2020, with the five-year strategy *Statistics for the Public Good*, which included a statement of the Authority's mission and four strategic principles. That five-year period has now concluded. The Board expects to publish an updated strategy in due course, led by a new Chair and a new National Statistician. In the meantime, this letter sets out the Board's current priorities for the statistical system that it is determined to see delivered. All the components of the system have their part to play in delivering these priorities, and this letter is supported by their strategic business plans and vision documents, as referenced throughout.

Context

In preparing this letter, the Board has drawn upon feedback and observations from colleagues across the statistical system as well as users and producers of official statistics. The Board is proud of the continued hard work and dedication of colleagues across the system, and the engagement of users of official statistics which together enable the delivery of statistics that are trustworthy, high quality, and valuable. We are encouraged by colleagues' determination to improve statistics where needed.

The Board sees the constant demands that are made of official statistics and how they are met by colleagues across the GSS working together to enhance the understanding of social, economic and environmental matters. In the past five years this has included population censuses across the UK; the GSS response to the Covid-19 pandemic; and the regulation of the use of official statistics.

Alongside these successes the Board recognises that there are many difficulties facing the GSS, as recent reviews have highlighted. Some are felt widely across the system: people are

less willing to take part in household surveys; departmental budgets are increasingly stretched; and barriers to sharing data between departments and bodies persist. Other challenges are more acute, such as the need to restore quality and confidence in the ONS's core economic statistics. Facing these will require focus, an openness to learning and collaboration across the system.

To do this well, the Authority Board will be seeking assurances that colleagues across the system have the skills, training and support to deliver their work effectively. This is ever more important as the work of statisticians and analysts becomes increasingly multidisciplinary. The ongoing collaboration between the Royal Statistical Society and the GSS on *The Future Statistician* will play a key role in identifying how the GSS can best equip statisticians to face the challenges of the future and create a sustainable talent pipeline.

In response to Professor Lievesley's central review recommendation, the inaugural UK Statistics Assembly took place in January 2025. Organised by the Authority, in partnership with the Royal Statistical Society, the Assembly brought together attendees from a wide range of sectors to discuss and advise on statistical and data priorities for the UK. The insights and report from the day have already been feeding into planning work. The Acting National Statistician is leading work in four areas: user engagement, more granular data, greater use of administrative data and UK-wide coherence. With a constrained financial backdrop and difficult prioritisation decisions ahead, it will not be possible to meet all users' needs. It will therefore be even more important that GSS colleagues continue to communicate well with other producers and users of official statistics while making these decisions.

Key Priorities

To drive forward the delivery of the priorities set out in this letter, the Board will group its work into five defined areas:

- **Oversight of ONS recovery plans.** We will scrutinise progress on ONS economic and survey recovery plans post Devereux Review, including technological resilience and legacy system reduction.
- **Foresight.** We will be vigilant, anticipating and addressing risks, ensuring the Board's oversight prevents avoidable missteps.
- **Engagement.** We will focus on earning and maintaining confidence in the Authority and official statistics through clear communications, engagement with Parliament, and follow-up on the UK Statistics Assembly.
- **System-wide leadership.** We will focus on setting and communicating strategic priorities for the statistical system. We will strengthen governance, champion leadership and talent development, and support the evolving role of the National Statistician.
- **2031 Census.** We will oversee preparations for the 2031 Census, including user and stakeholder engagement, through a dedicated Board sub-committee.

These five areas will shape the Board's agenda planning and areas of focused challenge and assurance, supported by timely information and products from the executive team.

The Authority's previous strategy was organised around the four principles of 'Radical', 'Ambitious', 'Inclusive' and 'Sustainable'. It is time to replace these. From now, we will ground all our work across the system in the following values: We will expect **openness** in engaging with users of statistics, with a willingness to listen, respond and collaborate across the system. We will look for **innovation**, where this is a means to better serve our core purpose. We will encourage **efficiency** in how we prioritise, use and share resources and data. And we will insist on **rigour** in analysis, assessment and quality assurance. These ways of working complement the Code of Practice's pillars of trustworthiness, quality and value.

Government Statistical Service

The production and analysis of official statistics in the UK is woven into the fabric of public life, with the professional statisticians, data scientists, geographers, researchers, economists, analysts, and other staff of the GSS working in UK government departments, the devolved governments and official bodies. This decentralisation is a distinctive feature and great strength of the UK's statistical system, keeping expertise close to the policy areas it supports, allowing for more responsive analysis.

At its best, the reach of the GSS across departments also invites a culture of collaboration and innovation. GSS members can move between roles in different parts of government, building a broad base of experience and sharing this within a professional community. This is an important enabler of development. New ideas can sprout in different departments and take root elsewhere. Over the past five years, the Authority Board has seen colleagues in the GSS collectively rise to challenges with statisticians and analysts across departments and nations working together to respond to rapidly changing and high-profile issues.

Collaboration on this scale requires sustained effort and shared purpose. The need for data for government missions and cross-departmental policy development only heightens the importance of the GSS cohering in its work. At a time of budget constraints across the public sector, it is more important than ever that the Authority can act as a steward of the official statistical system as a whole, with regard to the collective evidence base and analytical capability it represents.

In response, the Authority Board recognises it must devote more of its time and attention to supporting and engaging with the work of the GSS. That is beginning to happen. The Authority is acting on the recommendations of the Lievesley Review, which concluded that "*it is time for the Board to step into a more visible, ambitious space*" in leading the wider statistical system. The Board will spend more time considering work from outside of ONS and OSR, through regular updates on work taking place across the UK and GSS via updates from the National Statistician and hearing directly from the Chief Statisticians and Deputy Heads of the GSS. Board members will take opportunities to engage with GSS colleagues themselves. The Board will support the National Statistician (acting and permanent) to take a more visible and active role in leading the GSS community and the Heads of Profession for Statistics.

The current strategic vision for the GSS, *Strength in Numbers*, lists initiatives against four central priorities for the system: Coordination, Cooperation and Leadership; Capability and Community; Setting Standards; and Transformation and Innovation. These priorities represent both what the GSS already does well and where it can go further. The Board fully supports this vision.

The National Statistician

Following the publication of the Devereux Review it was decided to split, at least temporarily, the role of National Statistician and leader of the ONS. We are grateful to Emma Rourke for her leadership, serving as Acting National Statistician in the interim period while we recruit the next National Statistician. The Board will shortly advertise for the role of National Statistician and set out the responsibilities in more detail.

The National Statistician has a system-wide leadership role. This section highlights some immediate priorities – recognising that the role will evolve over time.

In relation to the ONS, the Acting National Statistician and her successor will advise the Board at a strategic level on the quality of ONS outputs and appropriateness of methodology of key statistics.

As Head of the GSS, the National Statistician (acting and permanent) will engage with Statistical Heads of Profession and members of the GSS across the UK, including by chairing the Inter Administration Committee (IAC) to promote best practice, consider shared issues (including updating the Concordat for statistics in 2026) and identify system-wide challenges that require the Board's attention. To inform the updated Concordat document and future priorities, the Board requests from the IAC an articulation of its vision for maximising the opportunities of cross-UK collaboration, mindful of the Lievesley Review recommendations and 2025 OSR systemic review.

The National Statistician will play a key role in advising the Board at a strategic level on the 2031 Census of England and Wales. They will continue to represent the GSS, including the ONS, on the international stage to strengthen the UK's position as a statistical leader and trusted partner across the international statistical system.

The National Statistician leads the Government Analysis Function across the Civil Service and the Board welcomes its new 2025–2028 strategy to *“provide better outcomes for the public by providing the best and most efficient analysis to inform decision making.”* The Board will remain engaged with this work through the National Statistician's leadership, noting areas of common interest such as capability, standards and cross-government data.

Office for National Statistics

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is the executive office of the Authority responsible for collecting and publishing statistics related to the economy, population and society. Through its unique role as the UK's national statistics institute, it plays an important leadership role across the system and the international statistical community.

The recent review by Sir Robert Devereux, jointly commissioned by the Authority Board and Cabinet Office, examined the performance and culture of ONS. We agree with the Review's findings that changes are needed in the way the ONS is led, how decisions are made and how risk is managed, and we are acting urgently to restore trust.

Although the ONS has a wealth of capability and expertise, it has been through a difficult period, making headlines for the wrong reasons and grappling with serious quality issues in core economic statistics. The Board has welcomed Darren Tierney who began as Permanent Secretary of the ONS in August and will, as accounting officer, be responsible for delivery of the ONS business plan. James Benford has begun as the new Director General for Surveys,

Economic & Social Statistics. This restructured division brings together the various components of the statistical production process for economic and social statistics under James's leadership. We welcome the publication of the plans for economic statistics and ONS surveys which alongside the organisational business plan will be at the centre of this recovery.

The Board and its sub-committees, including the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee, will scrutinise regular updates on the delivery of these plans. We have made clear that these need to be candid, and clear where there may be challenges to delivery or additional support required. This renewed focus on priority areas may include making difficult decisions on stopping or reducing certain activities. As part of the recovery plans, the ONS leadership must ensure that colleagues have the skills, support and organisational structure required to deliver effectively. The Board welcomes the steps taken already to do this, including the agreement of a new ONS mission statement *'To deliver trustworthy, independent, high-quality statistics that underpin the UK's most critical economic and societal decisions and inform the public'* and accompanying leadership commitment.

In July, HM Government commissioned ONS to conduct a mandatory, questionnaire-based, whole-population census of England and Wales in 2031. This followed the Authority's recommendation to Government for a census as part of a system of population and migration statistics which combines the power of data collection and builds on the use of administrative data. The Census has provided a vital window into the life of the nation for more than 200 years. The Board expects the ONS to build on the successes and lessons learned from the 2021 Census and through a new Board sub-committee will monitor delivery and provide expertise and challenge to ONS.

This has been a difficult period for the ONS and the Board will be working with Darren, the National Statistician and wider ONS leadership team to provide scrutiny and support as they deliver on the ONS's new mission statement.

Office for Statistics Regulation

The Office for Statistics Regulation is the Authority's regulatory arm. It ensures that statistics are produced and disseminated in the public good and aims to increase public confidence in the trustworthiness, quality and value of official statistics in the United Kingdom.

The Board is encouraged by feedback from colleagues across the GSS of the fundamental role that the Code of Practice and its pillars of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value play in supporting and guiding the production and publication of official statistics. Working with the OSR, the Board is adopting an updated Code of Practice later this year. This will draw upon feedback from users and producers of official and be used as the basis for regulatory assessments.

The Board welcomes the OSR's approach of celebrating success and best practice across the system whilst highlighting where there are areas for improvement. The benefits of this mixed approach were recognised by Professor Denise Lievesley in her Review.

As the refreshed Code of Practice is launched next month, the Board will support the OSR to raise awareness of the changes amongst producers and establish clear expectations of the requirements of them. In doing so, the Board encourages the OSR to be rigorous in its assessments and set out clearly how it has applied the code in each assessment. Where

requirements are made of producers of official statistics, the Board expects these to be clearly directed to a specific action owner and include details of how and when OSR expects such actions to be taken, and how OSR will follow them up.

Whilst much attention has recently been given to the work of the ONS, the OSR's work extends beyond to the wider statistical system. As a regulator, its ability to publicly highlight common issues facing the system is most valuable, as is its ability to highlight positive achievements. The annual publication of the annual State of the UK Statistical System report is a key part of this, and the OSR should use this to require progress against the challenges it identifies.

One such challenge is the rise in unverified new data sources, misinformation and, more recently, the use of artificial intelligence to promote misinformation. Official statistics are central to public debate in a democratic society and a rise in misinformation risks damaging public trust in official statistics. The Board expects the OSR to continue to contest the misuse of official statistics used in public debate through its casework function, working with the Chair of the Authority to improve standards in how statistics are presented. To do this effectively, the OSR should continue to build partnerships with other organisations to raise awareness of the principles of the Code of Practice and promote best practice amongst users and producers of data and evidence. The OSR's experience of handling regulatory casework during the 2024 UK General Election campaign will serve it well during next year's Senedd and Scottish Parliament Elections.

The Board has asked the OSR to address these points and how it will deliver them in the forthcoming publication of its regulatory strategy and business plan.

Next Steps

As ambassadors for the statistical system, the Board will continue to champion the production of independent, high quality, timely statistics that meet user need and challenge their misuse.

We welcome the vital scrutiny, challenge and support we receive from Parliament as we fulfil this work, in particular from the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee. We will continue to update the Committee as we deliver the priorities set out in this letter and, in time, welcome a new Chair of the Authority and National Statistician to the Board. We stand ready to consider the Committee's findings of its most recent inquiry into the work of the Authority.

I am sending a copy of this letter to the Acting National Statistician, ONS Permanent Secretary, Director General for Regulation, Departmental Heads of Profession for Statistics, Chief Statisticians of the Devolved Governments, and the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee.



Penny Young
Deputy Chair, UK Statistics Authority