



*Office for National Statistics*  
**Departmental Trade Union Side**

9 June 2006

Statistical Reform Team  
Room 3/07  
HM Treasury  
1 Horse Guards Road  
LONDON SW1A 2HQ

*Dear Colleague*

***Independence for statistics: a consultation document –  
Response from ONS Trade Unions***

1. The Trade Unions – Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), Prospect and FDA - representing staff at the Office for National Statistics have carefully considered the proposals set out in the above document, published in March 2006. Our responses to the proposals are given below.

**Paragraph 4.4: Existing reform agenda**

2. Reference is made here to “the significant beneficial organisational and modernisation work already under way in the ONS”. So far as we are aware, some £40 million of public money has so far been invested in ONS modernisation, yet the ONS modernisation programmes’ original deliverables have been repeatedly ‘downscoped’ to the extent that delivery of significant benefits remains a remote prospect.

3. Paragraph 4.4 goes on to refer to implementation of Lyons and Gershon review recommendations. It is important to note that ONS Management’s commitment to exceed Lyons’s own expected relocation targets has resulted in the loss of many posts from ONS’s London and

Titchfield offices; and the arbitrary redeployment of staff based at those ONS offices, with all the attendant disruption and distress caused to those staff.

4. Far from contributing to ONS's modernisation and improving the Department's efficiency (an avowed principle of statistical reform proposals [paragraphs 1.9 and 4.3 refer]), ONS Management's attempts to implement Lyons and Gershon recommendations have so far resulted in cuts in services and increasing pressures on statistical output quality. While we welcome your review's objective of establishing a statistical system that secures "statistics of high quality" [*ibid.*], we must emphasise that the effect of recent 'efficiency' initiatives at ONS is likely to undermine that laudable objective.

5. We therefore see benefits in improving financial management and delivery of outputs through the creation of an independent national statistics office. Our comments on your proposals for such an independent entity follow.

**Paragraphs 4.11 – 4.13: A Non-Ministerial Department/Civil service status**

6. ONS Trade Unions welcome the proposal to establish ONS as a Non-Ministerial Department (NMD), for the reasons set out at these paragraphs: NMDs are "part of Government, but independent of Ministers" (crucial if ONS independence is to be *seen* to be effective); and their staff "continue to be civil servants". We further welcome the Financial Secretary to the Treasury's endorsement of this proposal.

7. Not only is continued civil servant status for ONS staff advantageous for "facilitating the continued movement of professional staff within and across the statistical system" (important though this indeed is): it is essential *at least* to retain and protect ONS staff's established terms and conditions of service if they are to be expected to continue to deliver high-quality service during the period of change to independent status and beyond. It must be noted this latest proposal comes in addition to a series of organisational change initiatives, each impacting on ONS staff – for instance, ONS's Business Strategy/Modernisation Programme, Lyons and Gershon, etc.

8. If ONS staff are to be expected to endure the 'initiative fatigue' caused by this concatenation of corporate changes, then they in turn are entitled to expect fair treatment by their employer, the Government. Retention of civil servant status for ONS staff would be a first token of that fair treatment; *improved* terms and conditions of service, to bring ONS staff more into line with the majority of their colleagues in other Government departments, would be the least they might expect in the period during which they will be asked to deliver a seamless statistical service while ONS's independent status is established.

**Paragraph 4.15: Scope of the system**

9. We strongly oppose the proposal that "Ministers will decide whether [statistics produced by their departments which are not National Statistics]

should become National Statistics". If implemented, this provision would run counter to the requirement that the statistics office board should approve statistics as National Statistics; and would fatally undermine your proposals' overall objective of achieving independence from Government for the statistics office.

**Paragraphs 4.28 - 4.29: Data access**

10. We note the proposal that the new statistics office will have the same access to data as ONS currently has. In response to the request for views on increased data access, we would argue that legislation establishing the new office must not be limited to the existing provisions for data access. It must provide a basis for access by the new statistics office to any information within government, where that is required for a statistical purpose. It would be short-sighted to specify in the legislation the particular data to which access would be provided, since the demands for statistical information are constantly changing.

**Box 3 – Possible principles for assessment**

11. In the above section of the consultation document, it is proposed that there should be a "clear separation of duties between those in the statistics office responsible for production and dissemination of statistics, and those responsible for assessment against the code [of practice]". We would like clarification on what means are envisaged for securing such a separation of duties between different groups of ONS staff? And also, what the implications of this requirement for ONS staff are?

**Paragraph 4.34: Independent appointments process**

12. We welcome the proposal that "all members [of the board] – including the Chair and Chief Statistician – be appointed through open and fair competition and in line with the Office of the Commission for Public Appointments guidance". However, we regard the aim of ensuring "the independence of appointments to the board" as inconsistent with the proposal that *ministers* should advise on the appointment of the Chair and Chief Statistician; and that *ministers* should appoint the other non-executive members of the board. Surely the benefits of establishing the statistics office as a *Non-Ministerial Department* accountable to Parliament rather than ministers are seriously undermined by allowing that NMD's board to be appointed by ministers?

**Paragraph 4.35: The Government Statistical Service (GSS)**

13. We believe that the role of the GSS needs to change to maintain staff mobility and develop credible statistics for government. The GSS must attract professionals beyond the recruitment of assistant statisticians and provide opportunities for statistical staff to gain experience outside government. While this would not be a new function for the GSS, in recent years its resources and roles have been circumscribed.

14. The issue of maintaining mobility and professional development is also key for economists who, though few in number in the existing ONS, provide essential skills to complement those of the statisticians. ONS recruits new

assistant economists through the Government Economic Service. If transfers to and from the new statistics office were not possible, recruitment of these professional staff would be made much more difficult.

**Paragraph 4.40: *Laying reports***

15. We welcome the proposal for the board's annual report to be "laid before Parliament directly by the board, rather than via a minister".

**Paragraphs 4.42 – 4.45: *Funding***

16. We welcome the proposal in paragraph 4.43 for "sufficient independence in relation to government spending controls to avoid a perception that statistical independence could be compromised". We further welcome the elaboration at paragraph 4.44 proposing that "funding (excluding the census) is set outside the normal Spending Review process". It is essential, however – whatever funding process is adopted, that the new statistics office is fully funded for its workload (including those issues addressed in our paragraph 8, above), especially considering some of ONS's current funding issues which have resulted in cuts to outputs.

17. We are concerned at the proposal that any funding "review process would have built-in incentives to ensure efficiency". We seek some clarity on exactly what 'incentives' are envisaged here?

**Paragraphs 4.49 – 4.51: *The Registrar General***

18. We note the proposal that "the role of Registrar General ... be split from that of Chief Statistician"; and note that the Government is considering the position of the General Register Office (GRO) and National Health Service Central Register (NHSCR) within the government machinery, and invites views on the future location of the GRO and NHSCR within government.

19. ONS Trade Unions have no strong view on the future location of GRO and NHSCR. However we believe that the proposed legislation must address the arrangements linking GRO and the statistics office for the production of statistics, regardless of GRO's location. We note that the proposals set out in your consultation document imply anomalous arrangements for the GRO for England and Wales *vis a vis* other UK GROs (Scotland and Northern Ireland), whereby UK statistics on population and demography, including the Census, will be produced outside the GRO and independently of ministers in England and Wales, and within the GROs and under the oversight of the appropriate ministers in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

20. We furthermore have a strong view on the future careers and job security of ONS staff currently working at GRO and NHSCR. We would urge:

- early indications of proposals for the future location within government of GRO and NHSCR
- a firm commitment to early negotiations with ONS Trade Unions on any proposed transfer of ONS staff
- firm commitments to the future job security, and to protection of terms and conditions of service, for ONS staff currently working at GRO and NHSCR.

**Paragraph 4.52: Legal ramifications**

21. We note the proposal that “*where appropriate*, existing legislative powers on statistical matters [will be] transferred to the new bodies as needed”, [emphasis added]. We would strongly argue that included in such a transfer of powers must be the transfer to the new statistical office/chief statistician of:

- the ‘competent authority’ status presently bestowed upon ONS by the Statistics of Trade Act (1947), including an undertaking that these functions may not be delegated;
- the requirements on the Registrar General under the Census Act (1920) and associated extant legislation relating to population statistics.

**Summary**

22. In principle, ONS Trade Unions welcome proposals for greater statistical office independence. Concomitant proposals for greater financial independence too are welcome, so long as these imply sufficient resourcing for ONS to meet its demanding work and change programmes – and so long as these factor in the pressing need to address the legitimate requirements of ONS staff, without whom no change proposals can be implemented. Those requirements include sufficient funding to secure fair and equitable salary levels for staff, and to secure satisfactory staffing levels for the delivery of the statistics office’s work programme; and commitment to comprehensive staff training and development processes.

23. We hope the issues identified above will be given due attention in subsequent deliberations, and that these will be satisfactorily addressed in any future, refined proposals.

*Yours sincerely*

**GEZ KIRBY**

Chair, ONS Departmental Trade Union Side