

# Official statistics, public policy and public trust

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**Summary.** The question of public confidence in official statistics has been central to government statistical policy for the last 10 years. This year the Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007 was passed. The paper suggests key characteristics of the new arrangements that will be needed if public confidence in the official statistics outputs is to be strengthened. It is argued that this will depend on public confidence in the statistical system as a whole rather than just the new Board. The organizational structure of the UK statistical system is described and this is linked to the issue of public confidence. Finally the wider questions of evidence-based policy and the use of statistics and statistical thinking throughout government are discussed.

**Keywords:** Evidence-based policy; Government statistical system; Official statistics; Organizational structures; Public confidence; Public policy; Public trust

## 1. Introduction

It is a singular honour for any Fellow to be chosen to serve as President of our Society and I have been grateful for the opportunity. Indeed, given the historical accident of being in post at the time of receiving approval for reforms from the Privy Council it has fallen to me to serve for an extra 6 months. I can fairly claim to be 25% more honoured, but certainly not more deserving of honour, than previous Presidents.

I willingly pay tribute to my predecessors. The Society is in good condition because of their stewardship and on a personal level my requests for advice have always been generously met. However, I would like to pay tribute also to the staff who work for the Society and who are as committed as we, the Fellows, to its success. They, together with the many Fellows who give freely of their time to the Society, make it what it is today.

The theme of this address is the official statistics system: in particular the question of public confidence in its outputs and its relationship to evidence-based public policy. This is a theme that has been taken up by government in the last 10 years and, most recently, has led to the Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007. The Society has taken a public stance on a range of issues related to the theme and it must be stressed that the views that are expressed here are those of the author and not the Royal Statistical Society.

The general question of the role of statistics in monitoring the economic and social condition of the nation and their use in public policy goes back to the earliest days of the Society and earlier. Our founding fathers were committed to social and economic improvements and recognized the role of statistics in assembling the arguments in support of reform although the provision of officially produced statistics at the time was very poor by modern standards. This theme is ever present throughout the history of the Society and is strongly maintained to the

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present day. Today, unlike the 1830s, the vast majority of our statistical information is derived from official statistics either directly or as a result of secondary analyses of microdata. As a result the issues of the production of official statistics, and in particular the framework within which they are produced, and their use in public policy are interlinked.

In the more recent past several Presidents have addressed various aspects of this topic and in particular Moser (1980) focused on the UK Government Statistical Service (GSS) and Smith (1993) addressed the issues of ‘population and selection’ which rest at the methodological heart of official statistics as well as statistics in a much broader context. Lievesley (2001) in a welcome departure from national issues used her Presidential address to focus on the international dimension of official statistics. Smith (1996), in the most recent address to take up the issue of the role of statistics in public policy, challenged the Society to recognize that statistics and statistical thinking, despite their undoubted importance in an evidence-based society, have failed to penetrate public decision-making processes as fully as we would wish.

Even more recently the Society’s 2007 annual conference had as its theme the link between statistics and public policy. This was a very successful event with many fine presentations.

In this paper I shall address the system of official statistics, its links to public confidence in its outputs and the interface between statistics and public policy. A key question for the Society is how statistics and statistical thinking might have an even greater influence on public policy and decision making than it now does.

## 2. Early days

A modern perception of ‘evidence-based policy making’ is sometimes characterized as a process whereby the ‘evidence’ is assembled almost independently of the policy options and then through a process of analysis and distillation the policy options and then the preferred policy choice emerge. When the Society was founded (as the London Statistical Society in 1834) this separation of empirical evaluation from policy choice appears to have been embedded in its foundations. The Society adopted the symbol of the wheat sheaf and the motto *aliis extenderum* implying that the Society’s function was to collect facts whereas the threshing out of conclusions was for others. The prospectus stated

‘... accurate knowledge of the condition and prospects of Society is an object of great national importance not to be obtained without a careful collection and classification of Statistical facts’,

and, by the time that the prospectus came to be considered at the first meeting, began

‘... the first and most essential rule of conduct is to exclude all opinions’.

The origin of this injunction goes back to before the Society was established. The British Association for the Advancement of Science had been formed in 1831 and at its third meeting, in Cambridge in 1833, a group of statistical activists led by Babbage had irregularly proposed the formation of a statistical section of the Association which was accepted and would lead, in due course, to the creation of the London Statistical Society in 1834.

There was clearly some concern within the scientific community about this development. The British Association for the Advancement of Science insisted that the section confine itself to ‘matters of fact, with mere abstractions, and with numerical results’. The ‘higher generalizations’ of political economy and political philosophy were forbidden. Cullen (1975), to whom I am indebted for his description of statistical development in this period and for quotations from original sources, cites an unpublished report of the proceedings of the Association’s 1833 meeting including this passage in the concluding address of the President, Adam Sedgwick:

1 'If we transgress our proper boundaries, go into provinces not belonging to us, and open a door of  
 2 communication to the dreary world of politics, that instant will the foul Daemon of discord find its way  
 3 into our Eden of philosophy'.

4 On the face of it the intention of our Victorian forefathers seems clear but all is not as it  
 5 seems. In reality our founders, and statisticians of this period generally, did not adopt this strict  
 6 separation. Almost always, the statisticians of this period were motivated by the need for social  
 7 reform. Very often they 'knew' precisely which reforms they wished to promote. The statisti-  
 8 cal compilations were often designed to support the intended reform and the statistics, or at  
 9 least the emphasis of interpretation, were chosen to underpin the case. For example Farr and  
 10 Chadwick, who were two major figures in this period, did not develop theories principally as a  
 11 result of statistical investigations but rather followed certain types of investigations because of a  
 12 conviction that the theories were true. Chadwick's important 'Sanitary report on the condition  
 13 of the labouring population of Great Britain' which was published in 1842 was based on a false  
 14 belief of the miasma aetiology of disease and on a very selective use of evidence. There are many  
 15 examples of selective use of evidence through this period and large sections of reports were based  
 16 on assertions that were not underpinned with empirical evidence. In many cases the main pur-  
 17 pose seems to have been advocacy for policy changes and social developments ('opinions' in the  
 18 terms of the Society prospectus) with statistical evidence playing the supporting role. However,  
 19 the difficulties of collecting 'statistical facts' at this time should not be underestimated.

20 This is not to detract from the standing of people like Farr as among the most innovative  
 21 of social scientists of the 19th century, making enormous contributions to the development  
 22 of statistical compilation, analysis and presentation. Indeed an interesting strand of develop-  
 23 ments through this period, and much earlier in terms of Bills of Mortality, was the concern  
 24 with methodological questions that could have a serious effect on the validity of the statistical  
 25 evidence. Data completeness was a major issue. For example, there were concerns about the  
 26 omission of Dissenters and Catholics from mortality records that were based on parish regis-  
 27 ters. In addition there was the obvious concern that if infants who had not been baptised were  
 28 excluded from the records then it would have serious effects on estimates of life expectation  
 29 and infant mortality rates. Similarly there were concerns that comparisons of mortality between  
 30 different populations should take account of different population structures and the ideas of a  
 31 stationary population, standardized mortality ratios and Farr's development of life tables were  
 32 very important. When the Registrar General post was created in 1837 with a system of general  
 33 birth and death registration a major concern in the early years was to establish that the quality  
 34 of data and, in particular, the coverage were an improvement over the earlier period. Much  
 35 higher apparent birth rates in rural areas were correctly diagnosed as evidence of inadequate  
 36 registration coverage in urban areas. This was linked to illegitimacy rather than taken as a sign  
 37 of lower fertility in the urban population.

38 As well as the high ideal of using statistics to understand and improve society, there was a  
 39 rather different, more political, subtext which also emerges. This was the idea that statistics  
 40 could defuse some of the more extreme claims regarding social conditions and hence counter  
 41 gross exaggeration. For example, Jacob (1834) wrote

42 'A more general diffusion of accurate knowledge regarding the state of public affairs would tend to check  
 43 that excitement and party spirit which has often been created by misrepresentation and exaggeration, and  
 44 has produced an annoyance to the government, and at least a temporary disaffection of the public mind'.

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 46 This is still an important role for official statistics particularly when describing politically sen-  
 47 sitive topics. They must set the scene for levels of crime or migration, for example, and should  
 48 provide an authoritative picture in areas where perceptions may be misleading or opinions on

1 the true situation diverse. However, it would be claiming too much to suggest that higher qual-  
2 ity, more authoritative statistics always dampen the ‘excitement and party spirit’ in the world  
3 of politics. Even today, misrepresentation and exaggeration are not unknown.

### 3. Official statistics and public trust

#### 3.1. *Background*

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8 It is difficult to underestimate the influence that official statistics have on our lives. They are  
9 used extensively for monitoring and developing public policies, for monitoring the delivery of  
10 public services and for decision making in both the public and the private sectors. Decisions  
11 based on statistics affect directly the inflation that we experience, the mortgages that we pay and  
12 the interest that our savings accrue. Major decisions on pension and benefits increases, and a  
13 large proportion of the UK contributions to the European Union and the entitlement of regions  
14 of the UK to European Union structural funds depend directly on statistical information. As  
15 citizens, explicitly or implicitly, statistical information affects the decisions that we make and  
16 the views that we form. It directly affects our perception of the performance of government. It  
17 influences our choice of school for our children and the perceptions that we have of hospital  
18 performance and the delivery of public services more generally. In particular, here in the UK  
19 perhaps more than any other country, a huge number of public sector targets are monitored  
20 and used to influence the performance of public sector activities.

21 Statistics, their production and interpretation, really do matter. It is uncommon to find some  
22 area of public debate that does not draw on a body of statistical information. As a result, public  
23 confidence in the statistical system and its outputs is vital. In particular this is essential if people  
24 are to have confidence in the decisions that are made on their behalf by elected leaders. For  
25 example, people will not accept the case for closing a school or hospital if they do not trust the  
26 statistics on which the case is made. More generally, no one will trust government if it is seen  
27 to rely on statistical information which is perceived as untrustworthy.

28 Such mistrust undermines the system of government and the democratic process itself. It  
29 also undermines the utility of the statistics that are produced whatever their real quality and  
30 relevance. Ministers, by consciously creating space between policy promotion and statistical  
31 production, could do much more to build public confidence and perversely they are as much  
32 victims of mistrust as are the citizens. Ministers are in a no-win situation if whenever the statistics  
33 are ‘bad’ they are accepted and used to criticize the government and its policies and whenever  
34 the statistics are ‘good’ they are disbelieved as being ‘fiddled’ or ‘false’. In any specific situation  
35 this is not the basis for public debate and can only be overcome by a general improvement of  
36 public confidence in the statistical system itself.

37 Hence it is argued that public confidence is not a desirable option, to be offset against other  
38 desirable attributes such as influencing the use of statistics by government, or improving public  
39 policy. It is an essential attribute without which the utility of even the highest quality statistics  
40 is undermined. Trustworthy statistics sit at the very heart of the democratic contract between  
41 the public and its elected government.

42 In the last 20 years or so one of the major objectives of the Society has been to improve the  
43 framework within which official statistics are produced and in particular the introduction of new  
44 statistical legislation. Of course we can trace this concern with the official statistics system back  
45 into the 19th century. This modern campaign bore some fruit when the present government were  
46 elected in 1997 with a commitment to create an independent statistical system, followed by the  
47 creation of the ‘Framework for statistics’ in 2000 and this year the Statistics and Registration  
48 Service Act 2007.

1 The UK statistical service compares well with most national comparators. The range and  
 2 timeliness of UK statistics are generally good. Quality of outputs is generally perceived to be  
 3 adequate although improvements should be made and there are some specific concerns which  
 4 need to be addressed. In some respects such as the availability of longitudinal studies and access  
 5 to microdata for secondary analyses the provision in the UK is first class.

6 Nonetheless public confidence in official statistics is low as it is with almost all forms of gov-  
 7 ernment activity and it was to strengthen trust that the Statistics and Registration Services Act  
 8 2007 was passed. Fig. 1 displays a chart from the Eurobarometer report (European Commis-  
 9 sion, 2007) reporting on public confidence in official statistics. The UK reveals the lowest level  
 10 of public trust among the 27 European Union member states. It shows how far we have to go  
 11 to build public confidence.

12 A perusal of the chart, for those who know the European statistical system well, does not  
 13 appear to reveal any strong association between public trust and the perceived quality of national  
 14 statistical systems or the range of statistics that are produced. There are countries with much less  
 15 elaborate statistical systems than ours that benefit from much higher levels of public confidence.  
 16 Of particular interest in the chart is the case of Ireland, a country which might be considered  
 17 to have a rather similar public culture to that of the UK. The Irish public have the lowest level  
 18 of mistrust in their official statistics of all 27 countries, albeit with a high level of ‘Don’t know’.  
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### 21 *3.2. Implementing the Statistics and Registration Services Act*

22 This year the Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007 has been passed. This is something  
 23 which the Society pressed for and welcomed. I do not intend to provide a detailed analysis of  
 24 the Act. I doubt whether the Society, if offered a blank sheet and a pen, would have written leg-  
 25 islation which is similar to that enacted. When it was introduced to the Commons, the Society  
 26 along with other knowledgeable commentators were disappointed with its form and content  
 27 and resolved to promote a series of amendments to improve it. Working through contacts in  
 28 both Houses of Parliament and through direct contact with government, the Society achieved  
 29 many of its objectives and the Act is improved as a result, albeit still not of a form and content  
 30 that the Society would have chosen.

31 However, statistical legislation is one thing; the effect that it has on public confidence is  
 32 another and we must wait to see whether it has the desired effects. The Act provides an opportu-  
 33 nity to change public perceptions of our statistical system and, just as importantly, the environ-  
 34 ment and culture in government, within which the statistics are produced. Much will depend on  
 35 the spirit with which the provisions in the Act and related non-statutory provisions are imple-  
 36 mented. This will depend on the new Board, the National Statistician, Parliament and members  
 37 of the GSS. Ministers and their non-GSS civil servants also have an important part to play in  
 38 establishing the new regime.

39 Without focusing on the detail of the Act I offer some personal views on how the UK sta-  
 40 tistical system needs to function under the new act to build public confidence. This depends on  
 41 two key elements:

- 42 (a) an environment within government which creates space to demonstrate professional inde-  
 43 pendence and statistical integrity and
- 44 (b) statistical producers who are committed to the development and maintenance of the  
 45 highest professional standards.

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 47 Both are essential to public confidence in the system and its outputs. The ways that the new  
 48 system needs to function are as follows.

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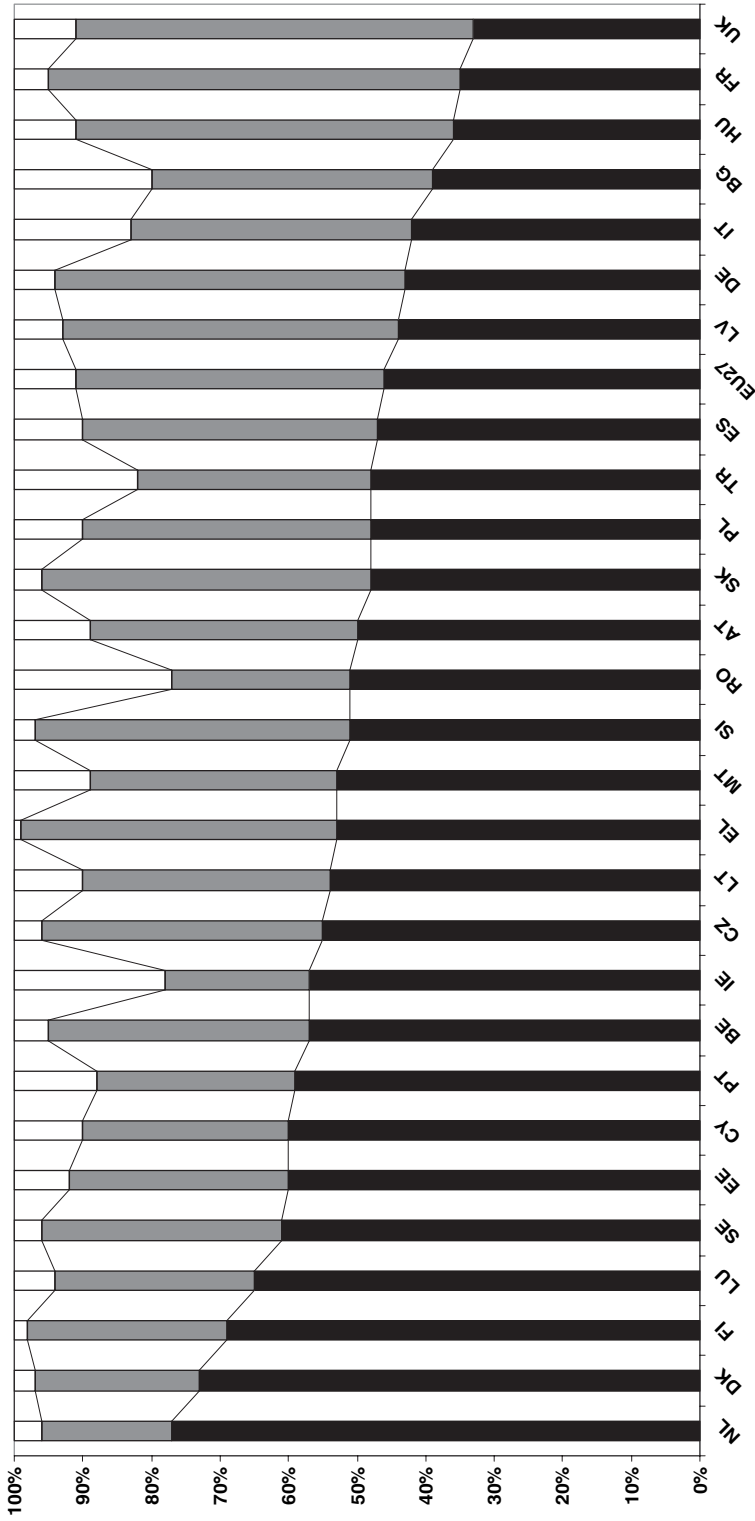


Fig. 1. Trust in official statistics across European Union member states (source: European Commission (2007)): ■, tend to trust; □, tend not to trust; □, 'don't know'

- 1 (i) The new Board has a dual role for strategic management and to maintain an oversight  
2 of the system, including in particular compliance with the code of practice. It will be  
3 essential that it is seen to take account of the public interest in all that it does and the  
4 way that it functions.
- 5 (ii) As a non-Ministerial department, the Board must win public confidence in itself if it is  
6 to promote public confidence in the statistical system more widely. As a priority, it will  
7 need to establish in the public consciousness its independence from direct Ministerial  
8 control and will need to build strong relationships with all stakeholders, but particularly  
9 with Parliament. If Parliament acknowledges and supports the Board's independence  
10 in daily practice then public confidence in the Board is more likely to follow. But public  
11 confidence in the Board alone is not enough (see below).
- 12 (iii) *The reach of the Board:* the Board must not limit its strategic oversight to the Office  
13 for National Statistics alone but must span the entire system. Many of the statistical  
14 outputs that are needed by modern society depend on a co-ordinated and integrated  
15 response from various government departments. The achievement of this is rooted in  
16 coherent planning, integrated budgetary allocations and a day-to-day commitment to  
17 shared purposes. In a government administrative system that, because of its very size  
18 and complexity, fosters departmental baronies, a countervailing voice for co-ordination  
19 and common purpose is essential. To fulfil this function the Board will need planning  
20 and budgetary information in consistent form for the system as a whole and should use  
21 it to promote a coherent statistical service.
- 22 (iv) *Roles and responsibilities:* the Society advocated as clear a separation as possible be-  
23 tween the roles of the National Statistician and the Chair of the Board. Specifically the  
24 National Statistician, as well as being the professional Head of the GSS and chief statisti-  
25 cal advisor to the Board, should be responsible for statistical production and all of the  
26 professional responsibilities such as methodology, the timing and content of statistical  
27 releases and maintenance of classification systems that support statistical production.  
28 If there are questions about the compilation or interpretation of any statistic or the  
29 application of international standards in a specific case then it must be the National  
30 Statistician who is accountable.
- 31 (v) The Chair of the Board is responsible for the overall functioning of the statistical system  
32 and should act as its advocate. The Board should ensure that producers operate in a  
33 healthy environment and that the statistical producers consult and take account of the  
34 public interest in the decisions that are made. It should promote practices and policies  
35 that take account of the public interest and promote public confidence in the system.  
36 If there is any question about compliance with the code of practice then it is the Board  
37 who should investigate and respond.
- 38 (vi) *The scrutiny function:* public confidence in the statistical outputs cannot rest solely on  
39 the oversight role of the Board since the outputs are too numerous and too complex  
40 and the production processes too dependent on professional judgements and decisions  
41 for any scrutiny role to have the breadth and depth to give public assurance across  
42 the spectrum. The scrutiny role should not simply be concerned with narrow detailed  
43 assessments of numerous statistical series as separate outputs but must be aware of what  
44 assessments reveal about the broader picture.  
45 It is the health and robustness of the environment in which statistics are produced  
46 and the professional skills and commitment of those who produce them that will matter.
- 47 (vii) Trust will rest on public confidence in the statistical system itself and the way that it  
48 functions. The statistical producers must be regarded, and must regard themselves, as

part of the solution to building public confidence rather than part of the problem. The Board must try to ensure that a professional environment exists across the system in which the producers can function and must secure Parliament's support in championing this objective. If the Board and/or Parliament sink into persistent criticism of the statistical producers, rather than the environment in which they function, then it is difficult to see how public confidence can be strengthened. It is in creating this environment that Ministers and policy officials have an important part to play.

- (viii) However, this places a major requirement on the statistical producers themselves to function in ways that help to build public confidence. They also must always take account of the public interest in their work and must be open and transparent about professional issues: priority setting, methods and processes, presentation and interpretation. Above all they must build strong links to the user communities and genuinely consult on development plans and users' needs. They must find ways of demonstrating their professional independence and commitment to the intentions of the Act. They must also demonstrate their commitment to the professional standards that are required of them.
- (ix) This emphasis is not intended to minimize the importance of the scrutiny function but to place it in a wider context in which it ensures that the statistical environment is healthy and that the producers are functioning within it as they should. It should have value as a scrutiny function for the system or parts of it rather than simply a detailed audit of a specific statistical output.
- (x) *Release practices*: there is one aspect of the way that the statistical system functions which is so central to public confidence that it merits specific mention. This is the environment in which statistics are prepared for release and then presented. It is vital that the statistical system establishes a clear separate identity from the public information machine that is driven through policy departments' press offices. This includes the mechanism for release and the clear professional independence for content and interpretation. The government have accepted the case for this and have committed to non-statutory arrangements to achieve this but it would be an optimist who would think that this will be fully achieved in all policy areas without a struggle.  
 The value of control over the terms of the public debate is so strong that it is unlikely that policy departments will cede this ground to the statistical producers overnight. It must be recognized that influence is sought over this process, not just to protect the interests of Ministers, but also because the performance of many public servants is judged by the statistical outputs. Hence many levels of the public sector have an interest in ensuring that statistical information is presented in the 'best possible light'. The Board and the statistical system should make it a priority to win gains in this area and it may prove to be one of the first points of tension between the Board and departments. If so it could be the vehicle for establishing an early rapport between the Board and Parliament.
- (xi) Pre-release access to statistics for Ministers and policy officials has been strongly debated during the course of the Bill. The Board will now have a formal role before the government brings forth secondary legislation to set out the criteria and processes governing pre-release access. This also is likely to be a matter for strong debate in Parliament and an early opportunity for the Board to set out its position
- (xii) *Devolved administrations*: the Board has a responsibility to all levels of user of the entire system and needs to be sensitive to this. In particular it will span the UK and must devote sufficient attention to the needs of users within the devolved administrations.

1 These points are intended to establish the statistical system, with the National Statistician  
 2 as its professional head, as a public asset that is seen to be serving the public interest, respon-  
 3 sive to emerging needs and committed to the highest professional standards. Ultimately public  
 4 confidence will rest on a good proportion of the public having a supportive attitude to the sta-  
 5 tistical system itself respecting it as serving their interests. This will be strongly influenced by  
 6 the attitude of parliamentarians and the media. If we could reach this position, and we should  
 7 not underestimate the difficulty in the climate of criticism that pervades public debate in this  
 8 country, then public confidence in the statistical outputs would be assured.

9  
 10 **4. The official statistics system**

11 The organizational arrangements for producing official statistics vary from one country to  
 12 another and usually reflect wider decisions about public administration rather than a deliberate  
 13 choice for the statistical system itself. In the UK the arrangements for statistical production  
 14 are certainly complex and include centralized, decentralized and devolved settings. The GSS  
 15 invests considerable time and overhead cost in trying to maintain a common culture across  
 16 these settings and to promote a degree of co-ordination.

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 18 **4.1. Centralized, decentralized and devolved statistical systems**

19 Statistical systems may be characterized by three forms of governance:

- 20  
 21 (a) *centralized*—a single central statistical authority with a recognizable institutional identity  
 22 separate from Ministries that are major statistical users;  
 23 (b) *decentralized*—groups of statistical producers who are separated on a thematic basis (e.g.  
 24 health, education or crime) and under the control of the related policy department—in the  
 25 UK these producers are usually embedded in policy departments and may be integrated  
 26 with other analytic services but in other countries, such as the USA, the producers may be  
 27 contained within a separate statistical agency under the aegis of the policy department;  
 28 (c) *devolved*—parallel statistical activities based on some form of devolved public adminis-  
 29 tration with authority within a part of the nation as in autonomous regions or component  
 30 countries of a state.

31  
 32 The essential difference between decentralized and devolved arrangements is that in the former  
 33 each entity has primacy over a topic whereas in the latter each entity has primacy over a geo-  
 34 graphic area and the statistical production in any devolved entity is generally replicated in the  
 35 others.

36 The UK statistical system has well-recognized elements of all three forms of governance.

37 Labelling of any statistical system in this way is something of a caricature since in no coun-  
 38 try could one characterize the statistical system as being of one pure form. Even in the most  
 39 centralized systems there are decentralized components. In the most devolved systems there are  
 40 retained powers at the national level. Nonetheless it is useful to think about the characteristics  
 41 of each form of governance and their potential effect on public confidence. In practice some of  
 42 these are related to the source of funding for each element of the system.

43 There are several key issues, as follows.

- 44 (a) *Responding to user needs and priority setting*: decentralized entities are closer to parent  
 45 Ministries and hence closer to emerging policy needs for statistics. It is also argued that  
 46 the statistical producer can more easily get a seat at the policy table and so ensure that  
 47 statistical information is well used for public benefit. Similarly, a devolved statistical entity  
 48 is closer to the needs of its parent devolved administration and, it may be argued, other

1 users including the public within the devolved area. In a practical sense this may result in  
 2 statistics having a more direct and powerful influence on public policy to the benefit of  
 3 all citizens.

4 Conversely decentralized and devolved entities run the risk of being less responsive  
 5 to users and to user priorities other than those in their principal focus. There are con-  
 6 cerns that ‘locally’ driven decisions result overall in inconsistent decisions on priorities,  
 7 inconsistent adoption of classifications and definitions and ultimately inconsistent and  
 8 incomparable outputs.

9 There are also concerns that cross-cutting issues such as social deprivation or a coher-  
 10 ent statistical picture of the elderly (covering various facets such as health, social care,  
 11 income and wealth) receive lower priority from each statistical contributing unit than the  
 12 topic merits to the overall detriment of the statistical outputs.

13 However, although a central statistical office may offer greater co-ordination, coher-  
 14 ence and consistency it is characterized as being less aware of and responsive to emerging  
 15 policy needs and is not as well placed to obtain statistical information that is used effec-  
 16 tively by key decision makers. Although a central statistical office may be protected from  
 17 undue influence from any policy department, it can also be perceived as isolated and  
 18 unresponsive: a group of statistical producers who are too isolated from user needs and  
 19 hence unresponsive to them.

20 Additionally, there is growing use of administrative sources for statistical purposes and  
 21 decentralized and devolved statistical units that are closer to the administrative function  
 22 may have greater access and greater influence on the way that such sources are developed,  
 23 particularly when information technology systems are renewed.

- 24 (b) *Statistical infrastructures*: beneath the statistics that users see there are essential, if unglam-  
 25 orous, statistical infrastructures that must be maintained and developed and which play  
 26 a vital role in delivering quality and consistency of its outputs. Business and address reg-  
 27 isters, classification systems and geographical classification schemes are all essential to  
 28 a modern statistical system and the quality of its outputs. These need to be uniformly  
 29 applied and uniformly available across the system whatever the organizational arrange-  
 30 ments. Some part of the system, usually the centralized component, must take respon-  
 31 sibility for continued investment in essential infrastructures and for making them avail-  
 32 able across the system. Similarly access to data and administrative information should  
 33 be available where it is needed for statistical purposes subject always to confidentiality  
 34 requirements.
- 35 (c) *Methodology*: another driving force for quality and coherence is the use of consistent  
 36 methodologies. This covers the human input into the essential infrastructures above but  
 37 much more also. Consistent design and analysis methodologies, consistent use of tech-  
 38 niques such as seasonal adjustment, consistent production of statistical quality measures  
 39 and the periodic evaluation of statistical processes and outputs are essential if the overall  
 40 quality of the statistical system as a whole is to be achieved.
- 41 (d) *Dissemination*: cutting across both technical infrastructures and staff expertise is the need  
 42 for consistency of performance over statistical dissemination. This term covers both the  
 43 statistics themselves but just as important the consistency of metadata and commentary.  
 44 Statistics without informative authoritative commentary will not be as accessible, nor  
 45 have the influence, that they should. The need to serve the whole user community fairly  
 46 and impartially implies a requirement to support users’ needs regardless of the particular  
 47 statistical source. In a decentralized or devolved system this implies common standards  
 48 of delivery and content.

(e) *Critical skills*: statistical systems depend on the availability of a wide range of skills, in statistics, information technology, communication and presentation and many others. Because of the availability of these in the market and because of the relatively infrequent use of some key skills in particular areas, it is a concern that decentralized or devolved units may not always be able to sustain the level of expertise that is required. For example large centralized entities tend to have a critical mass of statistical methodologists whereas this is difficult to achieve in smaller units which may need to call on specialist skills relatively infrequently. Expertise in areas such as sample design, questionnaire design, generalized estimating systems, time series analysis and seasonal adjustment would fall in this category. Funding and commitment are needed to ensure that this critical mass of expertise is made available to support statistical evaluation and development throughout the system.

The key point to recognize is that centralized, decentralized and devolved systems have different strengths and weaknesses. The strengths will derive from the organizational structure and the weaknesses need to be recognized and ameliorated through systems and processes that must be put in place. In a system such as in the UK which is a hybrid of all three types much can be achieved if the system operates in an integrated fashion with all components recognizing their interdependence and their common commitment to the system as a whole rather than simply to their immediate prime user community.

This requires a common culture and a focus on the ‘bigger picture’ as the system serves the needs of all users, from European Union and international entities, through national users, down to devolved administrations, and local government and local communities, as well as other users such as business and commerce, academia and the public. This is not easy to achieve and requires a constant renewal of a shared culture and sense of purpose across the system as a whole. It also calls for systemwide mechanisms for support for infrastructure renewal, methodological expertise and so on. The UK GSS invests a significant amount of time and effort to maintain this common bond with some success but also with some persistent weaknesses. In general the integrating force is the sense of shared professional purpose across the system. The countervailing disruptive forces are the separate policy and funding priorities that are contained within individual departments with a rather localized view of what matters. The statistical system seeks to be ‘joined up’ within a government system that is not and has few mechanisms to be so.

The key point for the Board is that different components of the system must pay particular attention to different potential weaknesses if the system, as a whole, is to function effectively. In terms of oversight, one size does not fit all and this needs to be reflected in the focus of oversight that is exercised by the Board.

#### 4.2. *The interaction between organizational arrangements and public confidence*

If we consider the organizational arrangements purely from the perspective of building public confidence it is clear that different parts of the system face different challenges.

##### 4.2.1. *Centralized statistical offices and public confidence*

It is much easier for a separate centralized entity which is perceived to be at arms length from government and particularly from policy Ministries to build a public identity as ‘independent’. The very fact that it has a distinct institutional identity around which a line can be drawn and within which only statistical issues prevail is a major advantage. It is much easier to present issues such as professional independence, confidentiality of data, statistical compilation and release as being demonstrably free from unwanted government influence. It is also easier to exhibit

1 professional leadership as the Head of a recognizable institution. It is not a coincidence that  
 2 generally the best trusted of the national statistical institutes in other countries are of this kind.  
 3 They have the strongest public recognition and the strongest reputation for independence and  
 4 integrity. They may have other weaknesses but in public trust terms they have a major advantage.

5 Of course no organizational form is a guarantee of public confidence and there may be mis-  
 6 trust and lack of confidence in professional independence and competence under any system. It  
 7 is said that ‘trust comes on foot and departs on horseback’: it is a slow process to build public  
 8 confidence and it can be eroded quickly if there is cause for concern. Such cause may be an issue  
 9 over integrity, leaks or other improper events or concerns over quality and professionalism.  
 10 Any statistical system, whatever its organizational form, can lose public confidence if there are  
 11 major errors in the statistics that it produces for example. In all systems, however good, errors  
 12 occur from time to time. It is how they are handled that will determine the extent to which public  
 13 confidence is damaged and the time taken for its recovery.

14 The most important challenge for centralized offices is to ensure that they display account-  
 15 ability for the decisions that are taken and build a genuine process of consulting users on their  
 16 views about priorities and their perceptions of the relevance and quality of outputs and dis-  
 17 semination. The danger is to appear and too independent, and too unreceptive to criticism. In  
 18 addition the centralized part of the system must show itself to be supportive of the needs of  
 19 all users, including those who are most associated with other parts of the system. Supporting  
 20 devolved and decentralized parts of the system in terms of infrastructure and special expertise  
 21 will be vital also.

#### 22 4.2.2. *Decentralized and devolved statistical units and public confidence*

23 It seems inevitable that if statistical production is embedded in a policy department there will be  
 24 greater potential for political interference (or the perception of this which is no less damaging)  
 25 and hence a greater threat to public trust. The two elements that help a centralized statistical  
 26 office to create a strong independent identity are its institutional boundary that separates it from  
 27 other parts of government and its concern with statistical matters only. For statistical produc-  
 28 ers who are embedded in policy departments these two factors do not exist. This needs to be  
 29 recognized and, if the benefits of decentralized and devolved systems are to be enjoyed, there  
 30 is a need to work even harder at demonstrating professional independence and hence securing  
 31 public confidence.

32 A question of identity, separate from the parent policy department, is important. One way to  
 33 achieve this is to brand all national statistics as such and to have them identified in the public  
 34 mind as products of the statistical system rather than of particular policy departments. In this  
 35 function the statistical producers in policy departments should be seen as fulfilling their respon-  
 36 sibility to the National Statistician. This is not just a question of releasing statistics through  
 37 a common hub or Web site but much more fundamentally about the branding of the statis-  
 38 tics, their source and their producers as ‘National Statistics’. Moreover the statistics that are  
 39 produced must be seen as a valuable source in their own right with informative professional  
 40 commentary about the statistical picture. If the full statistical release is viewed as no more than  
 41 an adjunct for a Ministerial press release then it will be the latter that sets the agenda for public  
 42 debate and the attempt to underpin the separate statistical identity will have failed.

43 Creating a separate statistical identity is the most demanding challenge for statistical produc-  
 44 ers who are embedded in policy departments.

45 Journalists and other users should be briefed when statistics are produced if this helps their  
 46 understanding and ensures that the statistical messages are conveyed. This is true for a central-  
 47 ized office also but is arguably even more necessary for statistics that are produced by decentral-  
 48

1 ized and devolved statistical units since it is an overt opportunity to engage in direct exchange  
 2 with journalists and to demonstrate the professional independence and objectivity of the pro-  
 3 ducers. Additionally interpretation and explanation are even more important and the quality of  
 4 strong textual comment and explanation will again achieve this end. Primary data may be anal-  
 5 ysed for a wide variety of purposes, and active use of primary data sources to provide statistical  
 6 analyses on a range of issues beyond those that are narrowly associated with the government  
 7 of the day would again reinforce confidence in the professional independence of the statistical  
 8 producers.

9 Because of the closeness to the policy function, user consultation on the range, adequacy,  
 10 relevance and quality of the statistics that are produced and their suitability for the wider user  
 11 community is fundamental. There is a need to demonstrate that users, other than the policy  
 12 department, are listened to and their needs understood.

13 We need to recognize that the agenda to strengthen public confidence will be easier to sub-  
 14 scribe to for staff in the Office for National Statistics but less straightforward for statistical  
 15 producers in policy departments. There is an almost inevitable tension for the latter between  
 16 approaching as close as possible to the policy process to ensure that statistical thinking con-  
 17 tributes fully but at the same time ensuring some professional separation to maintain public  
 18 confidence in the integrity of statistical processes and outputs. Policy officials, who carry the  
 19 dual functions of giving confidential advice on policy to Ministers and also of promoting the  
 20 government's policies, can view statistical producers as erecting unnecessary barriers around  
 21 the statistical production and dissemination functions. As a result statisticians may be viewed as  
 22 unhelpful to the policy promotion function and hence may be excluded from the policy devel-  
 23 opment function. Statistical producers in policy departments may sometimes be unwilling to  
 24 press the professional independence issue too far for fear of this outcome.

#### 25 26 *4.3. Communication*

27 The benefits from strengthening public confidence in statistics do not just accrue to those outside  
 28 government. Ministers also have much to gain. There is no benefit to Ministers if, each time that  
 29 statistics show policies to be effective, there is general disbelief in the numbers and the debate  
 30 centres on whether the numbers can be trusted whereas, perversely, every time that they show  
 31 policies to be deficient, they are accepted and used as a basis for criticism. It is in the interest of  
 32 Ministers that the numbers are accepted and the debate centres on policy effectiveness rather  
 33 than the veracity of the statistics. Hence there is a continuing need to promote the benefits of a  
 34 strong, authoritative statistical system throughout government. Communication is vital.

35 By and large statisticians have an excellent record of speaking to each other and building a  
 36 common culture. This is true within the UK but also internationally where the processes and  
 37 networks that are developed to bring senior directors of statistical systems together are very  
 38 effective. As a result, the national and international communities of official statisticians have, in  
 39 my view, a much stronger common culture than most other professions. We are, however, much  
 40 less good at talking to policy officials and Ministers to explain the importance of and reasoning  
 41 behind codes of practice and similar protocols and the benefits of strong public confidence in  
 42 the statistical system. Indeed some codes of practice, including that for the UK, carry implica-  
 43 tions for Ministers and civil servants who are not statistical producers so communication and  
 44 explanation is vital. The perceived short-term disadvantages from respecting the professional  
 45 independence of the statistical producers are far outweighed by the long-term benefits of strong  
 46 trust in the system. As a result of our failure to communicate this message effectively, practices  
 47 to demonstrate the professional independence of the statistical system are seen by Ministers and  
 48 policy officials as impediments to the efficient process of government rather than as essential

mechanisms to ensure that communication with the public, on which the legitimacy of government rests, is achieved effectively for statistics. The Board could play a useful role by championing this dialogue with departments and the Society should do as much as possible in support.

## 5. Statistics and evidence-based public policy

This section considers the broader question of the role of statistics and statistical thinking in public policy, including the penetration of evidence-based policy into public administration. There is an obvious connection between official statistics, the GSS and evidence-based policy. These three terms have a common core but there is by no means a complete overlap (Fig. 2). The Society is concerned to ensure that statistics are used fully and effectively wherever they are needed throughout the public sector. Consequently, it would be a mistake to imagine that, if we wish to promote the use of statistics and statistical thinking for evidence-based policy, we should seek to influence only or even primarily the GSS.

### 5.1. The system's outputs

Official statistics are important. They are used to monitor public policies and public services and provide a window on the work of government. They are used to inform decision makers and the public about the *status quo* such as monitoring existing public policies and the current performance of public services. However, I shall argue that much as these regular statistical outputs may raise doubts about the efficacy of current policies they do not provide the basis for identifying alternative policies and they have a limited *direct* effect on new policy developments.

If we consider the large majority of national statistics that are released to the public month after month, year after year, then it may be argued that the connection between these and the monitoring of public policy is strong whereas the connection to new policy development is weak. Their primary purpose is to monitor the economic and social condition of society and to allow the public, parliamentarians and Ministers to make broad judgements about the effectiveness of public policy and the delivery of public services. They allow businesses to make investment decisions and to anticipate the growth or decline of business opportunities or citizens to make informed decisions about, for example, the choice of schooling for a child or the effectiveness of government. But, in truth, the regular estimates of gross domestic product, unemployment, crime statistics or hospital waiting lists give at best a very broadbrush picture of the general state of the topic that they portray.

In the UK, more than most other countries, we have a large number of statistical measures that are focused very precisely on different aspects of public policy or the delivery of public services. Examples include hospital waiting lists or the proportion of children achieving five

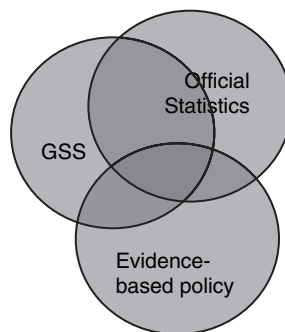


Fig. 2. Overlaps between official statistics, the GSS and evidence-based policy

1 General Certificate of Secondary Education passes at A–C grade, and there are similar mea-  
 2 sures throughout public administration. Even though these statistical measures are precisely  
 3 focused, and tell us when things are going in the wrong direction and so indicate a strong case  
 4 for a change in policy, the measures give little indication of what that new policy might be. That  
 5 question goes well beyond the initial statistical measure.

6 Much of the public output of the GSS falls into this category of what one might term the  
 7 ‘statistical wallpaper’: a statistical picture of the economic and social condition of society that,  
 8 by its very constancy, allows observers to monitor and make judgements about the state of the  
 9 nation or, more locally, which school parents might prefer for a child. A large proportion of the  
 10 time and effort of the GSS is directed at this general monitoring function, including the creation  
 11 of new statistical series to monitor emerging aspects of society.

12 I do not seek to minimize or undermine the importance of these statistical series: just their  
 13 direct relevance to alternative policy development. These series are not easy to produce. They  
 14 require regular maintenance and development. The statistical infrastructure that supports their  
 15 production must be renewed, concepts and measuring instruments must be critically reviewed  
 16 and even if the statistical production framework is excellent the society that is being moni-  
 17 tored is changing relentlessly. This very process of change means that the statistical measures  
 18 of yesterday will be progressively inadequate for tomorrow without further development and  
 19 change.

20 The constancy of these major statistical series is essential. Even if there is a change of gov-  
 21 ernment and the incoming administration adopt strikingly different policies from the previous  
 22 one, the major statistical series will not change. This is a strength since it guarantees that the  
 23 broad statistical picture will be maintained in a way that allows comparison with the past. It  
 24 also reinforces the professional independence of the statistical system to maintain statistical  
 25 series that provide important public information even through a change of government.

26 These outputs are important to policy development in the sense that they may trigger the inter-  
 27 vention decision—something must be done—but not what that something might be. To provide  
 28 a detailed assessment of policy options requires a depth of evidence focused on the effect of  
 29 policy measures that, by definition, are not yet in place. Such questions may lean heavily on well-  
 30 designed research studies and experiments that have good quality statistical thinking at their  
 31 core, but this goes well beyond the regular statistical series that are put into the public domain.

32 This case for a disconnection between the statistical wallpaper and new policy development  
 33 is somewhat overstated.

34  
 35 (a) In practice the major series are usually disaggregated in a wide variety of ways depending  
 36 on the specific series. This process of disaggregation, as part of the primary analysis,  
 37 provides much needed insight into issues such as regional variation and differences be-  
 38 tween different parts of the economy or different sections of society and as a consequence  
 39 provides some insight into where a policy may be more or less effective. If we take the  
 40 major economic series as an example, there is widespread analysis of disaggregated offi-  
 41 cial statistics, much of it undertaken either within the civil service but outside the GSS  
 42 or outside the civil service entirely. The purpose of much of this secondary analysis is to  
 43 provide a deeper understanding of the topic and to suggest further policy options.

44 (b) Additionally, an important by-product of official statistics is the provision of anonymous  
 45 microdata which are made available through organizations such as the Economic and  
 46 Social Research Council Data Archive for secondary analysis by academics, policy ana-  
 47 lysists and others. This is a vital source of data that is very widely used to provide policy-  
 48 related analyses and is a major source of evidence as input to evidence-based policy.

1 Nonetheless, the term ‘evidence-based’ policy conjures up a much more focused and directed  
2 form of policy assessment than the published series provide. If we consider any specific pub-  
3 lic policy or the delivery of a public service then, as statisticians, we know that one needs to  
4 understand at a much deeper level the effect of the policy, including the chain of events that are  
5 required to make the policy effective. For example, a policy that is designed to achieve higher  
6 levels of participation in the labour market for single mothers would need to take account of  
7 a wide range of issues such as evaluating the barriers to greater participation, almost certainly  
8 taking account of the differences depending on the age of the children, the education and skill  
9 levels of the mothers, levels of financial and social support that are available and their effect,  
10 the fiscal and financial consequences of participation and so on. Ultimately the policy has to  
11 affect people’s behaviour and that interaction between public policy, intended outcomes and  
12 personal response is complex.

13 Bird (2005) set out the statistical issues that need to be taken into account when designing  
14 statistical measures for performance monitoring and this report contains a wealth of sensi-  
15 ble advice that covers the much wider field of social research and the creation of evidence for  
16 evidence-based policy development.

17 There are many areas where statistical analysis is or should be a cornerstone of the gov-  
18 ernment’s policy development and there is no link to the GSS. For example modelling and  
19 projecting the paths of epidemics such as foot-and-mouth disease or severe acute respiratory  
20 syndrome where scientific advice on policy intervention falls to parts of the civil service such  
21 as the Scientific Civil Service. Generally the scientists who are responsible for this important  
22 work would not regard themselves as statisticians but as scientists from other disciplines for  
23 whom statistical methods are but part of their toolkit. Often the GSS has little or no direct  
24 involvement in this work. This is the case in almost all countries where the ‘official statistics’  
25 system is concerned with the regularly reported statistical series and related analyses.

26 The Society is as concerned to ensure that statistics are used effectively in these areas as in the  
27 regular outputs of the GSS. If it is to have any influence it must do so through the Government’s  
28 Chief Scientific Advisor or the Chief Scientific Advisors of particular Ministries rather than  
29 through the National Statistician and it must be recognized as an essential contributor to the  
30 multidisciplinary work. There are numerous examples of Ministers or government departments  
31 establishing advisory panels on issues for which there is a core statistical element. Almost always  
32 these panels have no recognized statistical expert as a member. Recognition within government  
33 of when statistical expertise could usefully contribute is woeful.

34 Setting to one side the general range of scientific work that is undertaken by the Scientific  
35 Civil Service, there are strong groups who work alongside the GSS in policy departments whose  
36 main function is to carry out economic and social research to support policy development and  
37 a greater understanding of the effect of policies in practice. In round terms the GSS has about  
38 900 members of whom only a small fraction are directly associated with policy development,  
39 the Government Economic Service has 1000 members, the Government Social Research Service  
40 1000 and the Government Operational Research Service 400. A huge amount of policy-related  
41 work is undertaken, or commissioned, by these groups, all of whom will make use of statistical  
42 methods although most members would not consider statistics as their core discipline.

43 Much excellent research into economic and social issues is undertaken or commissioned  
44 within government. And yet there are plenty of examples where policies are adopted on what  
45 appears to be flimsy empirical evidence or where the sources of data are not established before  
46 a policy change to monitor the effect.

47 Consider, for example, selected passages from two recent reports by Parliamentary Select  
48 Committees.

1 (a) Public Accounts Committee (2007) (*tackling anti-social behaviour*):

2 ‘Some ten years after the first anti-social behaviour measures were introduced, no national evaluation of the effectiveness of the different anti-social behaviour interventions has been undertaken’.

3  
4  
5 ‘Although the Home Office had commissioned a piece of research on the effectiveness of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders in 2005 the results were inconclusive and the Home Office have not published them.’

6  
7 ‘The Home Office and the Respect Task Force were unable to provide information to the Committee about when those on Housing Injunctions, Parenting Contracts and Orders or Dispersal Powers had failed to meet their conditions.’

8  
9  
10 ‘The lack of published data on the effectiveness of different measures to combat anti-social behaviour in different situations or with different groups of people has led to variation in the extent to which local areas use the interventions available to them. Decisions are based on local preferences and the familiarity of those in authority with the different types of measures, rather than an objective assessment of what works with different types of perpetrators.’

11  
12  
13 ‘The Home Office should:

- 14  
15  
16
  - 17 ● develop and implement nationally an evaluation system to assess the comparative effectiveness of the individual measures and powers, and the extent to which socioeconomic, geographic, ethnic, and age factors influence the outcomes achieved;
  - 18 ● use the data collected to provide local anti-social behaviour teams with evidence based recommendations on what works best in which circumstances; and
  - 19 ● specify a standard data set to be collected by local anti-social behaviour coordinators, so that all areas collect information on the use of measures against the same set of criteria, and in particular separating out data for young children from those nearing adulthood...’

20  
21  
22 (b) Employment and Skills Committee (2007) (bullying):

23  
24  
25 ‘Defining what bullying is and identifying instances of bullying is the first potential barrier to successfully tackling the problem’.

26  
27  
28  
29 ‘We have become convinced that a lack of accurate reliable data on bullying is one barrier to more effective anti-bullying work. We are concerned that decisions on anti-bullying policy are being made with very little evidence to guide them.’

30  
31  
32  
33 ‘There appears to be a lack of research on how bullying affects bullies, although the evidence we received suggests that there may be significant problems for individuals and the community generally if bullying behaviour which occurs in childhood is not tackled and changed.’

34  
35 Although these quotations come from specific reports relating to specific policy departments, social research is widely commissioned across government and the issues that arise would be better viewed as general rather than specific to particular departments or topics.

36  
37 The general issues appear to be that on some occasions at least there is

- 38  
39  
40 (a) a lack of data specification and data collection to support policy evaluation and/or development,
- 41  
42 (b) inadequate attention to definitions and classifications if nationally comparable data are to be collected,
- 43  
44 (c) inadequate national guidance to those who deliver policies and services on what works best and when, and
- 45  
46 (d) failure to publish commissioned reports.

47  
48 Some of these are issues on which the GSS could be expected to promote improvement. Others are closer to those who undertake or commission policy analysis and social research.

1 To these general concerns there are two more that are not reflected in the reports that were  
2 cited above but which have been of growing concern.  
3  
4

### 5 *5.2. Data from private sector suppliers of public services*

6 The first is that the growing extent of contract arrangements with the private sector to provide a  
7 wide range of public services has, in some cases, resulted in essential data for the monitoring and  
8 evaluation of those services being suppressed. The justification that is given is that the service  
9 is delivered through a commercial arrangement and hence the data are 'commercial inconfi-  
10 dence'. This is a dangerous argument that will erode the availability of data that are essential  
11 for monitoring and evaluating the service delivery. The very act of engaging a private sector  
12 supplier does not absolve the government from its responsibility to deliver effective and efficient  
13 public services and if public accountability is to be satisfied then such contracts must include a  
14 requirement for the supplier to provide statistical data, which should be available for statistical  
15 analyses in support of monitoring and evaluation.

16 Indeed one could go further. If private sector suppliers offer personal services as alterna-  
17 tives to public provision (as for example through private schools and private hospitals) then  
18 there should be a general requirement that the same data as are collected from the public  
19 sector to monitor the effectiveness and efficiency of the public provision should also be col-  
20 lected from the private sector providers to support public choice and to drive up standards  
21 of provision. Where appropriate and where there are many private suppliers, statistics could  
22 be compiled to describe the private sector activity and hence to compare it with the pub-  
23 lic sector without breaching confidentiality of any individual supplier. Of course there are  
24 cases where private sector suppliers already provide such data but it is not universal. Many  
25 of the health statistics that are published by the UK for example do not include private sector  
26 activity.

27 If the Society wished to press this case of availability of data it could do so through govern-  
28 ment as well as Parliamentary Select Committees which depend extensively on the range and  
29 quality of statistical information to monitor government activity and the provision of public  
30 services. This is an area where the GSS should have a locus also.  
31  
32

### 33 *5.3. The use of randomized trials*

34 The second concern is the stark distinction between the use of randomized trials in medicine and  
35 social policy. One of the success stories of recent decades has been the acceptance of the need for  
36 randomized trials in clinical investigations and medical statistics more generally. Researchers  
37 have recognized that all sorts of influences may impair inference from inadequately designed  
38 experiments. Blind and double-blind randomized trials are used extensively to protect against  
39 these influences and to provide more robust conclusions. In contrast with this practice in the  
40 medical field, there are very few examples of their use in the field of social policy. As a result, too  
41 often we see policies that are implemented on the basis of inadequate empirical evidence, only  
42 to find that in due course the policy does not have the desired effect or may even have adverse  
43 consequences.

44 Randomized trials in social settings are often difficult to design but, in general, the practical  
45 and ethical considerations are no less difficult in the medical field and here their use is extensive.  
46 Clearly, not all policy options would lend themselves to the use of randomized trials but the  
47 current level of use suggests that the Government Social Research Service could do much more  
48 to promote their use to the benefit of public policy.

1 The reports from the select committees and a general perception of the process of developing  
2 evidence for evidence-based policy suggest that there is still much to do to raise standards.  
3  
4

## 5 **6. Summarizing remarks and conclusion**

6 The Society has a successful record in recent years of influencing the public debate surrounding  
7 the need for legislation for official statistics. Beyond the legislation it has had a positive influ-  
8 ence on a wide variety of issues surrounding their production and dissemination. This strand  
9 of activity is not yet over. The legislation must be given the chance to be effective and the new  
10 arrangements fully established. The Society will want to work with the new Statistics Board and  
11 with Parliament in support of the new arrangements and will no doubt wish to promote various  
12 issues where it sees further improvement needed.

13 Compared with the success on the official statistics front, the Society has had much less influ-  
14 ence on improving the evidence base and related practices in support of social research. We have  
15 made comparatively little impact on the challenges that were set us by our former President  
16 (Smith, 1996) and that is disappointing. Too often we see policies that are adopted on the basis  
17 of inadequate empirical evidence.

18 In large part this may be due to the timescale in which decision makers need to act when  
19 policies are called into question and alternatives are needed. Good empirical research takes  
20 time and there can be a tension between the scientific and political timelines. Civil servants who  
21 are responsible for anticipating future policy needs must always be forward looking, trying to  
22 anticipate developments and initiating research so that the results are available when needed.  
23 One should not underestimate the difficulty of this task.

24 Nonetheless, there are too many examples of inadequate evidence, and a persistent failure to  
25 address the underlying deficiencies over time. Many policy areas, such as bullying or anti-social  
26 behaviour will not disappear whatever policies are developed. It is clear that more attention  
27 needs to be given to rather unglamorous tasks such as establishing clear definitions and set-  
28 ting up basic data collection processes. These are likely to be needed whatever the future policy  
29 options might be and are essential for monitoring the situation in a consistent comparable man-  
30 ner. They are likely to provide an essential baseline also for evaluating specific policy options  
31 and for supporting specifically designed experiments.

32 Additionally the distillation of research findings and the dissemination of these to the people  
33 who deliver public policies and public services is not as good as it should be. There is a lack  
34 of clear guidance that is couched in terms which would help those who need it. In medicine  
35 mechanisms have been established such as the Cochrane Collaboration and the case for doing  
36 something similar for social policy could be explored.

37 Underpinning this is the need to ensure that all research is published. The idea that particular  
38 reports can be suppressed or left languishing in a pending file for months or even years is unac-  
39 ceptable. Whether the results support the policy of the day or not, it is in the public interest for  
40 the results to be released. Just as the code of practice for official statistics requires that statistics  
41 be published without delay once they have been compiled, so there is a need for a corresponding  
42 code of practice for social research that would require the release of research results without  
43 delay once they have been finalized.

44 To influence these issues the Society needs to influence a much wider range of people within  
45 government than just members of the GSS. In addition to Ministers the government's Chief Sci-  
46 entific Advisor, Departmental Scientific Advisors and the Head of the Social Research Service  
47 need to be engaged as well as those who are members of or who support Parliamentary Select  
48 Committees.

1 Much more generally we need to engage ever more actively with government scientists and  
 2 professionals from a range of disciplines who see their first allegiance to some other discipline  
 3 such as sociology or geography but who make extensive use of statistical methods and design  
 4 in their work. The action that the Society has taken in recent years to support the Users Forum  
 5 and to broaden its appeal more widely to users of statistics is very welcome but there is much  
 6 more that might be done to engage fully with colleagues from other disciplines.

7 Our Sections, particularly the Social Statistics and Official Statistics Sections, have a tradi-  
 8 tion of engaging with analysts working in government to provide a forum for vigorous scientific  
 9 discussion on policy-related issues. We need to maintain and strengthen this activity and to  
 10 strengthen the links between our Sections and the Users Forum. Perhaps we need new Sections  
 11 to widen the range of activities. Periodically we collaborate with sister organizations to mount  
 12 joint meetings and this should be encouraged further.

13 The creation of corporate membership arrangements with government departments is an  
 14 important development and we need to involve representatives of these groups with our Sec-  
 15 tion committees to help to shape our scientific programmes. Given the number of professional  
 16 analysts in the government service, we should try to establish the Society as a natural forum for  
 17 discussion of their work and an essential complement to their professional lives.

18 In short the Society needs to reach out at a wide range of levels, engaging and encouraging  
 19 those who use statistics within government and promoting improvement where we see it needed.  
 20 We need to be recognized as having much to offer more efficient and effective public policy if  
 21 we are to be turned to when specific advice is needed.

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