

RESPONSE FROM THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Background

The National Archives (TNA) is a Government Department and Executive Agency under the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs and Lord Chancellor. It selects, preserves and makes publicly available the records of English and British Government from Domesday Book (1086) to copies of government websites. Today it plays playing an increasingly pro-active role in helping government departments and agencies manage information that is created and stored in electronic format. It also promotes higher standards of preservation of, and public access to, non-governmental archives of all kinds.

TNA greatly values the close relationship that it has built up with ONS over many years. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the Government Statistical Service (GSS) create much raw data, which are public records under the terms of the Public Records Act 1958 and are often worthy of permanent preservation because of their enduring historical value. The National Archives wishes to maintain a good flow of this data from the creating departments and agencies to the National Archives at the appropriate time, so that they are preserved in accordance with national and international standards and are accessible to researchers. In addition, our two organisations have worked closely in providing joined-up services for family historians onsite and now increasingly online. We trust that this good relationship will continue and that, whatever the future position of GRO within government and the relationship of the new statistics office to government, they will retain and enhance their capabilities as service delivery organisations.

Key Points

- **The National Archives is generally supportive of the proposals because they are intended to ensure the integrity of the statistics produced by government bodies**
- **Any changes in the status of the statistics office and the position of GRO in government should enhance their capabilities as service organisations working in partnership with The National Archives delivering high quality services to family historians and others**
- **The legislation setting up the new Non Ministerial Department and Independent Board should make it quite clear that their own administrative records, and the statistical data they hold, are public records under the Public Records Act 1958**
- **The new Board should have a specific responsibility for promoting awareness in the GSS that government statistical data are public records subject to the Public Records Act, and that arrangements should be made to ensure their appraisal and, where selected, their transfer to TNA or other appropriate archives service**

- **The Code of Practice should include an explicit provision that government statistical data should be managed as part of the public records system**

The comments below expand on the second, third and fourth Key Points.

Clarity on Public Record Status: In paragraph 4.11 all the other Non-Ministerial Departments and independent regulators cited as models for the statistics office have public record status. We believe, therefore, that the continuing public record status of ONS records should not be a contentious issue. We strongly recommend that the new legislation should contain a section guaranteeing that this will definitely continue to be the case and removing any doubt on matter.

Remit of the new Board: Under present arrangements, it is sometimes difficult to persuade parts of the GSS that the records they create are public records. This can on occasion lead to significant delays in transferring statistical data to the appropriate archive service. There are entirely adequate provisions in the Freedom of Information Act, which ensure that data transferred to the archives will not be made available contrary to the provisions of the Data Protection Act. This is a concern sometimes raised by professional statisticians and one we believe to be often misplaced. We trust that the new board, in seeking to protect the confidentiality provided (paras. 4.27-29), does not overlook this important point. In this connection it would be helpful if the new legislation spelt out what are the confidentiality considerations that apply to ONS statistical data, including when the data are transferred to another body. More generally, we propose that making proper provision for the archiving of historical statistical data should be one of the criteria marking out statistics as 'possessing the highest professional quality and integrity' (4.1).

Code of Practice: In support of the above point, the Code should include a specific requirement that government statistical data should be managed as part of the public records system, including if appropriate transfer to the archives in accordance with agreed procedures and timescales. One possibility is that statistical data could be defined as 'historical' at some point between 5 and 10 years, at which time it should appraised for its long-term value. We are very keen to see this addition to the Code and would welcome a commitment in principle to do this. We would, however, be very willing to have discussions with ONS colleagues on the precise form this addition would take.

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