

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Pre-appointment Hearing: Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, HC 1162

Tuesday 29 March 2022

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Members present: Mr David Jones; Tom Randall; Karin Smyth; John Stevenson.

In the absence of the Chair, Mr David Jones took the Chair.

Questions 1-38

Witness

I: Sir Robert Chote, Government's preferred candidate for Chair of the UK Statistics Authority.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witness

Witness: Sir Robert Chote.

- Q1 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to this session of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. I am taking the Chair this morning in the absence of our usual Chairman, William Wragg, who is currently away from Westminster.

Today the Committee is conducting a pre-appointment hearing for the Government's preferred candidate for the role of chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Robert Chote. In recent years, the public have had an increased exposure to and reliance on data and statistics on a day-to-day basis. That trend looks set to continue in the coming years. The Committee is looking forward very much to examining Sir Robert's motivation and suitability for this very important role. We would also like to take the opportunity to express our thanks to the incumbent chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir David Norgrove, for his hard work and dedication in his role over the past five years. We wish him well for the future.

Good morning, Sir Robert. Could you please introduce yourself for the record?

Sir Robert Chote: Thank you very much. I am Robert Chote, the Government's—if not yet anybody else's—preferred candidate for chair of UKSA.

- Q2 **Chair:** What was it that led you to apply for the role of chair of UKSA?

Sir Robert Chote: I have been a user of official statistics and other statistics throughout my 30-year career, and I am a passionate believer in the contribution that comprehensive, timely and high-quality statistics can make both to public understanding of the world around us and to the formulation of good policy. From the other roles that I have fulfilled, I also have a particular interest in how public institutions combine the need to demonstrate their independence, show analytical rigour, communicate effectively, be responsive and have good working relationships with policy makers. I hope that some of that past experience in different roles may be of use to UKSA in this one.

- Q3 **Chair:** If you are appointed to the role, what will your priorities be?

Sir Robert Chote: My goals essentially are to ensure that the statistical system has and is seen, by the public and the full range of people who use it, to have a combination of attributes. It needs to be trusted. It needs to be transparent in the way that it does its work. It needs to be responsive to users and other stakeholders. It needs to be collaborative in the way that it works with other institutions. It needs to be impartial and innovative. It needs to operate ethically and efficiently. That is the set of overarching objectives. I think they are consistent with the strategies that have already been set out.



In that context, my early priorities would be getting to know and winning the respect of the existing board, and asking members and those who interact with the board how well they think it is functioning—do they think there are areas where it could be improved? I would also want to look at the skills mix of the board and establish what we should be looking for.

A second important priority will be to establish good working relationships with the national statistician and the director general for regulation, with a robust framework for support and challenge, and also, in time, to ensure that there is good succession planning in place for those posts when that is needed.

I would also want to get around and visit the various UKSA, ONS and OSR locations. As you know, the institution is broadly spread geographically. I have had a lot of interactions with members of the Government Statistical Service, but I would want to talk to a wider range of them to understand properly how the various bits of the system fit together and where the people working in it and with it see the strengths, weaknesses, risks and opportunities, and to assess the engagement and wellbeing of staff.

Then there is getting up to speed with what you might think of as the delivery priorities of the next few months. Obviously, that will include the release of the results and findings from the last census, getting ready to give advice on what the future of the census ought to look like, the roll-out of the integrated data service and continuing work on the modernisation of economic statistics.

I would also want to ensure that I fully understood the resource and other constraints that the system is operating under, including its financial settlement, the cost pressures that it is facing, human resource issues and the technology and data security strategy and challenges. I would want to assess how the intervention policy is working and ready myself to work with OSR to discourage and respond to future episodes of misuse and ensure that the generic lessons of that activity are learned.

Crucially, I would want to engage with external stakeholders, including members of this Committee, to see where they believe the system is working strongly or weakly and examine with them how we can ensure that the statistics authority is always outward-looking, responsive and transparent in how it works.

All of that said, no institution looks the same from the inside as it does from the outside, so priorities will in part depend on what happens when I start lifting up the stones and looking at what lies underneath, if and when I get there.

Q4 Chair: That is a very demanding agenda. Do you feel that you should be focusing on any particular issue during, say, your first 12 years—12 months in office?

Sir Robert Chote: I am sure that it will feel like 12 years. I take your point. As I mentioned, there is clearly a set of important delivery challenges for the institution over that period, and the integrated data



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service is a good example of that. It obviously has technological, ethical and human resource challenges, and there is the whole issue of how you ensure that that is delivered and you get the most effective use of it.

There is also the census, which I am sure we will come to later, in terms of supporting and challenging the ONS in the dissemination of its results and, in particular, the challenge created for that by the fact that it had to be undertaken in the middle of the pandemic and not at a particularly representative moment in time.

Another is looking at the ongoing challenges for the improvement of economic statistics, which has been under way for some time. Obviously, there is the work in using scanner data for inflation data; understandably, there is a lot of focus on inflation at the moment. I think that of the activities being generated over the next few months, those are probably the three biggest meals on the menu to be consumed.

Chair: Thank you for that.

Q5 Karin Smyth: You have talked about your approach for the first 12 months. We are interested in looking at the broader statistical world. In your view, what are the big issues facing the statistical world in the next five years?

Sir Robert Chote: In a sense, the three that I have just mentioned—that concrete challenge—typify a set of broader thematic challenges that confront the statistics system. One is making further and better use of administrative data. That is obviously a key element of thinking about what the future of the census might look like and your ability to try to move to a situation where you can present a rolling and more timely picture of the population. Another is encouraging data sharing across Government and beyond. As the incumbent has said, joined-up government requires joined-up data, and there is probably more work to be done in encouraging Departments and bodies that still feel somewhat reluctant or nervous about that being a journey that is worth travelling. Another is encouraging and facilitating the widest possible use of data. I want to be ensuring that the fruits of all the activity of the statistical system are as widely accessible as possible, bearing in mind the ethical and data security issues around that.

Institutionally, I have been an observer of the ONS for 30 years, and until relatively recently “nimble” is not a word that many people might have attached to it, but I think that many have been impressed by the speed and responsiveness that it has shown to the changing needs of users inside and outside Government during the pandemic. There is clearly an opportunity to build on that sense of momentum as well as addressing the technological and ethical issues that arise from that new activity. If you are taking more data from different sources and putting it together to best effect, there are technological, human resource and ethical issues to be addressed. All of those are the set of challenges, and they are in some ways exemplified by the three immediate delivery challenges that I discussed earlier.



Q6 Karin Smyth: One of the essential criteria is the ability to be open-minded about reform of the organisation. How much experience do you have of being part of a large-scale organisational review to help make the things that you outlined happen?

Sir Robert Chote: One example would be when I arrived at the Office for Budget Responsibility in 2010. The organisation was set up in embryo before I arrived, and the legislation—and precise discussions of structure, format, role and responsibility—evolved over the period after I arrived. It was not all set in concrete at that point; I was chair of the OBR as legislation was going through the Houses and debated there. I am certainly open to the fact that you learn and refine during that period, and we did. There were changes in the legislative structure and in the way in which the institution operated, in particular to ensure that it was functioning predictably and that it was demonstrating independence from political concerns as effectively as it could be.

My two priorities on coming in there were to maximise transparency but also to recognise uncertainty and risk more up-front in the analysis of the public finances. That is probably the example of where I have had to shape that. I inherited something that was still quite fluid and not set either legislatively or institutionally and worked through that. Key lessons from doing so are obviously to talk to users and to talk to people who actually know how the system works—people who have made the sausages on the inside of the machine, to mix metaphors. Both those things are important.

If you are taking people through a set of changes that might arise from that, how easy that is to do depends to a good degree on how clear you are able to be with people, what the end destination is and what the implications of the changes are. In the case of any future review of the structure, you are somewhat a prisoner of how clear the Government's and Parliament's eventual view and recommendations are. You obviously want to reassure staff and take them on a journey where you are able to say, "This is the destination and why this is being done." You want to take people through with the minimum of uncertainty and anxiety, but that is not always in your gift in these situations.

Q7 Karin Smyth: That is helpful. In your first answer, you talked about working with this Committee. Following on from that, working with this Committee—and with Parliament in its wider role—in setting that agenda is clearly important. What is your approach to doing that?

Sir Robert Chote: This Committee and the other Committees are very important stakeholders for any public body. I had a similar relationship with my previous-but-one hat on with the Treasury Committee for the OBR. We need to be accountable and responsive to you. We need to come to you and tell you the things that you need to know about what is going on in the system. That needs to be based on regular contacts, and I am very open to how you would most like to do that.



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One other thing that we found useful in my former life was ensuring, if there were new people coming on to the Committee, that there was an opportunity to explain to them exactly what we did and how we did it in a briefing before they had to come and do formal sessions, so that we were supporting people in all of that.

The same is true of Parliament more broadly. This is perhaps an interesting contrast with the OBR, where it really was the Treasury Committee—almost, although not entirely, to the exclusion of anybody else, except perhaps the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee—that was interested. In this role, given the span of the statistics system, you obviously have a greater degree of interest from a wider variety of Committees, and it is important to be able to address and serve that. But in terms of the responsibility for the institution, I assume you will be taking a greater degree of sustained interest in us than the other Committees would be.

Q8 Karin Smyth: What about Parliament in its wider sense?

Sir Robert Chote: There obviously is a greater formal role in terms of where the appointment goes, so that is a difference from my previous hat, where it was the Treasury Committee that had veto power over the—

Q9 Karin Smyth: Just to be clear, we have talked about the importance of UKSA as a public body that obviously has lots of constituent parts. We have enjoyed a direct relationship with lots of those constituent parts, so we hope that that continues. But in terms of the organisation in the public view now, particularly as people have become more adept users of statistics and data, I wonder whether you have thoughts about the wider role of parliamentarians in understanding that and the relationship with the various bodies.

Sir Robert Chote: You want to be supportive of that. You want to recognise the fact that not everybody here or outside is going to know precisely how the statistical system fits together and which bits of the structure do what. One example would be ensuring that the system can be responsive to the information that Members naturally want about what is going on with their constituencies. The House of Commons Library are playing a very important role in that, and being sure that we talk to them about whether they are able to service you in terms of your ability to get hold of data at the right geographical level and spread would be one good example. The key is to be responsive. Parliamentarians' needs will evolve, as other people's needs will evolve. The key thing is that UKSA and its component elements should be outward-facing, responsive, listening and learning from the evolution of user needs as time goes by.

Q10 Tom Randall: The Cabinet Office has announced that it intends to undertake a review of UKSA in the coming years. What do you think that sort of review ought to include?

Sir Robert Chote: Well, the Cabinet Office undertakes a series of arm's length body reviews anyway, and those, I think, are typically focused on whether the entity still needs to exist, whether its structure is fit for



purpose and whether it is performing against the remit that it has been given. Having been through three reviews of the OBR and having been involved in reviews of other fiscal watchdog agencies in other countries, I know they depend very much on how much time and resource you want to devote to this. You can go right back to, "What's the remit? What's the structure? Do you want to revisit the legislation?" Or are you more focused on, "Is there a very strong reason for this no longer to be an arm's length body?" I don't think that would arise, very obviously, in this case.

So it does depend very much on how you do them, but the general split, with these sorts of reviews, is between a review that says, "Is this body doing what it is supposed to be doing currently, given its current structure?" and a review that takes a step back and says, "Is the remit you have given it and the structure that it has fit for that?" It will be for the Cabinet Office to decide at which end of that spectrum they want to pitch it.

Q11 Tom Randall: That was going to be my next question, actually—whether you think that the underpinning legislation, the 2007 Act, ought to be part of that review. But you don't take a view on that at the moment.

Sir Robert Chote: Well, it certainly could be. It would be quite a task to revisit all of that. You have had an inquiry that spanned quite a lot of this territory. It would be quite a large exercise, in terms of time and resources, to go back to that. Obviously, from my point of view, I have no objections to the legislation being looked at. If, for example, you take within the legislation the issue of whether ONS and OSR ought to be more formally separated, I am quoted in your inquiry report on this saying that, on the face of it, it's a slightly odd structure and one wouldn't necessarily have designed it that way, or one's instinct might not have been to design it that way, with a blank sheet of paper. It was a design of its time, roughly the same time as for the BBC Trust, which had the same sort of umbrella—not entirely happily in that case. So I would have no objections, but my sense—I think you say this in the inquiry report—is that even some people who wouldn't have started from here would probably not regard it as worth while to try to unscramble the legislative egg, starting from here. It will obviously have to be a decision for Government and Parliament to do that.

I think there is an interesting question about whether greater separation would be sensible. Obviously, for those people who think that the system is sufficiently suboptimal that you want to go down that path and revisit things, it would give some greater appearance and substance to the independence of OSR from ONS. The question I would have, quite at the forefront of my mind, is whether or not that would actually increase its effectiveness. I say that partly from my experience of a range of bodies; I used to chair the network of fiscal watchdogs across the OECD, and the challenge of small bodies trying to scrutinise relatively large bodies is not a straightforward one. The challenge that most frequently arises is your ability to get information and data, but, just as importantly, the support and interaction and "How do we interpret this?" from the body. If you are a completely distinct body, that can be quite a tough thing to do, and in

the fiscal watchdog world, some ended up having to take people to court in order to get the information out of them.

Some people might see a disadvantage to having production and regulation under the same umbrella, in the sense of, "Is there a risk that the UKSA will tell or encourage OSR to be soft on ONS, because if they have a criticism, that in turn casts light on how well the UKSA is fulfilling its oversight and strategic functions?" I can see that some people would have some concern; I do not think there is much evidence of it actually happening in reality. On the other hand, being chair of the authority spanning both means that you are in a relatively powerful position to stop ONS giving OSR the runaround and saying, "Well, we can provide you with that information, but in an unhelpful form in 18 months' time, rather than when it's needed." It is not quite as straightforward as "separation increases independence"; you would need to think about effectiveness as well.

Going back to the BBC example, when the Trust was deemed to be not fit for purpose and, in a sense, regulation and production was split, you had another large, well-qualified organisation in which to put the regulatory function, in the shape of Ofcom, which was already regulating the other public service broadcasters as well. What you did not do was create a small body that was trying to get information out of the BBC. Frankly, Ofcom found it hard enough to get information out of the BBC, so it is quite a complicated set of trade-offs here.

Q12 Tom Randall: If a review takes place, regardless of the scope of that review, there will be possible organisational change within UKSA. I just wondered what personal experience you have of leading staff through organisational change, and how you would best support UKSA's staff through any review.

Sir Robert Chote: This comes back a bit to the answer I gave earlier. You have a review with a set of recommendations, and presumably there would be a response to that. You would have views on that, but the independent review does not get to decide; it is for Government and Parliament to decide where that goes. The clearer the destination of that, the easier it is to take staff through, because there may be difficult or uncomfortable change, but there is less uncertainty. That is a key issue.

The closest example of where I have been involved in this was with the creation of the OBR, which involved taking a set of functions and people out of the Treasury and moving them over to the new body, with a new set of governance arrangements around that. Understandably, people had some concerns about that: they were being taken away from the mothership into a smaller vessel, and had issues about what that meant for their contractual status, their future careers and so on.

I saw it as a very important part of my role at that stage to reassure people about what our vision was, how that structure was going to work, and how the relationships were going to work between the people they had been working with before and now the people from whom there was a



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slight degree of separation. Obviously, it would depend on what the nature of the changes was, but it is about communication and, hopefully, doing what you can to allay uncertainty where you are in a position to do that—but you may not be in a position to do that.

- Q13 **Tom Randall:** Changing tack slightly, thank you for supplying your CV to the Committee ahead of this session. You list on that that you are currently chair of the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council and a director at Pacific Horizon Investment Trust. How do you balance those roles alongside being chair of UKSA?

Sir Robert Chote: In terms of time commitment, both together are less than a half-time job, so in terms of the overall timescale I don't think that is a particular problem. The flexibility of the arrangement of the timing of those things means it can be done in a manageable way.

With the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council, that is complementary rather than conflicting. It means that I spend quite a lot of time looking at issues around the integrity, comprehensiveness and availability of data at the devolved Administration level. At the moment, I am wrestling with trying to understand the functioning of the Northern Ireland health system. We have been looking at the Northern Ireland public finances and the structure of Departments, and then the nature of the data coming out of those.

I think I am devoting more attention to those sub-national issues than I would be if I were just fulfilling this role. I hope that will be complementary; obviously, I have discussed this with the national statistician and he doesn't see a particular conflict, but obviously you are very free to take a different view on that.

Pacific Horizon is a much smaller time commitment. It is an investment trust that invests in Asia, outside Japan. It is managed by Baillie Gifford, the Edinburgh fund manager. I am straining to think of a potential conflict there. It does mean that I am spending more time in Edinburgh than I otherwise would, which will give me the opportunity to talk to stakeholders and staff there more easily and more frequently than I might otherwise. I hope that it would be manageable as a package.

- Q14 **Chair:** Are you an executive director at Pacific Horizon?

Sir Robert Chote: No, non-executive.

Chair: Thank you very much.

- Q15 **John Stevenson:** Clearly, the accuracy of statistics is vital, and an essential requirement of the role is commitment and enthusiasm for statistical independence and impartiality. From your previous experience, how would you demonstrate that?

Sir Robert Chote: Most of my career has been spent using data and trying to do so in an independent and impartial way. I was the director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies for eight years. That work involved an awful lot of use of economic and social statistics, and population statistics, and



the whole raison d'être of the institution is to provide independent analysis and research.

The IFS also had what I used to, in those days, call its public service broadcasting function, of helping the press, the media and parliamentarians to deal with competing claims about the use of statistics or forecasts or policy interpretation. I have turned up at many, many Select Committee meetings, helping people with those sorts of arguments. I hope that demonstrates that.

That was, of course, a key issue with the OBR. The whole rationale for the creation of the OBR was to ensure that economic and public finance forecasts were produced on a professional basis, and that you could demonstrate to the public that they were not tainted by politically motivated wishful thinking. In doing so, a very important part of that is to explain the uncertainties that lie around it.

You are right about accuracy, but you also need to explain to people—this is an important part of economic and fiscal forecasting and policy setting—what confidence you can have around sets of numbers or point estimates, because if you are setting policy, you certainly do not want to be betting the farm on whatever forecast I was responsible for at the time coming out to be completely correct, because it never would be. You need to be thinking about what the ways are in which the world could turn out to look different, and how my policy needs to respond to this, because it needs to be robust to the range of that. But the statistics were absolutely core to the work we were doing. In that sense I have been a very long-time user of them. Of course, I was a reporter for ten years as well.

So, timeliness, accuracy, comprehensiveness. Obviously, people in the economics sphere have issues around revisions—how you have to recognise the fact that the picture you paint of the world may, over time, start to look different. What you don't want to do is say, "Well, I've published one number and it never changes." That is brilliant if it never changes, but if the actual reality of the world has, then there is no shame in revising and painting a different picture. There is a trade-off between how frequently you do that and how timely—

Q16 John Stevenson: To follow up on that slightly, what would you do if you ever felt that your statistical independence and impartiality was being compromised?

Sir Robert Chote: In the sense of coming under political pressure, the scope for direct interference in the production of statistics is relatively limited. But in the use or presentation of them, if you have those sorts of concerns, I would, in the first instance, deal with them privately with the people who were trying to exert that pressure. Then, if you need to, you take that more publicly, including bringing concerns of that sort to this Committee. I think the way that you avoid that is establishing proper relationships and sets of expectations around behaviour beforehand and being as consistent—not capricious—and as predictable as you can be in



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the way that you deal with those situations, so that you are not springing surprises on people when you do not have to.

Q17 **John Stevenson:** If you felt you were compromised, would you resign?

Sir Robert Chote: If I was personally compromised, yes, of course.

Q18 **Chair:** You mentioned that if you felt there was any improper pressure being applied to you, you would take the issue to this Committee. Could you expand on that?

Sir Robert Chote: In addition to us being responsive and accountable to you and explaining to you what is going on in the system, there may be occasions when we have to come to you to ask for your support in underpinning and ensuring the integrity of the system. I cannot say what the circumstances would be where that would arise, but we have to have that in reserve. Over the years I have had a fair deal of experience of saying things that Ministers and other politicians would rather I had not said. Sometimes they take it well; sometimes they take it less well.

Q19 **Chair:** I was going to ask you that very question. What experience have you got of pushing back against Ministers who, in your view, have overstepped the mark?

Sir Robert Chote: Less so in terms of overstepping the mark. In the OBR and forecasting context, sometimes they have concerns about the way the narrative around a forecast might be presented. There can also be issues around the way in which the process operates—"Can you give me some more time to do this, that or the other"—which you feel compromise the integrity and robustness of the system. There have been occasions when I have had to have long and difficult conversations with Ministers about those things—sometimes short and difficult conversations with Ministers about those things.

As I say, the aim should be to have a good working relationship and to recognise the pressures and the reality that people in the policy world and the political world are operating within, but to be clear what is acceptable and what isn't. The aim is to show that you are acting in a way that is consistent and predictable and that—this would be true of the intervention policy—that you are not there to make yourself look smart or clever by springing a surprise on somebody. The ultimate aim is to ensure that the public is well informed—in the statistical world, in this context, and about what is going on in public finances, in the previous context. That combination of an effective working relationship, but a set of standards and accepted behaviour, and behaving as predictably, non-capriciously and consistently as you can is the basis. My long experience of dealing with Ministers and people in this context is that they are frequently better at dealing with bad news than you think and worse at dealing with surprises.

Q20 **Chair:** In this Committee's report on data transparency and accountability during the pandemic, we recommended that the ministerial code should be strengthened so that it was clear that Ministers would be required to abide



by the UKSA code of practice in presenting data. Do you think that that was a correct recommendation?

Sir Robert Chote: I think that was a very sensible recommendation. Correct me if I am wrong, but as I understand it, at the moment the ministerial code says one should be “mindful” of the code of practice. That seems weaker than it ideally would be. As I understand it, the Government came back and said there might be circumstances in which the need to bring more timely information to Parliament might trump the requirements of the code. That suggests to me that there is clearly a middle path, if you wanted to go down that, of saying that the code should be adhered to and that in those circumstances when Ministers feel that they should not adhere to it, they have a responsibility to explain publicly why they think that is the case, and you take that on its merits.

Q21 Karin Smyth: In 2019, our predecessor Committee made recommendations around demonstrating independence around the regulation and production role. Do you believe there are any outstanding issues as a result of that dual role?

Sir Robert Chote: This comes back a bit to the discussion we had earlier about the pros and cons of further separation. I think—as the incumbent does, very sensibly—that if you have the needs of the two institutions ever in conflict, you have to put the regulator first and everybody needs to know that that will be the case. You are not going to encourage the regulator to go soft in the comments that they may be making about ONS, although obviously they are making a whole lot of comments and recommendations in other areas as well.

My sense is—people will and do differ on this—that that system is working effectively and that OSR is performing well. You can point to examples—local population, for example—where concerns about statistical quality have not been taken as seriously as perhaps they could have been by ONS and where OSR has stiffened the spine admirably. I would want to be seeing how I feel that that intervention policy—the regulation element—is going in practice. But, from my standpoint, it seems to be operating reasonably effectively at the moment.

There is a set of issues around whether you want to have a greater set of formal separation between the two but, as we were discussing beforehand, I think you have to balance the greater visible and institutional independence that that will provide over the potential effectiveness. If you split off OSR and stuck it as a completely separate entity, it is a tough ask to be able to do that effectively without the support that the UKSA chair and UKSA should be providing across the system.

Q22 Tom Randall: UKSA has a five-year strategy that it launched in 2020 called “Statistics for the public good”. Your would-be predecessor has said that the implementation is going well, but I wonder what approach you will take to implementing the outstanding elements of the strategy once you are in post.



Sir Robert Chote: Again, we come back in particular to some of the near-term delivery challenges around census in its two dimensions—IDS, economic statistics and so on. I would obviously want to be ensuring that the board is getting the right sort of tracking and progress information so that we are on top of the continued progress in getting all of that implemented. Change programmes of this sort do not always go to plan.

There will be times when you have to think it is better to proceed safely than it is to proceed swiftly, but you would want to ensure, where you can, that progress was on track, that you were monitoring this correctly, and that value for money was being observed and you're delivering. It is certainly something where we would look to see that the board has got the right information that it needs to see how these things are evolving, with a proper timeline of what we hope to achieve by when, and some contingency for what happens if things come along that mean you cannot do it precisely on that timetable. That would all be proper project management.

Q23 **Tom Randall:** Do you have experience from your previous roles of picking up a corporate strategy from a predecessor and then running with it?

Sir Robert Chote: A while back at the IFS, I inherited something. That was a long-standing organisation that was running and had periodic strategies and objectives. The OBR was slightly different because it was more a start-up than an ongoing strategy. I had a set of legislation and terms of reference that effectively formed a strategy, but that was more for me to set out the vision of how I wanted it to operate and what the underlying spirit was going to be. The IFS would be my last example of inheriting something and taking on a set of objectives that people have. You certainly don't want to arrive as a new person and say, "I'm going to demonstrate that I am a new person by ripping up all the work that you are already in the process of doing"—that is very foolish. But you obviously want to look at how you think it is evolving, and that is in your mind the next time you have to come up with a new strategy and how you set out the translation of a five-year strategy into what you want to be doing year by year in business-plan terms.

Q24 **Tom Randall:** It is a bit premature to talk about the end of your term before you have started it, but if the current UKSA strategy ends in 2025, have you given any thought to how you might work to develop a new strategy that will start before your own term as chair comes to an end, and how that might move on to your successor?

Sir Robert Chote: As you will appreciate, the substance of that strategy is a little premature because I haven't got my feet under the desk for the first one. The key thing you want to ensure is that you have proper communication and engagement with both users and the people inside the organisation, which I think is what underpinned the last strategy when that was put in place. The timing of the pandemic meant that you were balancing the particular issues that arose out of that with, none the less, what seems to me a strategy that is not dominated by that and has sensible objectives around ambition, looking forward. I think that is what



you would want to be looking for in addition to ongoing responsiveness to what users want. You would want to take that as an opportunity to talk to people in a more fundamental sense about what they see as the opportunities and risks and potential activity, where people see gaps and see that the approach needs to change, or the challenge needs to change.

Q25 John Stevenson: As you know, we have different Administrations in the UK. How do you plan to collaborate and manage the key relationships that you will have with the different Administrations to ensure that we have some coherent UK-wide statistics?

Sir Robert Chote: As you know, there is a concordat and, inevitably, a set of Committees and other channels through which this communication takes place. The key thing in terms of the coherence is that this has to be done as a willing, co-operative exercise rather than having it imposed from anywhere in particular. Even if that were formally possible, that is not a way to generate ongoing success. You have to have a shared vision of why it is in everybody's interest for there to be comparability, to understand where the differences and the problems are now, and to move forward on that.

I am helped in the fact that I have had in previous roles and in the current one a good deal of interaction with the Assemblies and the Governments in Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh. One of the attractions of this role is to maintain and build on those sorts of relationships, and to ensure that you can get that degree of coherence, because you are balancing the autonomy and the rights of the devolved Administrations to do what is in their power to do. It has to be in everybody's interest to get as comparable a picture as you can and an understanding of where there are inevitable differences—at least, you want to know why and to understand them.

Q26 John Stevenson: Do you think that having a census in different years helped?

Sir Robert Chote: I am not sure that one would necessarily have chosen that as the initial optimal strategy, but it was before my time, so I do not know exactly what set of decisions went into that. The practical consequence is that, in putting together a picture of the UK, you need to address the technical challenges that come out of that. But there should be no doubt that it is an important objective to be able to come together with a picture of the UK population as a whole. It is another good reason why the ideal of moving to a more timely, rolling picture of the population, rather than a decennial snapshot, is a desirable objective if you can get there; but we have to be guided by the evidence on exactly what the future of the census is.

Q27 Chair: On the coherence of statistics, I think you indicated earlier that it is very important that the average member of the public should be able to assess whether value for money and good-quality services are being addressed. Is it possible at the moment for a patient in Wales, for example, to compare whether he has an equivalent health service to a

patient from England or Scotland?

Sir Robert Chote: The short answer is, I don't know. We are currently wrestling with the statistics around the Northern Ireland health service—trying to get a coherent picture within Northern Ireland is tricky enough. You have, for example, the obvious challenge of Northern Ireland having a more integrated health and social care system than England, so if you are trying to do that comparison, as we have been—even at the level of asking, “What is spending per head on health and social care in the different constituent nations or regions of the UK?”—it is not a straightforward question.

If you are operating the system in an integrated way, there is a substantive grey area between the two, because that is the integration you are designing it to deliver. Doing that is not straightforward. There will be more granular indicators of waiting times, for example, which might be more comparable, but in big-picture terms, if you have differently operated systems, it will never be completely straightforward to achieve that.

Q28 **Chair:** Do you think part of the function of UKSA is to develop a system in which it is possible for a patient in any part of the country to assess the quality of the service that he or she is receiving against the service in another part of the country?

Sir Robert Chote: On the exact details of how the health statistics and comparability works, I am afraid that you are taking me to a level of detail that, until I have my feet under the desk, I will not be able to say. It is clearly desirable to have a comparability that would allow you to do that. To what extent the nature of the management information and the administrative data does or does not allow us to do that, I confess that I am not yet expert enough to say.

Q29 **Chair:** Is that something that you would be inclined to look at?

Sir Robert Chote: Health is clearly a hugely important public service. That is why we have picked it as our first sustainability issue to look at in the Northern Ireland context. I am very quickly learning, from looking at Northern Ireland, the complexities around trying to do comparisons between there and the other nations, which is what I have been focusing on. I do not underestimate the challenges that may be involved in that.

Q30 **John Stevenson:** In your questionnaire, you said that one of the important challenges for further progress was encouraging reluctant Departments to share data. How do you intend to go about that?

Sir Robert Chote: There are two issues there. One is the level at which you engage with the Departments. If there is a sense of reluctance, is it primarily from Ministers, officials, the top of the institution, the particular people who deal with the data, or the layers in between? So, there is that set of issues—who, in practice, do you need to persuade?

Essentially, then, I think you need to take a two-track approach here. If it arises from a sense of anxiety and is about risk, you need to be able to



look sensibly at that and to reassure the reluctant Department that those risks are being properly managed, and that it is not exposing itself to unacceptable potential downsides. There is a reassurance element to it.

The other bit is trying to identify areas where overcoming that reluctance would be beneficial, both for the Department's own decision making and understanding, and for making it aware of the broader gains to Government and to effective policy. It is about identifying who, and it is that twin-track approach to—how can I put it—accentuating the positive and reassuring on the negative, to misquote the song.

Q31 John Stevenson: Final question: what do you think the success metrics for the integrated data service should be?

Sir Robert Chote: Fundamentally, the ultimate success has to be with how this data is used. Do Government, researchers and the general public—to the extent that they are able to access this—use imaginatively that scope that that bringing together and joining up of the data offers? In terms of delivery, there are timelines—when you want to get to particular levels of piloting, betas and so on—and a project management issue, but ultimately, once all this information has been brought together with a great deal of time and effort, it is about whether you are helping people. It is encouraging the horse to come to the water and to drink it.

Q32 John Stevenson: It does go back to the Chair's point about comparison of health statistics, for example.

Sir Robert Chote: Yes, and I think that the IDS—as I understand it; again, I will get to know this better—is partly concentrating people's minds. Because it is an exercise in bringing data together, that brings a lot of those comparability issues to the fore and perhaps makes people, or you, aware of problems that you might not previously have been aware of, so there is that potential there too.

Q33 Karin Smyth: Moving on to ethics, Sir David Norgrove highlighted some of the ethical challenges around the confidentiality and security of data. We are interested in your thoughts on this and on how you think UKSA as an organisation should respond.

Sir Robert Chote: It is very important substantively. UKSA should be leading an ethical statistical system. My sense, in terms of international activity, is that it has been very engaged in being at the forefront of that. That matters for two reasons—in its own right; and that the public have to have confidence. If you are asking people to hand over, directly or indirectly, data about themselves and their family, people need to be reassured that that will be used properly and will not be disclosed inappropriately.

On how to address that, data security is one of the areas in which I will need to do a good deal of learning, but ONS and the authority will obviously be in regular contact with the National Cyber Security Centre, GCHQ and the people with responsibility for systems. That is important. There are ethical issues around the way in which data is collected as well,



so you need to have a firm eye on it. There is that twin need, however: it is important in its own right; and it is important to have for public confidence in the way in which information about them will be used.

Q34 Karin Smyth: You gave another answer about the public being well informed and you talked about confidence. The one word we have not used in this hearing so far is “trust”. I will check the record, but in the past couple of years in particular, we have heard a lot about the trust of the public in the data. That is an important issue. I do not think we have talked about trust in that. Do you want to respond?

Sir Robert Chote: You can see that as trust at an institutional level, trust in the particular sets of numbers, and as trust in the process of producing and disseminating them. I think the evidence of the regular survey on public confidence in official statistics does show quite a high degree of trust in the official statistical system as a producer of robust, accurate, untainted numbers—rather higher levels of trust than in some of the people who use them. That is a good thing, but not one that you should take for granted. It is one of the important reasons why you want to keep that sort of survey information flowing in and, in particular, if you do see movements in that sense of trust—which could be positive or negative—trying to dig down to see where the explanations for that lie, and learn from them in what you are doing in future.

Obviously, you can have trust at the institutional level and trust in the use of statistics. Clearly, the interventions policy—the role that OSR and the chair play in calling out misuse of statistics—is an important part of developing and building trust, so that the misuse of statistics is not seen to undermine confidence in the statistics themselves. That is an important part of the role as well. Again, if you go to the public confidence in official statistics surveys, while the public probably do not know it is OSR or exactly who is doing it, they do appreciate the fact that that is being done on their behalf by the statistical system.

Q35 Karin Smyth: You have talked a lot about technical issues, and the technical good production of good-quality statistics. Do you see your role in upholding trust, developing it, and counteracting mistrust as one of proactively encouraging greater trust in the data?

Sir Robert Chote: Yes, I do, and as I say, there are different dimensions to that trust in the institution. Again, I would go back to my OBR experience. Do people see this as an organisation that explains what it is doing and how and why; and if the organisation has to make decisions about which people might be suspicious, worried or anxious, does it get on the front foot in saying, “This is why we are doing what we are doing. You may not agree with the way we are doing it, but this is the thought, this is the proper process, and this is the way we have gone through this. We have demonstrated that we have spoken to people.” You are not going to keep everybody happy all the time, but that is an important part of the trust piece.



Then, as you say, you have the interventions and responses to misuse—the trust in the way in which your data, as an individual provider of it to the system, is there as well. That can be tricky, and has been in different parts of the country over time, so you always need to be alert to that.

Q36 Chair: You have touched on the census. What is your view on the issue of moving away from the traditional decennial census and making larger-scale use of administrative data?

Sir Robert Chote: I think the vision and the objective of being able to move to a more real-time rolling picture of the population and its characteristics, rather than a decennial snapshot, is an entirely desirable direction to be moving in and a destination to get to. You only have to look at the fact that by ill fortune, the last census had to be taken in the midst of a pandemic, to see why that more rolling picture would be more desirable. You are confronted now with the presentational and substantive challenge of to what degree you present the results of the 2021 census as being a snapshot of a uniquely unrepresentative period in British life, or whether you try to adjust that, because obviously, the numbers are used by public and other bodies to inform decisions into the future, hopefully into a period in which those particular circumstances will be less acute than they were at the time.

That is important, but you have to be guided by the evidence in terms of whether it is safe and robust to move in that direction. You obviously have work already under way on whether particular categories of administrative data are up to the job of replicating and replacing the information that you would have got from the census. You also need to identify those areas where there is information that you collect in the census that, currently, you do not get from administrative data, and where you might get that. The obvious example is that it is not clear elsewhere where you would get data on people's occupation.

I am slightly uncomfortable with the notion, as David might have been, that there is a huge binary decision to be made in 2023. We need to be looking at the different components and taking the public on that journey of seeing which bits fit together and which bits you are more or less confident about, rather than suddenly springing a big announcement on people without having rolled a pitch saying, "Look, these are the things that need to be got right and need to be addressed. How far are we on that journey?" before you make any ultimate decisions.

Q37 Chair: Finally, what criteria would you say this Committee should use to judge your success during your term of office?

Sir Robert Chote: At one level, have I ensured that the statistics authority has achieved the legal requirements and objectives that Parliament has set out in legislation? The other area is judging me on that set of characteristics that I set out: are we trusted, are we transparent, are we responsive, are we collaborative, are we innovative, are we efficiently using Government money? In terms of what you would draw upon from that, obviously the views of stakeholders and the surveys of



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trust in official statistics. My role will be a relatively small part of that, but it is something important for you to look at.

In terms of monitoring my own performance internally, ensuring that there are 360° reviews, so that colleagues and stakeholders are telling me whether they think we are doing an effective job. I think you need to look at the level of the board as a whole. It would be good practice in most institutions to periodically look and say, "Is the board functioning effectively as a group, and is the chair playing the correct role in that?"

There are different layers to this. The big picture is, do we have a statistics system that people have confidence and trust in, in terms of integrity of the numbers, the production, the communication of them and the response to misuse? Turning that into something that is more tractable and managerial, and keeping my feet to the fire, regularly appearing before you and being probed, is an important part of that. As with the census, it is best to do that on an ongoing basis, rather than wait five years and surprise everybody.

Q38 Chair: You will probably be pleased to hear that we have done our probing for today. Thank you for appearing before the Committee. Is there anything you would like to add?

Sir Robert Chote: Not particularly. It has been a great pleasure. If, in the fullness of time, you and others decide to go with me, I look forward to a continuing relationship with the Committee and, perhaps relatively early on, to get a sense from you—formally or informally—of how well you think the interactions are working and whether there is anything that can or should be done to improve that, so that this very important channel of accountability operates as effectively as it can.

Chair: Thank you for your time today.