

PRESS RELEASE

EMBARGOED until Monday 29 February 2016 00:01am

Treasury Select Committee recommendations on the governance of official statistics

The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) has taken note of the Treasury Select Committee (TSC) letter to Professor Sir Charles Bean regarding its views on the governance arrangements for official statistics in the UK.

In the correspondence, Andrew Tyrie MP, Chair of the Committee, outlines a number of suggestions, including:

- A recommendation that the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA) should be made to report to HM Treasury, as opposed to the current arrangements under which it reports to the Cabinet Office;
- A suggestion there should be a separate independent regulatory body to oversee the production of official statistics;
- Better parliamentary oversight for the work of the UKSA, through pre-appointment scrutiny by parliament for the Chair of the UKSA and the National Statistician.

The RSS thinks that there have been encouraging signs of improvement from the UK official statistics system in the last couple of years. Most notably the UKSA has been active in de-designating a number of statistics that are not of a high enough quality, including statistics produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Therefore in our view there is no need to significantly change the governance structures. Also some of the proposals made in the TSC correspondence are in fact not significantly different to current arrangements (as detailed in the notes to editors).

Commenting on the TSC recommendations, Mike Hughes, Chair of the RSS National Statistics Advisory Group said:

"Strengthening the independence of statistics is laudable but bringing them under the purview of the Treasury would achieve the opposite perception and would be counter-productive for government. There would be the constant question of whether Treasury had influenced the figures."

ENDS

CONTACTS

For more information, contact Roeland Beerten, Director of Policy and Public Affairs, on 02076143925 or at r.beerten@rss.org.uk

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) is a membership body with almost 8,000 members with a vision for data to be at the heart of understanding and decision making. At the time of the development of the legislation leading to the current arrangements the RSS was closely involved in the debates on strengthening the quality of official statistics in the UK, following the then Chancellor's announcement of his intention to make the ONS independent of government.
2. At the time of the legislation leading to the current arrangements going through parliament, the House of Lords insisted on transfer of responsibility from HM Treasury to the Cabinet Office on independence grounds at the second reading stage. Therefore what the TSC proposes would be a reversion to old arrangements.
3. The legislation which led to the current arrangements under the Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007 already identifies a separate regulatory body and assigned the function to the UKSA. At present this function is carried out through an independent Regulation Committee chaired by Professor Sir Adrian Smith. Therefore the arrangements proposed by the TSC by and large already exist.
4. Pre-appointment scrutiny by parliament already takes place for the Chair of the UKSA through the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee (PACAC). There is one known instance of a proposed appointment not taking place after parliamentary scrutiny by the Public Administration Select Committee (PASC), the predecessor of PACAC under the previous parliament. Therefore what is proposed by the TSC in relation to the chair of the UKSA already exists under current arrangements.
5. Under the current arrangements UKSA is accountable to Parliament through its reporting to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee. Its predecessor, PASC, carried out an extensive scrutiny exercise of the work of the UKSA and the ONS, comprising of ten separate studies into its effectiveness and operations. Although it concluded improvements could be made it did not recommend a change to the current governance arrangements.

6. The UKSA has been notably more active in the last two years in de-designating statistics by removing the 'National Statistics' designation from them where they do not meet quality standards. A list of de-designations can be seen here <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/monitoring-and-assessment/assessment/register-of-de-designations/>
It notably includes major statistics such as the Retail Prices Index, crime statistics and UK trade statistics. Therefore the TSC's criticism that the UKSA has not held ONS and other statistical providers to account is now less strong than it may have been a few years ago.