

UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY

Minutes

**Thursday 18 December 2025
London Boardroom**

Hybrid Meeting

Members Present

Penny Young (Chair)
Peter Barron
Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter
Professor Mairi Spowage
Professor Dame Carol Propper
Emma Rourke
Darren Tierney
Dr Sarah Walsh

Other Attendees

Mo Baines (for item 10)
June Bowman
Kate Davies (for item 13)
Lucinda Eggleton (for item 12)
Nicola Shearman (for item 11)
Rob Kent-Smith
Sarah Moore
Kirsten Newton (for item 12)
Tom Taylor
James Benford
Alex Lambert (for item 13)

Secretariat

Sally Jones
Tom Marsh

Apologies

Dr Jacob Abboud
Ed Humpherson

1. Apologies

1.1 Apologies were noted from Dr Jacob Abboud and Ed Humpherson.

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 27 November 2025 were approved.

4. Report from the Authority Chair

4.1 The Chair noted thanks on behalf of the Board to Emma Rourke for her work as Acting National Statistician and wished her every success in her next role through the Whitehall in Industry scheme. Emma had established a clear focus for the National Statistician's Office. It was noted that in addition to James Benford, Mary Gregory, ONS Executive Director for Population Statistics and Census, would attend Board meetings going forward and Lucinda Eggleton, ONS Director, National Statistician Office, would attend for relevant items relating to the National Statistician's Office.

4.2 The Chair reported on her activities since the Board last met. She noted the need for a clear timetable for the appointment process for a new Chair of the UK Statistics Authority. The recent recruitment campaign had closed without appointment. The Chair highlighted the importance of maintaining the work led by the Acting National Statistician in the coming months. Work was ongoing by ONS to refresh the management information provided to Board and other committees to enable effective oversight. The Chair, Dr Sarah Walsh and Dr Jacob Abboud had met Tom Taylor to discuss the approach. The Minister Josh Simons, Cabinet Office Parliamentary Secretary, had visited the Newport office on 25 November.

4.3 The terms of reference for Population Statistics System Committee, a new subcommittee of the Board, were provided and noted by the Board.

5. Report from the Permanent Secretary

5.1 Darren Tierney provided the Board with an overview of activity and issues since the last meeting highlighting the following:

- i. delivery progress of ONS recovery plans including positive feedback from stakeholders. Significant progress had been made in terms of finance and resourcing of delivery plans with further work which would be undertaken as part of the ongoing business planning process;
- ii. the results of the 2025 People Survey were similar to the previous year with a drop in Employee Engagement by one percentage point. A more detailed paper would be provided for the January Board meeting;
- iii. regarding ONS's senior leadership structure, recruitment processes were ongoing for a Chief People Officer and Director General for Digital, Data and Technology;
- iv. the strategic outline business case for Census 2031 had been considered by a Treasury Approval Panel, supported by extensive engagement by Mary Gregory, Jason Zawadzki and Tom Taylor; and
- v. legacy transformation was a key area of focus for the senior leadership team with work ongoing to develop plans including the use of Artificial Intelligence and the potential for use of consultants to help review the current infrastructure and advise on a route map. A specific session on IT architecture and legacy transformation was scheduled for members of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee on 28 January.

5.2 Members discussed the update and noted the need for ONS to consider the sequencing of the work on prioritisation, business planning and the review of the strategic risk profile. Non-Executive Director engagement with Government Statistical Service (GSS) Heads of Profession had highlighted the importance of ONS engaging with GSS colleagues as part of the prioritisation process. ONS had announced the decisions on the prioritisation work noting

there would be a dedicated ONS lead for the relevant areas to underpin engagement with stakeholders. Prioritisation decisions would form part of the ONS's business planning process.

- 5.3 With regard to the census ONS were engaging with the Devolved Governments on funding and readiness including considerations relating to the interaction of elections in 2026.
- 5.4 The Board heard that work was ongoing to align risk reporting for the Economic Statistics Plan with the strategic risk on quality economic statistics with an agreed set of controls to mitigate the risks around legacy and manual systems. Members highlighted that the key components of the limited opinion, by the Head of Internal Audit for the financial year 2024/25, including data, technology and legacy, were still key areas of focus for the ONS senior leadership team. Board members noted the progress made by ONS with the introduction of a prototype data explorer for provisional weekly death statistics in England and Wales. Another area of progress by ONS included the exploratory work on the potential to use PAYE data to improve labour market statistics.

6. Report from the Acting National Statistician

- 6.1 Emma Rourke provided the Board with an overview of activity and issues since the last meeting highlighting the following:
 - i. collaboration with Professor Dame Angela McLean, (Government Chief Scientific Adviser and Head of the Government Science and Engineering function) and Departmental Directors of Analysis with an event in January 2026 on the strengths and limitations of Large Language Models to support policy making;
 - ii. the work internationally with colleagues in economic statistics with the Ghana Statistical Service; and
 - iii. the plans to publish an update on the response to the UK Statistics Assembly that had been held in January 2025;
- 6.2 The Acting National Statistician had written to Permanent Secretaries of the Deputy Heads of the GSS to thank them for their service and to request support in the interim period without a National Statistician.
- 6.3 Members discussed the update and it was agreed that the draft response to the UK Statistics Assembly would be provided for members in correspondence for comment ahead of publication.

7. Report from the Director General for Regulation

- 7.1 Rob Kent Smith, Deputy Director for the Office for Statistics Regulation provided an overview of regulatory activities since the last meeting, highlighting the publication of OSR's strategy on 26 November. OSR's business plan would be scheduled for Board discussion at the next Board meeting. Areas of focus for OSR included preparation for elections in Scotland and Wales including an update to the Authority's Intervention Policy to ensure alignment with the refreshed Code of Practice for Statistics. Rob Kent-Smith and OSR's Head of Casework had met with colleagues at the Scottish Parliament about the use of statistics in demographic debate.
- 7.2 With regard to publications, on 27 November OSR had published its final report of its review of economic statistics published by ONS, which recognised the work by ONS and set out the approach to the future regulation of ONS in this area. ONS had published its first quarterly report in response to OSR's systemic review on 4 December.
- 7.3 The Board heard that the volume of casework had increased. OSR's 2025 People Survey results had been positive with an increase in employee engagement.

8. Report from the Chair of Regulation Committee

- 8.1 The Chair reported on the work of the Regulation Committee which had last met on 4 December.

8.2 The Committee had considered:

- i. OSR's business plan, strategy evaluation and strategic risk profile;
 - ii. the accreditation of cancer waiting time statistics produced by NHS England subject to some amendment;
 - iii. the publication of the Systemic Review of Mental Health Statistics in Wales;
 - iv. ONS's first quarterly update on the Economic Statistics Plan, which had been published on 4 December. (It was noted that at the November Board meeting had provided an opportunity for Board members to comment on the draft ESP plan for publication);
 - v. OSR reported on its engagement on the Transformed Labour Force Survey (TLFS) and Labour Force Survey (LFS). The Committee had discussed perceived optimism bias in the update on the TLFS to Board in November, which had subsequently been clarified as a misunderstanding of the RAG statuses in the update. These indicators reflected ONS' confidence in ability to make an assessment at various points in time, rather than confidence in delivery;
 - vi. OSR's concerns about draft updates on harmonisation work being led by the NSO for GSS, including on plans for update on progress of sex guidance, which had not been published at the time of the discussion; and
 - vii. an update on the Authority's Intervention Policy and election update in preparation for the forthcoming elections in Scotland and Wales in May.
- 8.3 Non-Executive Director members of Regulation Committee had met with OSR colleagues and discussed topics including workload and the need for the OSR senior leadership team to demonstrate how feedback had been acted upon. NEDs had also met GSS Deputy Heads discussing OSR's role in relation to methodology (including AI); the value of OSR interventions and the approach by OSR to address the backlog of statistics not reviewed for some time.

9. Communications Update

- 9.1 Peter Barron and Sarah Moore reported on recent media coverage of ONS since the last meeting, highlighting the proactive approach being taken by the Communications team. Media coverage and sentiment in November had been more balanced covering a range of statistical outputs. During this period ONS had published two migration releases supported by media briefings. ONS had published the outcome on prioritisation with positive feedback for being open, transparent and taking difficult decisions. There was however still some negative media coverage on themes of poor data quality.

10. Board Effectiveness Review

- 10.1 Mo Baines, lead Non-Executive Director, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and Chief Executive of the Association for Public Service Excellence, presented emerging findings for her external review of board effectiveness. In line with best practice, to undertake an external review every few years, the review had been commissioned by the Chair.
- 10.2 The scope of the review as agreed with the Interim Chair included discussions with Board members, a previous Non-Executive Director and a member of the ONS Senior Civil Service who regularly bring papers to the Board. Mo introduced the item focusing on a number of overarching questions. The discussions covered the effectiveness of the Board, governance, culture, relationships, behaviours, skills and experience, quality of information, diversity of thought and characteristics and potential areas for improvement. Mo had observed the November Board meeting and was provided with board papers and the annual self-effectiveness reviews of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee and Regulation Committee that had been undertaken in 2025. Mo did not attend Board subcommittee meetings but was provided with a recording of the most recent Regulation Committee meeting.
- 10.3 It was acknowledged that the aim of the review was not to revisit the extensive inquiries already undertaken including the Devereux Review and ongoing inquiry by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC). This allowed for a critical friend

approach: taking account of challenges already highlighted together with a forward look focus on how the current Board could maximise its effectiveness and what changes within the current overall set up could contribute to this.

- 10.4 The Board heard that in all interviews the impact of challenges faced by the Authority over the last couple of years informed discussions. Cultural issues, such as previous working relationships at a senior level had created barriers to the effectiveness of the Authority. The Board were committed to providing rigorous oversight, challenge and support for ONS during its recovery.
- 10.5 The review highlighted some strong examples of NED engagement, for example, the development of the Future of Population and Migration Statistics recommendation and more recently the work by Audit and Risk Assurance Committee NEDs supporting the ONS Risk and Assurance team. There was an acknowledgement that Board agendas had been dominated by specific ONS topics (TLFS, Integrated Data Service and the Future of Population and Migration Statistics). This was already being addressed with the Interim Chair ensuring regular discussions on People and Cultural issues as well as GSS and Devolved Governments topics with Chief Statisticians and Deputy Heads of GSS in attendance. The quality of papers and management information for the Board also featured in discussions. This area was being addressed with improvements to high level Management Information already underway. With regard to NED skills the current Board provides a wide range of deep expertise relevant to the Authority. The impact of the delay in NED recruitment due to the general election was apparent during 2024. The recruitment and appointment of new NEDs joining in January 2025 had strengthened skills and has impacted positively. Feedback suggested the potential for further strengthening with enhanced experience of large scale transformational leadership and a macroeconomist.
- 10.6 Members discussed the emerging findings and recommendations - relating to Board oversight including the potential for producer challenge, further strengthening of NED skills, sharpening the quality of papers and management information and the importance of a timely recruitment process of a permanent Board Chair. Some members highlighted their concern at the potential suggestion of introducing a dedicated forum to provide oversight of ONS, noting that it could be counterproductive and bureaucratic. It was clarified that the recommendations would need to be considered fully by the Board, alongside the outcome of the PACAC Inquiry.
- 10.7 The Board noted thanks to Mo Baines for her work on the review. It was agreed that members would have an opportunity to provide further feedback ahead of the Board Effectiveness Report being concluded. The final report would also be shared with PACAC.

11. National Statistician – Memorandum of Understanding [SA(25)68]

- 11.1 The Chair updated the Board on the progress of arrangements for the split of responsibilities between the National Statistician and Permanent Secretary. Progress was being made on the Memorandum of Understanding that would codify the split.
- 11.2 Board members discussed the options, including mitigation of the associated risks, for the split of responsibilities with consideration to the legal advice from the Government Legal Department. The Board collectively agreed that the Board should pursue the option whereby it delegates certain functions directly to the Permanent Secretary under the legislation, whilst also directing the National Statistician not to undertake those functions. It was agreed that members would provide any further comments in correspondence.

12. International Strategy [SA(25)69]

- 12.1 Lucinda Eggleton introduced a paper which provided an update on development of the new GSS International Strategy. The strategy would provide a framework for UK government statisticians to work together to shape international standards, influence global statistics, gain valuable insights on modernisation, and access comparative data. The change of emphasis would provide an opportunity for leading as the UK National Statistics Institute (NSI) to include

an increased emphasis on learning from others. Feedback from consultation across the GSS would be addressed and work was ongoing with the GSS International Committee members to identify priorities that align with the pillars of the GSS Vision 'Strength in Numbers'.

- 12.2 Members discussed the developing strategy. The importance of modernising NSIs was noted including ONS. Regarding coherence, an area of focus included multinational corporations and accounting treatment in the same way across borders. It was noted that International standards did not fully account for AI. It was noted that there were lots of shared international challenges and the strategy provided the opportunity for bilateral and multilateral engagement and shared learning. There was the potential to incorporate Trustworthiness, Quality and Value as set out in the Code of Practice for Statistics. Members strongly endorsed the increased emphasis on learning from others.
- 12.3 The Board noted the developing strategy, which was an opportunity to strengthen the impact of UK statistics internationally.

13. Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan [SA(25)70]

- 13.1 Alex Lambert and Kate Davies introduced a paper which provided an update on progress made against the commitments set out in the Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan.
- 13.2 Areas of focus related to the key challenges of interviewer recognition and sustaining field force headcount with a recent increase in attrition rates. Delivery of the December 2025 milestone for the interviewer recognition project had not been achieved. With regard to business surveys, progress had been made on legacy systems reduction with three surveys transitioned off legacy technology. Work was ongoing to complete the build of the Statistical Business Register but there were a number of challenges to be addressed including uncertainty on timing for legacy systems to be decommissioned.
- 13.3 Members discussed the update. The following points were made in discussion:
- i. the survey strategy work provided the opportunity for ONS to consider a wide range of issues including the resourcing model given the difficulties upscaling the field force and difficulties with the interviewer recognition model. A paper was scheduled for the Executive Committee in January to consider these issues;
 - ii. benchmarking against other similar organisations could also provide useful learning, in areas such as approach to resourcing models, and pay incentives; and
 - iii. the business planning process would conclude the prioritisation process and help underpin the approach by the enabling functions working with the business areas to address legacy remediation.
- 13.4 The Board noted the update.

14. Any Other Business

- 14.1 The Authority Board would next meet on 29 January 2026.

UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY

Agenda

Thursday 18 December 2025, 11.00-14.30

London Boardroom,
Hybrid Meeting

Chair: Penny Young

Apologies: Dr Jacob Abboud, Ed Humpherson

Attendees: Mo Baines (for item 8), Kate Davies (for item 11), Lucinda Eggleton (for item 10), Alex Lambert (for item 11), Rob Kent-Smith, Kirsten Newton (for item 10)

NED Session: 10.30-11.00

1 11.00-11.05 5 mins	Minutes and matters arising from previous meeting Declarations of interest	Meeting of 27.11.25
2 11.05-11.10 5 mins	Report from the Authority Chair	Oral update Penny Young
3 11.10-11.25 15 mins	Report from the Permanent Secretary	Oral update Darren Tierney
4 11.25-11.40 15 mins	Report from the National Statistician	Oral update Emma Rourke
5 11.40-11.50 10 mins	Report from the Director General for Regulation	Oral update Rob Kent-Smith
6 11.50-11.55 5 mins	Report from Committee Chair <ul style="list-style-type: none">Regulation Committee	Oral update Prof. Dame Carol Propper
7 11.55-12.05 10 mins	Communications update	Oral update Peter Barron Sarah Moore
12.05-12.25 20 mins	Break	
8 12.25-13.15 50 mins	Board Effectiveness Review – emerging findings	Oral update Mo Baines
9 13.15-13.30 15 mins	Progress on the split of the role including the draft Memorandum of Understanding and feedback from discussions with key stakeholders	SA(25)68 Penny Young
10 13.30-13.55 25 mins	International Strategy	SA(25)69 Lucinda Eggleton Kirsten Newton
11 13.55-14.20 25 mins	Survey Improvement Enhancement Plan	SA(25)70 Alex Lambert Kate Davies
12 14.20-14.30 10 mins	Any Other Business	

Next meeting: Thursday 29 January, London Boardroom

Arrangements for the split of responsibilities between the National Statistician and the Permanent Secretary

Purpose

1. This paper discusses the options for and risks of giving legal effect to the splitting the responsibilities of the National Statistician (NS).

Timing

2. Board members are asked to agree on the proposed way forward and comment on the draft Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). As well as the general need to codify how we expect things to work, we are particularly keen to have something to work from when we engage with shortlisted candidates for the NS competition in early January.

Recommendations

3. Members of the Board are invited to:
 - i. agree on a preferred option; and
 - ii. provide comments on the draft MOU.

Background

4. The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 (the Act) create the Statistics Board as an independent body corporate. The Act sets the Board's objective (s.7) of *promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good*.
5. The Act then sets out the Board's functions, some are mandatory (e.g. production of RPI, and monitoring of official statistics), and some are permissive (e.g. production of any other statistics and providing statistical services). These functions all rest with the Board, not with the NS.
6. The Act creates the role of NS who has two key roles, which are:
 - i. firstly, they are they are the Board's *principal* adviser on official statistics; and
 - ii. secondly, to be the Chief Executive of the Board and head of the executive office which is to assist them in the discharge of the Boards functions.
7. The NS also has other statutory functions which sit only with them, for example decisions related to pre-release. Additionally, they traditionally also hold other roles such as head of the Government Statistical Service (GSS) and head of the UK Government's Analysis Function, but these are non-statutory and not specified in the Act.
8. The Lievesley review recommended that in the event of the next vacancy of an NS, the Cabinet Office, collaborating with the authority, should:

“Commission a review of the role of the National Statistician well ahead of the next recruitment campaign, examining the many component parts of the National Statistician role to decide whether to propose changes to the role and what this may look like. This should also identify where changes to the Act may be required to facilitate the delegation or sharing of the National Statistician's responsibilities.”
9. More recently, Sir Robert Devereux recommended separating the roles of Permanent Secretary of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and National Statistician, temporarily at least, and it is this that has prompted the current split. From a practical perspective, Darren Tierney and Emma Rourke have been operating in line with Devereux's proposed

separation since Darren's arrival; and work continues on refining the resourcing model. Work has been ongoing on formalising the MoU in tandem.

Discussion

10. The Act allows for the functions of the Board to be delegated to others, and it also allows the Board to direct the NS how to or not to exercise particular functions of the Board. This enables the splitting of the role. As well as our own analysis of the Act, we have taken legal advice from the Government Legal Department (GLD) - see **Annex A** for a summary of the legal risks advised, which the Board should take into account.
11. There are two ways separation can be achieved. Option 1 is, arguably, more explicitly aligned with the intentions of Devereux, but carries more legal risk. Option 2 carries less legal risk but gives a less clear separation.

Option 1 - The Board delegates certain functions directly to the Permanent Secretary (PS) under S36 of the Act, whilst also directing the NS either not to undertake those functions or limiting their role in exercising those functions.

12. The NS would create an executive office as per s.32 of the Act. This would be known as the National Statistician's Office and would be responsible for assisting them with delivering a subset of the Board's functions, as well as any functions which naturally sit with the NS (e.g. Pre-Release Access (PRA)). The NS would be head of this office as well as Chief Executive of the UK Statistics Authority (the Authority). In accordance with s.32(2(b)) the PS would automatically be a member of the Executive if they were one of the Executive members of the Board.
13. Additionally, the PS would be head of the Permanent Secretary's Office (PSO), a separate office sitting within the Authority whose objective is to assist the PS in the exercise of the functions the Board may delegate to them. The PSO would use the branding ONS. The PS would be head of this office, reporting to the Board.
14. This would be effected by (i) A Direction from the Board to the NS not to exercise certain functions (or parts of functions) (ii) A delegation from the Board to the PS giving them power to exercise a subset of functions (iii) the MoU which will provide further detail about what is the remit of the NSO and what is the remit of the PSO and at a high level how the working arrangements will operate in practice.
15. In this model NS and PS are both line-managed by CO, and accountable to the Board. The NS does not line manage the PS, but is able to provide them advice, and - through their membership of Board, as its Chief Executive - will set strategic direction and hold the PS to account alongside other members of the Board. If the Board rejects the advice of the NS, then the Board would need to publish its reasons for doing so and lay a statement before parliament.

Option 2 - The Board directs the NS to delegate certain functions to the PS.

16. In this option the ONS would be the Executive Office established under s.32 of the Act. The ONS would be comprised of two parts (i) a National Statistician's Office (NSO) and (ii) a Permanent Secretary's Office (PSO).
17. As a matter of statute, the NS would be the overarching Head of this office and (as in both options) the Chief Executive of the Board. The NS position as such would have to be reflected in practice which may be achieved by the NS as a member of the Board agreeing high level strategic objectives for ONS; and advising the Board annually on ONS performance.
18. The PSO would be part of the ONS and be responsible for exercising the functions of the Board that the NS has delegated the PS to assist them with.
19. The PSO would be headed by the PS and could operate under just the ONS Brand.

20. This options will be effected by (i) A Direction from the Board to the NS effectively saying 'these are things that are in the remit of the PSO, and you must delegate to the PS' under the power to direct the NS in how to undertake their functions (ii) A delegation from the NS delegating functions in line with the Board Direction and (iii) the MoU which will be the document that provides further detail about what is the remit of the NSO and what is the remit of the PSO and how the working arrangements will operate in practice.

Conclusion

21. As the Act never foresaw the split of the National Statistician role neither option perfectly achieves the policy objectives nor is without a level of legal risk. The legal advice is that both options carry a risk of successful legal challenge (explained more in the appendix), but that Option 2 has a slightly lower legal risk. Although when considered alongside other factors such as accounting officer rules (which we are seeking further GLD advice on), the public statements already made about splitting the roles and the mitigation that big decisions could be taken to the Board then the *overall* risk for either option is in my view in the same ballpark.

Nicola Shearman, Legal and Data Services, 15 December 2025

GSS International Strategy

Purpose

22. This paper provides an update on development of the new Government Statistical Service (GSS) International Strategy (the Strategy) and seeks the Authority Board's advice on how to ensure the Strategy has maximum influence and impact, aligned with the Authority's broader strategy.

Recommendations

23. Members of the Authority Board are invited to:

- i. comment on the proposed updates to the Strategy with a focus on the vision, mission and strategic objectives and on the review process undertaken;
- ii. provide advice on how the GSS International Strategy can gain traction across the GSS and deliver impact internationally for the UK statistical system and wider UK policy objectives; and
- iii. note the timeframe for launch, following the appointment of the new National Statistician.

Background

24. The UK statistical system operates within a global context of international classifications, obligations, standards, guidance and a fast-changing technology and data landscape. The GSS International Strategy '[Statistics for the Global Good](#)' provides a framework for UK government statisticians to work together to shape international standards, influence global agendas, gain valuable insights on modernisation, and access comparative data.

25. A new, updated strategy is required for the 2025-30 period which reflects the current external context as well as changes to the GSS's priorities and operations. The current strategy was written in 2020 during a very different era for UK statistics marked by the Covid-19 pandemic and European Union (EU) exit period when we needed to think about our place in the world as a newly independent system.

26. Through its collective expertise, the GSS has significant power to influence international statistical standards and work with other countries to modernise and strengthen the global statistical system. The Strategy aims to ensure that GSS international engagement is more strategic and focused, delivering greater impact for the whole UK statistical system in line with UK priorities.

27. Over the past five years, key beneficial outcomes of our international engagement on UK statistics includes the negotiation of an arrangement on statistical cooperation with Eurostat which has restarted collaboration and influencing the development of the update to the System of National Accounts, which provides internationally agreed recommendations on how to compile measures of economic activity. The UK's reputation in the global statistical system is also enhanced by the capacity building work it leads – such as through Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding and other funded projects such as Standards for Official Statistics on Climate and Health Interaction (Wellcome) and Analysis 4 Action (Wellcome). This externally funded work allows the UK statistics community to have greater reach and influence on global standards and capacity whilst also supporting the UK's international policy objectives set by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) through its Ministerial level boards.

28. This is the first time that the Strategy has been brought for discussion to the Authority Board. The Strategy is governed by the National Statistician in her/his capacity as head of the Government Statistical Service and the lead international representative of UK official statistics. The GSS International Committee (GSSIC) supports the National Statistician in the coordination and strategic leadership of international statistical affairs. The National Statistician's Office has been conducting a consultation on a new strategy in 2025. GSSIC members have provided feedback on a provisional draft, and we plan to present it to GSS Heads of Profession shortly.

Discussion

29. The Authority Board is invited to share its views on the proposed new text for the Vision and Mission.
30. Consultation within the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and across the GSSIC suggests that the current pillars of Influence, Lead and Build retain currency but could include an increased emphasis on learning from others. This shift reflects the dual impact of Spending Review (SR2) resource constraints across the GSS – where departments need to do more with less – and the increasing areas of innovation globally which the UK can learn from – especially as statistical bodies globally face similar issues. The vision and missions of the strategy will be amended first to reflect this shift, alongside broader text changes, with a potential change to the pillars if necessary.
31. We will address feedback from the GSSIC that the current draft needs to be more relevant to the work of the wider GSS beyond ONS. We are working with GSSIC members to identify priorities that align with the four pillars of the GSS Vision 'Strength in Numbers'¹. Current proposals include:
- i. learning from international best practice on coherence;
 - ii. coordinating in multilateral fora to support the Government's economic growth mission; and
 - iii. gathering insight on international progress on statistical modernisation and innovation.
32. The National Statistician role will be fundamental to the success of the Strategy. With responsibilities for the Strategy's direction and governance, the National Statistician will set priorities, encourage participation and inspire change. As head of the GSS she/he will be able to take a cross-system view, acting as an enabler for the whole GSS and mobilising resource from across the GSS. We also want to strengthen the role of the GSSIC so that it can drive the delivery of activities that align with the Strategy's priorities. We propose to do this through an annual action plan and the establishment of task teams of GSS members that are dedicated to specific deliverables.
33. The final draft will be shared for review and consultation in early 2026 ahead of finalisation in March. The new National Statistician will approve the draft for publication following her/his appointment (April 2026 tbc).
34. Does the Authority Board feel sufficiently assured that the strategy will achieve its aims through the review process set out? Are there additional steps they would advise to ensure that that the Strategy delivers concrete change that is of real value to the GSS.

Conclusion

35. The Strategy is a valuable opportunity to harness the collective strengths of the GSS to strengthen the impact of UK statistics internationally. Success will depend upon engaging the wider GSS in its delivery, using the leadership role of the National Statistician. We welcome the Authority Board's views on updating the vision, mission and

¹ The four pillars are: Coordination, Cooperation and Leadership; Capability and Community; Setting Standards; and Transformation and Innovation

objectives of the Strategy, and on how to help it have reach and buy in from across the GSS.

Lucinda Eggleton, Director, National Statistician's Office, 8 December 2025

Update on the Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan: December 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 note the positive measurable improvements now being observed across social and business surveys from the IEP, as well as ongoing work to update expected milestone dates as projects are established.

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 programme reports to the Board separately.
4. In line with commitments made between James Benford (Director General for Surveys and Economic and Social Statistics (SESS) and the Office for Statistical Regulation (OSR), Office for National Statistics (ONS) has published a quarterly progress update to the website.
5. Some IEP milestones across social and business surveys are currently reported as red. We are addressing these issues, but as outlined in the original IEP publication, timings for some milestones were expected to evolve. As our understanding of delivery increases as work progresses, we are making targeted adjustments to delivery sequencing, managing interdependencies, and refining priorities to support effective and coordinated progress. We are working with the respective Programme Management Offices to re-baseline some of these milestones, with updates to follow at the Authority board in February. Further detail on the specific actions are included throughout this report.

Social Surveys

6. October has seen positive continued progress in social survey operational performance, with comparisons to April demonstrating ~1900 additional achieved interviews are now being obtained a month. It was also positive to see the Office for Budget Responsibility's (OBR) positive feedback on LFS in their budget report. Over the past two months, progress has been made on several actions, including rollout of new technological developments to improve data collection for the Living Costs and Food (LCF) survey (see paragraph 11). Challenges on Interviewer Recognition (see paragraph 10) and with field numbers are being addressed (see paragraph 14).
7. Regarding progress and RAG statuses of all IEP actions for social surveys, in total there are 21 actions. Of these 21 actions:
 - i. three are complete;
 - ii. nine are reporting green, delivery is highly likely;
 - iii. three are amber, delivery is feasible but with significant challenges;
 - iv. three are amber / red, indicating delivery challenges with uncertainty associated with the recovery plan. Two are related to the TLFS and are reported separately and the third relates to upscale of the field community (see **Issues** section below);

- v. two are red, indicating delivery being unachievable. One of these relates to the TLFS and is reported separately, the second relates to the Interview Recognition Project, for which further details are provided in paragraph 10; and
 - vi. one has not yet started.
8. Progress towards the main themes of the IEP is discussed below.
9. **Sustainable Field Operations – field headcounts:** Recruitment for the face-to-face cohort was deliberately slowed over the summer to focus on improving field effectiveness, with plans to ramp up again from September and October. October has seen a sizeable increase in attrition, largely driven by the larger number of agency staff (see paragraph 14). Following the withdrawal of the Scottish boost for the Annual Population Survey (APS), the total headcount target for March 2026 has been revised from 1,023 to 1,003.
10. **Sustainable Field Operations – Interviewer Recognition (IR) project:** Significant additional work to review and improve the design of the IR project is underway. This is required as upscaling of the Face-to-Face community has affected survey allocation, regional variance, and fairness in recognition achievability. In addition, data from Telephone Operations Community has been found to be unsuitable for use. These issues are being addressed as well as strengthened governance and quality risk management. Emphasis is being placed on ensuring the scheme is robust, equitable, and sustainable – recognising that quality in design must take precedence over speed. Delivery against the milestone of December 2025 is unachievable, and there are delivery risks to the forecasted March 2026 implementation. A series of deep dives are occurring with a view to resetting timelines.
11. **Technology – Living Costs and Food (LCF) survey record of spend (RoS) tool:** The RoS tool, developed to replace an Excel diary used to record detailed spending data, launched at the start of October. This marks a significant step in the uplift of LCF data collection. The tool will improve data quality through the inclusion of automated checks, as well as introduce efficiencies by reducing interview administration time, and minimising duplication of data entry.
12. **Technology – LCF receipt assistant tool:** Implementation of the RoS provides an opportunity to further develop and test a new pipeline to automate processing of receipt images using artificial intelligence. Development of the pipeline is ongoing, including improvements to the user interface. Positive feedback has been received from stakeholders during the first phase of testing. Timelines for completion of the next build and second phase of testing are under discussion, considering the prioritisation of other LCF developments.
13. **ONS Social Survey Strategy –** ONS' Executive Committee has commissioned a new strategy to ensure social surveys continue to effectively support high-quality, trusted economic and population statistics. A scoping paper to guide the work and enable strategic alignment will be prepared for January's meeting. This strategy will be delivered in line with business planning and will inform the refresh of the Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan beyond March 2026.

Issues

14. Latest field data indicates a significant rise in interviewer attrition, increasing from 22 leavers per month in April to 52 in October. This trend is primarily driven by departures within our expanding agency interviewer population. This was a potential risk with this resource model and the impact is that interviewer numbers have not risen as anticipated in October and November. We are now potentially hitting a ceiling of around 850–900 interviewers under the current approach which makes achieving the 1,003 target this year less likely. While overall field performance continues to improve month-on-month, missing the target will limit further gains in Quarter 4 for TLFS Plus, LCF, and Wealth

and Assets Survey (WAS). To address these challenges, we have agreed an ExCo deep dive in January and are refining our approach through:

- i. scale up recruitment and retention: increase hiring efforts, introduce longer agency contracts, and push for transfer to ONS contracts where feasible;
- ii. improve workforce support: conduct a deep dive into exit data to understand attrition drivers and refine training and support for agency staff; and
- iii. reassess resource needs: update field headcount requirements based on latest performance estimates to ensure realistic targets.

Risks

15. All risks to delivery are reported on the risk register, with mitigating actions and owners assigned and regular reviews. Key risks relating to TLFS are reported separately. For the remaining IEP work:

- i. future funding – the full year costs of the substantial field community growth throughout this financial year (25/26) will have significant impact into the next financial year (26/27). Initial estimates are that an increase of £8-10million will be required to maintain the increased size as outlined at the last Board. See **Forward Look** (paragraph 38) outlining potential trade-offs in business planning;
- ii. resource – there is a risk that field capacity cannot be sustainably increased to accommodate both our current and future survey targets; and
- iii. interview Recognition Project – as outlined in paragraph 10, the IR project is undergoing significant review and improvements to the design.

Business Surveys

16. The plan on a page of IEP actions for business surveys can be found 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. ten are complete.
- ii. eight are reporting green, delivery is highly likely.
- iii. five are amber, delivery is feasible but with significant challenges.
- iv. eight are red, delivery appears unachievable.

17. For several of the red actions, this reflects justified adjustments to delivery plans. For example, the survey quality reviews have been paused to ensure the most appropriate surveys are addressed first, the milestone for the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) has been acknowledged as unachievable within the original timeframe and will be re-baselined accordingly with clearer scope, and some of the Statistical Business Register (SBR) actions have been replanned to follow a more effective delivery sequence. These changes are being made to strengthen overall delivery and ensure resources are aligned to strategic priorities. More information is included throughout this report.

18. **Technology- Statistical Business Register (SBR):** Work is ongoing to complete the build of the SBR. The functionality to draw samples is nearing completion and is currently being used for the Financial Services Survey (FSS) and Building Materials Surveys.

19. The functionality to integrate the SBR with other systems is preventing us from transitioning more surveys to the SBR, as manual work arounds are needed. The work needed to integrate these systems is understood and is being prioritised by Digital Services. Until this integration work is complete, the milestones to transition further surveys to the SBR will remain red.

20. The work to ingest the Business Index data, VAT, PAYE and extended Companies House dataset, provides an enhanced business population, which will increase the

coverage of our surveys, leading to enhanced quality. The limited test resource available to assure this work is also putting pressure on delivery timelines.

21. We are currently working with Data Governance and Operations Directorate, to acquire Self-Assessment data, expected in Summer 2026, which will further enhance coverage and quality.
22. The International-Macro Standards and Systems (IMSS) work, which forms part of the Economic Statistics Plan, is dependent on the SBR. Whilst the SBR has been built to accommodate a field for a new Standard Industrial Classification (SIC), SIC2026, until the mapping of this to the existing SIC2007 is complete, the new classification structure cannot be adopted by the SBR.
23. The transition of all surveys to the SBR is being discussed, considering the need for sample reviews to assess changes to the structure of the population from the introduction of SIC2026, and population size because of the extended population.
24. We are working towards a timeline for the Integrated Annual Business Survey (IABS), factoring in the above, to use the SBR as a sampling frame in April 27, adoption of SIC in 2028 and extended population in future years, to allow Economic Statistics the opportunity to assess the impact of each change. The IABS is also pivotal to the wider adoption of SIC2026 and the IMSS work.
25. **Technology – Legacy Reduction:** The Monthly Business Survey and Construction and Allied Trades Survey were successfully deployed on the Statistical Preparation Platform (SPP) in November. The Quarterly Business Survey was successfully deployed on SPP in December. Statistical results processing has also commenced on the Data Access Platform (DAP), marking a significant milestone for the teams.
26. The full replacement of end-to-end legacy technology for the Annual Survey and Hours and Earnings (ASHE) for the 2026 round, as reported in the September update, is no longer feasible. Progress on developing a plan for March 2027 continues as we work through the complexity of this change.
27. We have identified some misalignment on the definition of the end-to-end scope which we are prioritising with stakeholders and our enabling partners to establish a credible plan. The ASHE milestone (Action 12.1) is expected to be re-baselined and segmented into three distinct parts to enable accurate reporting and effective management of each component in the next financial year.
28. **Technology – Digital Collection:** The Business Prices suite of surveys has transitioned to online collection, projected to deliver £10,000 in savings for 2025/26 and £31,000 annually thereafter. As reported in the September update, migration of the Services Producer Prices Indices (SPPI) enables decommissioning of the Telephone Data Entry System, reducing the ONS legacy estate and generating £19,000 in ongoing annual savings.
29. Moving the Business Prices Surveys online brings the total number of questionnaires despatched online to 2.23million.
30. The remaining ASHE questionnaires currently on paper (118,000) will move to digital in April 2026. This is expected to yield £0.1million in savings in 2026/27. Following enrolment in year 1, we estimate £0.2million in savings in ongoing years.
31. **Technology – Automation:** ClassifAI has significantly improved Standard Occupation Classification coding for the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, reducing coding time by 224 hours in the latest collection.
32. An impact assessment using 300,000 business descriptors compared ClassifAI with the current G-code tool for Standard Industrial Classification. A decision to adopt ClassifAI for the Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES) has now been taken with

plans in place to re-code BRES classifications using ClassifAI, increasing the quality of coding and providing further reductions in coding time which will be reinvested into the quality assurance of business returns to this survey.

33. **Sustainable Operation – Large Cases Unit and Account Management:** While current targets are being met for Account Management, recent staff attrition has exposed gaps in expertise that may impact milestone delivery. Recruitment is underway to address these gaps; however, a temporary slowdown in progress is expected during onboarding. We will continue to assess expansion plans to understand and manage the potential impact.
34. Legacy technology and the need to work across multiple systems continue to hinder team expansion and efficiency. A pilot digital innovation collaboration has concluded, exploring automation and AI solutions to address these challenges. The resulting recommendations will inform future improvements and support expansion efforts.
35. **Improved Survey and Statistical Design:** The survey tool to assess quality and risk has now been completed by all survey owners and will be used to prioritise quality reviews. The quality review milestones (9.2, 9.3 and 9.4) have now been paused and moved to red whilst directors agree the priority order. While milestones and public commitments are considered, prioritisation will focus on areas of greatest risk and impact.

Risks

36. 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 as well as survey operations colleagues who will accept and embed the transformation. Competing organisational demands are limiting and stretching 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. We are also exploring ways to onboard larger cohorts efficiently and redesign training to build capability at scale and pace;
 - 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.

Forward Look

37. Looking forward into Financial Year 2026/27, ONS is working towards a single portfolio of change to improve economic statistics, with momentum on improvements continuing across business and social surveys as key themes within this portfolio.
38. Within social surveys, maintaining the current size of the field community already necessitates continued investment (see paper SA(25)49), and while it would be ideally valuable to boost both the LCF Survey *and* the WAS, likely prioritisation and trade-off decisions will be required. With the Scottish boost for the APS stopping from January, ONS is now engaging with users to understand the merits of continuing the English and Welsh boosts given current quality concerns and will report back at the February board.

39. For business surveys, recent work has quantified the quality risks associated with the survey portfolio and is enabling prioritised action to be included in business planning. The recent ExCo decision to prioritise business survey consolidation is being considered alongside the quality review and we will integrate these elements to assess their impact on the 26/27 portfolio of work.

Conclusion

40. Within Social Surveys, three milestones have now been completed, and good progress has been made on several others including launch of improved data collection for LCF. Detailed review of some actions, including the IR project, are underway and any necessary changes to milestone dates will be updated in due course.

41. Within Business Surveys, four more actions have been completed, and good progress is being made across many. Milestones for the SBR, Legacy Technology and Survey quality reviews need to be reviewed to reflect justified and targeted adjustments to delivery sequencing and to reflect office prioritisation, which we will update on at the Authority Board in February.

Kate Davies, Director, Business Surveys Directorate, Alex Lambert, Director, Social Surveys Directorate, December 2025