

Statistics User Forum



Statistics User Forum Evidence to the House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee Inquiry examining the role and performance of the UK Statistics Authority

1. The Statistics User Forum (SUF) is an ‘umbrella’ organisation which helps to bring together the increasingly large numbers of groups of statistics users. Its role is to support users of official statistics in communicating their needs to the producers of statistics; in turn, it offers a channel through which such producers can communicate and build relationships with a broad range of statistics users. SUF meets three times a year and its website [StatsUserNet](https://www.statsusernet.org.uk/) is always open for on-line discussion and information-sharing (with approaching 2,500 members and 35 communities of interest).

2. SUF aims to:

- help ONS, the UK Statistics Authority and all providers of UK official statistics (broadly defined) **improve user engagement** and more effectively meet users’ needs
- **champion ‘the voice of the user’**, so that users are at the heart of the development and production of all official statistics
- **promote the value of official statistics to society**, including by showcasing official statistics products and developments
- **encourage exchange of good practice in the running of user groups**. This fits with the ONS expectation of “a strong, self-sustaining user community”.

3. SUF was launched in 2004, building on the long-standing Statistics Users’ Council. Until late 2016, SUF received organisational and administrative support from the Royal Statistical Society, but this support is now provided directly from the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

4. The current membership of SUF is listed at Annex 2. This submission has been prepared by the chair of SUF, drawing on existing SUF material and in consultation with user groups referred to in this evidence.

Our evidence to PACAC comprises:

- Five cases studies which we trust will be helpful to the Committee. These mainly **address questions 5 and 6** in the PACAC review – engaging in dialogue with users, and ensuring that official statistics are easy to access, understand and use – and also **question 8**, translating vision into practice;
- A paper calling for a fresh focus on the use of official statistics (see Annex 1). This paper has been summarised and supported in the evidence **addressing question 5** submitted by the Royal Statistical Society¹. SUF worked closely with the RSS’s National Statistics Advisory Group in preparing the paper.

¹ <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/public-administration-and-constitutional-affairs-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/governance-of-statistics-inquiry-17-19/publications/>

CASE STUDY 1: Health and care statistics (England)

5. In response to the many concerns raised by users for some considerable time, the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA) has been very active over the past few years in initiating and supporting work aimed at improving access to, and use of, health and care statistics, and has attempted to ensure that the user community has had an opportunity to participate. The work that was initiated following these UKSA activities is still ongoing but has already led to some improvements.

6. These activities included several User Engagement events held by the UKSA Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR). This initiative started with convening a *High-Level Round Table*, which raised and documented issues of concern that had been reported. These were discussed in greater detail at a *Health and Care Statistics User Summit*, held in July 2016². Some ways forward to address these issues were agreed and a *second Health and Care Statistics event* was organised by OSR in November 2017 to report on progress and get feedback from users. The theme of this event was “Putting users’ needs at the heart of improving health and social care statistics”, and a report is available on the OSR web site³.

7. Information about subsequent progress that has published on the Government Statistical Service website by the producers of official statistics on health and care⁴. This provides information on how producers of official statistics are working together to improve the coherence of health and care statistics and to aid users to find the information they need. Two key committees have been established to steer and take forward this area of work:

- The *Health and Care Publications Advisory Board* aims to drive improvements in English health and care statistical publications through collaborative working and sharing best practice in order to better meet user needs.
- The *English Health Statistics Steering Group* (EHSSG) brings together producers of official health and care statistics together to improve the relevance, coherence and accessibility of health and care statistics with the aim of meeting users’ needs (see footnote 3 for further information and links, including the monthly emailed *Health and Care Knowledge Updates*). *Theme Groups* are being established, each focusing on a topic and together covering a wide range of aspects of the health and care statistics system. The Theme Groups have initially involved just producers but, as they become established, user representatives will be involved.

8. One of the main features of the work of EHSSG is the development of a *Health and Care Statistics Landscape for England*, an experimental and evolving output, providing links to official statistics on health and care produced by major organisations. The initial development of the Landscape just included lists of statistics available on particular topics, but ONS has now developed a tool to help users of government statistics find and access data and publications on health and social care covering England. This is hosted on the GSS website⁵ and allows users to search statistics by geography, theme, or search term. It is still under development and users have been encouraged to try it out, share with colleagues, and provide feedback on an ongoing basis to the health team at ONS. Although further work is required to improve the content and functionality of the Landscape tool, this development is a significant step forward to improve information about the availability of health and care statistics, and it has been welcomed by users.

² <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/better-statistics-better-decisions-health-and-care-summit/>

³ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/health-and-care-statistics-user-conference-summary/>

⁴ <https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/health/>

⁵ <https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/hc-statistics-landscape>

9. Although work initiated by OSR and taken forward by ONS/GSS and other provider organisations within health and care has led to improvements in information about the availability and scope of health and care statistics, major concerns remain in other areas. Accessing NHS data for England held by NHS Digital for analysis and research is a particular problem and these concerns were already well known to OSR. It responded in its review of data linkage and data access in the UK published in September 2018. This review investigated the UK statistical system's ability to provide greater insight to users via linked data⁶. It found that developments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland were well ahead of those in England.

10. The report of this review describes the problems with accessing health and care data in some detail mentioning the "different conditions for accessing health data versus other types of data held by government" and "We spoke to users in government, universities, think tanks who are frustrated by what they feel are unnecessarily prohibitive restrictions" (section 2.14). It also states that "Potential users of health data in England were particularly vocal about their difficulties accessing data ... We heard about lengthy and duplicative processes, often compounded by complex information governance structures and lengthy risk-assessment processes by data controllers, resulting in applications taking years to progress." (section 2.51). These processes have made it impossible to complete, or in some cases even start research projects within the time periods for which they have been funded. As a result, scarce research funds have been wasted. The extent to which the processes have been dominated by lawyers rather than experts in data analysis has been questioned. It is clear that NHS Digital does not enjoy a high level of public trust and this has led to 'opt out' procedures which have compromised the integrity of data made available for research and led to a potential for biased results.

11. There have been some positive developments to address these issues, but significant problems still remain. Users are looking to OSR to prompt and facilitate further work, and Proposal 16 within the review was "Work with health data users and NHS Digital to scope the terms of an independent review of NHS Digital's health data sharing and access processes". We welcome this much needed work, which is currently under way. However, consideration is still needed of the extent to which UKSA has the powers it needs in relation to NHS Digital, an 'arms-length' body, and the extent to which statisticians are involved at the higher levels of management of these data.

12. To sum up, this case study shows many positive aspects of UKSA, when it identifies an area of official statistics needing attention, brings together relevant producers and users and ensures that new structures and processes are in place. However, we can also see that more needs to be done. There are still issues and frustrations, including over access to health and care data for further scientific and policy analysis.

13. Finally, this case study also highlights two broader issues. First, it is not clear how UKSA identifies all potential areas needing attention, and how it then selects the areas to be progressed. Second, there is a concern among users who are looking for UK-wide official statistics that their voice is not always heard. There is clearly a tension here, between users who need a UK wide picture, say for international comparisons, and users only concerned with the separate, devolved administrations of public services. There is of course a long history here: England, Wales and Scotland have had separate health systems since 1919 and Northern Ireland as a different history. Services and the administrative data collected about them have developed differently. We do see a role for UKSA here, to develop collaborative working across the UK, making sure there are opportunities for staying in touch, sharing experiences between the four nations, and learning from

⁶ www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/systemic-review-outline-data-linkage/

each other. Greater sharing of information would help users understand differences between how the data are collected, and how data items are defined, in order to clarify where they are consistent and where they are different. Even where there are differences, statistics can perhaps be combined in a meaningful and useful way.

Case study provided by the Health Statistics User Group

CASE STUDY 2: Education statistics

14. This case study draws on observations made during SUF meetings and elsewhere about the lack of user engagement on education statistics for England, beyond the close working between the producers of education statistics and their policy colleagues. This has resulted in a specific statistical picture of education, based largely on management information from schools on test and exam results, rather than a more rounded picture, as required by users beyond government and policy, of the education system, its long-term outcomes and the role of education in developing society. The wellbeing of children and their social and emotional development is important to society and is identified internationally, including by the OECD, but receives only cursory attention within UK official statistics.

15. It seems that UKSA, the Department for Education and other providers have made little attempt to reach out to a wider range of users and potential users. (For instance, the Higher Education Statistical Agency user group is only open to authorised members⁷). One example of such excluded users are school governors who, as the RSS notes, “need to understand and interpret a wide range of data about the school, including performance and financial information”⁸. This includes local and national data for context and comparison, as well as school data. Little thought has been given to how this group of users may have different needs to inspectors and central policy. It is also pertinent to note that such little official data is available about governors themselves and the work they do that a relevant charity organises an annual survey to establish trends and cross-sectional statistics for England⁹.

16. The experience of one recent correspondent to the New Statesman magazine is far from unique: “It is, of course, extremely difficult to find useful figures among the plethora of reports and tables [online]. I am concerned, however, that many commentators may be neglecting a key point: namely that state schools and academies are now dealt with on completely different tables, as different entities”, which makes it very difficult to understand what has happened in terms of funding over time¹⁰. The landscape of education statistics is highly compartmentalised, with little if any joining-up or overview to show the full statistical picture of education. This was highlighted in DfE statements about changes to funding which inappropriately included student loans and private schools¹¹.

⁷ <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/about/what-we-do/user-group>

⁸

http://www.rss.org.uk/RSS/Get_involved/Support_school_education/School_governors_/RSS/Get_involved/Support_school_education/School_governors.aspx?hkey=d320dd63-48b0-48a5-aab9-e4e81a9963c2

⁹ National Governance Association, in association with Tes

<https://www.nga.org.uk/Guidance/Research/Academic-year-2018-19/School-governance-in-2018-an-annual-survey-by-NGA.aspx>

¹⁰ Andrew Murphy, “Doesn’t add up”, letter to New Statesman, 1-7 February 2019.

¹¹ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/department-for-education-statistics-2/>

17. Education is generally held to be one of the most important aspects of our society. The education system is complex, constantly changing and delivered by many different organisations. UKSA has recently logged a number of innovative projects and developments in ‘children, education and skills’ statistics across the UK¹², pointing out that these “reflect an ambition to improve the value of the statistics”. However, although UKSA refers to users, it is by no means clear that they have talked with many users outside of the providers of education and we are not aware of a systematic approach to improving user engagement in education statistics, or to tackling concerns about quality assurance, governance and privacy that have been raised about the administrative data on which the statistics are based.

18. UKSA has responded to serious concerns about the Department for Education’s presentation and use of statistics. In a letter to the Secretary of State for Education in October 2018, the Chair of UKSA noted that “The UK Statistics Authority has had cause to publicly write to the Department with concerns on four occasions in the past year”, regretting that “the Department does not yet appear to have resolved issues with its use of statistics”¹³. It is not clear what further action UKSA might take to help with this, or how this would be integrated with broader improvements both to maximise the benefits of education data and to build trust among the people and organisations from which the data are drawn.

19. It would seem timely for UKSA to give fuller attention to the overall state and utility of education statistics. As noted in the previous case study, this also points to the need for a more transparent identification of issues and their prioritisation within UKSA’s work programme, undertaken in consultation with as wide a range of users as possible. There should also be more working in partnership between UKSA and organisations providing access to official and other data, especially the ESRC’s funded data resources, which have identified education as one of the topics where existing data can be used more extensively in research¹⁴, once an appropriate ethical basis has been established and agreed.

CASE STUDY 3: Neighbourhood Statistics System (NeSS)

20. ONS launched the Neighbourhood Statistics (NeSS) website 2001 and closed it in 2017. This platform had existed to provide good quality, small area data for England and Wales, initially to support a government agenda of neighbourhood renewal but soon becoming a resource for many different users, especially those wanting data for areas defined by postcodes. The way in which UKSA handled the closure of NeSS, and its failure to offer comparable services subsequently, caused widespread concern among the user community¹⁵. The lessons to be learned include:

- Importance of understanding the user base. In this case, parish councils for example seemed to be ‘off the radar’ of ONS, despite parish councils having duties requiring local data. ONS also seemed to be unaware of the extent to which NeSS was used in various ways in education, including to enable students to learn about their local population;

¹² <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/improving-and-innovating-enhancing-the-value-of-statistics-and-data/>

¹³ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/department-for-education-statistics-2/>

¹⁴ Eg <https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/news-and-events/eventsitem/?id=5453>

¹⁵ Eg see email to National Statistician in <http://www.statsusernet.org.uk/viewdocument/agenda-and-papers-for-suf-meeting-1>

- More effective and targeted communication with users. It is not sufficient to post notices and expect that users and potential users will find them. All communication must be clear, open and relevant to users;
- Experience gained through the cooperation and partnership of data suppliers across the GSS and beyond should be valued and built on, rather than discarded as in the case of NeSS;
- Greater engagement of users in the planning and delivery of developments. This is particularly vital where, as here, developments are triggered by the need to evolve an existing service, giving an opportunity to enhanced functionality rather than reduce it;
- Seeking opportunities for collaboration across the UK (in this case, local statistics continue to be available for Scotland and for Northern Ireland).

CASE STUDY 4: Consumer price indices

21. The submission to PACAC from the RPI CPI User Group summarises a number of serious concerns about UKSA from users of consumer price indices. The User Group has regularly updated SUF on these concerns, which exemplify a number of issues with UKSA that are found more generally, including:

- What appears to be disproportionate weight given to government users and voices, rather than seeking to meet the needs of a broader set of users;
- Tendency to focus on the production of statistics and their technical qualities, rather than on the use of statistics and their broader quality. The latter would look at statistics in terms of their fitness for the various purposes to which they are being put;
- Unwillingness to offer advice on how statistics should be used (and, where relevant, how they should not be used);
- Some reluctance by UKSA to take the initiative and 'call out' inappropriate uses of official statistics, rather than waiting for concerns to be raised with them.

Case study drawn from SUF meeting minutes and agreed with RPI CPI User Group

CASE STUDY 5: Migration statistics

22. Migration statistics are seldom out of the news and there are many users requiring up-to-date and accurate statistics on the numbers of migrants, whether between parts of the country or between the UK and other countries. There are challenges in defining migration and in measuring it. ONS provides the secretariat for the Migration Statistics User Forum and actively engages with users and with other official statistics producers (such as the Home Office and DfE) here and through other channels, including as part of a major transformation programme for population and migration statistics, linked to future Census developments in England and Wales.

23. The launch in 2017 by ONS of a "new era for migration statistics"¹⁶ was therefore welcome, if a tad overdue, as a move not only to press on with statistical developments but also to publish more insights as well as data. Iain Bell, the deputy national statistician responsible for this area, recognised that ONS "must create a clear and compelling story that informs the debates which matter to people. We will be where people are with information to inform the debate". As for a number of other key social topics, ONS has set up an internal Centre for International Migration, including to

¹⁶ <https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2017/09/22/ons-forum-new-era-for-migration-statistics/>

draw together data from a variety of sources. Regular statistical releases have been improved, with more charts and text, including key points and warnings about possible mis-interpretations of particular data points. There have been occasional special articles published, notably on migration since the Brexit vote¹⁷.

24. However, it is not yet clear that ONS, or UKSA, has fully entered the on-going debate about migration. UKSA did comment on EU migration and UK total net migration statistics at the end of 2015¹⁸. The OSR usefully stepped into the migration statistics debate in 2017 on the issue of non-EU students, asking ONS to label estimates of the emigration of non-EU students as experimental. Further analysis since then has confirmed concerns that the International Passenger Survey (IPS) estimates of non-EU student emigration do not appear to be accurately capturing this flow, producing a non-EU student emigration figure that is too low.

25. There remain significant concerns that have an impact on the public debate, however. If the estimate of non-EU student emigration is too low, then it must be the case that something else in the IPS estimates is also incorrect (for example, either another category has been over/underestimated, or the total net migration figure is inaccurate). However, the rest of the IPS figures in the Migration Statistics Quarterly Report (MSQR) maintain their official statistics designation and are not branded as experimental.

26. Until there is a clear answer to the question why the non-EU student emigration figure appears to be inaccurate, it is difficult to have confidence in the headline figure for total net migration of non-EU citizens. However, users reasonably assume that non-EU net migration has consistently remained above EU net migration over the past decade, because this is what the MSQR tells them.

27. ONS acknowledges the uncertainties about the non-EU net migration figures in technical reports that have been produced periodically over the past few years. These reports contain thoughtful analysis of the issue, including via a productive collaboration with the Home Office to examine the differences between administrative and survey data. However, the analysis remains buried in technical outputs and has not made its way into the communication of the MSQR headlines, which what most users read. This means that many users have no idea that there is any doubt at all about the comparison between EU and non-EU net migration figures.

28. Other organisations, such as the Migration Observatory at Oxford University¹⁹ and the Social Market Foundation²⁰, are researching and publishing analyses of the official statistics, including drawing attention to weaknesses. Such publications and sources are not mentioned in ONS outputs. While ONS has taken steps to move forward, it seems to be over-stating things slightly to say that the ONS quarterly releases now give the “full story” on migration²¹.

29. This case study shows that, although there has been progress, UKSA could and should do more to encourage ONS and the rest of GSS to be more transparent. They should involve users more, and rise

¹⁷

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/migrationsincethebrexitvotewhatschangedinsixcharts/2017-11-30>

¹⁸ https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/images-letterfromsirandrewdillnottowillmoy10121_tcm97-45082.pdf

¹⁹ Eg <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/long-term-international-migration-flows-to-and-from-the-uk/>

²⁰ Eg http://www.smf.co.uk/p-release-immigration-is-local/?doing_wp_cron=1549457690.0645720958709716796875

²¹ <https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2018/11/29/migration-continues-to-add-to-the-uk-population/>

fully to the expectation that official statistics are where people are, with sound, relevant and clear information.

Case study with input from the Migration Statistics User Forum

Statistics User Forum

11^h February 2019

Contact: Paul Allin, Chair, Statistics User Forum p.allin@imperial.ac.uk

Annex 1: OFFICIAL STATISTICS – A FRESH FOCUS ON USE

Summary

1. The Statistics User Forum is publishing this paper to support the case for the UK Statistics Authority 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.

2. 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 Authority²², and from OSR and other wider reviews of official statistics. In some cases, these are leading to improvement programmes and other transformations²³. However, user engagement issues and unmet needs continue to be flagged with the GSS, including through the independent 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 statistics²⁴. Nevertheless, there is much more to do to raise the standard across ONS and the whole of the GSS.

3. 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.

4. Our key message is that the SUF 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

²² <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/osr/what-we-do/>

²³ Eg to respond to Professor Sir Charles Bean’s independent review of UK economic statistics, 2016

²⁴ 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

5. 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

6. The Royal Statistical Society’s Data Manifesto²⁵ 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.

7. 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.”*²⁶

8. 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

²⁵

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

²⁶ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/code-of-practice/>

opportunity to 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”²⁷

The importance of understanding and communicating use and potential use

9. 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.

10. 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”²⁸. While, as we noted above, there is now a programme of improvement to economic statistics, culture change here and more widely is still needed.

11. 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.”²⁹

“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

²⁷ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/joining-up-data/>

²⁸ 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>

²⁹ 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

12. 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.

13. 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.

14. 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.

15. 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.

16. 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 practices³⁰. 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?
17. 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.

SUF January 2019

³⁰ 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>

Annex 2: SUF Membership (January 2019)

User groups with representatives	Other organisations*
<p>Construction Statistics User Group Crime and Justice Statistics Network Data Analysts User Group (DUG) Financial and Economic Statistics User Group Fire and Rescue Services User Group Gender Statistics User Group Health Statistics User Group Housing Statistics Network Steering Group International Business Statistics User Group Labour Market Statistics User Group Migration Statistics User Forum Open Data User Group Output Area Classification User Group RPI/CPI User Group Sub-national Data User Group Transport Statistics User Group Water Statistics User Group</p>	<p>Academy of Social Sciences BBC British Society for Population Studies Confederation of British Industry CILIP (<i>The library and information association</i>) and SCOOP (<i>Standing Committee on Official Publications</i>) Equalities and Human Rights Commission ESRC and UKDS Full Fact House of Commons Library IFS IPSE – <i>the Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed</i> Local Authority Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA) Market Research Society CGG NCVO NIESR NOMIS Royal Statistical Society Social Research Association Society of Professional Economists Trades Union Congress UK Finance UK Statistics Authority/OSR/ONS</p> <p>* these are organisations from which people come to SUF meetings, other than as active user group representatives. It is not necessarily the case that people come as formal representatives of these organisations.</p>