

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Transforming the UK's Evidence Base, HC 197

Tuesday 12 March 2024

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Members present: Mr William Wragg (Chair); Jo Gideon; Mr David Jones; Damien Moore; John Stevenson.

Questions 181 - 229

Witnesses

I: Professor Denise Lievesley CBE, Lead Reviewer, Review of UK Statistics Authority.

II: Baroness Neville-Rolfe DBG CMB, Minister of State, Cabinet Office; and Steffan Jones, Director of Joint Data and Analysis Centre, Cabinet Office.

Examination of witness

Witness: Professor Denise Lievesley CBE.

Q181 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. Today the Committee is holding its fifth evidence session in our transforming the UK's evidence base inquiry. We will be considering some of the issues raised in the inquiry so far.

Our witnesses this morning are spread across two panels. First we will hear from Professor Denise Lievesley CBE, who was commissioned to conduct a review of the UK Statistics Authority in June 2023 with the aim of establishing how the organisation is performing. Secondly, we will hear from Baroness Neville-Rolfe, who is the Cabinet Office Minister responsible for this area. Could I first ask Professor Lievesley to introduce herself for the record?

Professor Lievesley: Thank you for the invitation to speak to you. I am Denise Lievesley. I am an applied social statistician.

Q182 **Chair:** Thank you very much. The first question from me is a rather open-

ended one. Can you tell us about how you conducted your review?

Professor Lievesley: Yes. As you mentioned, the review was commissioned last June and I immediately began. We had a call for evidence and we took evidence in writing over the following few months. We had evidence from about 30 contributors.

The main part of the review was conducted through individual discussions with users and producers of statistics, both inside and outside government. It was very fortunate that fairly soon after the review was commissioned I was anyway going to the World Statistics Congress in Ottawa. The World Statistics Congress is held every two years, so I was able to go and speak to a number of statisticians from across the world.

In addition to individual discussions, we held some roundtables where we focused on particular topics. Of course, I attended a number of relevant meetings, including meetings of the UK Statistics Authority, the Regulation Committee, meetings of the staff of the Office for National Statistics, the Government Statistical Service, the Treasury, the OBR, and so on. So, a large amount of information gathering, a large amount of reading of relevant documents, in particular the number of reviews that have taken place previously. The review by Sir Charles Bean, of course, was critical, but there have been other reviews, too, one by Andy Garrett of the methodology, for example, and one by Professor Patrick Sturgis focusing particularly on the statistics in the Covid period; a lot of gathering of material and then testing out ideas, going back to many of the same people. It has been seven months of gathering information and then trying to synthesise it.

Chair: Yes, and I should say that I appreciated our conversation towards the beginning of your endeavours. I was grateful to have that input. Of course, we made a formal representation as a Committee as well.

Professor Lievesley: Yes.

Q183 **Chair:** Given that extensive evidence gathering, in general how well or otherwise does the UK statistical system compare to those of other countries?

Professor Lievesley: The universal view across other countries is that we are very highly rated, up in the third, fourth or fifth of the statistical offices across the world. We are not necessarily seen as being as innovative as the Netherlands. There are sometimes issues with trust in the data that Canada seems to manage better than we do. There are issues to do with professionalisation of statistics that is managed extraordinarily well in France, for example. Countries have different strengths and weaknesses, but overall we are seen very highly. I think that our reputation went up during Covid because we were seen as being quite brave in stepping into needing just-in-time data. It is quite startling that even richer countries, other OECD countries, were using UK data during that period because they did not have data of their own.

Our reputation is very high. Of course, when we were a member of the EU we also had a very active role in Eurostat, so we would be influencing a lot of the European statistical system. One of the things we might want to discuss is how we replace that. So, a good reputation and, in particular, the Office for Statistics Regulation is envied. There is not another country that has the equivalent of it. There are reviews taking place in a number of other countries, Germany for one, and they have expressed interest in our Office for Statistics Regulation, which is seen as being a very important pillar in terms of trust in statistics.

Q184 Mr Jones: Professor Lievesley, I would like to ask you a few questions about the impact of devolution upon your work and your review. During the course of this inquiry we have heard from a number of witnesses about the challenges they face in comparing data produced by the four Administrations within the United Kingdom. Were those concerns raised with you during the course of your work and have you taken them into account in your review?

Professor Lievesley: They were raised with me a great deal. We had a number of discussions about this issue and, of course, I also spent some time in Scotland and in Wales and on the telephone in Zoom calls with Northern Ireland. It was a major part of what I was looking at. As the Government's response to my review has indicated, I have highlighted a number of the problems in achieving comparable data across the UK, but I am sorry to say that I do not have a magic solution to this. This is a difficult problem.

Q185 Mr Jones: What are the factors that drive these challenges?

Professor Lievesley: I am familiar with the problems in general because I used to be Director of Statistics in a UN agency. The whole issue of how you get the balance right between data that is specific and relevant to the particular policies and circumstances of a nation or a part of a nation versus how you get comparable data that allows you to share information and learn from one another is a hard balance to achieve. It is becoming more difficult the more our statistics are reliant upon administrative processes, where often the administrative processes reflect different administrative systems, as they do in relation to health and education, for example, across the four nations. It is becoming more difficult, not easier.

There are solutions. A partial solution is post hoc harmonisation of administrative data, and that is carried out wherever possible. A more radical solution would be to collect data from specially designed statistical surveys rather than using administrative data, but that is expensive and there are resource issues.

Q186 Mr Jones: Clearly, we have to decide whether or not we are going to pursue the survey route or look at the operational data that are produced by the various Administrations. Perhaps you could expand on what you

have just said. What do you think is the best approach?

Professor Lievesley: I think the best approach is to have a balance between the two. I am not making a party political point, but I would like to take some of the political tension out of this. I always worry when statistics are used for naming and shaming rather than for learning and exploring. I hope that we get to that situation.

The concordat across the nations is important but we need more of a four-nation approach. There is suspicion, as I am sure you are aware, in the three smaller nations that sometimes a UK solution is actually the English solution. There needs to be respect and co-operation in that respect. We also need to respect devolution in the sense that there will be data that aren't a priority for the UK but are a priority in Wales or in Scotland or in Northern Ireland.

Q187 **Mr Jones:** In terms of the citizen, though, it is surely important that he or she should be able to compare the service received in their part of the UK with other parts of the UK.

Professor Lievesley: Absolutely.

Mr Jones: That is increasingly difficult, isn't it?

Professor Lievesley: It is increasingly difficult and it is important. I do stress that it is important. It is about getting a balance between the comparable data and the data that you need for the specific circumstances.

Mr Jones: That is not a purely political point, is it?

Professor Lievesley: It isn't. I hope that my proposal for a statistical assembly will help in this regard. I hope that this will mean that we can engage quite openly and transparently as to what the priorities are and how we get the balance right between the locally specific data and the cross-nationally comparable data.

Q188 **Mr Jones:** You mentioned earlier that an element of harmonisation might be appropriate. Is harmonisation of UK-wide data sufficiently resourced in your view?

Professor Lievesley: In my view, no, it is not. In my view, we do need more resources to be devoted to this. There needs to be recognition of the importance of having not just data so that we can compare ourselves across the four nations but data for the UK that we can compare with other countries. That is important, too. One of the impacts of not having a Scottish census at the same time as we had the English and Welsh census is that it is much more difficult to get population data for the UK that is comparable to other countries.

No, I do not think that it is adequately resourced. I think that if you talk particularly to the statisticians in the three smaller nations, they would

say they do not have the resources that they need in order to be full partners in the methodology that is needed for this.

Q189 Mr Jones: Would increasing the resourcing of this exercise be something that you recommend to the Government?

Professor Lievesley: I have not gone into a great deal of discussion about where the resources are placed, but I have said that I think more work is needed in this area, yes. Whether it is additional resources or whether it is a redistribution of resources is not something that I have addressed, but I do think more resources are needed, yes.

Q190 Mr Jones: Overall, would you say that we should be concerned about the comparability or the availability of subnational data?

Professor Lievesley: Concerned is a—I think it can be improved and I think there is work needed to try to ensure that we have a more coherent picture of statistics across the UK. Efforts are going into it and there is good co-operation across the four national statisticians. Concerned, yes. It is an area that needs more attention.

Q191 Mr Jones: As a Welsh MP, I frequently have the issue of the comparability of health data raised with me. Are there any other areas that you would say are matters of concern?

Professor Lievesley: Any area where the administrative systems are different is going to cause concern in terms of getting comparable data. Education I certainly know about because my previous role was Director of Statistics at UNESCO. I had responsibility for comparable education data and that is problematic when education systems are different in the different countries. I would say that it is probably in the social areas more than it is in the economic areas. There is more standardisation in the economic areas and there is a greater role of the Office for National Statistics in collecting the data and setting the standards.

Q192 Damien Moore: Good morning, Professor Lievesley. Seven years on from the Digital Economy Act, which was intended to unlock access to data for statistical research purposes, why are there still such challenges in sharing data between Government Departments?

Professor Lievesley: That is a very good question. It was one I was asking a lot. The legislation is essential but it is not sufficient. One of the difficulties we have in a decentralised system is that data is being generated and owned by such a wide range of different parts of government and that makes implementation much more complicated. Of course, we have the difficulty that the legislation did not cover health and social care data and they are fundamental to many of the social issues we want to address.

One of my strongest recommendations is that the Government have to get a grip on this. There needs to be a much greater understanding as to what we mean by data sharing and how we use it for research and

statistical purposes. In particular, and I say this coming from an academic background, there needs to be greater clarity as to how the academic communities can access integrated or shared data. We need to understand that most academic research in this country, a very high proportion, is fundamental to the implementation and the evaluation of government policy, so it is critical that we have good access.

I have learnt from other countries that legislation is necessary but not the only factor. The culture is important. I am sorry to say that there are examples from other countries that are also struggling with this, even though they might have the legislation. For example, when I was in Canada I learnt that although statistics is a federal system, health is a provincial system. Therefore, there were difficulties in getting agreement to share health data, which is why they said, along with some other countries, that they used our data during Covid. We are talking about what is probably respected as the best statistical office in the world.

It has not been resolved but it is essential. The more that we move into understanding that we want to integrate data from different sources, that the problems that we are facing are multidimensional, that health is not separated from housing, employment and so on, the more important this will become.

Q193 Damien Moore: You mentioned Canada in particular having a challenge, so the UK is not unique in that respect. Have you observed any countries where there has been a challenge and they have overcome that, something we could look to?

Professor Lievesley: Australia was one of the earliest countries to develop the system of having legislation that gave the rights of the statistical office to utilise other data. They made very fast change in that respect and it went very well. I think they have struggled a bit with the issue of how you get private data sources in, but they have done very well in getting government data into one integrated database.

One of the things I struggled a bit with in the review was that my review was about the statistical system but sharing data is not just about statistics. Sharing data is essential in order that we can provide better services for the population. That is one of the reasons why I highlighted that this is not just for the statistical system and that is why I have thrown it back, if you like, to the Cabinet Office to say, "Where is the leadership in this area?" Statistics is critical in this regard but it is not the only user.

Q194 Damien Moore: Moving on to the use of the private sector, we often talk about the sharing of public sector data but government statisticians are increasingly looking to private sector sources for their work. To what degree do you think official statisticians have been able to make use of legislative provisions to allow access to this private data?

Professor Lievesley: That is only in its infancy and there is a lot more

work needed. As we move to using more administrative data sources, it will be critical. I remember having a discussion some time ago with the Irish statistical office, which was making progress in this area. Then the progress halted because of issues over GDPR. There are quite complex structures in this, but I do not think that we have yet got to a situation where we are utilising the rich data sources that we have across the UK most effectively.

Q195 **Damien Moore:** You recommended in your report that the central Government led by the Cabinet Office and the Treasury must actively work to resolve the systemic and often cultural barriers to data sharing between Departments. What do you think this should look like?

Professor Lievesley: I don't think it is for me to say. I think that goes beyond my review. It could be a more senior person championing this. We have had championing of data coming from senior levels within government, but the difficulty is that there still are not the incentives in the system for statisticians, analysts and others, who own the data and see themselves as carrying all the risks but do not understand the benefits. It is obviously a resource issue but it is leadership. It is about concentrating on the benefits of data. Too often we focus on the problems of privacy and so on without focusing on the benefits.

Q196 **Damien Moore:** Moving on, the ONS is currently developing an integrated data service on behalf of the Government. What do you make of this service and can it really work in light of what we have heard about the reluctance of Departments to share the data they have?

Professor Lievesley: It is not moving as fast as it should because of the reluctance. It is very interesting because the IDS has a programme review, so I started off my review thinking that was out of scope. It could not be out of scope because it is so fundamental to what is happening in the statistical system and because so many of the users, both inside and outside government, said to me that they had concerns that it is not making the progress that it needs to make and it is fundamental. Whatever the decision is for the next census, censuses at some point in the future will not be carried out in the traditional way. They will be carried out by bringing together and integrating data sources. The IDS is fundamental to that.

As part of what the Cabinet Office and the Treasury do with respect to data sharing, I think there is also work needed by ONS in terms of better outreach, better clarity as to what that is for, and better understanding of the incentive system for statisticians and others in the line ministries and the other Government Departments.

We have not made the progress in this that some countries have. Every richer OECD country in the world is going down this route and creating a similar thing to IDS, it is not unique, but some other countries just have a greater start because they have common identity numbers or

population registers and so on. We really are at a disadvantage in this country in not having that. That makes the whole issue of how you integrate data so much more difficult.

Q197 **Jo Gideon:** Professor Lievesley, over the course of our inquiry we have been trying to understand whether the UK has a robust and transparent framework for identifying and prioritising demands for data. What is your view?

Professor Lievesley: My view is that they don't. My view is that probably no statistical office across the world has a good one. That is why I am proposing something that I have to admit has not been done elsewhere but I think is needed, which is to have a statistical assembly that brings together users from across the four nations and within government and outside government in order to make much more transparent what the prioritisation is of the statistical system.

It might be a fair criticism of ONS in particular but maybe also some of the other Government Departments that they are trying to do too much. Prioritisation is needed, but users, particularly those outside government but strangely also some key users inside government, said they did not know how the agenda for statistics was set. They did not know how they got their priority on to that list. That is very worrying, so I think that we need a much more transparent process.

Since I have proposed this and discussed it informally with people, there is a lot of enthusiasm. There is a lot of good will to help the statistical officers of this country to become much more transparent in how they set the priorities and much more open not just about what they will collect but also what they will not collect. If they are transparent about that, it gives the opportunity for other organisations—UKRI, for example—to then decide where they are putting their priorities.

That is why I am proposing a statistical assembly and a more open process. I would like to see the UKSA have much higher visibility than it currently has. An annual lecture by Sir Robert Chote is important, and in the process of giving that annual lecture he can highlight the important work that is being done by the Office for Statistics Regulation that I found outside of government was not always understood.

Q198 **Jo Gideon:** You say that what you are proposing has not been done before or elsewhere. Are there any other countries that have sought to identify and prioritise demands for data that we could take lessons from?

Professor Lievesley: I think that we would be a leader in this area with a statistical assembly, so other countries would be watching us and how we make it work. I am convinced that we can make it work.

There are other countries that have done more work on registering what statistics are collected. I am thinking particularly of Sweden, where Statistics Sweden maintains a register as to what public data are collected and by what agency. They maintain that register and that is

accessible for anybody. It is a good system for you to find the data that you are looking for as a user. People within Statistics Sweden said to me that one of the disadvantages of that register is that it causes a certain amount of—how should I say—stodginess in the system. It is hard to make change because it has been captured and it is set down in writing.

That is one of the reasons why I was thinking that you need a system of refreshing. You do not want to throw everything up in the air every three years, but you do need a system of refreshing, just stopping and saying, “Are we collecting the right things? Have we prioritised?” One of the difficulties right across government is that new things get added and things do not get stopped.

Q199 Jo Gideon: We were surprised by the suggestion in the Government’s response to your review that government demands for data should take precedence over other demands. Do you share that view?

Professor Lievesley: I don’t, no. I was sorry to see that, too. I do not agree with that phrasing. Of course, it is important for us to be assured that the Government have the data they need for developing and evaluating sound policies. Of course, that is important, but it is also important for me to have data that allows me to call the Government to account. It is important for me to have data that may be uncomfortable for the particular Government of the day. If you have a system where the Government data has precedence in a resource-constrained environment, you could quite easily get to the situation where only the Government data is collected. No, I don’t think that is the right way of approaching it.

If I might also say, I do not think it is the current practice. I have not seen evidence that this is happening. I see evidence of a UKSA that is very conscious of external needs and tries to take account of them.

Q200 Jo Gideon: You touched on the use of statistics in public life. In some of our previous reports, we found that statistics can be misused in public debate. We have recommended that the Ministerial Code be strengthened to encourage the appropriate use of evidence in public life. Is this an issue that you looked at?

Professor Lievesley: It is an issue I looked at and it is an issue of great concern to people who care about confidence in official statistics, who want a system that is trusted and trustworthy, if I can put it like that. It is an issue I looked at and I was aware that your Committee had made a recommendation in the past that, mindful that the code of practice was not sufficient, it should be a requirement to comply. I know that the head of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Robert Chote, feels similarly. I feel similarly, so I did include it in my observations.

Jo Gideon: Those were your findings, basically?

Professor Lievesley: Yes.

Q201 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. I wonder, Professor Lievesley, if there is anything you wish to add at this juncture or any questions we have not asked you, in summary perhaps.

Professor Lievesley: In summary, I should say that I spent quite a bit of time on the thorny issue of whether regulation and operation of statistics should report through to the same board, the UK Statistics Authority. You wrote to me about that. I started off the review thinking it should be separate. I ended up the review thinking it is working very well. What needs to happen is greater transparency and visibility of why the current system is working well to reassure some of the users who are concerned.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Professor Lievesley, for your time this morning and for sharing the findings of your review. We are grateful to you. Shortly we will be hearing from the Minister, but for the moment thank you very much for your time.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Baroness Neville-Rolfe DBG CMB and Steffan Jones.

Q202 **Chair:** We now move on to our second panel, headed by Baroness Neville-Rolfe, who I will ask to introduce herself for the record.

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: I am the Minister of State at the Cabinet Office and I am the sponsor of the UKSA.

Steffan Jones: I am Director of the Joint Data and Analysis Centre in the Cabinet Office. I am also the Joint Co-Senior Sponsor of the UKSA in the Cabinet Office as an official.

Q203 **Chair:** Thank you both very much. As an initial question from me, Baroness Neville-Rolfe, what were the key messages you took away from Professor Lievesley's review?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: First of all, perhaps I could start by thanking her. I think that she is still in the room. She is a very distinguished statistician and very experienced. She worked incredibly hard and delivered a report in seven months, far outgunning other people who do these reviews. I am enormously grateful to her.

There are two or three things I took away. First of all, it is good that what we are doing is seen and recognised internationally as both independent and fit for purpose. Then there were some recommendations that I liked. First, it was the call for more disciplined and open engagement through a triannual statistical assembly, which is a novel idea, bringing in all four parts of the UK. I think that will improve transparency, improve challenge, and provide a stronger leadership role for the chair of the UKSA board through an annual lecture, which is important for leadership and visibility.

Secondly, I liked the recommendation for more work on data sharing. We are already doing some of that. There was an Act that went through, the Digital Economy Act 2017. We have an integrated data service within the UKSA but, frankly, there is much more to do and a lot of potential here. We have said we will come back on that item.

Thirdly, I like the encouragement of talent in statistics, with a director general for methodology suggested and a review of the leadership arrangements in 2025 to set up the next national statistician for success and to have a proper talent pipeline.

Fourthly, I think that we need a better website. Denise Lievesley has said we need a better website. That is still work in progress. I think that we need a clearer understanding—I certainly came to this confused—about what the Chief Statistician does, what UKSA does, and the role of the Office for Statistics Regulation, which is an interesting part of the UK system. They both report separately to the chair of the board and I do not think that is widely understood. Of course, there is the issue that I have been dealing with before we instituted the review, which is how we can harmonise key statistics across the UK nations, especially on health. That is a problem.

Although we do not agree with all the report, I am an enthusiast for official statistics. My bedtime reading used to be social trends and it is very important to evidence-based policy. It is a very important area and I am delighted that your Committee is doing a review.

Q204 Chair: Thank you very much. We are very pleased to have you with us this morning and we will unpack some of those topics as we go through the session. I should say that this Committee was in Paris last week and we visited the French equivalent of the statistics authority. They were very proud of their website, with typical French modesty, I would say.

In all seriousness, one of the recommendations in the review is the need to consider all users of statistics rather than those of government alone. Without access to good data, neither Parliament nor citizens are able to properly scrutinise the work of government. Why do you suggest in the response from the Cabinet Office that the needs of government should “take precedence”?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: This is the very first sentence of our reply on page 2, I think, where we say, “external user engagement will always be balanced against the statistical needs of the Government”. The background to this is that this is a new idea to bring in a triennial assembly, to bring people from all walks of life and devolved Administrations, and then come to a view as to what the plan should be for the year. Of course, we understand completely that the statistical system is set up independently, but it does serve us in terms of making sure we have the economic data we need to run the country, data on different regions, social exclusion and so on. I think that what this is

saying is that when the assembly is taking place and the chairman is about to make his lecture, it is important that there is proper engagement between the Government and the statistical office on the way ahead. I do not read it in the way that you do as suggesting we are going to veto everything. That is certainly not what is intended at all.

Chair: It is useful to have that on the record because when we saw that, "take precedence", it did make us slightly question aspects of it. It is very useful for you to clarify it in that way, for which we are grateful. I will move on now to John Stevenson.

Q205 **John Stevenson:** Minister, part of your responsibilities is sponsorship of the UK Statistics Authority. What exactly does that involve?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: It is interesting. It is quite a limited role because of the independent nature of the statistics set-up. That is right, I think. UKSA is accountable to Parliament, not to Government. It operates at arm's length from central Government. That is in line with international good practice for national statistical offices. However, it means that I do not supervise production or regulation of statistics or take decisions on that. What I do have to do for my colleagues in the Commons is to answer questions in Parliament. Those usually draw on UKSA material repeated verbatim. I have led on this review since I was made a Minister. I lead on any legislation. For example, last year we made some changes to the Digital Economy Act to bring in four new Departments so that we can do more data sharing of the kind that we need going forward. I lead on appointments to the UKSA board.

Q206 **John Stevenson:** That is your responsibilities. How do you go about ensuring the independence of the authority as against government?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: I am there to uphold the independence, as I have done today, in terms of what they do. I see Sir Ian two or three times a year, and the chairman, and I try to act as a helpful and friendly sponsor.

Q207 **John Stevenson:** Do you see your role as being actively involved in ensuring the independence of the authority?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: I believe that I have to ensure that the system brings independence. Having the UKSA reporting in to the board and having the quite separate statistics regulation function also doing that is very important. I see the triennial statistical assembly, which we have supported as an idea that has come forward from the reviewer, as helping with that independence, having more public engagement on the statistics that should be collected.

Q208 **John Stevenson:** Quite clearly, you see the independence of the statistics authority as being very important and, therefore, the use of those statistics becomes very important. Would you agree with that?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: I would, and I also think that the statistics

need to be more widely used. I was talking about evidence-based policy. Your Committee takes a great interest in this.

John Stevenson: It does.

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: I would like to see other Committees doing so as well.

Q209 **John Stevenson:** Part of our Committee's recommendations was that the Ministerial Code should be strengthened so that Ministers are required to abide by the code of conduct of the UK Statistics Authority. Why has that not happened?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: There is a paragraph, as you will know already, on statistics in the Ministerial Code. That in turn refers to the code of practice for statistics, which Ministers also get when they are appointed. Clearly, the Ministerial Code is a matter for the Prime Minister. Prime Ministers look at it, usually after an election. We have noted the PACAC's point and I can certainly pass that on, but I think—

Q210 **John Stevenson:** It may be a matter for the Prime Minister but this Committee has recommended its incorporation.

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: Yes, indeed.

John Stevenson: The professor recommended its incorporation; so has Sir Robert Chote. Do you recommend its incorporation?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: From my point of view, the Ministerial Code is a matter for the Prime Minister. I can certainly relay further this point. It is already in the code of practice, and if you are a Minister you are very careful about what you do about data and what you say, particularly in Parliament.

Q211 **John Stevenson:** Do you think that you follow the code of practice?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: I certainly try to. I champion it among colleagues because I think that using statistics well can help with developing good policymaking.

Q212 **John Stevenson:** It is interesting. Certain Ministers have, arguably, misused or not followed the statistics in public comments. Do you think that they are not interested in the code?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: There is a system for drawing this to their attention, as I am sure you have been told by other witnesses, which I think on the whole works well. What happens is if a statistic that the statistical set-up feels has been misleading, then it is for either the regulator or, in the case of Ministers, Sir Robert Chote to write and point this out. That is published, so you have the full benefit of sunlight on that. I think that helps to make sure that people are respecting the independence and objectivity of statistics.

Q213 **John Stevenson:** Basically, you think that Ministers should be called to account when they misuse those statistics?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: I think it is right that we have an independent statistical authority that draws attention to what they should be doing. The Ministerial Code sets rules upon us that we all try to observe.

Q214 **Jo Gideon:** Baroness Neville-Rolfe, as we have already heard, there are long-standing problems around the sharing of data for statistical research purposes. In your recent response to Professor Lievesley's review you said that you intend to push forward on this important issue with the support of other Departments. What does this mean in practice?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: Given the passage of time and my wish to make sure that we had a response to your Committee quickly, it really was not possible to work out what we should do on data sharing in a few weeks. I might bring in Steffan in a minute because it is a very complex area.

My own feeling is that we need more momentum in this, which means we probably need more central effort. We need more ministerial involvement, but there are a number of different Ministers involved in making this a success so it is important that we set up arrangements that will work well, will complement the work that Sir Ian is trying to do in the integrated data service, and will look ahead properly to the changes that are happening, AI, deep fakes -all these other things that we are dealing with in this more challenging world. It seems to me that we should take the time to work more comprehensively on this.

Certainly, if the Committee has particular views we would be interested to hear those and feed that into that work so that when we make a further statement on data sharing and set up arrangements that are appropriate across Whitehall they are fit for purpose. Did you want to add anything, Steffan, because you have been quite involved in this?

Steffan Jones: Thank you. Briefly, given my role, unsurprisingly I am quite evangelical about better data sharing within government. The first thing to say is that we do share a lot of data within government. You will have seen in the Covid inquiry evidence that capabilities built up in response to the pandemic developed our ability to share data and to share data well. We have now established a national security centre in the Cabinet Office, which stands ready to provide data and situational awareness on a whole range of risks that face the UK. That is a capability that we just did not have before and that relies on data sharing within government and drawing data from outside of government.

Obviously, there are challenges with data sharing. There are sometimes legal challenges. There are sometimes technical challenges. There are sometimes cultural challenges. As the Minister has said, they affect all parts of government so it requires a whole of government approach and response. There is a lot of momentum behind improving data sharing in

government and, as the report says, things like the IDS are a potentially valuable tool in enabling us to share data better. It will help with the future options around how we do the census, for example, and to understand key policy issues better. There are some good recommendations in the review about how the IDS programme itself can better engage with users to make sure that we can make the most value of it.

Q215 **Chair:** Thank you for that, Mr Jones. Can I just unpack that slightly further? The Minister might wish to comment on this. The Digital Economy Act was passed upwards of seven years ago, so quite some time, and I accept that there always are challenges and sometimes necessary delays. However, this is quite a while. You mentioned practical and technical challenges, but then what stands out to me is the cultural challenges. They would be something you could get to grips with—and this is me naively assuming—with a ministerial direction and leadership on the issue. I wonder if you want to comment on that further.

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: I would. You anticipated what I was going to volunteer. Of course, the professor brought the cultural point up well, I think, in her very interesting report.

To be fair, quite a lot of work has been done under the DEA's research powers. We have had 865 accredited research projects across Whitehall and involving the devolveds as well I think in some cases. We have added new extra bodies - DEFRA, Cabinet Office, DfT and DBS. Of course, it is very good if you share data because it means you can look at, say, health and justice together.

Q216 **Chair:** Is there a particular Department that has been somewhat recalcitrant? We normally have the usual suspects listed and if you have to mention the Treasury you can do, or not.

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: The point I would mention is that the Digital Economy Act, perhaps for cultural reasons, does not include health. I think that is because of hesitation and concern about health data, which I very much understand as a former businessperson. People are extremely concerned about personal data and in all the systems we are setting up we are trying to use the latest technologies to make sure that there is no risk to personal data. For me, that is another bottom line to add to independence because it really is very important. The work we have to do needs to include cultural work so that people can understand how you can do this safely, can volunteer the information and can also understand the prize. Joined-up government, where you bring data from different Departments together, as we are discovering in the Covid inquiry work we are doing, is very important.

The other thing I wanted to say is that Steffan mentioned the national situation centre and all their data. We would be very happy to welcome the Committee to take a look at that if it finds it useful, either as part of this inquiry or more generally. I have had a cross-party group of cyber

parliamentarians looking at it and they did find it very useful. You can see how all the data is coming together and how, if you had a crisis, which we are always concerned about, you would get data and you could increase the use of data.

Q217 Chair: We will certainly take you up on that. That is a kind offer. Forgive my flippancy in mentioning the Treasury; that is one of my usual remarks. I can appreciate entirely the ethical concerns that there might be in terms of health data and the private sector, but in terms of health data within the public sector I would have thought there were less qualms about that.

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: Steffan might want to come in about changing attitudes in this area. My impression is that people are willing to have health data used in research and so on—I used to sit on Health Data Research UK—but you have to make sure that it is properly protected and it is not used in the wrong way by insurance companies, for example.

Steffan Jones: I think that is right. People are very mindful of the responsibility they have when they are data owners and there are legal obligations or risks that those people take as data owners. One of the issues we sometimes face is that the incentives are not always well aligned. It might be for the greater good to share data, but all the benefits lie elsewhere and all the risk lies with the person who owns the data. That is the thing we have to work through to make sure that we have the right systems that allow people to feel confident in sharing their data in a way that minimises the risk on them and allows us to realise those benefits across government.

Q218 Chair: Finally from me, and I am conscious that I am interrupting with supplementary questions, parking health data, are there any other forms of data in different Departments that do not have the same very legitimate concerns about privacy and confidentiality that are still part of that cultural challenge?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: The answer is probably in every Department because what you are doing by sharing data with another Department or with outside agencies and consultants is taking a risk with that data. This is part of the work we need to do, to make sure, first, that we have safety and security and hygiene and, secondly, that people understand the benefits and that there are mutual benefits.

There are also benefits, I think, in value for money. If you share data, then you do not have to collect so much. One Login is one of the Cabinet Office programmes where once you have gone into the public system once, that data does not need to be collected again. I am doing the same thing on borders, which I am responsible for. We have a single trade window. Once you put in the data, on the cargoes that you will need to ship, you will not have to re-enter them all the time. All these come from sharing data. You see a lot of examples in the private sector such as

Trainline and, indeed, TfL. We want to try to use this opportunity that this recommendation gives to work together better across Departments to unlock this. I don't think it is that easy, but I do think the momentum is with us. I am certainly very interested in doing a lot more.

Chair: Thank you. My apologies, Jo.

Q219 **Jo Gideon:** That is fine. It leads quite nicely on to my next question. Which areas of Cabinet Office are currently involved in improving access to data and what have they been doing to date?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: As you lead on the analyst function in the Cabinet Office, why don't you answer that question, Steffan?

Steffan Jones: There are lots of different ways in which we work on data sharing in government. In my team or in Dr Laura Gilbert's team, the No. 10 data science team, we work with Departments to make sure that we bring data into the central government to support decision making. We have made huge strides on that front and the national situation centre is an example of that. That involves working with Departments to agree memorandums of understanding about how we are going to use the data, developing technical solutions so that we can access the data in the right way, and that we move away from the slightly old-fashioned world of people sharing spreadsheets or PDFs of data to having data that is accessible by code and coding languages.

The second thing we do is we have the CDDO in the Cabinet Office, which sets lots of the rules and the frameworks around how data is shared across government. We can probably provide more detail on all that it does, but it is crucial to allowing the technical requirements for sharing data across government. It has a specific role in relation to a number of the elements of the DEA and it is crucial to creating a framework and an environment where we can share data within government. They are the two big elements, I would say, within the Cabinet Office.

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: We could follow up perhaps with a few examples. I have an example in one of my other areas, which is fraud, where we are using the DEA. That allows us to look at and aggregate names and addresses of Companies House and people involved in inappropriate loans. You can see the clusters and you can share that data, and that allows proper enforcement. It allows us to use some of these modern techniques in a better way, but we obviously have to do that in a responsible way as well.

Q220 **Jo Gideon:** You draw the data in from various Departments, like a knowledge hub.

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: Exactly, an anonymised knowledge hub.

Jo Gideon: Yes. If other Departments want access to the data, do they have to go via Cabinet Office or is there a direct Department to

Department? Are you the route in for all data?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: What is the answer to that?

Steffan Jones: Departments are encouraged to share data between themselves and often that is where the greatest value is realised because they have common cross-cutting policy issues that they are grappling with. The Cabinet Office, as I say, helps with some of those frameworks for setting the guiderail to how that happens across government and then it also has its role in supporting Cabinet Office Ministers and the Prime Minister in thinking through policy decisions. We draw in data to do that. I would say that the vast majority if not all the data we deal with in the Cabinet Office to support policymaking is aggregated data, so it is not personally identifiable data. You obviously need much stronger controls and practice around sharing that data.

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: Particularly for the policy divisions, they get supporting data from across Whitehall and they use that to inform policy decisions so that they are better and more evidence based. Where you have Departments with a joint interest—so the Treasury would be interested like the DBT in the flow of trade—clearly our role is to encourage that cross-fertilisation, not to try to create a central soviet hub of data. That is not the approach because I don't think that would work that well.

Q221 **Jo Gideon:** That is helpful. Why did you not accept in full the recommendations that Professor Lievesley made regarding the integrated data service?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: Can you refer me to the recommendation? This is the partially agree? Yes.

Jo Gideon: Yes.

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: Recommendation 7. It is back to the conversation that we are having already. We think that the IDS is very important but we think it could do things better. We want the work going forward to ensure that that potential is delivered but that we also deliver something that involves Government Departments and the Cabinet Office and probably the Treasury to make sure that this works and that we bring in a certain amount of user engagement, which was where we started this morning, so that the things that IDS is doing are right for the future. Clearly, we started with independence, that is important, but it is important on data sharing. I think that if you asked Sir Ian, he would say that he cannot do it alone. I have had conversations with him about how we could work together on this.

Q222 **Mr Jones:** In his review of July 2021, Lord Maude recommended that the national statistician should be tasked with undertaking a comprehensive audit of analytical capability among policy officials. In the progress report

that the Cabinet Office issued in 2022, it reported that ultimately the desired outcome is for analysis, evidence and research to be better integrated into all policymaking to drive better decisions in government. How far are you advanced in meeting that ambition?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: Let me try to answer the question. The Lord Maude report is not really my area, but I would say that he was interested, as I am, in ensuring we have a lot of good analytical capability among policy professionals. As we saw during Covid, that is incredibly important.

We have in the last few years set up a government analysis function. Of course, the head of that government analysis function is ONS; it is Ian himself. I think it is good that it has brought all these different things together, statistics, economics, social research, operational research, actuary, geography, digital and data. Good progress is being made with that and I will turn to Steffan because he is our analyst lead within the Cabinet Office. The main person to ask about the progress of how the analyst function works would be Sir Ian because he has the accountability for leading on that. Sorry, that has only half helped.

Mr Jones: I was rather hoping to have some examples of the way that integration had been achieved.

Steffan Jones: I am happy to come in there. We have seen a lot of investment across all Government Departments in their analytical capabilities. Within the Cabinet Office, my unit, the Joint Data and Analysis Centre, is a new unit. We did not exist a few years ago. The No. 10 data science team did not exist a few years ago. Virtually all the different business units have expanded their analytical and data capabilities. That is incredibly important and the analysis function supports analysts across government. It brings us together to talk about shared issues and it supports with learning and development. It supports with recruitment. As the Minister says, the individual professions are in charge of professional oversight and development. In the economics profession, you have the heads of profession who ensure oversight and professional development.

I guess the thing that is most important, though, even more important than any of that, is making sure that analysis is not seen as a separate add-on, that it is integrated into the decision-making process. We saw through the response to Covid the value in doing that and we are seeing that sustained not just within the Cabinet Office but in the way I see other Government Departments working. The integration between analysis and policy has taken a big step forward. There has been a big shift in momentum and mindset and that is crucial. Having the capabilities, sustaining them and development is one thing, but having it integrated into the policymaking process is fundamental, and there we have seen huge progress.

Q223 **Mr Jones:** Could you give us maybe one or two examples of better

decisions in government that have been achieved as a consequence of this integration?

Steffan Jones: I won't draw out specific decisions because that would go into the advice that has been provided, but take Covid as an example. The Covid taskforce was set up. As the inquiry evidence shows, it had a large analytical capability integrated as part of the taskforce. All the material produced by the taskforce supporting decision making had data analysis front and centre of the advice that was given to the Prime Minister and others about the decisions they were taking. It might sound odd but that is not how government always worked when I started a long time ago. Sometimes the analysis came afterwards or felt separate. It was integrated throughout the process on Covid, so the advice to the Prime Minister and others on the analysis of the data was front and centre. The quality of that analysis and data was improved as we built our capabilities.

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: Perhaps I could add one thing from my own experience because I was out of government from 2017. I came back at the end of 2022, and there is definitely a much greater emphasis on data KPIs, some of which are good and some of which are less good, and making sure you have proper STEM thinking in policy thinking. In the Cabinet Office, we have already talked about the situation centre but we also have the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, which helps with the top 280 projects across Whitehall. If you talk to the CEO of that, it is very apparent that they are collecting data on the progress, on value for money, and encouraging Departments to use that in a more scientific way.

In different areas, the thinking behind Lord Maude's recommendations has made a difference. Last year's training challenge across the Cabinet Office was called One Big Thing, and every member of staff was encouraged to take digital training. For example, I saw my private office doing it. Recruitment has changed so that the analysis function of recruitment is now being done centrally in the fast stream. We are bringing in more professional people with a greater emphasis on STEM skills in our recruitment.

Q224 **Mr Jones:** You mentioned improved value for money. Are we to understand that the integration of analysis into decision making is saving the country money?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: Exactly. That is exactly the point. It is interesting that we now have more focus on productivity work, and you will have heard the Chancellor talking about that in the recent Budget. It is clear to me that the use of these analytical tools, both the more trendy AI tools but also just proper analysis and evidence-based decision making, can help to get better value for money out of the Civil Service.

Q225 **Damien Moore:** Good morning. The analysis function's mission is to

support the Government in making better decisions using consistent and professional standards. Doesn't asking the Treasury analysts to prepare Opposition costings on the basis of assumptions defined by Spads and Ministers threaten the impartiality of the civil servants?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: This is a point about Opposition costings. Yes, it is a long-standing convention that the Ministers of the Crown can ask civil servants to cost Opposition policies and that tends to become a bit more frequent closer to referendums or elections. The key thing is that Ministers are entitled to do that. Spads I have to explain, Spads only advise; Spads do not commission these things. I am happy to put that on the record today and that Ministers do sometimes ask for those costings. I think that helps debate.

Q226 Damien Moore: What limits are there to stop civil servants from being drawn into party political debates, though?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: I started life as a civil servant so I am probably a good person to ask. For over 20 years I was in the Civil Service, and you certainly have a very clear view that you don't, "No, Minister, that's a political matter". I think that having so many Spads around has helped with that because it is clear that they do the political work and the civil servants do the non-political work. I have noticed in my own private office how correct they are. There are ministerial codes and Civil Service codes to ensure the independence of the Civil Service. It can get difficult in the run-up to an election, but one of the things that civil servants do is provide advice on manifestos from all the parties as to how things would be implemented. On the whole, I think that system works okay, although if you have 400,000 or 500,000 people there is bound to be the odd exception.

Q227 Damien Moore: Is it difficult now?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: The Civil Service acts independently and properly. As a Minister, you have to make sure that things go on. In some of the areas that I run, whether I was there as the Minister in a few months' time would not make a great deal of difference. You have to make sure that they are moving ahead with work in the public interest. Talking about things like infrastructure projects, you might have different infrastructure projects but an important function that the Civil Service has is to try to run those better. I come from business so I obviously have slightly different spectacles and try to encourage people to move forward and get things done.

Q228 Chair: Minister, as well as your responsibilities towards the UK Statistics Authority you are also responsible in the Cabinet Office for transparency and freedom of information. I just wanted to give you the opportunity at the end of our questions now to express why you believe that transparency is important and perhaps unpack your role and tell us more about what your role involves with regard to those issues.

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: My role on transparency is primarily dealing with freedom of information requests. There is casework that evolves over time and I have to make sure that my officials are on top of what we should be doing under FOI and dealing with the Information Commissioner where they disagree with us and, indeed, dealing with the Information Commissioner in general. He and I both want more transparency and I think that this Government have done a lot to increase transparency.

The second thing is that every quarter we put about 22 datasets out into the public domain, everything from what we are spending to a recent one that I asked questions about, which was how quickly we are paying our smaller

suppliers. I have a role in making sure that that is done on time and put out appropriately. We are trying to move forward. We have plans to have a single transparency data platform on that so it is easier for external users to search and look at that data.

Q229 **Chair:** The final question from me draws on what Mr Jones described as the integration of analysis function within policymaking. In the past, there may have been examples of policies that were announced first and then the analysis was done to catch up with the announcement. With that analogy, we have heard from a number of people who have contributed to our inquiry that government are not sufficiently transparent about the evidence that underpins their policies. Do you share those concerns?

Baroness Neville-Rolfe: I have said how I try to champion the work of the statistical authorities to make sure that that informs debate. Of course, we have systems of clearing things for policy, which I do not normally lead on, but to the extent that I do I note that there is proper analysis underlying those. Ministers are encouraged and, in fact, they get questions in Parliament to explain why the policies they are announcing are the policies they are announcing and how much they cost. There were difficulties during the Covid period and, of course, we have a wide ranging inquiry looking at just that. I look forward to its conclusions.

Chair: Thank you. Assuming there are no further questions from the Committee, Baroness Neville-Rolfe and Mr Jones, thank you very much for your time this morning.