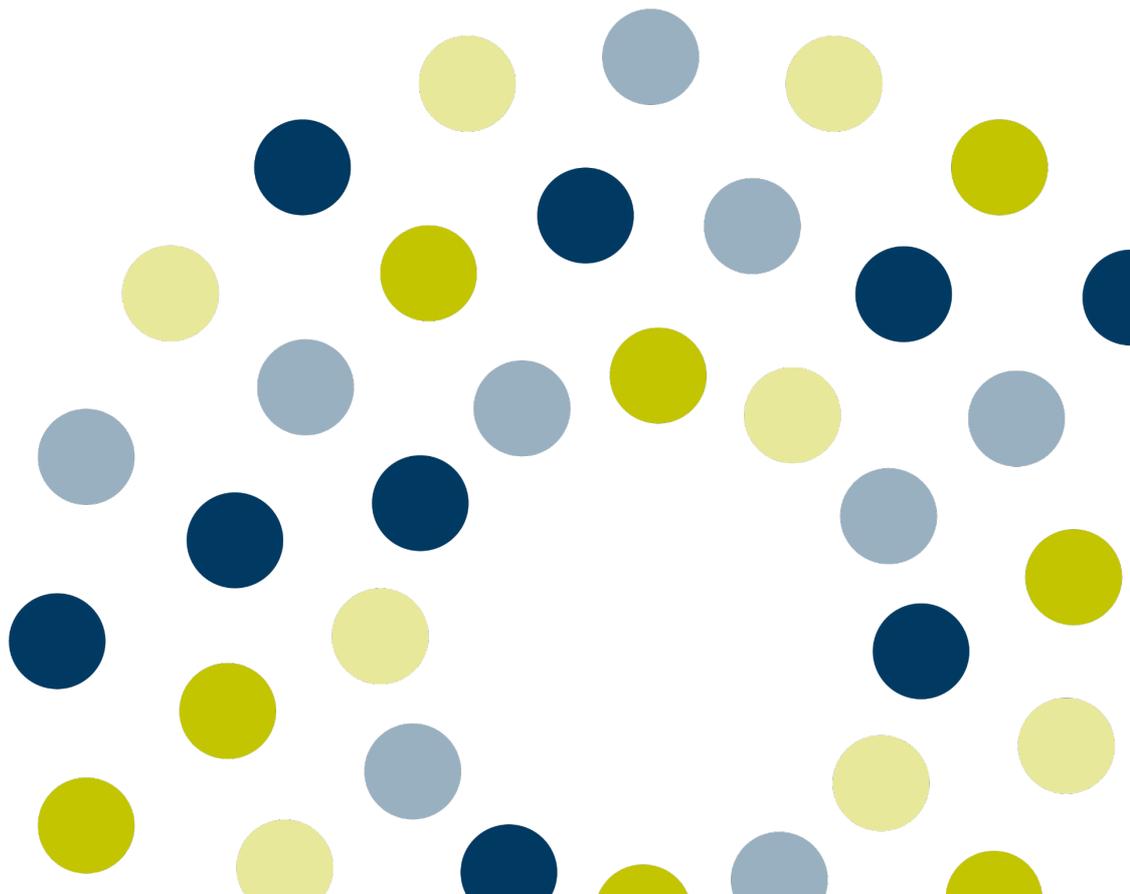


# UK Statistics Authority Board Independent Effectiveness Review 2025

**Led by: Mo Baines, Interim Lead Non-Executive Director in the  
Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government and  
Chief Executive of the Association for Public Service Excellence**

24 January 2026



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# 1. Summary of Findings

The review was conducted during a period of major change and transition for the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA), after a difficult 2025. It was agreed that the focus should be future facing: on how the current Board could maximise its effectiveness, and what changes within the current overall set up could contribute to this. The report does not focus on the well documented challenges set out in the Devereux Report.

The UKSA has continued its improvement journey and there is clear evidence of a culture shift, with the executive embracing challenge and seeking further improvements through collaboration and innovation reinforced by a Board determined to challenge and support.

There are strong examples of the UKSA Board utilising the skill set and time of the Non-Executive Director (NED) cohort outside of meetings, such as work on risk and assurance, communications, statistical advice, and social surveys. The Board is applying challenge and curiosity to process and outcomes, with structure and purpose. At the meeting that was observed, NEDs challenged where they were not convinced an assessment was supported by the evidence, and a constructive discussion ensued.

Executive and Non-Executive members are engaged in the question of what changes would further enhance understanding and scrutiny:

- All agreed that a combination of increased capacity on the Board together with supplementing with specific skillsets would enable NEDs to spend more time building deep knowledge and contributing to the recovery, for example through deep dives and engaging on specific programmes or issues. Strengthening with specific skillsets on operational transformation and programme management; together with macroeconomics would complement and further strengthen the range of deep expertise already in place.
- One suggestion that has been floated within the Executive is for a specific sub-committee of the Board to act as an ONS Board, to allow more time for this. NEDs consider that oversight of the ONS is a key task of the Board itself and that strengthening capacity and broadening skills, would achieve this aim with less bureaucracy. The Board as a whole believes that any major change to the governance set up should properly await a permanent Chair.

The UKSA should consider on-going Board resilience. This is particularly the case on cyclical work programmes such as the Census which require long-term work planning.

The UKSA Board would benefit from stability to enable it to continue its journey. The Interim Chair is bringing strong and inclusive leadership to the Board, but an extended period of uncertainty clearly adds further challenge. It will be helpful if further delays can be minimised. (Cabinet Office leads on this recruitment). In the meantime, given the extended delay, the Chair and Board should not feel inhibited in its decision making.

## 2. Introduction

In line with cross government guidance, this year the Board of the UK Statistics Authority has undertaken an external review of effectiveness led by Mo Baines to get an independent perspective. Mo is the Interim Lead Non-Executive Director in the Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government and Chief Executive of the Association for Public Service Excellence. Mo is also a Visting Professor at the University of Staffordshire (Centre for Business Innovation and the Regions).

### 3. Background

The UK Statistics Authority is an independent body at arm's length from government, which reports directly to the UK Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 established the Authority with the statutory objective of “promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of statistics that serve the public good”. The Authority provides professional oversight of the Government Statistical Service (GSS) and has exclusive responsibility for its two executive arms, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR).

Over the last year the UKSA, including the Board, has been under significant scrutiny. The Authority has been reflecting on its roles and responsibilities and ways of operating. The review is not therefore intended to revisit or reopen matters, which have already been the subject of detailed consideration as outlined below. Rather this independent review is to help ensure the Board can be as effective as possible going forward.

#### Reviews

The following reviews provided useful context and were referenced throughout discussions, which formed the basis of this review.

March 2024: [Independent Review of the UK Statistics Authority by Professor Denise Lievesley CBE](#)

April 2025: [The ongoing inquiry by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee](#) to examine the performance of the UK Statistics Authority, and its two executive offices, the ONS and the OSR.

June 2025: [Devereux Review of the Office for National Statistics performance and culture – UK Statistics Authority](#) (commissioned by the UK Statistics Authority and Cabinet Office).

#### Changes to Senior Leadership

As part of the context, it is useful to note the changes in senior leadership over the last year:

January 2025: [Professor Mairi Spowage, Dr Sarah Walsh and Peter Barron](#) appointed to the Authority Board.

May 2025: [Professor Sir Ian Diamond stepped down as National Statistician](#) due to health issues. Emma Rourke took on the role as Acting National Statistician from this point.

July 2025: Sir Robert Chote informed the Cabinet Office of his intention to step down as UK Statistics Authority Chair in the autumn to take up his role of President of Trinity College, Oxford.

August 2025: Following the separation of the role of National Statistician from the Permanent Secretariat of the Office for National Statistics, as recommended by the

Devereux Review [Darren Tierney was appointed as Permanent Secretary of the ONS](#).

December 2025: [Emma Rourke stepped down as Acting National Statistician](#) and left the Authority in December.

In October, the Authority wrote to colleagues across the Government Statistical Service setting out [its new priorities for the statistical system](#). The letter formally supersedes the Authority's five-year strategy, Statistics for the Public Good.

The recruitment exercise for a permanent National Statistician is underway. The recruitment exercise for the Chair has closed without appointment. A new campaign will launch later in 2026 following the appointment of the National Statistician and the outcome of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee's inquiry.

This timeline highlights the extent of the transition that the Authority is undergoing and the challenges that presents.

## 4. Methodology

I conducted a series of interviews and a group discussion, full details can be found at **Annex A**. I observed the Board meeting held on the 27 November 2025. Due to time constraints, I did not attend Board subcommittee meetings, but I was provided with a recording of the Regulation Committee held on 4 December. I had access to Board papers and was provided with the reports of the annual self-review of effectiveness for both the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee undertaken in August 2025 and the Regulation Committee undertaken in July 2025.

## 5. Key Themes

In all interviews the impact of the challenges faced by the Authority, particularly the ONS during this period, informed the discussions. Reference was also made to the importance of the Board's role in system wide leadership, as well as its oversight of ONS recovery plans. The scale of the ongoing challenges was well understood, and many examples given on positive changes throughout this transition period. The Board has navigated a number of personnel changes; is implementing the separation of roles; has challenged the Executive to act on issues of trust and culture within ONS and to complete the prioritisation work; and to be open in its reporting to the Board and the wider stakeholders. The Executive has got down to work on the recovery plan with energy and commitment, and the tide is beginning to turn in terms of external perceptions.

Much has already changed for the better; and there was a clear appetite to continue improving on the outcomes for the Authority and its related bodies by both the Board and the Executive.

Interviews focused on the effectiveness of the Board, governance, culture, relationships, behaviours, skills and experience, quality of information, diversity of thought and characteristics and potential areas of improvement. Future resilience also featured in some interview discussions.

Key themes identified included the following:

### 5.1. Culture and Behaviours

There is a determination by the Board to provide rigorous oversight, challenge and support for ONS during its recovery, with a recognition that it is early days in terms of delivering recovery plans but that the right steps are being taken to achieve this. The ONS Executive clearly welcomes the increased level of scrutiny, and invites NEDs to continue to develop how it does this. There is a curiosity and commitment evidenced by the Board which will enable this scrutiny and challenge. There is also a commitment and ambition to support the National Statistician and the wider statistical system to ensure the Board focuses its time appropriately across the ONS, OSR and wider system. There have already been more opportunities for the Board to engage with leaders across the system.

Some interviewees raised that in the past, producers themselves often did not attend meetings in person, and reports lacked the required level of candour and transparency on the challenges and levels of risk being faced by ONS. Papers were heavily managed before being shared with the Board. However, there is now a consensus that this has changed since the summer, with changes at a senior level within ONS including the appointment of Darren Tierney as Permanent Secretary and James Benford, Director General for Surveys and Economic Statistics. The provision of information may now be so detailed that the key focus in terms of challenges and risk that the Board should focus on is perhaps not as clear as it could be. Papers are also still very long. This was described by some as an 'overcorrection', with a willingness to ensure degrees of openness and transparency are such that the right balance of information, to enable challenges and risks to be readily identified, may in

fact hinder the desired outcomes. This situation is not unusual and given the findings of previous reviews and actions taken so far, the fact that this 'overcorrection' is readily acknowledged should be viewed somewhat positively. This situation is addressed in some of the recommendations made below, and improvements to high level Management Information are already underway.

Some long standing interviewees commented that cultural issues, such as working relationships at a senior level within ONS, previously created barriers to the effectiveness of the Authority. These have been covered as part of recent reviews and as such there is no need to cover in any detail as part of this review other than to observe that there is a clear willingness amongst both the Executive and the Board to look forward rather than backwards, which is positive. An openness and understanding is encouraged by the interim Chair, and the wider Board, and similarly reflected in the approaches and attitudes of the senior executive leaders and the wider team.

## **5.2. Non-Executive Director (NED) Skills**

The current Non-Executive members of the Board provide a wide range of deep expertise relevant to the Authority. The impact of the delay in the NED recruitment process due to the last general election was apparent during 2024 with the lack of specialist audit and communication skills on the Board. The recruitment with the appointment of new NEDs joining in January 2025 has seen that skills gap addressed, together with the introduction of a NED with extensive experience across the Government Statistical Service. This has all had a positive and growing impact throughout 2025.

Feedback suggests that given the scale and span of the Authority, and the particular challenges of ONS, the Board would benefit from increased capacity together with some specific additional skills. The Authority would benefit from enhanced experience of large scale transformational large scale change and leadership. (The current Board does have members with relevant experience here, but given the scale of the challenge, would benefit from more). The Board does not need a people expert as such but is currently missing skills typically found in a private sector NED who has run an organisation, such as a generalist NED, who would bring enhanced knowledge to the Board of operational transformation and large scale programme management. Given the nature of the organisation a current good example of utilising NED skills is that of media and communications, supporting and indeed encouraging push-back on misinformation issues. A further observation is that the Board may benefit from a macroeconomist.

My observations of the NED cohort is that it benefits from not just UK renowned experts but internationally recognised figures of authority in their own disciplines. Future resilience is therefore important to the UKSA, as such levels of expertise are not easy to replace quickly, and it takes time to acquire deep knowledge of the Authority's work. The Board has a particular concern about the rapidly approaching end of David Spiegelhalter's term in May 2026.

### **5.3. NED engagement**

There are many good examples of making the best use of NED expertise across the organisation outside of meetings. Examples given where this has worked well was during the development of the Future of Population and Migration Statistics Recommendation, with a NED providing a high level of support outside of meetings in reaching the decision point in March 2025, which was a key decision point for the Board. The statistical expert has provided detailed support on specific areas. More recently the ONS Risk and Assurance team are benefitting from a high level of NED support on the work around risk and assurance. Agreement has been reached with a NED attending Programme Board meetings for the Economic Statistics Plan and a NED providing communications expertise for the Transformed Labour Force Survey programme. This is enabling NEDs to be fully briefed on key delivery areas providing additional assurance for the Board – and also an opportunity to advise on areas of challenge outside of meetings. In addition, of course, all NEDs are involved in the work of at least one sub-committee. A new sub-committee has recently been set up (on Population Statistics, including the Census), which further draws on NED engagement and time.

Feedback suggests this can go further and would be welcomed, subject to NED capacity. One suggestion is for NEDs to conduct rapid deep dives in areas of the organisation – complementing the work of ARAC. The current Chair of ARAC has instituted deep dives – complementing this with NEDs looking at particular issues for the Board as a whole could work well.

A note of caution is that during the pre-recovery period it was reported that there was a lack of a systematic approach to NED engagement outside of meetings, which was interpreted by some executives to have had the potential to undermine ONS Executives. Transparency and protocols will ensure that NED engagement serves to nurture open and trusting relationships and strengthen Board effectiveness, and avoid blurring the lines between the Executive and the Board. This has markedly improved recently, providing a greater level of assurance and transparency.

### **5.4. Governance**

The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 established the Authority and its function. There is a recognition that the Board has wide ranging and substantial responsibility. It is a complex and unusual governance system set up by the SRSA 2007.

There was a consensus among interviewees (who were able to comment) that Board agendas during recent years had by necessity focused on ONS major programme delivery, has crowded out other important areas, specifically ONS business as usual but as importantly, system wide topics. Changes have already been made here:

- The Audit and Risk Assurance Committee is chaired by Dr Jacob Abboud. As noted, he has instituted deep dives across the business of ONS. I did not have the opportunity to observe a meeting, but feedback indicates that as an advisory committee to the Board it delivers on its remit to support the Board and Authority's Accounting Officer in their responsibilities for risk management, control and governance. ARAC has conducted a skills

appraisal, and the onboarding of new members has resulted in a strong focus on audit actions follow up, support for the Executive on the system of risk and assurance, and a more realistic assessment of risk levels.

- The Board has instituted regular discussions with the GSS and Chief Statisticians from the Devolved Governments. These have included issues such as harmonisation, coherence and leadership development.

The Regulation Committee (subcommittee of the Board), chaired by Professor Dame Carol Propper is the forum for effective oversight of the regulatory arm of the Authority. Based on feedback the Regulation Committee is working well (and this accords with Professor Denise Lievesley's earlier assessment). The Regulation Committee is essentially the board for oversight of OSR and does so effectively. The impact of NEDs in recent months has included successful encouragement of OSR being clearer and more direct in its assessment recommendations. While formal updates are provided to the Authority Board on the work of the Regulation Committee there are opportunities for Regulation Committee members to be more explicit with the Board as a whole about concerns they have as they arise, rather than wait for the regulatory work to progress through its steps.

Interviewees reflected on potential routes for further strengthened oversight, and there was further opportunity to consider this at the December Board discussion. One suggestion from Executive members was to consider a dedicated forum, for example a Board sub-committee. NEDs commented that ONS is such a major part of the work of the Authority that this may be over bureaucratic and lessen the impact of the Board. An alternative suggestion was for a Production Board that would oversee all production within the Government Statistical System. Finally, broadening the skills of the Board as already identified may be sufficient. (Note that the Authority - previously in 2008 - had a dedicated subcommittee to provide rigorous oversight of ONS delivery). Any solution would need to recognise ONS as the National Statistics Institute, and its role in supporting the rest of the statistical system.

Based on feedback there is no doubt that the Executive welcome rigorous oversight and scrutiny by the Board and the need for concluding the work on the separation of roles and responsibilities between the National Statistician and the Permanent Secretary with the production of a Memorandum of Understanding. Given the recruitment timetable for a permanent National Statistician and Authority Chair the timely completion of the MoU will no doubt assist further in supporting good governance.

## **5.5. Prioritisation of Board agendas**

As has already been noted, Board agendas over the last year have been crowded out by ONS topics focusing on key areas of challenge and as such the Board did not have the bandwidth at meetings to focus on the entirety of its remit.

Over the last few months this has in part been addressed by the Interim Chair with the introduction of regular Board discussions with Deputy Heads of the Government Statistical Service and Chief Statisticians across the Devolved Governments on matters such as coherence and harmonisation of statistics, which they have

welcomed. The appointment of a permanent National Statistician will be key to ensuring momentum on relevant objectives here.

From observing the meeting, a disproportionate amount of time is being spent discussing topical standing updates that can comprise nearly half of the meeting, risking squeezing the focus and discussion on key strategic topics in areas of challenge. This raises a further query as to the frequency of standing items where, given the reporting cycle, there is not always sufficient substantive changes to the reports, suggesting the possibility of alternating some reports to provide Board time for the strategic issues.

## **5.6. Quality of Papers and Management Information**

Based on feedback there is an acknowledgement that a lack of previous reporting with candour and transparency impacted on the effectiveness of the Board. This is already being addressed and perhaps the balance has now shifted to providing too much information, and/or the risk that the key risks and issues are not surfaced clearly enough, making it difficult to focus the Board discussion on the key challenges.

The collective experience of the Board is in place to provide intelligent curiosity on the most critical aspects of delivery. To enable the Board to hold the Executive to account papers need to be open honest and transparent with clear recommendations to facilitate the right discussion.

Based on feedback the current very extensive performance management report is not discussed in any detail and would benefit from substantive discussion as an evidence base for holding the Executive accountable. Discussion tends to focus on the information provided in the main papers. The ONS Executive have been working on improving the management information provided to the Board at the request of the Permanent Secretary and Chair. Generally, the paper pack for Board meetings is far too long – there is a balance to be struck here – but shorter papers with clear options would support effective oversight.

## 6. Future Resilience

The resilience and effectiveness of the Board is critical to the UK Statistics Authority and the UK Statistical System.

Based on this review and alongside the conclusions of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee Inquiry (currently expected to report after the February recess) the Board may wish to consider the following recommendations.

1. **Board skills:** Addressing the current skills gaps on the Board (a) with the consideration of addition of two generalist private sector NEDs – specifically those who have led organisations and delivered major transformational change, and (b) in addition, a macroeconomist. Consideration should also be given to Board resilience should any members leave the Board and the availability and calibre of specialists with the current gravitas of the existing members, especially given the impending end of a second term of a long standing statistical expert.
2. **NED engagement:** Consider how to make best use of the expertise of NEDs with more opportunities for engagement across the business led by the Secretariat. Ensure there is a light touch framework in place that manages NED meetings with Executives, including the possibility of a ‘buddy’ system on key lines of enquiry. If there are capacity issues, consider how best to address these.
3. **Board forward agenda:** Consider the running order for agendas and cycle of reports and noting standing updates to free up time to go straight into substantive strategic items. Secretariat engagement with the Chair, National Statistician and Permanent Secretary is important with input from members.
4. **ONS Board:** As part of the work around governance consider how best to ensure focused oversight of ONS. Three possible routes include expanding the skillset of the Board and keep oversight at Board level; introducing a specific sub-committee; or introducing a more general ‘production board’ to oversee the production side of the GSS generally. If the route of one or other sub-committee is considered, it would impact on the sub-committee structure as a whole and so on, which would need looking at coherently. This may be something an incoming permanent Chair would more appropriately consider.
5. **Board papers:** Consider the Board template for papers with the aim of reducing the length of papers. Reporting to Board should continue to be with candour and transparency focusing the discussion on the challenges and highest risk areas.
6. **Management information:** Review the performance management information – ensuring that it provides the Board with insight to inform discussion. There is a need for a strong empirical base for decision making and providing clarity of areas of concern.
7. **Producer Challenge:** Review whether there is scope to introduce a challenge panel between the Board and producers to enable occasional deep dives into issues which are not otherwise possible in the current Board setting.

8. Physical nature of meetings: The current boardroom in the London office is not ideal. While the seating plan and chairing skills of the Interim Chair encourage inclusivity and diversity of discussion, the long table is not ideal. A circular or oval table arrangement would be better and a larger more comfortable space to conduct lengthy meetings with, by necessity, the presence of a number of Board and Executive members.
9. The current delays in the appointment of a permanent Board Chair is disappointing and while the Interim Chair and Board are pressing on with getting the job done, delay risks the progress made being disrupted or delayed. It will be important to maintain momentum.

**Mo Baines, Interim Lead Non-Executive Director in the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government and Chief Executive of the Association for Public Service Excellence.**

**24 January 2026**

## **Annex A**

### **27 November 2025**

- Observed the UK Statistics Authority Board meeting
- Individual meetings held with Darren Tierney, Permanent Secretary, Emma Rourke, Acting National Statistician and Penny Young, Interim Chair.
- Group discussion with Non-Executive Directors:
  - Dr Sarah Walsh
  - Professor Mairi Spowage
  - Professor Dame Carol Propper
  - Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter
  - Dr Jacob Abboud
  - Peter Barron

### **1 December 2025**

- Meeting with Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation
- Meeting with Alex Lambert, Director Social Surveys

### **4 December 2025**

- Meeting with Professor Sir John Aston (Sir John's term on UKSA Board ended on 31 December 2024)

### **18 December 2025**

- Presentation of initial findings to UKSA Board and discussion

### **January 2026**

- Final report approved.