

Independence for Statistics – Comments on consultation document

by

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1. The stress on independence from political interference and the establishment of a NMD are very welcome and many of the following comments seek to suggest ways in which both these can be further strengthened.
2. The idea of having a Statistics Commission was a sound one, but my own experience of its activities suggests that it has had a limited effect and I believe that this has lessons for the future of national statistics. Specifically, I have engaged with the Commission over the construction and use of educational performance indicators, in particular being critical of the way in which these have been handled by the DfES. While the commission initiated a dialogue about my concerns involving the DfES (published on its web site) my opinion as a professional statistician is that they lacked the technical expertise to properly understand the methodological issues involved and that this led to a series of poorly considered judgements. Thus, I am not too unhappy that the Commission is to go, but the procedures that replace it should take care to ensure that properly competent, and independent, statisticians are involved in maintaining quality and passing judgements. The Royal Statistical Society should be asked to play a role in this.
3. The relationship between the proposed NMD and individual government departments is the weakest aspect of the proposals. Paragraph 4.15 makes it clear that individual departmental ministers will be able to decide which statistics are to be considered ‘national’ and those that are not will lie outside the sphere of influence of the NMD and its Board. It seems that ‘non-national’ statistics will not be subject to the code of practice since (para 4.15) only those deemed to meet the standards will be designated as national statistics. This appears to leave open the possibility that individual government departments, if they do not wish to meet high quality criteria, will simply refuse to designate the relevant statistics as ‘national’. If this is the case it would be very unfortunate and would tend to bring the whole system into disrepute. My suggestion, therefore, is that there should be provision for the Board to *require* what they regard as important statistics to become national statistics within a specified time frame during which they would be required to meet the appropriate standards. In other words, the decision as to what constitutes national statistics should not rest with individual government departments. Para 4.22 only allows for the Board to ‘advise’ ministers about statistical quality; something much stronger than this is required. If the proposal is implemented as it stands (para 4.15) then urgent attention is needed to determine how the quality of non-national statistics is to be assured.
4. Paragraph 4.34 appears to give ministers the responsibility for appointing the Board members. This proposal sits very uncomfortably alongside the

requirement that it is independent. A better procedure for the chair and board is for a suitable parliamentary committee to carry out the appointments, advised by professionally qualified staff.

5. In paragraph 4.37 it is unclear where 'responsibility for professional quality' of departmental statisticians ends and 'other aspects of responsibilities' begins. For the former the Chief statistician will have responsibility and for the latter the relevant departmental minister. Public perception of the current system is that departmental political considerations have sometimes influenced when, how or how much statistical information is published. This is generally undesirable and there should be far stronger links between departmental statisticians and the Chief statistician and a broad definition of 'professional quality' to avoid un warranted political interference. One way of achieving this would be to move towards a system whereby the national statistics office took more responsibility for the careers of departmental statisticians, as for example occurs in France.
6. It is very important that Parliament (paras 4.38-4.41) has proper oversight of the new system. I would suggest that a special (select?) committee or subcommittee be constituted for this where as many as possible of its members have some relevant statistical expertise. It would also be useful to have a review process for the new arrangements to see how the criteria are being met.