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19th November 2012

Thank you for your letter of October 16. Jenny Church is replying separately to you regarding your first question and I will take the other questions in the order you had them.

- 2) *“Official statistics need to be trusted, and that means they have to meet certain standards”. What those standards are, or should be, and the mechanisms that should be used to make the necessary assessment.*

Essentially the statistics have to be produced to high professional standards, be independent of political or other influence, meet user needs, be communicated clearly and easily accessible. The Code of Practice outlines these standards and is, in our view, a satisfactory statement of them. National Statistics have to be assessed against the Code, and this is a suitable mechanism. The aspiration should be that all official statistics (ie those produced by central and devolved governments and their agencies) are produced to code standards whether or not they are assessed.

In practice this depends on a) ensuring that all statistics of importance have national statistics status so they are formally assessed; b) ensuring that official statisticians throughout the Government Statistical Service apply the same standards and ethos to all their work and have the professional support to do so; c) ensuring that the need to adhere to these standards is recognised and supported by ministers and senior non-statistical staff in departments, devolved administrations and agencies; and d) continued vigilance by the UK Statistics Authority for any serious breaches.

The need for a shared culture and ethos throughout the GSS is important and this relates to points made in response to question 5 below. UKSA might consider whether a self-assessment process for official statistics that are not national statistics, using essentially the same criteria (possibly with some exceptions) with results published by ministries and agencies would be helpful.

- 3) *What terminology should be used to differentiate “official statistics” from “National Statistics” (Q15)?*

The phrase “National Statistics” was originally intended to imply two things: that the statistics concerned are of a certain importance; and that they meet certain quality standards. Since the Act the formal definition is for official statistics that have met Code of Practice standards

although the implication that these are statistics of particular importance is still there. No short two or three word phrase will encompass all this but the phrase “Accredited National Statistic” might work as shorthand with a fuller explanation (eg “These statistics have met the criteria required to be accredited as National Statistics”) given with some prominence in the text or as a footnote.

Whatever phrase is used UKSA should use well-established “brand awareness” PR methods to promote knowledge and acceptance of the concept. A specific campaign directed at key audiences (media, professional users etc) could be considered but in any event other techniques such as including explanations in any verbal briefings, ensuring that words such as National Statistics are always capitalised and revising the current roundel logo to make the tick mark more prominent would be advisable.

- 4) *Please supply any further information that you did not have the opportunity to raise during oral evidence.*

- 5) *In light of difficulties of separating out the functions of producing and assessing statistics that you alluded to in your written evidence, are there alternative governance structures that the UK Statistics Authority could consider adopting?*

I take these two questions together since part of the response to 5) covers the only major issue we did not have the opportunity to discuss fully (although it was touched on) during the oral hearing.

We accept that deciding the structure of the UK Statistics Authority given its various responsibilities is not easy and that every arrangement is likely to have some drawbacks.

The RSS considers that the key division within the UKSA, as regards both staffing and committee structure, should be that of the production of statistics (including but not confined to the ONS and including the National Statistician’s office) from the scrutiny and assessment side. Two of the three key sub-committees of the main Board are the ONS Board and the Assessment Committee. We understand that members of the UKSA main Board sit on one but not both of these committees with the UKSA Chair sitting on (but not chairing) that Assessment one. We welcome this as good practice.

Currently, however, it appears that Assessment Reports and the Monitoring work of the UKSA are also discussed at the main board as well as at the Assessment Committee. (The Monitoring work of the UKSA includes the Monitoring Briefs which are the Authority’s investigations into actual or potential issues raised with them, some with inevitably high profile as well as other reports on matters of interest.) It would seem logical that the Assessment Committee rather than the overall Board would normally have sign off on Assessment reports and probably for most Monitoring Briefs. In general we feel this committee should be the driving force behind the Authority’s detailed Assessment and Monitoring work leaving the main Board with broad oversight or the resolution of particularly contentious or high profile issues. Overall there would seem to be a case to consider that the main board delegates more of its work to the ONS Board and the Assessment Committee in order to enhance the separation between scrutiny and production.

In addition to its scrutiny role, and to its responsibility for the ONS, the UK Statistics Authority, and the National Statistician, have responsibility for the health of UK statistics generally. However this role is not well defined due, essentially, to the devolved and decentralised nature of the UK statistical system. While there are advantages to this system there are also drawbacks; in particular it makes formal planning for statistics, and hence proper consideration of the UK's statistical needs, challenging. We accept that the UK system means that departments and the devolved administrations have the final word on their statistical plans but we do feel that they should be obliged to consult and pay attention to the views of the National Statistician and, where needed, the Authority. We regret that the UK Government has not yet accepted this view and we would urge PASC to highlight the need for it in its reports. (The issue of coordination with the devolved administrations will presumably be a topic in your forthcoming second study.)

The terms of reference of the Committee for Official Statistics, the third main sub-committee of the UKSA Board, would then be defined to support this role of the National Statistician and the Authority.

Equally there is a strong case for the National Statistician to have tighter control over the Government Statistical Service as a whole with influence over postings and career management. This is needed both to ensure quality (see question 2) but also to ensure sufficient professional support. The National Statistician stated in her evidence to you that Heads of Profession and Chief Statisticians in Departments now have in their performance agreements an objective about their professional role and their accountability to her on professional matters which is a welcome step in the right direction. We are unsure to what extent these arrangements extend over all the 200 or so bodies which produce official statistics. In some of these bodies the statistical department may be small, or indeed consist of a sole individual, and they will be in particular need of professional support and guidance.

I hope these comments are helpful.

Kind regards

Jill Leyland
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