

UK official statistics: an update on the issues that the RSS is pursuing

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In January 2023, we [reported](#) that ‘**public statistics**’ was one of the topics that the RSS was exploring through the work of its National Statistics Advisory Group (NSAG). We now see this as the overarching framework against which to progress specific topics.

There is no doubt that during 2023, as in earlier years, the UK official statistics system published a huge volume of outputs - data, statistics, analysis - that meet the goal of statistics for the public good. Congratulations to the teams recognised in the latest round of the [Campion Award](#) for Excellence in Official Statistics!

However, there is still the concern that much of the statistical system is focused on meeting needs of governments and then making the material more widely available. All of that is clearly for the public good but our concern is that this does not fully embrace what statistics for the public good could and should be about. The official statistics system is not just about producing outputs, there needs to be greater attention given to producing outputs that are fit for diverse purposes.

The concept of public statistics is to formulate official statistics by starting with the questions of public interest that need statistics to help answer them. This requires more emphasis on gathering the requirements for statistics and on balancing the needs of government and of non-governments users in the inevitable hard decisions that need to be made in delivering statistical outputs efficiently with limited resources. One way of helping to facilitate this would be to import more statistics and data into the official statistics system than currently.

We flagged the concept of more public statistics in our [response](#) to a call for evidence from the independent [review](#) of UKSA by Professor Denise Lievesley and explored this and other aspects at a [roundtable](#) in September, attended by Professor Lievesley. Another opportunity was taken in written [evidence](#) for the [inquiry](#) into ‘Transforming the UK’s Evidence Base’ currently being held by the UK Parliament’s Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC).

Our next step on public statistics is to work up the rationale and proposals, including illustrative case studies, and to champion this approach to be reflected in the refresh of UKSA’s five-year strategy. We hope to be able to see shortly how our evidence landed with the independent review and the PACAC inquiry, before we finalise the case for more public statistics.

The **Code of Practice for Statistics** plays an important role in maintaining quality of official statistics and would be vital in endorsing and quality assuring public statistics. We were therefore pleased to hold an [event](#) with OSR on 30th November to discuss what makes a good code, and how the existing code should be refreshed. We look forward to further developments on the Code in 2024.

User engagement is another important strand of public statistics, building on longer-term concerns to ensure that users and potential users are fully involved in the development and delivery of official statistics. The RSS is now hosting FoSUG, the Forum of Statistics User Groups. FoSUG held two meetings during 2023, including discussion of Census outputs and tools, and population statistics. ONS continues to enhance the [StatsUserNet](#) website and we encourage all users and producers to



contribute to it and to make it even more effective in connecting users, producers, and users and producers with each other. (Registration is free and quick).

However, we remain concerned with the slow rollout of the GSS user engagement [strategy](#) and have questioned this through our membership of [NSEUAC](#). We are starting to establish relationships with GSS Heads of Profession for statistics as well as maintaining contact with senior ONS, OSR and UKSA people.

The cost-of-living crisis makes even stronger the case for having timely measures of inflation that are more relevant to households than the macro-economic measures CPI/CPIH, which invariably make the headlines. We remain strongly committed to **Household Cost Indices** (HCIs) as complementary measures. Around the start of 2023 we still had concerns about the pace and extent of ONS's work to develop HCIs and to publish them regularly. (See this [paper](#) by John Astin and Jill Leyland, published on the RSS website, [correspondence](#) with the National Statistician, and a [letter](#) to The Economist).

We therefore welcomed ONS's [publication](#) of updated HCIs (to Q3 2023) in early December 2023. NSAG collaborated with the Inflation Statistics User Group and RSS sections on Finance and Economics, and on Official Statistics, with an event to help spread awareness of HCIs further, hosted by the Resolution Foundation on 12th December. While quarterly publication of HCIs now seems assured, we are seeking confirmation that ONS will continue their development.

The topic of wider measures of progress - **Beyond GDP** - continues to be a priority. We worked with the ONS to hold four hybrid [events](#) at the RSS during 2023, to raise awareness of developments to the System of National Accounts (SNA, in which GDP is defined) and a range of developments of Beyond GDP metrics. The final event aimed to understand what 'Beyond GDP' means for the UK. These were well-attended and lively events. We learned much about international developments shaping the Beyond GDP agenda, as well as the increasing number of sources of UK data and statistics that can be used to tell the story of UK progress.

However, we concluded that this is really about GDP and beyond. GDP will continue more or less as is, and will no doubt continue to be the headline measure used by many. Other metrics already exist in or beyond the SNA, or might be included in the revised SNA (particularly a measure of net domestic product in which the use of natural resources is included for the first time). The UN network of economic statisticians is committed to following up the 2025 publication of the revised SNA with plans for a Framework for Inclusive and Sustainable Wellbeing. This will aim to integrate the SNA, the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA) with a new System of Population and Social Accounts.

So, what does 'Beyond GDP mean for the UK? It still looks very much like a set of statistical products that have yet to connect with users and potential users. One welcome development is that ONS now publishes GDP and Beyond GDP statistics on the same day. But that leaves the challenge of encouraging more media and social discussion of the broader picture of UK progress and what that means for how we live our lives and run our businesses and communities.

There was much discussion about **population and migration statistics** during 2023. We [responded](#) to ONS's consultation on developments in England and Wales: the RSS broadly supports the ONS's aim to replace the decennial census with annual population estimates based on admin data.

However, we identified six areas where we have concerns about this approach, for example around



the stability of administrative data sources and the availability of data down to sub-local authority level. These need to be addressed before we can fully welcome the new direction.

One of our concerns here, the encouragement of **greater UK-wide coordination and integration** of population and migration statistics, resonates more widely across official statistics. We recognise that [arrangements](#) are in place generally to address coherence, including UK-wide statistics on devolved topics, and we continue to urge UKSA and the devolved administrations to recognise needs for UK statistics and datasets. The approach adopted by the [UK Health Statistics Steering Group](#) may apply more generally and we look forward to exploring this further, in conjunction with the Health Statistics User Group.

To finish this review, I make no apologies for returning to the importance that we attach to strong and sustained **user engagement** and clear communication about how developments are progressing. These are vital if the ambition of innovations such as replacing the census with administrative data, and the [Integrated Data Service](#), are to be achieved, as well as further increasing the use and the usefulness of official statistics and data overall. The RSS will be looking for ways to work with ONS and the GSS on this, reducing the gap between procedures and practice, to ensure that official statistics and data stand out as trustworthy and trusted beacons in this increasingly complex information age.

I am again grateful to all those in NSAG and in other sections of the RSS who are actively involved in helping the RSS to be a friend (critical at times) of the UK statistical system. We also recognise the often-unsung efforts of everyone working in official statistics. Do contact me to follow up on any of this, or with any other concerns or appreciation you have for UK official statistics. Thank you.

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