

Independent review of the UKSA: Call for Evidence Response Template

It is recommended that you read the full call for evidence guidance document found on the UKSA Review webpage before completing your response.

Please note that the text boxes used in this template can be expanded to accommodate additional text.

Guidance for respondents

- **You must provide all the relevant information in Section 1**, or we may not be able to process your submission. *You do **not** need to respond to all of the questions in Section 2 if they are not all relevant to you.*
- **Answers should not exceed a maximum limit of 500 words per question.** Submissions exceeding this recommended length may not be read in their entirety.
- **You must clearly state which questions you're answering** by referring to the relevant numbers assigned to each question.
- **Please provide specific examples** wherever possible.
- Where you have referenced specific sources, please **provide a bibliography in the box provided**. This does not count towards your word count.

Section 1 - General Information

9. Please tell us your reason for submitting evidence. For example, are you responding as a 'user' of ONS statistics, or a 'supplier' of data to the UKSA/ONS?

The Royal Statistical Society is a professional society for statisticians and data scientists, with over 10,000 members. Our members engage with government statistics in a range of ways: producers working in either the GSS or ONS, UKSA board members, regulators, and academics and journalists who use data for their research.

Given the range of interests that we represent, it is not straightforward for us to present a response with a single voice. Instead, we intend to highlight areas of broad concern. We hope that we will be able to discuss these areas with the review team.

We would also propose a by-invitation meeting held at the RSS during August to support the review. This could serve as a sounding board for any emerging findings from the review, which – we hope – the review team might find helpful.

Section 2 - Call for Evidence questions

IMPORTANT: Where a question has **not** listed the UKSA, the ONS and the OSR separately, the 'UKSA' should be understood as including the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR).

The 'UKSA' should **not** be understood as including the Government Statistical Service (GSS). Where a question is asking about GSS, this will be explicitly stated.

Efficacy

The review will focus on the outcomes for users of the UKSA's work. The review will explore whether the UKSA is producing statistics that respond to genuine user need, given its underpinning remit is to promote statistics for the public good.

1. To what extent is the UKSA successful at producing high quality and respected official statistics? Please provide specific examples, including of international comparators.
2. Does the UKSA effectively understand, anticipate and prioritise to meet user needs, fulfilling its remit to promote and safeguard statistics for the public good?
3. How effectively does the UKSA communicate statistics to users? Please include your view of its role in communicating both the production of statistics and providing analysis and interpretation.
4. Is the UKSA developing appropriate new capacity, capabilities and techniques in Digital, Data (including data science) and Technology to support improvements to quality and efficiency, including across a range of its statistics that can make greater use of new forms of data? Please provide examples.

Please provide your response in the box below. Make sure to note the "Guidance for respondents" provided above before completing.

We are interested in how effectively user engagement is working at present. There is a new user engagement strategy and we think the review should assess how that is progressing. We are especially concerned with the question of how the statistical system recognises and responds to user needs from outside government – this needs a significant change in both culture and processes. Recent examples, around the Integrated Data Service and the development of the household cost indices suggest that more work is needed. The RSS is separately exploring how the UKSA strategy of producing statistics for the public good can be enhanced to start with societal needs, rather than with maximising the use of currently produced statistics.

The pandemic brought to light some such wider societal needs that we would like to discuss in particular:

- Health data, some of which is produced by the ONS, is fragmented and hard to navigate in a way that ensures data consistency for users.
- A move to greater use of administrative data given the declining response rates for surveys.
- Efficient and timely access to linked data sets.

We are also interested in discussing the lack of an over-arching statistical programme for UK official statistics. Here we have in mind a programme which aims to give users a coherent and complete overview of all official statistics and official statistics developments. Ideally, users would be involved in the regular updating of the programme, so that user priorities are recognised. We do recognise the challenges in compiling such a programme covering the GSS as a whole. A good starting point would simply be a regularly updated directory of all official statistics outputs and publications.

Governance

The review will consider the governance arrangements including the adequacy of the independence of UKSA and whether there is any conflict between the production and regulation functions it performs. The review will also consider the UKSA approach to UK-wide data, board effectiveness reviews and board diversity.

1. Does the UKSA operate at an appropriate 'length of arm' to ensure the right balance between alignment with government priorities and the need for technical expertise and impartiality?
2. To what extent are the roles of the ONS, the OSR and the UKSA appropriately clear and distinct? Is there clarity around and balance between roles and responsibilities in relation to the production and regulation functions? Please provide examples, including of other regulatory models both inside and outside of the UK that are comparable or relevant examples of best practice.
3. How well does the ONS and the OSR perform its roles with respect to the whole UK official statistics system? Please provide examples of successes and/or areas for improvement and consider relationships:
 - a. With other government departments to support policy development
 - b. Across the four Nations

4. How effectively does the UKSA provide strategic leadership for the Government Statistical Service? Are there areas for improvement or examples of successes and how effective is the strategic management of the professional talent pipeline?

Please provide your response in the box below. Make sure to note the “Guidance for respondents” provided above before completing.

It is important to address the question of whether it is optimal to have the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) as part of the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA) with the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The picture here is complicated, but the 2019 Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) review of UKSA recommended separating the organisations and it is, on the surface at least, unusual for producers and regulators to be part of the same organisation. The pros and cons of the situation should be looked at. We would also like to examine questions of whether OSR is appropriately resourced and to discuss the rise in the number of official statistics that are not badged as full National Statistics.

There is sometimes a lack of transparency of decision-making in the operation of the statistical system – down to simple things such as it being difficult to identify contact details for the Heads of Profession at government departments and engagement Theme Leads.

There have also been occasions when the source and quality (accuracy and relevance) of statistics quoted by ministers has been unclear in spite of UKSA interventions. It would be useful to explore whether this can be addressed in a more sustained fashion, so that lessons learned can be applied in future, and the importance of building trust and trustworthiness is emphasised.

Accountability

The review will focus on the adequacy of accountability arrangements with the Cabinet Office and whether ministers have enough assurance to meet their duties as set out in Managing Public Money.

1. Is there an effective and appropriate relationship between the UKSA as a non-ministerial department and the Cabinet Office as the sponsor department?
2. Is the accountability of the UKSA to the UK Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly well understood and effective?
3. Are there any examples of where you think accountability could be improved and how?

Please provide your response in the box below. Make sure to note the “Guidance for respondents” provided above before completing.

In terms of accountability to Parliament, this is an area where we think there are potential vulnerabilities. The nature of parliamentary oversight means that how much interest PACAC takes is essentially at the discretion of the chair of the committee and there is a concern that a chair who prioritises other areas of their brief need not provide adequate scrutiny to UKSA. In the future this may be problematic.

Efficiency

The government has asked all ALBs to consider additional efficiencies contributing to an overall reduction in spending, in the context of existing settlements and the 2022 Autumn Statement.

1. Is the UKSA delivering its role efficiently, making best use of resources?
2. Is the ONS set up to operate efficiently? You may wish to consider the clarity and effectiveness of the ONS's strategic, cross-organisational delivery and the impact of future technology on the production of national statistics.
3. Is the ONS producing statistics and analysis that is central to its remit? Are there examples of work undertaken by the ONS that is not central to its remit?
4. Are appropriate plans in place to support the delivery of the UKSA five year strategy, 'Statistics for the Public Good'?

Please provide your response in the box below. Make sure to note the "Guidance for respondents" provided above before completing.