

## RSS response to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee Inquiry on the work of the Civil Service<sup>1</sup>

### About the RSS

The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) is a learned society and professional body for statisticians and data analysts, with almost 8,000 members in the UK and across the world. As a charity, we advocate the key role of statistics and data in society, and have done so since we were founded in 1834. Two of our key strategic goals for 2014-2018 are for statistics to be used effectively in the public interest so that policy formulation is informed by evidence for the good of society, and for improving statistical literacy across all sectors of society.

The RSS has strong links with the world of official statistics through regular liaison with the UK Statistics Authority, the Government Statistical Service and the Office for National Statistics, and we provide mechanisms to bring together users and producers of official statistics. We are submitting evidence to this inquiry, with a primary focus on civil servants' individual skills and capabilities and whether in its current form, the civil service can effectively deliver government policy.

### Summary

- **Capacity of the civil service in delivering policy would be improved if civil servants were more statistically literate.** This could be achieved through basic training in statistics and interpretation of numerical information in a policy context. This would avoid poor development and implementation of policies which are ill-targeted and subsequently cost additional time and resources to rectify.
- **There must be more detailed mechanisms in place to enable quantitative skills and understanding to be embedded at all levels of the civil service workforce.** It is important that civil servants have a critical awareness and understanding of statistics produced by government.
- We note with concern, a tension between the government's open data agenda, and the drive to privatise organisations which hold critical parts of the national data infrastructure. **We believe the civil service has a critical role in ensuring public data are available for the public good**

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<sup>1</sup> Parliament.UK (2016). 'The work of the civil service examined' [webpage]. Available from: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/public-administration-and-constitutional-affairs-committee/news-parliament-2015/work-of-the-civil-service-launch-15-16/>

- The RSS welcomed the introduction of 5 days of learning and development for civil servants per year as part of the 2014 reform. **However, more must be done for analytical skills to be developed across all professions, including the communications profession, which plays a key part in the public communication of statistics, and the policy profession, where data and numerical information is critical in underpinning good policy development.**
- **We welcome current consideration of removing barriers to recruiting and retaining data specialists, and whether civil service pay grades are sufficient to recruit and retain the numbers that are needed.** However, gaps in data skills and data science should not be defined too narrowly as a shortage of external talent. We need existing analysts and skilled professionals within the civil service to take on the government's data challenge, and efforts to professionally develop skilled government statisticians and analysts should be strengthened for this.

### **How effective is the Civil Service in delivering Government policy? How could this be improved?**

1. As advocated in our *Data Manifesto*, evidence and official statistics should be at the heart of the policy debate.<sup>2</sup> To ensure government policy is effectively delivered, it is important that civil servants have a critical awareness and understanding of statistics which are critical to underpin public policy and also the key way of monitoring policy effectiveness. There is demand for greater data skills in the public sector. In a survey of public sector staff, 72% of respondents agreed that it is becoming increasingly important for civil servants to know how to access, share and use data.<sup>3</sup> Greater data skills within the civil service will mean the numbers underpinning policy can be accurately interpreted and as a result, policy can be developed and implemented more effectively. Investment in a more extensive training and development infrastructure to embed data and statistical literacy will prevent costly mistakes being made in the policy making process.

2. The RSS welcomes improved transparency for government data, and supports the government's continued commitment to deliver on its open data policy. A principle of being open where possible is reflected in the ethical framework that the Cabinet Office have published for both private and public sector data scientists who use government data alongside other helpful

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<sup>2</sup> RSS (2014). *Data Manifesto* (PDF). Available from: <http://www.rss.org.uk/Images/PDF/influencing-change/rss-data-manifesto-2014.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Policy Exchange (2013). *Smaller, Better, Faster, Stronger – Remaking Government for the Digital Age*. Available from:

principles. The Council of Data Ethics which the government has agreed to establish should also fill important gaps in professional awareness of good practice with data, which will be especially valuable for the civil service to uphold public trust.<sup>4</sup> This stands in addition to the UK Statistics Authority's Code of Practice for Official Statistics, which has established the particular and high standards that should be required in the government's use of statistics, and which should continue to be reflected in the Ministerial Code and in the offer of training.<sup>5</sup>

3. However, there remain significant barriers to effective delivery of open data by government. The Royal Statistical Society is concerned about the effects of outsourcing, and the consequences this has for open data. In our *Data Manifesto* we advocate greater data sharing between government departments and that more progress should be made on opening up government data.<sup>6</sup> When work is outsourced there is the issue that oversight of core data sets is often lost. The RSS believes there needs to be more coherence with regards to key public data sets, and when public bodies are privatised, sufficient mechanisms for regulation should be put in place to ensure core reference data are not lost and are developed and improved by government for the public good.

**Does the Civil Service have the right capabilities and skills? How could training and professional development be improved? Is the current pay structure attracting and retaining the right people?**

4. The 2015 Civil Service People Survey (CSPS), which was conducted across 96 civil service organisations, and questions civil servants on their learning and development, shines some light on current feelings amongst the civil service workforce on their current capabilities. The survey found that whilst 63% of those surveyed said they could access learning and development opportunities when they needed to, only 52% felt the learning opportunities they had taken in the last year have helped improved their performance and only 44% felt the training they had taken had helped developed their career.<sup>7</sup> We feel these results are disappointing given the reform to training

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<sup>4</sup> House of Commons Science & Technology Committee (2016). *The big data dilemma: Government Response to the Committee's Fourth Report of Session 2015–16*, (PDF). Available from:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmsctech/992/992.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> StatsLife (2016). *Cabinet Office issues data ethics framework for data science*. Available from:

<https://www.statslife.org.uk/news/2895-cabinet-office-issues-ethics-framework-for-data-science>

<sup>6</sup> RSS (2014). *Data Manifesto* (PDF). Available from: <http://www.rss.org.uk/Images/PDF/influencing-change/rss-data-manifesto-2014.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Cabinet Office (2015). *Civil Service People Survey 2015*. Available from:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/477335/csp2015\\_benchmark\\_report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/477335/csp2015_benchmark_report.pdf)

included in the 2013 Civil Service Capabilities Plan.<sup>8</sup> The use of training for career development is essential in retaining the workforce and instilling confidence.

5. There is clearly a need therefore for a more substantial and comprehensive training programme to improve career development. In terms of quantitative skills, Deloitte's assessment of public information for the 2013 Shakespeare Review noted concerns about a general "lack of skills and familiarity to work effectively with data" within the public sector.<sup>9</sup> To address this, the RSS runs regular in-house courses for government departments on statistics and numerical interpretation. Whilst we welcome such opportunities to improve statistical literacy it would be beneficial for the civil service to develop a more structured and sustainable method of skills development in this area.

6. The UK Statistics Authority (UKSA) should continue to take a leading role in addressing data gaps and improving data sharing, through its ability to scrutinize the scope and use of official statistics throughout the public sector. The Authority's Code of Practice is a valuable tool for all civil servants to ensure the quality of official statistics is effectively monitored and assured, taking account of internationally agreed practices.<sup>10</sup> We would encourage policy makers to continue to seek the Authority's advice and for all civil servants dealing with official statistics to have adequate training in and knowledge of the Code of Practice.

7. We welcome the recommendations from the Independent Review of Economic Statistics carried out by Professor Sir Charles Bean. The creation of an ONS data science hub as advocated by Sir Charles (and now committed to by government) will provide a 'focal point' for the development of data science techniques, and should also offer a centre for training in data science.<sup>11</sup> By providing a dedicated centre for training in data analysis and harnessing further collaborations between civil servants and other sectors, the government should, as Sir Charles sets out in his report, attract

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<sup>8</sup> Civil Service (2013). *Meeting the Challenge of Change – A Capabilities Plan for the Civil Service*. Available from: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/307250/Civil\\_Service\\_Capabilities\\_Plan\\_2013.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307250/Civil_Service_Capabilities_Plan_2013.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (2013). *Shakespeare Review: An independent review of public sector information*. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-sector-information-market-assessment>

<sup>10</sup> UK Statistics Authority (2009). *Code of Practice for Official Statistics* (PDF). Available from: [https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/images-codeofpracticeforofficialstatisticsjanuary2009\\_tcm97-25306.pdf](https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/images-codeofpracticeforofficialstatisticsjanuary2009_tcm97-25306.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> HM Treasury (2016). *Independent Review of Economic Statistics* (PDF). Available from: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/507081/2904936\\_Bean\\_Review\\_Web\\_Accessible.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/507081/2904936_Bean_Review_Web_Accessible.pdf)

and retain high quality staff. We feel this is a positive step for improving data science skills within the civil service and increasing links between the public, private and third sectors as well as with academics. However, more must be done to increase skills throughout the civil service, not just for those working specifically in data analysis but also for those in communications, to ensure statistics are correctly and effectively communicated to the public, and in the policy profession, where data and numerical information is critical in underpinning effective policy development.

8. Finally, we note there are current debates on-going about civil service pay and whether this is sufficient for the attraction and retention of specialists, among which digital and data specialists are a strong present concern. This Public Administration Select Committee found that the lack of pay rises in post is acting as an incentive for civil servants with specialist knowledge to move out of post in search of promotion, meaning skills that were expensively acquired are lost.<sup>12</sup> For their 2016 annual report, the Review Body on Senior Salaries heard concerns from the Cabinet Secretary that the traditional civil service pay grading structure poses a barrier to recruiting sufficient commercial, digital and data specialists from outside the civil service.<sup>13</sup> The head of the Government Digital Service has similarly called for a new and consistent pay model for digital and data specialists, to work alongside the traditional model of the civil service.<sup>14</sup> The Review Body on Senior Salaries recommended that “where robust evidence supports such arguments, an appropriate pay response may be justified, alongside complementary actions in areas such as training and skills development.” We welcome the Review Body’s recommendations as we would like to see government make better use of data with more trained personnel, including external candidates, for this. However, efforts to address gaps in data skills and data science should not be defined too narrowly as requiring external and commercial talent. We need existing statisticians and data analysts within the civil service to take on the government’s data challenge together with newly recruited professionals across all departments.

*Submitted by RSS’ Press & Policy Officer, 8 June 2016*

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<sup>12</sup> Public Administration Select Committee (2015). *Developing Civil Service Skills: a unified approach* (PDF). Available from:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmpublicadm/112/112.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Review Body on Senior Salaries (2016) *Thirty-Eighth Annual Report on Senior Salaries* (PDF). Available from: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/518130/1027-WL-38th\\_Annual\\_Rpt\\_Sen\\_Sal\\_2016\\_Accessible\\_.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/518130/1027-WL-38th_Annual_Rpt_Sen_Sal_2016_Accessible_.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Foster, M. (2016). ‘*Whitehall’s digital staff could break free of traditional grade structure to woo talent, GDS boss says*’, *Civil Service World*. Available from: <http://www.civilserviceworld.com/articles/news/whitehalls-digital-staff-could-break-free-traditional-grade-structure-woo-talent-gds>