



Review of the UK Statistics Authority Cabinet Office response to the recommendations

Introduction

We have today published the 2024 Independent Review of the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA) conducted by Professor Denise Lievesley CBE. We would like to extend our sincere thanks to Professor Lievesley for her time and insights in conducting her review.

As the Review states, the power of statistics shapes our understanding of the world in which we live. Credible, timely and relevant statistics help all of us make informed decisions and allow us to measure progress and track performance. For the Government, devolved administrations, local authorities, businesses, charities and beyond, statistics underpin our understanding of the past and our policies for the future. Pleasingly, Professor Lievesley noted in the foreword that the standing of the UKSA is remarkably high.

The Lievesley Review is both timely and valuable in its concise articulation of some of the most challenging issues facing the government's statistical system. It captures the complexity of the UK's decentralised approach, and sets out what the government needs to prioritise to realise its ambition to deliver a data enabled future. Most pressing is how to share data between departments responsibly, efficiently and effectively in order to derive the most benefit for our citizens.

Professor Lievesley does not offer prescriptive solutions to the systemic issues facing the government as these are for the Government collectively to consider and agree. As a Non Ministerial Department the UKSA is a department in its own right: it derives its core budget directly from HM Treasury and is operationally independent, though it is accountable to Parliament through Cabinet Office Ministers. As such, some of the 19 recommendations are for the UKSA to adopt and deliver, though where appropriate this response sets out Cabinet Office expectations and views on implementation.

The Review highlights two multifaceted, persistent challenges: the lack of comparable data between the different parts of the Union and the barriers to data sharing within government. In the interest of publishing the Review as quickly as possible this response sets out only the Cabinet Office's initial thinking on these topics. The onus is now for us to work with other government departments to develop nuanced policy solutions to the challenges identified. Once this work has been completed it is our intention to publish a more detailed response to these two recommendations later in 2024.

Where necessary the Cabinet Office has sought views from other departments across government when formulating this response.

Background

The Lievesley Review was conducted as part of the Public Bodies Review Programme launched in 2022 in line with the 2021 Declaration on Government Reform. The Review followed the requirements and expectations of the programme and focused on four themes: governance, efficacy, accountability and efficiency. While a central tenet of the review

programme is to find 5% efficiencies, given that the UKSA had already committed to 10% savings with HM Treasury it was agreed that this review would not seek to find further savings.

Cabinet Office's response to each recommendation

Recommendation 1: The UK Statistics Authority (UKSA) should lead the establishment and delivery of a Triennial Statistical Assembly. This Assembly should involve key organisations inside and outside Government and across the four nations, with the remit of determining the UK's needs for statistics through a wide consultative process. This should include the private sector, government departments, local government, academia, think tanks and media representatives.

The UKSA will then respond to this by producing a proposal for the statistical priorities for the next three years, thus identifying data gaps and ensuring that users can hold the statistical system to account on the delivery of the programme of work. It will also enable other producers of statistics to complement the work of the official statistical system and factor this work into annual budget allocation processes.

To respond to the Statistical Assembly and to supplement its findings, an annual public lecture from the Chair of the UKSA should be delivered to provide an update on the work of the statistical system and priorities for the year ahead. This should build on the OSR's annual State of the Statistical System report. The lecture would raise the profile of the Board, further user engagement and establish the UKSA's leadership role in the statistical space.

Cabinet Office response: Agree, with conditions

While the Cabinet Office welcomes improving the transparency and accountability of the UKSA through the establishment of a UK-wide Triennial Statistical Assembly and an annual Chair's lecture, external user engagement will always be balanced against the statistical needs of the Government - particularly economic - which take precedence.

As a Non Ministerial Department the delivery of such an Assembly would fall under the independent operational activity of the UKSA and is for the department to implement. Should this work be taken forward it will be delivered out of the UKSA's current funding envelope, for which there are resources for user engagement. The Assembly would be most effective if it was timed to take place ahead of a formal Spending Review.

The Cabinet Office will seek assurances from UKSA that steps will be taken to ensure that the Assembly has strong representation from the private sector and is not captured by special interest groups.

Recommendation 2: The Review recommends that the expertise of the senior staff of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) would be greatly enhanced by the appointment of a Director General for Methodology who would be a focal point for the improvement and communication of data quality, and who would foster engagement with senior methodologists in other national statistical offices and in academia.

Cabinet Office response: Agree, with conditions

Personnel decisions are for the UKSA to determine as a Non Ministerial Department, though the Cabinet Office notes that such a post exists in many national statistics offices internationally, notably Canada which enjoys an excellent reputation.

The creation of such a post would be delivered out of the UKSA's current headcount and funding envelope.

Recommendation 3: The Government should amend the statistical legislation so that the Act reflects current practice, taking the opportunity to make clearer the practical operation of the UKSA. For example, that the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) reports separately to UKSA, not via the National Statistician, and that the Director General of the OSR is an Accounting Officer and is expected to report separately to PACAC.

Cabinet Office response: Agree in principle

While there is a case to update the Statistics and Registration Service Act (2007) to better reflect current governance practices and further improvements, this is not a current Government priority and will be a matter for the next Parliament to consider.

In the meantime the UKSA leadership should take active steps to combat the 'misunderstanding and confusion' that the Review summarises regarding its governance arrangements and the relationship between ONS and OSR to assure users and stakeholders that robust systems are in place to regulate the ONS and the wider GSS.

Recommendation 4: The inconsistent application of Pre Release Access to official statistics across the UK statistical system has the potential to undermine trust. The Cabinet Office and devolved legislatures should amend the relevant secondary legislation for each nation at the earliest opportunity to follow the approach to Pre Release Access taken by the ONS in line with the Code of Practice for Statistics.

Cabinet Office response: Disagree

Pre Release Access for official statistics provides time for departments to have a considered policy and media response to publications of official statistics. Robust processes are in place to deal with breaches of pre-release restrictions within UK Government.

At this time the UK Government has no plans to alter the current arrangements.

Recommendation 5: The UKSA should build on existing work and lead discussions between the four nations and strengthen the Concordat to encourage more UK wide data by creating common standards and improving harmonisation where appropriate and mutually agreed. HM Treasury should ensure that funding is available to support the harmonisation of key data.

Cabinet Office response: Agree

The UK Government intends to publish a more detailed response to this recommendation later this year as improving comparable data between the four parts of the UK remains a priority. Any funding decisions will need to be considered as part of the next Spending Review.

It is fundamental that citizens in all parts of the UK should be able to compare their data with other parts of the country. Comparable data are also crucial to enable all administrations to identify, design, and deliver interventions which benefit people and communities across the United Kingdom. When this does not take place, as we saw with the UK Census in Scotland when it was carried out on a different timeline to the rest of the UK, not only did this contribute to lower uptake and higher costs but also much of the data are not fully comparable to the rest of the UK as it took place in a different year.

The Review sets out the current challenge: where data are collected through the delivery of a service (i.e. administrative data) differences in policies, definitions, timing and other aspects of methodologies can result in data that are not comparable. This can prevent statisticians, elected representatives, service providers, the media and members of the public having a clear idea of how services and outcomes compare across the UK.

The Cabinet Office welcomes steps taken by ONS in recent months to prioritise this area of work and recognises that there is no simple solution. The UK Government is committed to working with the UKSA (particularly ONS) and the Devolved Administrations to put in place a better system to increase the collection and publication of UK wide comparable data, including future legislative options if required.

Recommendation 6: The centre of government, led by Cabinet Office and HM Treasury, must actively work to resolve the systemic, often cultural, barriers to data sharing between departments. All government departments, particularly those who own significant amounts of data, must prioritise data sharing for statistics and research purposes and support the development of programmes such as the Integrated Data Service to enable greater sharing of data across government for statistical and research purposes.

Cabinet Office response: Agree in principle

The Cabinet Office welcomes the Review's focus on data sharing within government and will set out a more detailed response to this recommendation later this year. We are committed to push forward on this important issue with the support of other departments

Recommendation 7: The IDS is critical in facilitating the greater use of administrative data and bringing greater efficiencies to statistical analysis and decision making across government and academia. The Review therefore recommends that the ONS takes action to ensure that the purpose, scope and requirements of the IDS are clearly communicated and that the needs and concerns of departmental data owners are sufficiently understood.

Cabinet Office response: Partially agree

The Cabinet Office agrees that the implementation of the Integrated Data Service is one of a number of developments that has the potential to improve the government's ability to share data responsibly, effectively and efficiently between departments and across all parts of the UK. Reviewing the progress against delivery of the Integrated Data Service will be considered as part of the wider work to respond substantively to recommendation 6 on data sharing later this year.

The Cabinet Office also urges the UKSA Board to increase their oversight of the delivery of IDS and ONS's stakeholder engagement on the programme across government.

Recommendation 8: Regarding the National Statistician role, Cabinet Office, working with the UKSA Board 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 in order 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; and
- Examine the talent pipeline and talent development structures it has in place across the Government Statistical Service (GSS) to ensure that those with potential to be future applicants for the National Statistician post and other senior roles in the statistical system are identified and nurtured.

Cabinet Office response: Agree

The Cabinet Office agrees that in recent years the role of National Statistician has been a challenge to appoint and welcomes this suggestion to review the role. The Cabinet Office will undertake a proportionate review, with input from the UKSA Board, of the role in 2025 to explore if and how the role can be split. The Cabinet Office will also work with GSS regarding the wider talent pipeline.

Recommendation 9: Within ONS a suite of actions relating to communications should be adopted, including:

- Urgently improving the website so that it meets user requirements more effectively;
- Ensuring that there is a better understanding of the levels of uncertainty around specific official statistics, particularly economic, to reduce public (and government) surprise to revisions; and
- Building partnerships with organisations that foster relevant communication expertise to improve engagement with the wider needs of users.

Cabinet Office response: Agree

The ONS's website is a vital tool for the general public and government officials alike. As the report highlights, the current website is sometimes hard to navigate and during periods of high demand users report that it is not as responsive as it needs to be. The Bean Review raised concerns regarding the website in 2016 and while some progress has been made it is regrettable that the website still does not yet meet user needs despite increased investment.

While funding arrangements are a matter between UKSA and HM Treasury, should additional funding support be sought during the next Spending Review the Cabinet Office would expect a detailed action plan be put in place to ensure value for money. We would anticipate the website is developed in a way that exploits modern infrastructure and AI technologies in full and that data are made available in modern machine readable formats at the point of publication via API.

The Cabinet Office agrees that statistical uncertainty does need to be better understood within government, the media and the wider population. The Cabinet Office would welcome clearer, more concise communications from ONS to accompany key statistical publications, particularly on high-profile economic statistics. The Cabinet Office supports ONS working with partners - such as the Bank of England and the Office for Budget Responsibility - to ensure that statistical and other uncertainties are communicated more effectively.

Recommendation 10: The Authority Board should look to appoint a Non-Executive Director with relevant communications experience to advise and support the UKSA.

Cabinet Office response: Agree

The Cabinet Office is currently conducting a campaign to seek a communications expert to join the UKSA Board.

Recommendation 11: The Advisory Groups working with the National Statistician should become more formal: recruitment should be open and be clearly advertised to encourage applications. The style, design and attendance at the meetings should also be reviewed to ensure that they facilitate frank constructive sharing of views and feedback.

Cabinet Office response: Agree

The Cabinet Office supports increasing the diversity of challenge and rigour within ONS in order to drive the quality and timeliness of the official statistics it produces. All opportunities to advise the National Statistician should be advertised transparently through the ONS website, and the appointments made fairly and on merit.

Recommendation 12: To demonstrate the commitment to user engagement and remind producers of its importance, the reference to ‘consult users before making changes that affect statistics or publications’ in the UKSA Code of Practice should be reinstated so that users are consulted before producers make substantial changes to statistical data collection or outputs.

Cabinet Office response: Agree

The Cabinet Office agrees with this recommendation, though it urges users to be mindful that the UKSA must prioritise its work and make difficult decisions to stop work in order to allow for new statistics to be collected.

Recommendation 13: Internationally, the UKSA should:

- In consultation with His Majesty’s Government, prioritise the establishment and signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with Eurostat in line with the option provided in the Trade and Cooperation Agreement; and
- Update its international strategy, *Statistics for the Global Good*, to provide more detail on how it will engage and lead within key global organisations, including the OECD and IMF.

Cabinet Office response: Agree

The Cabinet Office supports these recommendations. Given the UKSA’s international standing there should be a continued emphasis on their role as a thought leader among our international peers.

As ONS develops its next international strategy post 2025 the Cabinet Office would expect to see significant engagement and alignment with other international departments and teams (where appropriate) across government.

Recommendation 14: The UKSA should engage with the Cabinet Office to explore the consequences of mandatory completion of the Labour Force Survey.

Cabinet Office response: Agree

As the largest household survey in the UK, the Labour Force Survey is the cornerstone of ONS statistics on UK employment. Addressing falling survey response rates, and the subsequent reduction in the quality of data, must be a priority of the ONS. As part of wider efforts to increase response rates the Cabinet Office is willing to explore all options with UKSA and key users within government, including the opportunities and risks of implementing mandatory completion of the Labour Force Survey. Non-mandatory options to increase response rates will also be considered as part of these discussions.

Recommendation 15: The UKSA should build on its work engaging with Parliamentarians and Select Committees of both Houses and devolved legislatures further. It should continue to seek out opportunities to proactively add insights and value to the work and interests of the Select Committees. Equally, Select Committees should actively seek to use ONS data and analysis.

Cabinet Office response: Agree

As a Non Ministerial Department, UKSA is accountable directly to Parliament. The Cabinet Office supports wide engagement between UKSA and parliamentarians, which should not be limited just to the Parliamentary Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. All Parliamentarians should be encouraged to make the most of ONS data and analysis. The Cabinet Office welcomes the suggestion of greater ties between the ONS and the House of Commons library.

Recommendation 16: The Cabinet Office should look to supplement the existing sponsor team with resource to give the support and resilience required.

Cabinet Office response: Agree, with conditions

The Cabinet Office appointed the Directors of Analysis in both No10 and Cabinet Office as co-senior sponsors in Autumn 2023 in order to bolster the expertise of its sponsorship of the department. We agree that the current sponsor team could benefit from additional resource and see this as an opportunity to take a new approach to public body sponsorship and creatively draw on the analytical, digital, data and project management expertise housed within Cabinet Office. A matrix approach will ensure that the sponsor team has the right level of resource and expertise without requiring additional departmental headcount.

Recommendation 17: The Memorandum of Understanding between the UKSA and Cabinet Office as Sponsor Body should be reviewed by both organisations to ensure that it reflects the requirements in the HM Treasury Framework Document Guidance for Arm's Length Bodies mindful of the UKSA's statutory independence.

Cabinet Office response: Agree

The Cabinet Office intends to have reissued the Memorandum of Understanding / Framework Agreement by the end of 2024.

Recommendation 18: The UKSA should develop a framework to follow when considering ad-hoc commissions for statistics in order to be open about the opportunity costs of such work.

Cabinet Office response: Agree

The Cabinet Office supports the development of a priorities framework to better enable UKSA (specifically ONS) to effectively and transparently prioritise their work and to be clearer about what the potential opportunity costs are in accepting new projects.

The ONS must balance new requests from the Government with its ongoing vital production of core economic statistics, and must do more to battle the perception - particularly within the economic community - that 'business as usual' work is being downgraded in favour of newer or bespoke projects.

Recommendation 19: The UKSA should step up efforts to build partnerships outside of government, particularly with universities and think tanks, given the clear economic and social benefits to this collaboration.

Cabinet Office response: Agree

The Cabinet Office supports expanding UKSA's partnership work, not just with universities and think tanks but with business and the private sector across the UK. There is a great deal of innovation happening outside of government which the ONS should capitalise on and learn from.

Better utilisation of sovereign data assets through private partnership could result in a range of tools and products that citizens would welcome. The ONS is encouraged to think creatively on how it can make full use of other data assets and work with new partners to create markets for the benefit of our citizens.