

Independence for Statistics

Submission by Prospect to HM Treasury

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INTRODUCTION

1. Prospect represents 104,000 scientific, technical, managerial and specialist staff in the Civil Service and related bodies and major companies. In the Office for National Statistics (ONS) we represent 700 key workers, including methodologists, social survey officers and research officers.

2. This brief submission supplements the response from the Departmental Trade Union Side (DTUS) at ONS, which Prospect fully supports. It is also in line with our report "Intelligent Staff, Intelligent Government", published in September 2004, which sets out Prospect's principles for the reform of the civil service. In particular, it is Prospect's strong view that a positive strategy for change must include adequate investment in infrastructure and skills and cannot be driven by cost saving.

GENERAL COMMENTS

3. Having said this, we do in principle support the proposal to create an independent national statistics office and to do so through the establishment of ONS as a Non-Ministerial Department. This should, in our view, combine the advantages of effective independence with continuity of civil service status. However based on recent experience, not least ONS' ill-judged approach to implementation of the Gershon and Lyons reports, we are concerned to ensure that the implications of all the proposed changes are properly thought through and the process of change implemented with minimum disruption and full consultation with the recognised unions. The following paragraphs outline some key concerns.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS

Quality of service

4. As mentioned, recent experiences of job loss and relocation have inevitably caused disruption and distress to staff and, inevitably, this has led to pressures on quality of output. It is imperative that ONS moves from an approach linking "efficiency" with staff cuts to one that focuses on effectiveness and recognises the need for investment in high quality services. In this regard, the proposals for greater financial independence for ONS are encouraging providing, of course, that this actually delivers sufficient resources for ONS to meet its demanding work and change programmes.

5. Access to data will obviously be key to the future quality of statistical information produced by ONS. We therefore agree with the DTUS that it will be important to avoid a prescriptive approach in legislation to data access since demands for statistical information are constantly evolving.

Governance

6. Like the DTUS, we welcome the proposed independent appointments process. We recognise and sympathise with the concerns that have been expressed about the potential for confusion in relation, respectively, to Board and Ministerial authority and accountability. Prospect members have experienced at first hand the frustrations and pressures that can arise from lack of clarity – and occasionally deliberate obfuscation - in this sphere. For example, scientists offering independent advice to Ministers have at times been dragged into the political domain either as

oracles or scapegoats. It is Prospect's view that whatever model is eventually adopted, it must be clear where responsibility and accountability for decision-making actually lies. In addition, full recognition and adequate resourcing must be provided for the role of the intelligent customer.

Employment security and conditions

7. Success in taking the ONS forward as an independent statistical service will depend on the quality of staff, based on the degree of training and expertise that they possess. Retaining good quality staff in turn depends on good employee relations, equal opportunities for all employees and the prospect of a rewarding career. ONS needs to make substantial progress on all these counts. Prospect's own database of pay and conditions across the Civil Service shows that, with one exception, ONS entry rates are below the median – at some grades, substantially so. It is vital therefore not only that the new ONS secures adequate funding but that it is able to use some of this money to address the long-term pay problems that exist.

8. The effects of comparatively poor rates of pay have been exacerbated by the ongoing cuts and relocation programmes. In addition there are now widespread concerns among staff – including skilled specialists – about the viability and long-term commitment to any London site. This could also impact adversely on ONS' ability to attract high calibre recruits.

Career progression

9. Prospect supports the core objectives of the Professional Skills for Government (PSG) programme and, in line with this, attaches importance to ensuring that progression opportunities exist for specialist staff – including lateral movement across the Civil Service. We are aware that PSG is still at an early stage of development and implementation, particularly in respect of staff at Grade 7 and below. It is therefore important that ONS commits to involving the DTUS in devising, rolling out and monitoring the impact of PSG at departmental level. Equally, we would wish to see more proactive engagement with and by the relevant Heads of Profession. ONS should commit itself wholeheartedly to the professional development of its staff, and should support the acquisition of qualifications providing recognition for their skills.

SUMMARY

10. Prospect welcomes in principle the proposals to create an independent national statistics office. However, there are important issues of funding, structure and governance to be resolved. Moreover, change is not an end in itself. Priority must also be given to the needs and expectations of staff – on whom ONS' success ultimately depends.