

RESPONSE FROM THE SOCIAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

Consultation on Independence for Official Statistics

The Social Research Association comprises over 1000 members who are employed in a wide range of public and private sector jobs, and work across all social and economic policy areas. As Chair of the SRA I have consulted my Executive on the terms of this response and it reflects their views. The vast majority of our members regularly use official statistics in the course of their work, and have a strong interest in the timely production of accurate and relevant statistics and survey data. Also when there is a lack of public confidence in official statistics (as at present), this can reflect badly on social researchers more generally who are working to complement, expand and deepen the quantitative and qualitative evidence base.

The consultation seeks to address this core problem of lack of trust and confidence in official statistics. The SRA therefore welcomes the principle of independence for official statistics and supports the need to separate the production and publication of high quality statistics from the commentary on them and the analysis of their implications for public policy. The SRA agrees that ONS should become a non-Ministerial Department directly accountable to Parliament; that the role of the National Statistician should be prescribed by legislation; that staff of the new body should continue to be civil servants; and that the National Statistician should retain professional responsibilities for members of the Government Statistical Service.

The SRA has however 2 main concerns:

- The proposals need to go further to secure public confidence in the statistics system overall.
- The proposals do not appear to identify any requirement for user involvement at a strategic level.

In particular we are concerned at the increasing fragmentation of responsibilities for statistics between United Kingdom Government Departments and the Devolved Administrations; and the implications for quality control of much of the statistical system being outside “National Statistics”. There is a lack of public knowledge and understanding about the division of official statistics between “National Statistics” and “others”, and the extent of the applicability of the code of practice. Adding to the complex picture of responsibilities and accountability we are concerned that the Department of Health has recently set up the NHS Health and Social Care Information Centre which has significant responsibilities for health statistics but is outside a government department.

The lack of cohesion across the statistics system as a whole will be exacerbated by the mix of Parliament and Ministerial responsibilities, whereby the Chancellor will be responsible for coverage and quality issues; and Ministers in Departments continue to

decide which statistics produced by their Departments should be “National Statistics”. Nor will the independence of statistics be recognised while Ministers continue to receive advance notice of their publication, and to publish a commentary and analysis at the same time as the statistics are published.

The remit of the new independent Board is largely restricted to “National Statistics”, and representation is narrower than under present arrangements. The Board will have a mix of scrutiny and executive roles being carried out under the “umbrella” of Parliament. These arrangements do not suggest that there will be an adequate user input into decisions on the nature, extent and direction of statistics and major surveys. The importance of ONS’s role in securing the appropriate statistics for statistical analysis and research purposes to meet a range of needs supports a greater level of user involvement in the Board arrangements than is proposed.

The collection and analysis of statistics has progressed exponentially over the last decade and it is expected that technological and methodological developments will continue over the foreseeable future. In particular the potential for using, aggregating and linking administrative data in different ways is beginning to be realised; this is likely to lead to efficiencies in data collection and processing. It will be important for the new organisation to secure legislation for the sharing of data between Government Departments, and to protect the confidentiality of data providers. Given the speed of advances in maximising the use of administrative data to inform public policy, and the critical importance of improving public trust in statistics it appears to be a serious backward step to separate the National Health Service Central Register and the civil registration of births, marriages and deaths away from ONS.

There is little information about proposed funding. The SRA is concerned that unless adequate resources are made available to monitor, review and resolve the issues identified above, then the proposed new arrangements are likely to fail to meet their primary objective of securing public confidence in the statistics system overall

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