

Royal Statistical Society response to the Public Administration Committee inquiry on Civil Service Skills, 7 March 2014

1. The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) is both a learned society for statistics and a professional body for statisticians. We are active in a wide range of areas both directly and indirectly relevant to the study and application of statistics. We were first founded as the Statistical Society of London in 1834, and became the Royal Statistical Society by Royal Charter in 1887. There are more than 6000 members of the RSS around the world, of whom some 1500 are professionally qualified as Chartered Statistician. We are responding to this consultation from two standpoints. Firstly, as a body where many of its members are professional statisticians within the civil service, and secondly but equally, as a body that champions statistical literacy and the effective use of statistics in the public interest, so that policy formulation and decision-making are informed by evidence.
2. 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. We provide mechanisms to bring together users and producers of official statistics through the Statistics User Forum. The RSS assists professional statisticians to maintain and develop the skills they need by providing professional development courses, offering a range of examinations, accrediting degree courses, and through membership services. It is not enough simply to handle and process data; professional statisticians need to critically apply methodology, interpret results and communicate their findings.
3. Through our long standing engagement with government we are well placed to comment on skills and capability issues in the civil service. These skills and capability issues matter not only for the statistical sectors of the civil service, but also increasingly for most civil service professions, alongside the greater availability and use of data from across the public sector.
4. To promote statistical literacy, the Royal Statistical Society's *getstats* campaign has run seminars for a wide range of professions including journalists, MPs, local councillors, civil servants, press officers and housing association staff. Our *getstats* in Parliament events for MPs, members of the Lords and their staff, have discussed subjects as varied as the role of data and statistics in evidence-based health policy the assessment of school performance, accessing and understanding public finance information, and constituency information.
5. The recommendations from the Shakespeare Review on public sector information, which were accepted by government, made a strong case for strengthening skills and capability in analytical capacity and data handling across the public sector, and commended our work on skills development in statistical literacy as a good example of what could be implemented.

RSS response to 1. The Government's current approach to training and development within the Civil Service.

6. It is crucial that the production and use of statistics meets levels of quality and integrity that will command public confidence. More than this, it is important that civil servants have a critical awareness and understanding of statistics produced by government and by related organisations in the public sphere. Members of each profession in the civil service, and those aspiring to join, should get the opportunity to develop new, and hone existing, skills.

7. Current Government interest in low cost options to improve the skills base (such as MOOCs and incentives to use data regularly) should be explored, but they are likely not to go far enough in developing skills. Poor analytical skills and data mismanagement will lead to costs in the longer term, so access to the most effective training should be prioritised.

RSS response to 2. how information about existing skills and capabilities—and consequently any gaps—is captured, shared and acted upon across Whitehall.

8. Deloitte's assessment of public information for the Shakespeare Review has noted a generalised lack of skills and familiarity to work with data. The review also found that local authorities commonly lacked the skills to prepare and publish data.
9. The RSS is working with the GSS to improve its qualifications programme. We have linked our courses to the GSS competency framework, and have run regular in-house courses for government departments including the Ministry of Defence, Home Office, and the Department for Communities and Local Government. We have tailored content to the needs of individual departments, for example by incorporating their own data into the session. Whilst we welcome such opportunities, a more structured, rigorous and sustainable method of skills development should be found. At the moment it is unclear how professional bodies with expertise in skills development, such as the RSS, can engage with the civil service to explore the embedding of critical skill sets.

RSS response to 3. The extent to which the Civil Service Capabilities Plan (published in April 2013) addresses both current and future demands of Government.

10. The RSS welcomes the expanded role for Heads of Profession, and the instatement of 5 days learning and development per year. However we also think that analytical skills need to be developed, in a generic sense, across all the professions. To build the civil service's capabilities to respond to the 'open data' agenda, all civil service staff who receive, handle or interpret statistical information should receive training and support for this. Key professions will include communications professionals, the policy profession, economists, operational researchers and social researchers. We also note that press officers, speech writers and other communication professionals play a key part in the public communication of statistics and they should have an understanding of the necessary standards for doing this.
11. We welcome that the Government is clearly advocating better use of digital services. For redesigning services and delivering them digitally, we expect a strong emphasis on improving the ability for the public and other stakeholders to access public data where appropriate
12. Analytical research such as that produced by the What Works centres should be valued as a source of professional development for statistics, social research, policy delivery, and other civil service professions. We would like to see their findings reflected in the specialist expertise deployed across departments.

RSS response to 4. The impact of the abolition of the National School for Government and how well its replacement, Civil Service Learning, is addressing skills and capabilities gaps.

13. The civil service currently lacks a centralised offer of statistics modules or courses, which could be made available across all professions through Civil Service Learning. It is currently overly complex for the RSS and other external providers to list and offer these courses through Civil Service online and Capita.