

UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY

Minutes

**Thursday 25 September 2025
Colby House, Belfast**

Hybrid Meeting

Members Present

Penny Young (Deputy Chair)
Dr Jacob Abboud
Peter Barron
Ed Humpherson
Emma Rourke
Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter
Professor Mairi Spowage
Darren Tierney
Dr Sarah Walsh

Other Attendees

June Bowman
Brian Green (for item 2)
Karly Greene (for item
Sarah Moore
Phil Davies (for item 11)
Nicola Fisher (for item 2)
Grant Fitzner (for item 10)
Alex Lambert (for items 11 &12)
Liz McKeown (for item 12)
Philip Wales (for item 2)
Jennet Woolford (for item 12)

Secretariat

Sally Jones
Sarah Cobden
Tom Marsh

Apologies

Sir Robert Chote
Professor Dame Carol Propper
Tom Taylor

1. Apologies

- 1.1 Apologies were noted from Sir Robert Chote, Professor Dame Carol Propper, and Tom Taylor.

2. Declarations of Interest

- 2.1 There were no new declarations of interest.

3. Minutes and matters arising from previous meetings

- 3.1 The minutes of the previous meeting held on 31 July were approved.

4. Success and Challenges on how the UK Statistics System is working from a NISRA Perspective

- 4.1 Philip Wales, Chief Statistician and Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), Brian Green, Director of Economic Statistics, Nicola Fisher, Analysis and Research and Karly Greene, Director of Analytical Services gave a presentation to the Board on the UK statistical system from NISRA's perspective on their objectives and structure; challenges and opportunities at a national and local level; and the opportunity to build an empowering, dynamic and visionary UK statistical system.

- 4.2 Board members welcomed the presentation and the following key areas were discussed:

- i. challenges and inhibitors around data sharing and the extent to which departments could be held to account for sharing data;
- ii. the need for parity in legislation. NISRA do not have comparable access to data as ONS;
- iii. NISRA's approach to dealing with fiscal and budgetary challenges in 2023/24; and
- iv. preparation for the Census 2031.

- 4.3 Board members welcomed the opportunity to discuss and continue to collaborate in areas of mutual interest including data sharing and census preparations.

- 4.4 The Board noted their thanks for an excellent presentation.

5. Report from the Authority Chair [SA(25)44]

- 5.1 The Chair paid warm tribute to Sir Robert Chote, the outgoing Chair of the Authority, who had been in post since June 2022. Sir Robert had undertaken the role with integrity and professionalism throughout a challenging period. Penny would be taking over as Interim Chair from 1 October until a permanent replacement was found via the current recruitment campaign.

- 5.2 The Chair welcomed Darren Tierney, Office for National Statistics Permanent Secretary and James Benford, Director General Economic Social and Environmental Statistics (ESEG) to their first meeting.

- 5.3 The Chair asked the Board to agree that with effect from this meeting Darren Tierney would take on the role as the third executive member of the Board, alongside Emma Rourke (Acting National Statistician) and Ed Humpherson (Director General for the Office for Statistics Regulation). The Board agreed.

- 5.4 The Chair reported on her activities since the Board last met:

- i. the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee Inquiry was ongoing with the Cabinet Office due to provide evidence in the coming weeks;
- ii. the Authority strategy working group were in process of preparing a letter for publication to cover the interim strategy period;
- iii. membership of Population Statistics System subcommittee had been finalised and work was ongoing to schedule the first meeting in November; and
- iv. the Board were considering the implications of the split of the National Statistician and Permanent Secretary roles with work ongoing to produce a document provide clarity on the split.

6. Report from the Permanent Secretary [SA(25)45]

- 6.1 Darren Tierney provided the Board with an overview of activity and issues since joining the organisation on 11 August highlighting the following:
- i. changes had been made to the leadership and architecture of the organisation to ensure alignment at a senior level with key priorities, with James Benford's leadership covering the end to end statistical production process for economic and social statistics under a single director general;
 - ii. the work by the Executive Committee (ExCo) on the prioritisation process, which would provide the clarity needed across the organisation.
 - iii. rebuilding organisational culture was a key area of focus. Two SCS Awaydays had been held in August and September to discuss and agree an ONS Mission and Leadership Statement, which would create a shared set of values and common purpose in reestablishing a culture of transparency and understanding;
 - iv. engagement externally included a recent blog by James Benford regarding the decision to delay the Retail Sales publication; and
 - v. the Civil Service People Survey 2025 was live and would close on 21 October with results expected in December.
- 6.2 Members discussed the update and it was clarified that the prioritisation process was ongoing with plans in place for consultation and engagement with stakeholders during October. Rebuilding organisation culture, including restoring trust in senior leaders, and ensuring colleagues feel listened to, was a key priority for the Permanent Secretary.
- 6.3 Members noted the importance of effective communications to underpin statistical releases. Planning was ongoing regarding the publication of the next estimates for long-term international migration scheduled late November. The recent media coverage in relation to the long standing issue, highlighted by the Board at previous meetings, of delays to coronial data specifically drug related deaths was referenced. ONS would continue to work with the Ministry of Justice on this issue.

7. Report from the Acting National Statistician [SA(25)46]

- 7.1 Emma Rourke provided the Board with an overview of activity and issues since the last update. Emma noted her thanks to the Permanent Secretary for his support in setting up a new Directorate, led by Lucinda Eggleton to deliver system-wide and international priorities led by the National Statistician.
- 7.2 The Board heard that the international strategy would be scheduled for discussion at a future meeting. A strategic joined up approach to the international work would be taken across the system. In terms of the broader UK statistical system, events had been held for the Government Statistical Service community in August with a focus on building capability. This had included a knowledge sharing session on Artificial Intelligence (AI).
- 7.3 Emma had met with the National Centre for Social Research and has been invited to chair a strategic round table on the future of surveys, which would provide the opportunity to review risks and opportunities across the entire survey system, including ONS in a mutually supportive way.
- 7.4 Following an initial discussion at the Inter Administration Committee Emma would be chairing a workshop on 29 September with the Chief Statisticians and other partners to reflect on UK statistical coherence, to consider the Office for Statistics Regulation Committee systemic review setting out action needed to produce key comparable UK data, the Lievesley Review and Cabinet Office proposals. It was noted that progress in this area was likely to take time given the current resources available to the National Statistician.
- 7.5 Members discussed the update noting the scale of system wide issues the National Statistician could engage with and impact positively, such as the work around AI. There were some subject areas internationally, such as national accounts that the National Statistician

might want to delegate to the relevant ONS senior leader. With regard to data sharing members noted that working collaboratively would be important, particularly as data sharing issues were not just legislative but cultural. ONS engagement with the development of the National Data Library was important and there was a need for innovative solutions to enable data sharing across departments.

8. Report from the DG for Regulation

- 8.1 Ed Humpherson provided an overview of regulatory activities since the last meeting
- 8.2 The Board confirmed their approval of Code of Practice for Statistics 3.0, which would be published at the end of October and formally launch at the beginning of November. A programme of launch events and promotional activities were scheduled to help embed the new Code.
- 8.3 The Board heard that James Benford had written to OSR in August setting out the initial work ONS had undertaken in response to OSR's system review of ONS Economic Statistics. Ed Humpherson commended the blog that had been published by James Benford early September 'Correcting the record on retail sales, improving quality across economic statistics'.
- 8.4 With regard to the volume of casework OSR were considering the potential reasons for the decline, which would be reported to the Regulation Committee. Other areas of focus for OSR included the development of OSR's strategy which would cover what it means to be a credible and rigorous regulator in light of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Inquiry.

9. Report from the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Chair

- 9.1 The Chair reported on the work of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee which had last met on 12 September.
- 9.2 The Committee had considered:
 - i. the strategic risk profile with half of the risks reporting outside of risk appetite;
 - ii. the need to review and redraft the Strategic People Risk (SR5);
 - iii. a risk deep dive into technological resilience specifically legacy, with a proposal of a new governance digital services delivery framework;
 - iv. a report on the implementation of audit actions in response to the data governance audit with limited progress made. Good progress had been on the implementation of audit actions in response reports on AI, Reproducible Analytical Pipelines and Evergreen IT; and
 - v. delivery of the Internal Audit Plan 2025/26 and plans for a review of the plan for the remainder of the year by the Head of Internal Audit and the Permanent Secretary.
- 9.3 The Committee had also considered the annual self-review of effectiveness including a skills review by the Chair.

10. Communications Update

- 10.1 Peter Barron and Sarah Moore reported on recent media coverage of ONS since the last meeting.
- 10.2 The issues with retail sales figures for July 2025 had resulted in negative media coverage. As discussed earlier in the meeting the blog by James Benford, including an apology for both the delay and error focussed on providing clarity and transparency on what and why changes had been made. The blogs were in part aimed at addressing historical defensiveness by ONS. It was noted that improvements on stakeholder sentiment may be forthcoming in the coming months.

11. Economic Statistics Plan [SA(25)48]

- 11.1 James Benford introduced a paper which provided an update on the recent improvements to economic statistics and on progress of mobilising resources to deliver the Economic Statistics Plan (ESP).

- 11.2 James Benford noted his thanks to Grant Fitzner for his leadership of ESEG in the interim period, with progress made to identify the skills and resources needed to deliver the plan. Since joining key areas of focus included work to build trust within and across teams, developing governance to underpin delivery of the plan. The work on prioritisation was critical so as not put excessive pressure on colleagues. Stakeholder engagement was also a key area of focus.
- 11.3 Members discussed the update. With regard to the amber milestones reported it was noted that the ESP Steering Group would be discussing these and work was ongoing to align risk reporting with the Strategic Risk covering Quality economic statistics'(SR7). In terms of capability for delivery of the plan four GSS fast streamers had been recruited, adverts were currently live across other government departments and consideration was being given to secondments from other National Statistics Institutes. Integrating surveys within ESEG was progressing well with a focus on building trust amongst the teams. Given the size of the directorate private office support was being reviewed to ensure there was sufficient support across the different areas.
- 11.4 The Board noted the update. It was agreed that a substantive report to Board would be provided on a quarterly basis and oral updates would be provided at every meeting. Exceptional reporting would be scheduled as needed.

12. Update on the Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan [SA(25)49]

- 12.1 Alex Lambert introduced a paper which provided an update on progress made against the commitments set out in the Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan (IEP).
- 12.2 The Board heard that positive social survey improvements in survey data collection performance had been made as a result of IEP investment, although further work was needed to meet full social survey quality targets agreed with users. Field force resources had increased but challenges continued around attrition rates. The impact of the increased size of the field community would impact the next financial year, 2026/27 and would be considered as part of the next business planning process. The finance team were already aware of the financial risk.
- 12.3 With regard to business surveys significant progress had been made against the milestones. The replacement of end to end legacy technology for the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings was challenging due to the complexity of the methods and technology. Progress had been made toward eliminating paper-based questionnaires.
- 12.4 Members discussed the update highlighting that ONS is in a good position to be pioneering on the approach to survey response. Findings from phase one of the Trust project had demonstrated value in targeted communications with a five per cent increase in the TLFS response rate compared with the previous seven weeks. But the response was disproportionately among groups who are already better responders. With regard to risk reporting members noted that it would be useful going forward to understand whether the risks as reported were residual risks following risk mitigation and implementation of controls or gross risks.

13. TLFS/LFS [SA(25)50]

- 13.1 Alex Lambert, Liz McKeown and Jennet Woolford introduced a paper which provided an update on the Transformed Labour Force Survey (TLFS) Programme.
- 13.2 The Board heard that the TLFS programme reported Amber-Red at the August programme board meeting given the data quality risks associated with the integration of Northern Ireland data and the collection of Standard Industrial Classification/Standard Occupational Classification data. A new project had been created, the Household, Socioeconomic and Local project as part of the programme. The project had been set up to support user engagement, development and decisions on the TLFS Plus Survey.

- 13.3 It was noted that since Board papers were issued for this meeting three additional mitigations had been implemented to address the data rotation issue. Due to this issue the January 2026 milestone may not be met. At the end of October the programme would know whether the mitigating actions would enable the January 2026 to be met, but the current assessment was that April 2026 was more likely.
- 13.4 With regard to the broader communications context the approach to blogs by James Benford would provide a valuable addition for future labour market communications including improvements and challenges.
- 13.5 Members discussed the update and highlighted the potential for further harmonisation and or learning from NISRA's experience with the TLFS. It was clarified that NISRA used a smaller sample size which enabled them to do more face to face follow up. James Benford and Phil Wales had agreed at this meeting to bring the teams together to discuss approaches and lessons learned.
- 13.6 The Board noted the update and the ongoing effective stakeholder engagement. ONS had good relationships across stakeholders, taking a transparent approach on delivery as the work progressed. It would be important to maintain this focus on stakeholder engagement as any new challenges arose and programme delivery continued. It was agreed that TLFS/LFS would continue to report bi-monthly to the Board.

14. Any Other Business

- 14.1 The Board will next meet on Thursday 30 October.

UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY

Agenda

Thursday 25 September 2025, 09.15-13.30
Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, Belfast,
Hybrid Meeting

Chair: Penny Young

Apologies: Tom Taylor, Professor Dame Carol Propper,

Attendees: Phil Davies (for item 10), Grant Fitzner (for item 9), Alex Lambert (for items 10&11),
Liz McKeown (for item 11), Jennet Woolford (for item 11)

NED Session: 08:45-09:15

1 09.15-09.20 5 mins	Minutes and matters arising from previous meeting Declarations of interest	Meeting of 31 July 2025
2 09.20-10.15 55 mins	Successes and Challenges on how the UK statistics system is working from a NISRA perspective	Phil Wales & team
3 10.15-10.25 10 mins	Report from the Authority Chair	SA(25)44 Penny Young
4 10.25-10.40 15 mins	Report from the Permanent Secretary	SA(25)45 Darren Tierney
5 10.40-10.55 15 mins	Report from the National Statistician	SA(25)46 Emma Rourke
6 10.55-11.05 10 mins	Report from the Director General for Regulation	SA(25)47 Ed Humpherson
7 11.05-11.10 5 mins	Report from Committee Chairs Audit and Risk Assurance Committee	Oral update Dr Jacob Abboud
8 11.10-11.20 10 mins	Communications update	Oral update Peter Barron Sarah Moore
11.20-12.00 40 mins	Break	
9 12.00-12.35 35 mins	Economic Statistics Plan	SA(25)48 James Benford Grant Fitzner
10 12.35-13.00 25 mins	Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan	SA(25)49 Alex Lambert Phil Davies
11 13.00-13.25 25 mins	TLFS/LFS	SA(25)50 Alex Lambert Liz McKeown Jennet Woolford
12 13.25-13.30 5 mins	Any Other Business	

Chair's Report, September 2025

Purpose

1. Sir Robert Chote formally steps down as Chair at the end of the month. I would like to extend my thanks on behalf of the Board for his leadership over the last three years. He has led the Board and wider Authority through a particularly challenging period, and many of the difficulties were long standing. Sir Robert led with great integrity, dedication and inclusivity; I personally have valued working closely with him.
2. This paper provides the Authority Board with an overview of the Deputy Chair's activity in September.

Review of Recent Activities

3. Throughout this month, I have started meeting with senior colleagues to provide support and challenge during a time of transition for the Office for National Statistics (ONS). I have met with the ONS Permanent Secretary to discuss prioritisation and structural changes, and with the Acting National Statistician to discuss priorities over the coming months including cross-system leadership. Members of the Board met earlier this month to discuss how we envisaged the role split working in practice, and this is now being taken forward by officials supported by the Deputy Director for Strategy and Policy and our Legal team. The advertisement for the Authority Chair, which was due to close on 5 September, has been extended to 26 September to allow people who may have been away over August to apply. We have submitted comments back to the Cabinet Office on the National Statistician job specification, including those from the Government Statistical Service, ahead of the advert being launched in the coming weeks. We therefore hope to have a new Chair in post in the early new year, and a National Statistician soon after.
4. As part of my introductory meetings with stakeholders I met with Cat Little, Civil Service Chief Operating Officer and Cabinet Office Permanent Secretary, on 4 September. We discussed organisational challenges, the ongoing inquiry by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, and plans to review our corporate governance as recommended by the Devereux review. I will also be meeting with Steffan Jones, our senior Cabinet Office sponsor, on 19 September where I hope to agree initial next steps for the governance review. I was due to meet with Georgia Gould this month but as a result of the Government reshuffle, we will now have a different Minister in the Cabinet Office responsible for Authority sponsorship. We hope to have introductory meetings in the diary soon.
5. I attended two meetings this month with Board colleagues:
 - i. on 10 September, a briefing on 2031 Census with ONS colleagues where we heard about preparations for census activity; topic consultation and engagement plans; and the broader work underway to develop administrative data on the population; and
 - ii. a subset of the Board met on 17 September to discuss development of the Authority strategy.
6. I have also been liaising with the Board on our priorities for the next six months. As a Board, we recognise our important role in supporting the organisation through this transitional period and have set out in a short document the areas that we will be giving specific focus to, with owners against each. These include, at a high level, oversight of recovery plans; reputation; system-wide leadership; and the Census.

Looking Ahead

7. I am very much looking forward to meeting with Northern Ireland colleagues at the Board meeting this month, and continuing to hold introductory meetings with our major

stakeholders over the coming weeks. I appreciate all the support and involvement from Board colleagues and colleagues in private office, secretariat, strategy and policy during this interim period. I formally take on the interim Chair role at the end of the month.

Penny Young, Deputy Chair, 18 September 2025

Permanent Secretary's Report, September 2025

Purpose

1. This provides the UK Statistics Authority Board (the Board) with an overview of activity since the last Board meeting on 31 July 2025.

Since joining, I have been hugely impressed by the calibre of people across the organisation, but recognise the enduring effort required to confront our challenges

2. I was thrilled to join the Office for National Statistics (ONS) as Permanent Secretary on 11 August and am continually impressed at the capability and passion staff across the ONS have for their work, and for their appetite to help address some of our challenges. The Devereux review and Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee inquiry laid bare the scale of said challenges, and it will be a collective effort of the Executive Committee (ExCo), wider Senior Civil Service (SCS) and colleagues across the whole office, to drive the organisation forwards.
3. The role of Permanent Secretary and National Statistician has now been split. In sum, I will be responsible for the day-to-day running of the organisation, with accountability for delivery of ONS's function, performance and value to Parliament as Accounting Officer. Emma, as Acting National Statistician, will be focusing her time on system-wide leadership of statistical production within ONS and across government.
4. My immediate priorities as Permanent Secretary are; addressing cultural issues in the organisation, rebuilding the trust people can have in senior leadership and ensuring people feel listened to and able to speak-up; refocusing our resources and priorities on our core statistics; building a technology plan, ensuring that we move off legacy and put the organisation's digital and tech capability on a sustainable footing. Alongside these immediate priorities I will also be focussing on the set up of the Census programme to make sure the set up does not hinder the wider recovery work.
5. In the last week, James Benford and I met the Chancellor of the Exchequer and separately with the Governor of the Bank of England and other colleagues at the Bank. HM Treasury and the Bank of England are two of our closest stakeholders, and we set out our priorities and progress so far.

I am undertaking a restructure of the ONS to ensure the leadership and architecture of the organisation is set up for future success

6. I have done this through:
 - i. moving Surveys directorates under James Benford's leadership, putting much of the end-to-end statistical production process for economic and social statistics under a single Director General. Alongside Surveys, the assurance functions from within the Methodology and Quality Directorate (MQD) will also be moving to James;
 - ii. working with the Acting National Statistician to establish a new Office of the National Statistician, headed up by Lucinda Eggleton. This directorate brings together the International Division, the health data linkage and analysis work, the Government Statistical Service and Analysis Function teams, the statistics coherence and harmonisation teams and some of the second line assurance functions from the MQD;
 - iii. introducing a new leadership structure to oversee the Population Statistics and Population Transformation Directorates, headed up by a new Executive Director role who will report directly into me and be responsible for overseeing the delivery of Population Statistics and the Census. Delivery of our core life events statistics will transfer into the Population Statistics Directorate; and

- iv. changing reporting lines to ensure clearer accountability for our corporate services. I will have direct oversight of: Sarah Moore and the Communications and Digital Publishing Directorate; Tom Taylor and the Finance, Planning and Performance Directorate; as well as the People and Business Services Directorate. Keith Nicholson and the Security and Information Management team will also report directly into me.
- 7. Henry Watson started this week as Director of Human Resources and Estates on an initial six-month loan, at which point we will launch a formal recruitment process, replacing Philipa Bonay.

As part of our effort to refocus on our core functions and achieve our path to affordability, the Executive Committee are taking tough decisions on prioritisation

- 8. The work carried out through ExCo as part of the quarterly review process to resolve the emerging financial risk has closed with further progress made on the affordability risk first reported in July.
- 9. Pivoting from dealing with the emerging affordability risk, we will pare back activity that is not directly aligned with our core statistics production or Census 2031 preparation, focusing on what discretionary and income-funded work should be streamlined or stopped altogether. The decisions taken on prioritisation will have impacts on ONS' reputation, and output areas will be working closely with communications teams and stakeholders to manage this.
- 10. Whilst the immediate impacts are difficult to manage, longer-term these decisions will provide clarity for our staff, reducing overall organisational workload, the ability to re-focus more resources on our core priorities and easing the burden (both financial and non-financial) in future periods. As a result, we envisage an improvement in Strategic Risk 2 (Delivery of Ambition) scoring and the gradual mitigation of other people and financial risks articulated elsewhere across the Strategic Risk landscape.
- 11. Taking these difficult decisions is essential if we are to move forward with our recovery plans, with urgent resources needed for our Economic Statistics Plan (ESP) and Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan (SIEP). The number of outstanding ESP posts to fill this financial year is 147. Of these, 66 are currently active vacancies with various recruitment campaigns underway, and a further 58 roles have been successfully identified but pending start.

ONS culture needs to be rebuilt – and I have taken the early steps to do so

- 12. Rebuilding organisational culture, including restoring trust in senior leaders, and ensuring colleagues feel listened to, and that what is heard is acted on, is a key priority.
- 13. I have held two SCS away days across August and September where we discussed the ONS Mission and what our Leadership Statement should be. I am confident that coalescing around a shared set of values and common purpose will be an important step in reestablishing a culture of transparency and understanding.
- 14. A cultural reset also involves demonstrating to the outside world that things are changing in the ONS. James Benford's blog on the decision to delay the Retail Sales publication was a good example. The blog was an honest reflection on the delay to the release, focusing on what we have changed, why we have made those changes and the broader learning that follow from them. The blog received positive feedback, with recognition and support from the Bank of England at the recent Treasury Select Committee.

This transformation is taking place concurrently with the delivery of our wider suite of statistics and associated programmes

- 15. Whilst much of my focus has been on organisational transformation, there has been a lot going on with delivery of our statistical outputs and other programmes:

- i. following issues in the data supply, our Population Statistics teams have been in continued contact with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to support International Migration Statistics due to be published on 27 November. ONS and DWP teams have worked well together to put in place an interim solution to the data challenges, and discussions are taking place about how best to mitigate future risks;
- ii. progress continues with the delivery of the Transformed Labour Force Survey (TLFS) programme, but key risks remain in its delivery to the timeline outlined earlier this year. A critical action is underway around a further risk, relating to delivery confidence of the Transition State 11 January 2026 deliverable, with a likely delay to the TLFS timeline to April 2026;
- iii. following the recommendation to undertake a Census in 2031, the Future of Population and Migration Statistics (FPMS) Programme Board will transition to a Continuous Improvement model. This will support a pivot towards Census activities, as well as clarifying the future of the valuable work that is undertaken regarding administrative data. Finalising and implementing the transition, and associated closure plans, will be a significant area of focus over the coming months;
- iv. following ExCo's decision to close and internalise the Integrated Data Programme (IDP), lessons learned activities are underway and National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority (NISTA) has confirmed that the Integrated Data Programme has now been formally removed from the Government Major Projects Portfolio; and
- v. legacy Ingres Technology continues to put the delivery of some milestones outlined within the Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan (SIEP) at risk. Work is underway to determine a plan of action for the reduction of this technology, including its use in the Annual Survey of Hours and Earning. As discussed at Audit and Risk Assurance Committee, agreeing a coherent plan for legacy is now essential and I will be working on that over the coming weeks.

Darren Tierney, Permanent Secretary, 17 September 2025

National Statistician's Report, September 2025

Purpose

1. This provides the UK Statistics Authority Board (the Board) with an overview of National Statistician activity since the last Board meeting on 31 July 2025. This is the first iteration of the National Statistician's Report since the split of the National Statistician role. I welcome feedback on the content of this report to ensure it best meets the needs of Board members.

Role of the National Statistician

2. On 11 August, following the arrival of Darren Tierney as the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Permanent Secretary, I will continue as Acting National Statistician, and look forward to working closely with Darren as we provide an enhanced leadership capability to ONS and the wider statistical system.
3. Following the role split, as Acting National Statistician, I will remain the principal advisor on statistical matters to the Authority Board, as well as to ministers and Parliament. As Head of the Government Statistical Service (GSS) and the Analysis Function, I will focus my time largely on system-wide leadership of statistical production considering people matters such as capability and quality assurance. I will work closely with other senior analytical leaders across government and represent ONS at relevant international forums.
4. We are setting up a new Directorate, led by Lucinda Eggleton (former Director of Health and International) to deliver on system-wide and international priorities for the National Statistician. We are also preparing to launch recruitment for the Chief Methodological and Statistical Advisor role who will provide strategic methodological advice and develop our approach to second line quality assurance.

National Statistician's Committees and Panels

5. I have begun conversations with the Chairs, Secretariat, and Strategy and Policy colleagues on the terms of reference for existing National Statistician Advisory Committees and panels, and the value they provide to me as National Statistician.
6. I recently met with Bernard Silverman, the chair of the Methodological Assurance Review Panel (MARP) to discuss MARP future changes to the panel to elevate the methodological advice that is provided in light of the revised scope of the role of the National Statistician and incoming recruitment of the Chief Methodological and Statistical Advisor.
7. Nick Vaughan has been appointed chair of the Advisory Panel on National Accounts (APoNA) for a period of three years from 1 September 2025 to 1 September 2028.

Broader UK Statistical System

8. In August, there were two popular events held for the GSS Community which focussed on building capability. This included a Head of Profession knowledge sharing session on Artificial Intelligence (AI) which brought together 77 topic leads in AI for discussions about implementation examples and challenges. The second GSS Community Call for the wider GSS included items on census and GSS Learning and Development. The topics of questions and items for consideration at these sessions are being used to inform planning for our upcoming World Statistics Week sessions, GSS conference and 2025-2026 planning.
9. A gap has been identified in GSS leadership around AI. I am looking to appoint a volunteer ambassador role to support the Deputy Heads of the GSS in promoting and coordinating our activity to use and develop AI enabled analysis. The amount of time and

activities associated with the role are still to be developed but it will be influential in creating a community of practice across the GSS in learning from AI innovation and experimentation.

10. The Analysis Function launched their updated Strategy over the summer and have carried out a series of engagement activities, including a virtual launch event in early September. Conversations are ongoing with Departmental Directors of Analysis to explore the most useful convening that the National Statistician can enable across the Analysis Function to support multidisciplinary delivery.
11. The GSS Heads of Profession quarterly meeting took place on 9 September. Attendees received updates from across the profession, including from myself, the UK Statistics Authority, the GSS Harmonisation team, GSS Presentation Champions and GSS People Advisory Group. The group also discussed approaches to FOIs and the work of the GSS Dissemination Task and Finish Group. The group also received an update from the Royal Statistical Society on their recent work in collaboration with the GSS on the future of the statistician.
12. Earlier this month, I attended the Official Development Assistance (ODA) Delivery and Impact Board, chaired by Baroness Chapman, alongside representatives from across Government. The focus of the Board will be to provide oversight of cross-Government development policy. The meeting touched on coherence, evaluation and transparency with further meetings to be held towards the end of autumn.
13. Discussions have taken place between the UK Census Committee and Inter Administration Committee (IAC) secretariat and cross-UK members as work takes place to refresh the committees. Collaboration will continue with the National Statistician's team and committee members to finalise plans ahead of the respective meetings in October.
14. We have been invited as active participants to take part in exercise PEGASUS, a series of simulated Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies meetings to assess significant elements of the UK's preparedness, capabilities and response arrangements in the context of a pandemic arising from a novel infectious disease. This would allow ONS to build on strengths and lessons identified through the Covid-19 inquiry. The first exercise took place on 17 September, with further exercises scheduled for October.
15. Following an initial discussion at the IAC, on 29 September, I will chair a workshop with the Chief Statisticians and other partners to reflect on UK statistical coherence. Considering the Office for Statistics Regulation report, Livesley recommendations and system wide capacity the goal will be to create a refreshed plan on our approach to coherence.
16. I recently met with the action owners to discuss actions from the UK Statistics Assembly held earlier this year. Action owners provided latest updates on user engagement, more granular statistics, administrative data and UK-wide coherence, and a collective discussion on how work can be taken forward. A follow up meeting will take place following the National Statistics Executive Group in October. Additionally, a UK Statistics Assembly update has also been published on the UK Statistics Authority website.

Emma Rourke, Acting National Statistician, 18 September 2025

Update from the Director General for Regulation

Purpose

1. This paper provides the UK Statistics Authority Board with an overview of Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) activities.

Discussion

2. **Refreshing the Code of Practice for Statistics:** Following final sign-off from the Board, we will publish Code 3.0 at the end of October and formally launch it at the beginning of November. We are planning launch events, as well as preparing other promotional activities, and resources to help embed the new Code too.
3. Since the last Board meeting we have received the outcome of the internal audit of the process for suspending the accreditation of official statistics. This audit was undertaken as part of the 2025-26 internal audit plan agreed by the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee. It covered the processes in OSR and Office for National Statistics (ONS) for suspending accredited Official Statistics. In respect of OSR, the audit found that OSR's framework of governance, risk management and control is adequate and effective. There was one low-rated recommendation for OSR, which is that we should develop a detailed procedure note on the accreditation process that supports the existing accreditation guidance and policies. We will action as part of our wider Code 3.0 work by March 2026.

Casework

4. We have opened a further 14 cases since the July Authority Board taking our total for the year so far to 70. The mean closure time for the year to date is 22 days and the median is 15 days.
5. We have not published any casework letters in this period. However, we expect to publish a response to a letter from Seamus Logan MP in the coming weeks regarding [comments made](#) by the former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Steve Reed MP, that "pollution under the SNP in Scotland is even worse than it was under the Tories in England." The Secretary of State [published his own analysis](#) to back up the claim.

Engagement

6. I have had meetings with Darren Tierney, the ONS Permanent Secretary; Emma Rourke, the National Statistician; and James Benford, the Director General for Economic Statistics. The focus has been on ONS's implementation of its recovery plans. In line with the OSR requirement for quarterly updates on progress, James Benford [wrote to me](#) on 26 August, setting out the initial work ONS has undertaken. This is a useful tool for setting out ONS developments transparently.
7. I spent the first week of September in Edinburgh. I attended the **Royal Statistical Society (RSS) International Conference**. I was struck by the general appetite to support the Authority, ONS and OSR as we consider the governance of the statistical system. There was also a lot of interest in the issues facing the US statistical system.
8. While at the conference, I chaired two sessions: firstly, the awards session, focusing on the winners of the RSS Champion Award for official statistics (Ofsted, for their work on childcare 'deserts and oases') and of the RSS/OSR award for voluntary adoption (Mental Health Innovations, a charity, for their use of the Code in their work to support the delivery of mental health services). Secondly, I chaired a session on ethical standards, featured the head of the Market Research Society, the RSS's vice president for

professional affairs, and the Chief Executive Officer of Ipsos Mori. This allowed me to plug the upcoming Code launch.

9. In Edinburgh I also held bilateral meetings with the chief executive of National Records Scotland, the Chief Executive of Public Health Scotland, the Chief Executive of Carnegie UK, and the Chief Executive of the Scottish Fiscal Commission. I also met the heads of profession for the Scottish Government, Public Health Scotland and the head of Research Data Scotland.

Issues on my mind

10. **Developing OSR's strategy:** We continue to refine our proposed 2026-29 strategy, including in August a series of internal seminars to discuss the proposed themes. The two most significant areas of debate are: thinking through what it means to be a credible and rigorous regulator in the wake of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee hearings; and balancing how to be appropriately ambitious with being realistic about our role in supporting the integrity of evidence beyond official statistics.

Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation, OSR, 17 September 2025

Economic Statistics Plan, September 2025

Purpose

1. This paper updates the Authority Board on recent improvements to economic statistics and on progress of standing up and mobilising resources behind the economic statistics plan (ESP).

Recommendations

2. Members of the Authority Board (the Board) are invited to:
 - i. note progress toward setting out foundations for successful approach to delivery, including creation of a monthly delivery board and quarterly senior external steering group;
 - ii. confirm that the Board would be happy to align discussion of updates on the Economic Statistics Plan to go ahead of the planned quarterly external reports; and
 - iii. note the current position with mobilising implementation of the ESP, including progress and challenges

Background

3. The ONS economic statistics plan, [Restoring confidence, improving quality: The plan for ONS economic statistics](#), was published on 26 June 2025 alongside the Devereux Review and [Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan](#) (SIEP).
4. ESP represents an ambitious series of change which is highly integrated with areas across ONS including several elements of the SIEP and methodology and technology improvements.

Discussion

Setting Up for Success

5. It is key we ensure the Economic Statistics Plan (ESP) is set up for successful delivery with the right levels of control and transparency in place. We continue to shape our approach, but our focus is clear: a nimble approach delivering measurable outcomes, integrated planning, transparent and regular user engagement, and strong governance that enables clear reporting and confident decision-making. We will balance ongoing delivery with the need to build the right foundations – working closely with Finance, Planning and Performance colleagues and applying best practice standards as described in the Teal book.
6. Delivery continues, and our first Programme Board on **1 October** will review progress and agree our governance approach. With cross-ONS representation, the Board will set strategic direction, ensure alignment, and provide assurance and escalation.
7. The external steering group, bringing together HM Treasury, the Cabinet Office, the Bank of England and Office for Budget Responsibility, will meet on 7 October to discuss a reprioritisation of the ONS's statistical outputs.

Progress to Date

8. Since the ESP was published in July there has already been an improvement in the quality of statistical outputs and a move to a more open and transparent approach to communication which has been well received externally. On Gross Domestic Product (GDP), we published an article describing my improvements to Research and Development statistics, the treatment of multinational corporations and to the measurement of education output. On prices, we improved our house price index,

reducing susceptibility to revisions and are on track to resume publication of producer price statistics in October. On the labour market, we published an article explaining the quality and coherence of publishes statistics noting the Labour Force Survey data has come more into line with a range of other indicators as we have improved the sample size.

9. As of the current reporting period, 2025-26, ESP milestone status is **two Complete, 19 Green, 18 Amber**. Amber status reflects that, as delivery progresses, the full scale, complexity, and specific requirements of the work become clearer, highlighting challenges and delivery risks not initially visible at planning stage. These include demand across enabling partners and highlights the need for integrated plans and smart sequencing. While these milestones are under close management, re-scoping or slippage as plans are refined remains an emerging risk. They will be reviewed at the coming Delivery Board.
10. Steady progress continues in filling the posts identified to support delivery of ESP milestones and good collaboration across Economic, Social and Environmental Statistics Group (ESEG) and People and Business Services (PBS) is facilitating the pursuit of various recruitment channels.
11. To date, around 75 vacancies linked to ESP (across the Office for National Statistics (ONS)) have been filled since the publication of the plan in June. In the August update to Executive Committee (ExCo) it was noted growth of continuous improvement capability, embedded in the production teams, was key and filling some of these vacancies enable this to make progress. An additional compliment of over 30 analysts from existing ESEG functions have also been deployed to support ESP delivery. It is not yet clear how sustainable this reallocation is.
12. Current in-flight recruitment activity includes an internal expression of interest initiative which launched on Reggie at the end of August, various external recruitment campaigns, placement of Government Statistical Service (GSS) fast stream candidates, and an upcoming push to secure skills from overseas where they are available. PBS are also establishing a dedicated Deployment Coordination Group to focus on filling the most critical roles.
13. The ongoing ExCo discussions to reprioritise ONS outputs will help to help to provide space and bandwidth the plan in the next financial year (FY). Alongside the recruitment drive this will relieve pressure on stretched teams. There will however be unavoidable stretch across production teams for the remainder of this year now that they are carrying the plan before the posts to effect it are filled. Delivery capacity and change leadership remain key risks, with mitigations underway — including external delivery support and targeted coaching for senior leaders.
14. User engagement remains central to ensuring ESP delivers value and relevance. Stakeholder and technical panels are now established, and the Steering Group referenced last month will meet for the first time in the coming weeks, with quarterly meetings thereafter. This will support an integrated planning and engagement cycle, ensuring user needs are clearly understood and reflected in delivery plans.

Challenges

Beyond FY25/26

15. The pace of programme mobilisation, ongoing resourcing challenges, and evolving user needs suggest that the original ambitions for ESP may need to be revisited. To date, the focus has been on mobilising resources and delivering against the 2025–26 plan. However, early analysis of future milestones suggests that plans beyond this financial year may not be plausible without further action. Stronger prioritisation and sequencing will be required, working end-to-end with production teams and enabling partners. This will be a key focus of the first Programme Board in October.

Alignment

16. Achieving consistent alignment of priorities and resource across ONS remains a systemic challenge. A clear example is the issue affecting the methods review for Labour Market's Average Weekly Earnings. Despite a six-month deferral, delivery remains unachievable due to ongoing resource constraints within Methodology and Quality Directorate (MQD) and competing priorities. This has exposed a wider risk to ESP milestones that depend on timely methods reviews to define requirements.
17. While resolution discussions are underway with Business Survey and MQD colleagues, the underlying issue highlights the need for integrated planning and coordinated resource deployment. Without this, similar delivery risks will continue to emerge across the programme. As such this needs to be an area of focus moving forward.

Consideration for Priority Outcomes

18. This Plan plays a key part in delivering ONS Priority Outcome 2 and bringing Strategic Risk 7 (Quality economics statistics) back into tolerance through its focus on end-to-end quality improvements for our core economic statistics.

Conclusion

19. The Economic Statistics Plan is gaining momentum, supported by a maturing programme structure that strengthens governance, planning, and accountability. Recruitment and redeployment efforts have accelerated, with over 70 roles filled and further campaigns underway. However, delivery risks remain where resource constraints and competing priorities persist, particularly in areas requiring specialist input.
20. As delivery progresses, the scale and complexity of the work are becoming clearer, reinforcing the need for continued prioritisation and integrated planning. Whilst governance arrangements are taking shape and user engagement mechanisms being developed, it is clear the programme must ensure it is setup to make the decisions needed to protect delivery and actively manage emerging risks.

**Lisa Evans, Strategy, Planning, Innovation, Delivery, Assurance and Support
(SPIDAS), ONS, 18 September 2025**

Update on the Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan: September 2025

Purpose

1. Updates to the UK Statistics Authority Board (the Board) on progress made against the commitments set out in the Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan (IEP).

Recommendations

2. Members of the Authority Board are invited to:
 - i. note the positive measurable improvements now being observed across social and business surveys from the IEP, but the financial risk for next financial year (FY) to maintain this progress and support the Economic Statistics Plan (ESP).

Background

3. The externally published IEP outlines activities to restore confidence in our survey operations, enhance data quality, modernise our systems and methods and enhance respondent engagement, for both business and social surveys. The IEP directly supports, and is referenced, within the Economic Statistics Plan. While the Transformed Labour Force Survey (TLFS) sits within the IEP portfolio, this higher complexity/risk programme reports to the Board separately.
4. This paper is the second update to the Board and provides a deeper dive on Business Survey related risks and spotlights Social Survey benefits and progress.

Discussion

Social Surveys

5. Positive improvements in survey data collection performance are now evident as a result of IEP investment, although further work is still required to meet full survey quality targets agreed with users. It will also take time before these benefits are fully realised in published data and statistics.
6. Over the past two months, positive progress includes continued growth in the field community, improvements in field effectiveness and the completion of a major review of telephone operations. However, challenges persist around attrition rates for headcount in the field community and with successfully improving citizen engagement (see paragraph 11 below). With business planning commencing over the coming months, the Board's attention is drawn to the additional annual investment which will be required next FY simply to maintain the increased field size (see paragraph 13).
7. In total there are 21 actions. Of these 21 actions:
 - i. one is complete;
 - ii. 12 are reporting green, delivery is highly likely;
 - iii. four are amber, delivery is feasible but with significant challenges;
 - iv. three are amber / red, indicating delivery challenges with uncertainty associated with the recovery plan. All three are related to the TLFS and are reported separately; and
 - v. one has not yet started.
8. Progress towards the main themes of the IEP are discussed below.
9. **Sustainable Field Operations – field headcounts:** As of 26 August 2025, interviewer headcount has risen by 16 per cent since April, reaching 848. Progress

towards the March 2026 target of 1,023 is now rated Amber given attrition rates, but further management action is in hand with the field strategic resourcing partner.

10. **Sustainable Field Operations – Telephone Services Review:** A six-month long, major review of Telephone Operations (TO) and Survey Enquiry Line (SEL) has highlighted recommendations including improving consistency of management, better training opportunities and tackling outdated technology. By modernising systems, improving quality and availability of management information, and delivering structured training and wellbeing support, the report suggests the teams are well positioned to deliver high-quality data, and adapt to changing survey demands.
11. **Refreshed Citizen Relationship – the Trust project:** Findings from phase one of the project demonstrated some value in targeted communications. The TLFS response during the trial period increased by around five per cent compared with the previous seven weeks. However, the improvement was amongst already overrepresented groups (mainly over 65-year-olds). Communications raised awareness of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), reassured respondents the survey was legitimate, and helped people understand the importance of participation. Phase two is planned to explore approaches to improve participation amongst underrepresented groups, including ethnic minorities and younger adults.
12. **Technology:** Several targeted Artificial Intelligence (AI) projects are currently underway to enhance specific stages of the survey lifecycle. In parallel, discovery work has begun to explore broader AI opportunities across the full Generic Statistical Business Process Model (GSBPM) with the aim of developing a comprehensive strategy and roadmap. Separately, discovery activity is investigating the potential of alternative data sources to improve key aspects of the survey GSBPM.

Risks

13. Key risks relating to TLFS are reported separately. For the remaining IEP work:
 - i. financial Risk - there will be impact into the next financial year (26/27) as a result of the full year costs of the substantial growth throughout this financial year (25/26). Initial estimates are that to maintain the increased field community size of 1023, an increase in budget in financial year 26/27 will be required. This has been raised to finance teams and will form a key discussion within the organisation's forthcoming business planning;
 - ii. resource risk – field scale-up is now rated Amber based on continued high attrition levels of 25 per cent as noted above; and
 - iii. citizen engagement – results of Phase 1 of the Trust project have demonstrated the challenges of targeting the required populations to improve data quality.

Business Surveys

14. There is a plan on a page of IEP actions for business surveys along with a RAG status and description of progress against all actions. In total there are 31 actions with either a business or programme level milestone. Of these 31 actions:
 - i. four are complete;
 - ii. 15 are reporting green, delivery is highly likely;
 - iii. seven are amber, delivery is feasible but with significant challenges; and
 - iv. five are red, delivery appears unachievable.
15. For all red actions and resulting milestones, we are working collaboratively with enabling areas across the organisation to find a route to green.
16. The build of the **Statistical Business Register** (SBR) continues to make good progress, work to ingest data continues to push forward to schedule, our current focus is on ingest of VAT data from the Business Index. The deployment of samples from

the SBR for Building Materials and the Financial Services Survey has been successfully moved from the pre-production environment to production.

17. The Business Impacts and Conditions survey deployment remains delayed due to issues affecting small company selection and discrepancies between SBR and Interdepartmental Business Register Universe counts. Resolving these is crucial for accurate stratified random sampling across all surveys.
18. To transition surveys to the SBR, an integration strategy is needed. This is due to be presented to the ONS Design Authority shortly and will allow us to plan the work that is needed for transition as well as the order of surveys. Without this strategy and resulting functionality build, it remains necessary to playback information from SBR to the Inter-Departmental Business Register, resulting in a complicated approach to sampling and risk of error.
19. Progress continues to be made to move three surveys from **Legacy Technology** to the strategic platform by the end of December 2025. Confidence in achieving this milestone remains high for the Monthly and Quarterly Business Surveys. For the Construction and Allied Trades there are concerns around delivery, weekly stage gate meetings are in place to monitor progress.
20. The replacement of end-to-end legacy technology for the Annual Surveys of Hours and Earnings (AHSE) for the 2026 round, remains in doubt. As reported in the July update to the Board, the complexity of the methods and the “black box” technology presents a challenge in understanding the requirements needed to build a strategic replacement.
21. A comprehensive evaluation of the ASHE end-to-end re-platforming project, which includes the implementation of Power Apps and the Statistical Preparation Platform, has determined that completion by March 2026 is not feasible. Plans and a gap analysis are currently being developed for delivery by March 2027. Concurrently, Digital Services is conducting a discovery process to assess potential opportunities to accelerate this timeline.
22. Significant progress has been made toward eliminating paper-based questionnaires. The electronic questionnaire for single-employee businesses is approved and in development. Research has started on a version for businesses with two to four employees, with plans to extend the Secure Electronic File Transfer system to these businesses as a mitigation.
23. We have successfully migrated the Services Producer Price Survey to online collection and remain on track to move the Import and Export Produce Price Surveys online in October. The migration of Services Produce Price Indices (SPPI) means we can now decommission the Telephone Data Entry system, reducing the ONS legacy estate.
24. **Sustainable Operation:** Account Management now includes 47 businesses, surpassing the August 2025 target by 13 businesses. Recruitment is ongoing, and high interest may allow us to build a reserve list for future roles.
25. The Large Case Unit (LCU) has initiated discussions with two global companies for onboarding, and a major insurance firm has requested inclusion. This will help refine financial surveys account management services. The LCU now manages 210 reporting units, with a year-end goal of 300.
26. The first career pathway now features updated reporting aligned with survey topics, clear progression routes, apprenticeship options, as well as routine loans and secondments in statistical production teams, with similar specialisation in leadership roles. Additionally, we have proposed solutions for recruitment, retention, and skills development challenges in the Business Data Operations Division (BDOD).

27. **Enhanced Business Engagement:** The recent redeployment within ONS has strengthened the Business Surveys Directorate with additional stakeholder engagement expertise. This has expedited the advancement of enforcement, education, and engagement strategies designed to support the forthcoming non-response strategy. These strategies will be published to provide businesses with clear information regarding the consequences of non-response, data usage and storage protocols, and the potential applications of survey outputs.
28. **Improved Survey and Statistical Design:** A tool to assess the quality and risk of methods used in all business surveys has been developed, with survey owners required to complete it by the end of September. This will help prioritise quality reviews and identify which methods need the most attention. When complete we will reassess the milestone to review the Business Register and Employment Survey methodology and sample design, which has moved from Green to Red.

Risks

29. All risks to delivery are reported on the risk register, with mitigating actions and owners assigned and regular reviews. The main risks to delivery of the IEP, are as follows:
- i. resourcing – Support from areas like Digital Services and Methodology and Quality Directorate is essential for IEP delivery. Competing organisational demands may limit resources, but organisation-wide prioritisation in the coming month should mitigate this risk;
 - ii. resourcing – Security clearance delays hinder external onboarding. We are collaborating with ONS security to explore basic clearance options that support faster onboarding while maintaining data protection;
 - iii. legacy technology – Legacy systems affect output quality and staff experience. The ongoing survey methods review will guide legacy replacement and necessary changes. Timely delivery of strategic systems is vital to improving quality and meeting milestones such as the Standard Industrial Classification 2025 transition; and
 - iv. future funding – Ongoing funding for the Business Surveys Directorate is crucial to deliver the IEP. The International Macro-Economic Statistical Standards programme within the Economic Statistics plan relies on Business Surveys, and more funds will be needed from 2026/27 onwards to support this work.

Conclusion

30. Within Social Surveys, there has been encouraging progress across multiple strands of work aimed at strengthening survey performance and resilience. We are beginning to deliver measurable improvements in data collection, with field capacity and interview volumes rising steadily. Amber-Red actions/milestones are all contained within the TLFS programme and reported separately.
31. Within Business Survey, a fourth milestone has been completed, and good progress is being made across many. Delivery of milestones for the SBR and Legacy Technology continue to be at risk, collaboration with other Directorates across ONS continues with the aim of determining the route to green for these activities.

Kate Davies, Director Business Surveys Directorate and Alex Lambert, Social Surveys Directorate, ONS, 18 September 2025

Transformed Labour Force Survey – September 2025 Update

Purpose

1. An update to the Authority Board (the Board) on the Transformed Labour Force Survey (TLFS) Programme.

Recommendations

2. Members of the Board are invited to note:
 - i. the delivery challenges with the design changes due to be implemented as part of Transition State;
 - ii. the latest progress with collecting Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) and Standard Occupation Classification (SOC) data; and
 - iii. the purpose and priorities of the recently established Household, Socioeconomic and Local (HSL) project.

Discussion

3. The TLFS Programme reported Amber-Red at the August TLFS Programme Board given data quality risks associated with the integration of Northern Ireland data and the collection of SIC/SOC data – all risk/issues previously reported to the Board. Since the August Board, while positive progress continues across many aspects of the Programme, the January 2026 Transition State 11 (TS11) milestone, intended to represent the final key improvements to the survey before six months of stable data collection, is now rated Red and will not be met.
4. This Board update briefly summarises broader progress and introduces the new HSL project, before focusing on key risks/issues: TS11 delivery, SIC development and Northern Ireland data integration.
5. Positive progress:
 - i. the short Core TLFS, with a Wave 1 sample size of 90,000 households per quarter across Great Britain, launched on 7 July;
 - ii. supported completion, which enables interviewers to assist respondents within their own homes to complete the TLFS online, goes live on 20 October 2025 with training now ongoing across 333 TLFS field interviewers. This will ensure that digitally excluded or less confident respondents can still participate and aims to improve response rates among harder-to-reach groups;
 - iii. momentum is building on the new HSL project, with the creation of a dedicated analysis and engagement team. However, risks remain due to the relative lower maturity of the workstream (see paragraphs six to eight);
 - iv. the recent internal audit of the TLFS Programme (reported to September's Audit and Risk Assurance Committee) provided a 'moderate' rating and reinforces the importance of ongoing work related to scenario planning, strategic decision making and stakeholder management;
 - v. a focussed effort on resourcing has led to 24 posts being filled across the Programme since June 2025, including many critical vacancies, with recruitment in progress for a further 31 posts; and
 - vi. stakeholder engagement activities have continued with the latest TLFS data update shared for quality assurance with key external stakeholders, regular well-attended meetings of the Labour Market Technical Group, Stakeholder Advisory Panel and the Household, Socioeconomic and Local User Group, and a successful series of external 'deep dive' sessions as part of our peer review programme.

Introducing the Household, Socioeconomic and Local (HSL) project

6. The Board will recall that TLFS consists of two surveys, the very short TLFS core to support headline labour market statistics and the longer TLFS Plus which aims to meet the requirements of a broad range of users currently reliant on the LFS. The HSL project has been stood up at pace to support user engagement, development and decisions on the TLFS Plus survey.
7. Unlike headline labour market statistics, HSL statistics require an annual dataset for production. However, the July 2026 readiness assessment will not include a full assessment of the quality of HSL data as a full year's worth of Plus data will not be available at that point. The readiness assessment will also rely on unweighted datasets, as weights will not be developed in time. A key question the Programme is therefore currently considering is the level of maturity the HSL project will have in July 2026 and how this informs decision making. To support these considerations work is underway to:
 - i. engage with external stakeholders to refresh our understanding of priorities for the TLFS Plus survey, via the launch of an engagement exercise;
 - ii. further develop and transform topics on the Plus survey as the transformation of HSL topics from a face-to-face to online mode is in a mixed state. For example, at present, some topics have been lifted directly from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), with no further development;
 - iii. review HSL analytical priorities, adapting to stakeholder feedback as our engagement progresses. An initial view on whether topics must, should or could be needed for transition are presented, and we will review this as engagement progresses (and welcome views from the Board); and
 - iv. review TLFS Plus topics and TLFS Core topics that appear on the TLFS Plus to ensure coherence for estimates across the two surveys. The Plus-Core comparison is critical to informing the development of aggregate estimates across the two surveys.
8. The position on TLFS over recent years (driven by cost/time constraints) is that a level of risk may need to be taken against HSL data quality and maturity to maximise the speed of transition for headline labour market statistics. This HSL project offers a key step forward in understanding these risks and improving the Programme approach.

Transition State 11 Delivery Confidence

9. The baselined TLFS plan is to introduce all major survey changes necessary to meet critical user needs on the TLFS in January 2026, followed by three months of parallel running and data collection and then a data assessment from April to July 2026 (while the parallel run continues). The January 2026 milestone (TS11) is now Red and will not be met. The impact on Programme timescales is discussed below, but April to July 2026 delivery dates are now more likely, with ongoing work to confirm this. The design changes impacted are data rotation, improvements to the pay and earnings questions and implementation of Search As You Type (SAYT) for the SIC question:
 - i. data rotation aims to improve response and data quality across the longitudinal waves of the TLFS Core survey. By rotating existing data between waves respondents are either not required to respond to questions they have previously answered that will not change between waves or will be presented with their previously submitted information to check that it still applies. With the build now complete, the complexity of testing data rotation is better understood and the test window planned for a January release is insufficient. An initial wave of testing is ongoing, with a checkpoint now at the end of October to re-assess the remaining testing timeline based on the learnings from the first wave;

- ii. the pay and earnings question block is upgraded in TS11 given this is a major source of respondent negative feedback and drop-out. The changes have strong stakeholder support after extensive development within the Pay and Earnings Working Group. This question block has complex routing and requires large scale testing beyond that originally anticipated; and
 - iii. SIC SAYT development to enable SIC quality improvements will not be complete for January 2026 and we are now aiming for large-scale testing on the Plus survey from April 2026 to enable go-live of SIC improvements on the TLFS Core from July 2026. This is explained in SIC/SOC Data Quality Improvement Update below.
10. While SIC development challenges have been long reported to the board, the full scale of effort required to comprehensively test data rotation and pay and earnings questions has only been recently understood as this work has matured. In response to these challenges, the Programme has expanded resource on the TLFS testing team and is currently engaging with Digital Services to identify further opportunities and potential for contractor support. Testers are also now parallel testing data rotation and wider questionnaire changes to reduce the test window. A newly built testing automation package may also speed up testing of standard questionnaire changes (including pay and earnings) considerably. At the end of October 2025, the Programme will know whether the combined impact of these actions will still allow January 2026 to be met, but the current assessment is that April 2026 is more likely.

SIC/SOC Data Quality Improvement Update

- 11. A key focus of the TLFS Programme remains ensuring that SIC and SOC data is collected to an appropriate quality (as defined by SIC/SOC measure of success criteria). Significant stakeholder engagement on SOC now indicates that users may be prepared to accept current SOC quality at the point of TLFS go-live – this is now being followed-up and formalised. The focus of the Programme is therefore now firmly on improving SIC quality, and additional staff continue to be brought onto the Programme to support accelerated delivery.
- 12. A critical friend review has been conducted. The review involved a deep dive on SIC/SOC and identified recommendations that are being progressed.
- 13. The current data collection approach to address the SIC quality issue is to use a SAYT solution, similar to that routinely used in online insurance applications. In parallel, ONS continues to develop an advanced Artificial Intelligence SIC solution, as previously reported to the Board. Accelerated testing of the SIC SAYT solution has shown that further work is needed on the frame and question design. As such, SAYT was not ready for Transition State 10 (October 2025) full scale testing on the Plus survey and will not therefore be ready for January 2026 implementation on TS11. Further SAYT development and small-scale testing is now ongoing with the Programme continues to exhaust all opportunities to bring timescales forward, prioritising additional resources onto the project. Realistic timescales are now to have a SAYT solution for large-scale national testing on the Plus survey from April 2026, ready for go-live on the TLFS Core from July 2026.

Northern Ireland Data Integration

- 14. We are continuing to engage closely with the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) as we work through potential solutions to maintaining UK data outputs and publication timelines as they transition to their new Labour Market Survey. While significant work on both sides has gone into investigating reducing data processing timelines (alongside a range of other potential solutions), a jointly agreed approach that fully mitigates the risk remains to be identified. Teams are reviewing, re-testing and confirming remaining options prior to a decision on the way forward being taken to a TLFS Programme Board in autumn 2025 for ratification but it is

looking increasingly likely that we will not be able to reduce timelines to meet current publication dates without introducing unacceptable levels of risk to the data or reducing the amount of data we include from Northern Ireland.

Overall Implications on TLFS Programme Timeline

15. Current significant effort is focused on the issues encountered with TS11 and SIC data quality improvements, but there is an unavoidable impact on the original plan to have completed all survey improvements in January 2026. As such, at the present time, it is more likely that at least one of data rotation or pay and earnings improvements will be introduced from April 2026, while the earliest SIC SAYT will go live on the TLFS Core is July 2026 (after testing on TLFS Plus in April 2026). Within this context, the current Programme position is to maintain the Level 0 Data Quality Assessment Milestone in July 2026 to still provide a formal assessment of the data quality benefits offered from the short Core and in-home Supported Completion and enable future Programme plans to be confirmed.
16. Although the formal Programme ambition is to transition to the TLFS for headline labour market statistics in November 2026, this was the fastest possible scenario with no contingency to address development risks and issues. We have also always emphasised the need for a data-led approach with decisions made in collaboration with key stakeholders. As reported to the Board in March 2025 and as contained within the TLFS business case, the most-likely TLFS transition timelines were always within 2027. While the most recent development challenges still align to these potential later dates, any shift away from November 2026 would still attract stakeholder and media attention. Work throughout September is supporting a detailed evaluation on Programme scenarios and timelines at the Executive Committee in early October.

Conclusion

17. Positive progress continues across many aspects of the TLFS Programme, most notably regarding the launch of the short Core survey in July 2025, Supported Completion in October and the establishment of the HSL project which is entering into a critical period of engagement and prioritisation. However, the delivery of the TS11 full set of major TLFS improvements will not now occur in January 2026. The Programme is gripping this issue by prioritising additional testing and SIC resource, introducing automated testing approaches and introducing parallel testing of survey improvements. While mitigation actions continue, the Programme is conducting a deep dive on future scenarios and timeframes for the Programme Board and Executive Committee for October and developing internal and external stakeholder engagement plans.

Dr Alex Lambert, Senior Responsible Owner, TLFS Programme, ONS, 15 September 2025