

OFFICIAL STATISTICS – A FRESH FOCUS ON USE

Summary

The Royal Statistical Society is publishing this paper to support the case for the Office for National Statistics (ONS) establishing and implementing a strategy for improving user engagement across the Government Statistical Service (GSS). Such a strategy should embrace not only the existing users of current statistical outputs, but also recognise that there are unmet demands and potential new users. A strategy is needed to put into effect the welcome promise that users will be at the centre of the production of UK official statistics: a promise that so far has only been realised in a limited number of places. Producing a strategy is only the essential first step: it needs to be underpinned with a change of culture throughout the GSS, to spread the good practice found in the parts of the GSS that are clearly focussed on the use of the statistics and the data for which they are responsible.

Evidence for the need for improvement is clear from many of the assessments and compliance checks of official statistics carried out by the Office for Statistics Regulation, part of the UK Statistics Authority¹, and from OSR and other wider reviews of official statistics. In some cases, these are leading to improvement programmes and other transformations². However, user engagement issues and unmet needs continue to be flagged with the GSS, including through the Statistics User Forum (SUF), hosted by ONS, and the topic-based user groups. There are pockets of good practice across the GSS, some of which has been recognised in RSS awards for excellence in official statistics³. Nevertheless, there is much more to do to raise the standard across ONS and the whole of the GSS.

In this paper we emphasise the case for official statistics as a public good, recognising their value to society, because we believe that case has still to be realised. We then recommend action that we wish producers of official statistics to undertake to improve the use and usefulness of official statistics through better engagement with users.

Our key message is that the RSS urges the UK Statistics Authority, in conjunction with the senior management of the ONS and statistical heads of profession across the GSS, to develop, drive and fully implement an effective user engagement strategy, with the aim of substantially improving the use and the usefulness of official statistics.

“We know the price of a beer and a pint of milk. Why not the cost of educating a child?” Laura McLnerney, The Guardian, 20 November 2018

¹ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/osr/what-we-do/>

² Eg to respond to Professor Sir Charles Bean’s independent review of UK economic statistics, 2016

³ Eg the 2018 awards reported at <https://www.statslife.org.uk/news/3841-campion-awards-for-official-statistics-2018-winners>

The value of official statistics to society

Statistics from official sources inform and influence decisions and actions, in government and public administration, business, the voluntary sector and by individuals and interest groups. Those 'uses' of the statistics affect all our lives, such as our earnings and the prices we pay, or the provision of health services and local amenities. There is substantial public investment in the production of statistics. The return on that investment should not simply be computer systems full of data, but their use to improve the lives of people and make the world a better place. It is the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority, the ONS and the wider GSS, not just to produce data but to seek actively to maximise the societal benefit from their use.

"While various measures of income inequality and poverty exist, the UK no longer has an official measure of poverty for children, adults or pensioners. This leaves a situation where policymakers and politicians are less able to track progress and it is more difficult to hold them to account for effectively tackling the causes of poverty or improving the lives of those in poverty." Final report of the Social Metrics Commission, September 2018

The Royal Statistical Society's Data Manifesto⁴ observes that data is to the 21st century what steam and oil were to earlier centuries. Data is the driver of prosperity, the resource that can transform economic activity, and offer the capability that differentiates successful from unsuccessful societies. The Data Manifesto starts with the need for more effective engagement with statistics to support public policy-making. But it also stresses that there are many socially beneficial uses of official data that are not directly related to that agenda, be that individual decision making, community engagement, strengthening democracy and trust, or in commercial developments. Individually they might not have the influence of policymakers, but collectively they may be equal importance in our day-to-day lives. Whether it is management decisions in the health service, targeting crime prevention initiatives, identifying the most deprived and vulnerable communities, or in business investment, marketing, or other commercial decision-making, official statistics are used way beyond the world of policy.

The 2018 Code of Practice for Statistics issued by the UK Statistics Authority supports this theme when it states *"Users of statistics and data should be at the centre of statistical production; their needs should be understood, their views sought and acted on, and their use of statistics supported. Statistics producers should maintain and refresh their understanding of the use and potential use of the statistics and data. They should consider the ways in which the statistics might be used and the nature of the decisions that are or could be informed by them."*⁵

But this formulation is often implemented in ways that side-step the obligation to maximise the societal benefit from the statistical services of government. There is an opportunity to

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http://www.rss.org.uk/RSS/Influencing_Change/Data_manifesto/RSS/Influencing_Change/Data_democracy_sub/Data_manifesto.aspx?hkey=5dd70207-82e7-4166-93fd-bcf9a2a1e496

⁵ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/code-of-practice/>

change that mindset with the need to develop the use of ‘big data’ and data linkage. In responding to our call for a strategy, we anticipate that ONS will integrate the strategy with the actions it is planning in response to recent recommendations on data linkage from the OSR, including:

- “Actively seek input from the public in major decisions about statistics production and statistical research using data linkage
- Identify clear, consistent and meaningful language to use when engaging with the public about data safeguarding, linkage and use
- Maximise opportunities to identify the questions that society wants answered by exploiting existing networks of senior leaders e.g. Heads of Profession, Chief Statisticians, Directors of Analysis and Chief Scientists”⁶

The importance of understanding and communicating use and potential use

The UK Statistics Authority’s Code of Practice for Official Statistics covers all aspects of official statistics, including data quality and how to build trustworthiness, as well as supporting society’s needs for information. However, some rebalancing of effort is needed across these strands in the delivery of official statistics.

One example of this is from Professor Sir Charles Bean’s recent review of economic statistics in ONS. He recommended that ONS should refocus its culture “towards better meeting user needs ... Staff should be proactive, rather than reactive, in engaging with users and responsive to those users’ needs”⁷. While, as we noted above, there is now a programme of improvement to economic statistics, culture change here and more widely is still needed.

The National Statistician, the government’s chief adviser on statistics, recognised the issues in a statement in 2016 in which he said:

“We need to reach beyond debates around incremental changes to the status quo via set piece consultations, to understanding and capturing user insight to make the radical changes UK official statistics demands. Our decision making needs to be well informed by the best expertise in a given field whether from government or beyond, and the voices of senior experts and users need to be better integrated into our activity.”⁸

“There is still a focus across the GSS on key government users (HMT, Bank of England, etc) and there needs to be more thought about the public’s data needs.” Comment at SUF meeting discussion on user engagement, 2 November 2017

⁶ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/joining-up-data/>

⁷ C.Bean, *Independent Review of UK Economic Statistics: Final Report*, 2016
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-uk-economic-statistics-final-report>

⁸ John Pullinger, *Transforming our user insight*, 2016, available as Item 4, Annex 1 here:
<http://www.statsusernet.org.uk/viewdocument/agenda-and-papers-for-suf-meeting-2?CommunityKey=ce7d4fe7-9072-44da-afb2-d6b48077edb6&tab=librarydocuments>

The way forward

While it is easy to say that users should be at the heart of everything that producers of official statistics do, putting that into practice is more problematic. It is also not simply about reaching more users but, more fundamentally, about delivering more - and more effective - use of official statistics in an increasingly crowded information space. This requires more - and more effective - understanding by producers of the use of their products, through user engagement and by outreach to prospective users.

There are many factors that militate against the provision of a full service as envisaged here. They include: lack of time due to the demands of the statistical production cycle; anxiety about giving a lower priority to the needs of the government of the day; lack of experience and expertise among staff in key positions; dominant government users who do not want the statistical voice to be heard if it appears to be at variance with current policy; and so on. Clearly there are resource implications, although this may be more about re-distributing and using existing resources more efficiently than seeking significant additional resources. Our call for a strategy is not just for a document but also for planned and resourced action to tackle all of these factors and to change culture where there is currently a belief that openly engaging with users to discuss the use of the statistics will prove too difficult and unrewarding.

As exemplified by the RSS awards for excellence in official statistics, some government statisticians do tackle these obstacles and are finding a way forward; taking specific steps that make a real difference.

Our conclusion is that there is more that ONS should do to support engagement between producers and users of statistics and data. High level vision statements need to be supported with clear goals, embracing the societal value of official statistics that we have set out here. That is one element of what should be included in a strategic framework for ONS and the rest of the GSS. This would also provide ways of identifying, rewarding and sharing best practice in user engagement. Implementing the framework might, among other things, cover best practice for engaging with users and prospective users, along with guidance on how and when to do this. It should recognise that some uses span different sets of statistics and that users vary widely in their knowledge and skills. It should define roles and responsibilities, both within individual statistical areas and those in central support and advisory functions. Management responsibilities should be highlighted, including to recognise good practice and to share it. And as this will take time and resources to achieve, there also needs to be a resourced implementation plan and timetable, against which progress can be monitored and shared with all stakeholders.

It is for ONS to develop such a strategic framework, engaging with users and with other producers as it does so. One approach that could be adopted as a way of launching this

work draws on well-established marketing practices⁹. So, for example, ONS senior managers might start the ball rolling by challenging each of their teams on their current user engagement, along the lines of:

- 1) Who currently uses your statistics, how are they used, and how do you know?
- 2) What are your modes and methods of engagement? How, and how often, do you reach out to users and seek out potential users? Do you have (or have you considered) a strategy for statistics and analysis. If so, is there a team with responsibility to implement that?
- 3) How do you liaise with other business areas that engage with the same users? What scope is there for building relationships with users that take recognise all their uses of official statistics?
- 4) Have you identified other sources of data, statistics, analysis and commentary that users are drawing on, as well as your outputs? How do you position your outputs in that wider 'information space'?
- 5) How easy, or not, is it for users and potential users to find your outputs? What effort is required (which might count against the value of the statistics)?
- 6) What steps are you taking to draw public and parliamentary attention to the beneficial uses made of the statistics you produce? What further steps might you be able to take if you had access to additional resources or stronger senior management endorsement?

We believe ONS then needs to review the results of such an exercise, share the findings across the GSS and with other stakeholders in order to develop a strategy for improving the use and usefulness of official statistics.

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⁹ Allin, P. (2017) "Official Statistics and the Politics of Sustainable Development", WSEAS Transactions on Environment and Development, Vol 13, Pages 49-56.

<http://www.wseas.org/multimedia/journals/environment/2017/a145815-048.pdf>

This draws on: Collins, M, (2010) "Building a Better Mousetrap isn't Enough"

<https://salesandmarketing.com/article/building-better-mousetrap-isnt-enough>