

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [The work of the UK Statistics Authority, HC 847](#)

Monday 3 November 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 3 November 2025.

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Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Markus Campbell-Savours; Charlotte Cane; Sam Carling; Lauren Edwards; Peter Lamb; John Lamont; Luke Taylor.

Questions 329-420

Witnesses

I: Josh Simons MP, Parliamentary Secretary in the Cabinet Office; Catherine Little CB, Chief Operating Officer for the Civil Service and Permanent Secretary to the Cabinet Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Cabinet Office](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Josh Simons MP and Catherine Little CB.

Q329 Chair: Good afternoon, colleagues. I warmly welcome Josh Simons, the new Minister at the Cabinet Office, and a familiar face to this Committee, Cat Little, who is the chief operating officer for the civil service and the permanent secretary to the Cabinet Office. This is, we hope, our final session on the work of the UK Statistics Authority, and it falls to me to open the batting with this question: how did it get so bad before it was noticed that it had got so bad?

Catherine Little: Shall I start, and perhaps the Minister can add to this? First, we very much welcome the parliamentary scrutiny, which has been undertaken over many years. I went back and looked at every parliamentary intervention over the past five years, and I think it is fair to say that there has been a fair amount. This is not an issue that has been disregarded or undiscussed. It has been in plain sight for several years.

There are a variety of issues—a conflation of the organisational performance of the ONS, the position in which we find ourselves in economic statistics in particular, the labour force survey and the IDS; all of those issues have been scrutinised partly in isolation and at times all



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together. I think the Lievesely review was probably the first review that touched on all those matters. Very promptly after the Lievesely review, I think we did fairly quickly escalate to commissioning the Devereux report and then taking action. Implicit in your question is, "That is a long time to take decisive action", but in practice, for all those areas to be brought together in a comprehensive and clear way, it probably did take the Devereux report.

Q330 Chair: We all know the great phrase, "Lessons will be learned", but there is a need for sanctified, reliable, robust data statistics, and that affects so much of the formulation of public policy, business and everything else. Should we be worried that the importance of that element was not necessarily realised in the way it should have been, or that it was not at the forefront of people's minds? The credibility of the organisation has taken a hit, and it is the sort of organisation that cannot afford for its credibility to take a hit.

Josh Simons: It is probably worth saying where I come from in addressing this as the new Minister. My background before being elected was in data and statistics, and I wrote a book about how democracy should think about data.

Chair: Is it still available at all good bookshops? Christmas is coming and we are all looking for stocking fillers, Minister.

Josh Simons: Thank you for the plug, Chair. That was not what I was going for, but I appreciate it none the less.

It is unbelievably important that a democracy can see in order to make good decisions, and one of the great advantages of democracies is that they are good at surfacing difficult information to those who are elected to make decisions, even when it is uncomfortable. Therefore, I think it is unbelievably important that the credibility of the ONS is restored in an enduring way going forward. That is why, when I was appointed to this role not that long ago, I asked to meet the senior team of the ONS—the permanent secretary, the acting chair—and did so promptly.

My focus over the next six months or so will be to make sure that the implementation of the Devereux review has every bit of ministerial sponsorship and support that it needs to continue at pace. As you say, there has already been a reputational hit and, going forward, it is important that there is no further hit, and that real efforts are made to restore that reputation.

Q331 Chair: You may be aware that we have heard in previous evidence sessions that the culture of the organisation was not conducive to getting the best out of people, and that therefore the morale is pretty low. If I had a criticism of Devereux, it is that quite a lot of it was written—and I appreciate this was done at the time, and that things have moved on—in a slightly passive way. It said that things will happen in the fullness of time. It was not quite full Sir Humphrey speak but it was a pretty good pastiche. You have intimated this in your initial answer, but can you say a word



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about the energy? Who is driving? Who is putting their foot to the floor? I appreciate it is early doors for your responsibility of the ONS, Minister, but do you have an assessment—and do you, Ms Little, have one likewise—of the levels of morale and the appetite among the workforce?

Catherine Little: Shall I start?

Chair: I am relaxed. As long as it is all covered off, I do not mind who opens.

Catherine Little: Between us, across the whole of the hearing, I am sure we will do a double act. First, every single day, the staff at the ONS are doing a formidable job. Part of the staff morale issue is, yes, that there have been challenges and in some cases failings where we have to learn lessons. But, ultimately, they are good people trying to do a good job every day. I pay credit to the amount of work that they have done during quite intense scrutiny and speculation.

The energy and drive to change the organisation is always led from the top, which is why we very much prioritised recruiting a new permanent secretary. I hope you saw that we moved incredibly quickly to appoint expediently a very experienced operational transformation permanent secretary, in line with the Devereux report. He is actively seized of the importance of boosting morale and making sure that we change that culture. You have to create a culture where people feel safe saying the truth and being open about any sort of risks or performance issues. To do that, people have to have faith and trust that leadership will listen, respond and take things seriously.

As the line manager of the permanent secretary of the ONS, I am very confident that he is absolutely seized of that, working actively with the unions and with staff to identify the challenges, including working from home and how we get people to work together back in the office, and making sure that we harness the skills and capabilities of teams to improve. Every year we undertake a comprehensive people survey. Part of the challenge is that, obviously, if you do not have faith that the system is going to listen and take action, it is difficult to get to the bottom of the information in the people survey. But I think the signs are there that we know what we need to respond to, and we need to take action.

Q332 **Chair:** I say this as a Welshman from Cardiff, who would not spit on Newport if it was on fire—and it would be vice versa if I were from Newport—has any assessment been made of geographical location?

Josh Simons: I will add on to the energy point and then address directly the question on geography and Newport. To the extent that I can help with the energy issue, I will and am. I intend to visit the ONS in person as a Minister in the coming months.

Q333 **Chair:** To the horror of your diary secretary, I urge you on behalf of the Committee to make it sooner than in the coming months.

Josh Simons: Absolutely. Noted.



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Chair: I can see the diary secretary throwing daggers at me from the Public Gallery.

Josh Simons: He is smiling—it is fine. To ennoble the work that the ONS does, it is important for elected Ministers to pay respect to that work, to underscore how important it is, to talk about it, and to talk it up. There is now an important series of rhythmic meetings in place. There is a quarterly sponsorship meeting between the ONS permanent secretary and the sponsor team to specifically track progress on the review. There is also an economic statistics steering group that also meets quarterly, and the senior sponsor is a member of that group. There is an ongoing review of the location question, and I expect to receive a paper on it in the coming weeks.

Catherine Little: On location, the Committee will be aware how important the places for growth programme and the civil service having viable career development across the whole United Kingdom are for us. The ONS has several hubs where there are specialist teams operating outside of Newport. We need to look at how we make the most of those specialist hubs and build the career frameworks and development opportunities to grow talent to the very top of the organisation. I am confident that the permanent secretary has the strategic operation in hand.

Q334 **Chair:** A final question from me at this juncture: this Committee's assessment of what we have heard hitherto is that preserving the sanctity of the UKSA's independence has been the trump card. Somehow and at some time, possibly purely by evolution and accident, that has meant that nobody in Cabinet Office—including the Cabinet Secretary—or No. 10 could ask questions of the organisation and expect full and truthful answers. It is absolutely crucial that all stakeholders have confidence in the robustness of the UKSA's statistical output and that it is free and unfettered by Treasury advice—such as suggestions that it might not be helpful to put something a particular way or asking that it be rephrased and so on. The UKSA needs to be able to tell the story, warts and all.

However, what lessons have been taken away and what new procedures, if any, have been put in place so that, while the UKSA's independence is preserved, there is direct and engaged oversight? Minister, obviously you have responsibility and can issue directions if you see fit. The board were at great pains to tell the Committee what its remit was not, and to this day we have precious little idea what its role was. I am still not entirely sure that they had very much idea what their role in the whole thing was. Could you say something about that accountability back to Ministers and to you, Ms Little? What are your expectations and anticipations for and from the board?

Catherine Little: First off, it is absolutely possible to have independence and transparent accountability for all the reasons you described. That is important as we now implement the Devereux report recommendations. In the Cabinet Office we have two main roles. First, we act as sponsor for the UK Statistics Authority. That means making sure that the board has the



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support to undertake its role overseeing the UK's statistics system and ensuring that the ONS demonstrates high performance. That is set out within the memorandum of understanding between the Cabinet Office and the UKSA. I have a second responsibility in that every permanent secretary has a line manager within the civil service. I line manage the permanent secretary, and under the split arrangements, the UK national statistician.

I may perhaps oversimplify this, but I think that it is the job of the Cabinet Office to make sure that the UKSA is discharging the two responsibilities that I set out—and if not, to work with the board to take action. The memorandum of understanding sets out the powers that we have. You mentioned the direction; we are responsible for appointing non-executive directors and for ensuring that there is effective oversight in place.

Other than that, and overseeing a healthy system, it is very much down to the line management of the permanent secretary leadership. Clearly, the Devereux report set out some of the questions to simplify and increase accountability and make it clearer. We need to review and update the memorandum of understanding and make sure that the governance remains fit for purpose, delivering both independence and accountability.

Q335 Chair: You mentioned the Devereux report. I will ask one question. Clearly, most of the tactics and strategies being developed now are to meet what Devereux identified. What mechanisms do you have in place to take a mid-term test on Devereux? Things might have been so awful at the time of his review that he captured the topmost awful things, but not the ones below them that were not the most dreadful or important things at the time. That is, does Devereux indicate that things had hit rock bottom and so the only way was up, with the right sort of impetus and so on, or is there any way of temperature-checking it to make sure of issues that have hitherto not come to the fore but still merit addressing?

Catherine Little: Minister Simons mentioned the quarterly oversight. We have intensified the responsibilities under the sponsorship arrangements that we have in place with the UKSA. We meet on a regular basis to understand progress, but we have to triangulate that and work closely with the board of the UKSA. I meet the permanent secretary almost weekly, and I have regular dialogue with Penny Young, our interim chair. As the Minister set out, he has regular oversight and discussion. There is nothing better than talking to staff, so I have done a number of all-staff engagements to talk about progress and how people are doing. It is great that the Minister will also do that.

On your question about whether we have hit rock bottom and the only way is up, I like to think that that is the case. The oversight, the commitment of staff to turn this around—

Q336 Chair: You are not just making that assumption, but you are keeping a weather eye.

Catherine Little: I think that that is one of the lessons learned: we can never make assumptions. I go back to where I started. This has been in



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plain sight in lots of parliamentary scrutiny, with some light on it, and it took time to bring together a comprehensive set of plans. We can never take anything for granted. The Minister might want to add to that.

Josh Simons: To underscore, on your previous question, there is a fundamental conceptual distinction here, which the past six months have brought to the surface: the UK Statistics Authority and the ONS are Government departments—non-ministerial departments with employees who are civil servants. The civil service code is clear that civil servants are accountable to Ministers, and it is important to say that, because the past six months have demonstrated that when things are not going well, it is the Cabinet Office's role to step in. We have to be clear about the distinction between democratic accountability, which means that Ministers come to Parliament to account for what they and the civil servants who report to them do, and operational independence, such that the Cabinet Office will never interfere in the production of statistics—that is absolutely fundamental to the system. None the less, democratic accountability applies to the UK Statistics Authority just as it does to any other non-ministerial body.

Chair: A house-keeping point for colleagues: I will go to Lauren next and then—only because Sam needs to be in the Chamber for the train statement—I will turn to Mr Carling. I will take the questions out of order to facilitate an important statement for Sam's constituents.

Q337 **Lauren Edwards:** Thank you for coming along. I will ask first about broader board effectiveness. You are recruiting a new chair of the UKSA at the moment. Throughout the inquiry, many of us thought numerous times: what were the UKSA board doing at particular points in time? Do you have any plans for a broader review of the board's effectiveness, or is it hoped that replacing the chair will be sufficient to make the changes needed?

Catherine Little: I think we need to do both. Under our corporate governance codes, which we issue to all public bodies, it is good practice to undertake an annual review of board effectiveness. There are different ways of doing that, and we will work with the UKSA board to do it.

We have had quite a lot of change in the membership. This Committee will be aware, because of the appointment process, that we had a recruitment round to change a number of board members over 2024 to 2025. We are grateful to the board—being relatively new members—for working with us closely to oversee the transition, and I am also grateful to Penny Young for stepping up to cover the interim chair role. The combination of the two is important, and it matters deeply to us that there are open relationships. I know that the board know they can come to me at any point if they have concerns or questions, and vice versa.

Q338 **Lauren Edwards:** Are those annual board effectiveness reviews done independently?

Catherine Little: It is up to the board. It is normal practice within the corporate governance code for all organisations—private and public



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sector—and we issue support and guidance to bodies on how to undertake it. It is always helpful to get an independent assessment and to get some constructive challenge. Quite often in Government, we use peer-to-peer non-executives to help with board governance. In fact, I have just had a NED at the Home Office come and do a board effectiveness review at the Cabinet Office.

Q339 Lauren Edwards: Are the results of that effectiveness review shared with the Cabinet Office?

Catherine Little: I would expect them to be.

Q340 Lauren Edwards: Do you know when the last one was done?

Catherine Little: I do not, but I will find out.

Q341 Chair: Can you confirm that they will be shared?

Catherine Little: Yes, I will.

Q342 Lauren Edwards: Review after review has been clear that good statistics require improvements in the way that data is shared across Government. I think our predecessor Committee in a former inquiry found that Whitehall is quite bad at sharing data, because it lacks the incentives to do so. The Cabinet Office was the lead Department on cross-Government data sharing until recently—I believe that has been transferred to DSIT. This is a question for both of you: what responsibility do you think the Cabinet Office should accept for the lack of progress that has been made over the last decade in this area?

Catherine Little: Obviously, my Minister is a published expert in this, so I shall defer to him on some of the wider observations.

Chair: No pressure there.

Catherine Little: Before we did a machinery of Government change, which took place the day after the election back in 2024, the two things that the CDDO—the Central Digital and Data Office—was doing was, first, the national data strategy, and secondly, the road map for digital and data for 2022 to 2025. There is lots of brilliant work and there are lots of efforts. I think I have said to the Committee before that there are some practical things you can do and some system leadership things you can do, but ultimately, a lot of this comes down to culture, incentives and how we shift people's understanding of data.

Two years ago, we ran One Big Thing on data, and 200,000 civil servants undertook training on how to access data, when you share data and how it can help us in undertaking our responsibilities. We have done lots of things, although, as you imply, have we really shifted the dial? I still think there is a lot more to do. For me, it comes back to culture, leadership, incentives and making sure that the system as a whole works together, recognising this is a game changer for the way in which we run public services.



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Josh Simons: I would agree with much of that. The bottom line is that there is much further to go. One of the things people forget about data is that there are not just nice numbers on spreadsheets, and if only we could combine the spreadsheets everything would be fine—we would be sharing data. Often what happens when you get a number is that the number means something different, because it is produced differently, for instance across NHS trusts. That is a common problem, and dealing with that problem is very difficult. It is not really about data sharing; it is about how data is produced and harmonising policies for data production across places.

The blueprint for modern digital Government that was published, into which the national data strategy folded, is an ambitious plan for doing that, and there is lots of good work under way. For example, there is now something called a data marketplace, which is in testing mode. That is a tool for Government Departments to share data better across the boundaries of Departments. If that tool proves impactful and useful, and it works, it is a brilliant thing. We are still, in my view, very much at the early part of the curve on data sharing. It is important to remember that it is not just about forcing Departments to share data; it is about making sure that what the numbers mean is the same thing, and therefore they can be translated across departmental boundaries.

Q343 **Peter Lamb:** You are talking about the digital marketplace. One thing that the ONS had been working on that was cancelled was the integrated data service, which sounded as though it was trying to do much the same thing. Is there an attempt to replicate that work? Is it building on what was previously the case? Or is it something different?

Catherine Little: the integrated data service was a dedicated research environment designed to join up data for research purposes. The national data library is the next iteration of this, which is not just about research; it is about how we utilise data for effective decision making in policy and delivery. The IDS was cancelled last year following a review, partly because we have been unable to deliver the benefits that were envisaged. There was some excellent work and there are some things that we think we can use and learn from as we develop the national data library. Sadly, that was a major programme that has not delivered the benefits that we expected. I think the lessons learned for the national data library and for the data marketplace are important. We commissioned a review earlier this year, which was overseen by an interministerial group to make sure that the lessons were transferred to the national data library.

Q344 **Peter Lamb:** You will still have to start this new project from scratch.

Catherine Little: It will not be from scratch. We are building on a number of datasets and will build on the work of the IDS. There is quite a lot there that we think we can salvage.

Q345 **Peter Lamb:** In terms of the IDS, presumably there is a cost attached to that project. Roughly how much of that value do you think you will be able to transfer across?

Catherine Little: We are currently working through that. That is a work in progress, but you are right: we will need to set out what we can salvage and what will remain as a tangible asset to Government.

Q346 **Sam Carling:** I am going to start with a brief question on the board. We talked a bit about board effectiveness. Has there been a more detailed consideration of the structure of the board? The UKSA board oversees both the Office for National Statistics and the regulator of that body, which seems to me a bizarre governance set-up. Could that be contributing to the governance problems?

Catherine Little: There are quite a lot of recommendations and views about what we might do on the board. That is all actively under consideration. I am very keen that we get your Report and take on board your findings as well as work with new senior appointments, because I believe the new chair should have quite a big role to play in supporting how we take this forward. On whether the national statistician should be the chair of the UKSA and a member of the Cabinet Office should be on the board of the ONS, there are pros and cons to those different arrangements. It is important we go through them and look at the pros and cons.

Josh Simons: It is worth underscoring that the 2020 memorandum of understanding, the last public document that I know of setting out the relationship between the Cabinet Office and that governance structure is going to be updated. The goal is to publish an updated framework agreement by the end of the year, so there is thinking going on as an input into that framework agreement that we will share with you as soon as that is ready.

Q347 **Sam Carling:** Thank you—that is really helpful. I have some broader questions about the Cabinet Office's approach to appointments within the UKSA and the ONS. Can we start by talking about Sam Beckett, who was appointed as second permanent secretary at the ONS? Could you give me an indication of why and when Cabinet Office officials suggested that Sir Ian might like a second permanent secretary?

Catherine Little: The first thing to say is that this was before my time, so I have gone back and looked at exactly what happened. A second permanent secretary was established to support the ONS in specifically delivering its five-year strategy, which at the time was called "Statistics for the public good", and to support on economic matters. There was a full process with interviews and staff engagement. The First Civil Service Commissioner at the time oversaw the process, and it was regulated by the Civil Service Commission.

Q348 **Sam Carling:** When was Sir Ian asked about whether he would want that position? Or was he told that he needed to have it?

Catherine Little: I am not aware of the details of how that would have taken place. That would have been for contemporaries at the time.

Q349 **Sam Carling:** It might be useful if there is anything you can find on that



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letter that we could have in writing, just to help better contextualise some of this. Are you able to shed any light on why the role was not advertised?

Catherine Little: My understanding is that—this does happen from time to time in the civil service for regulated appointments, for very specialist, urgent and senior appointments—we had a candidate who had the economic experience, the leadership experience and the relevant professional experience to undertake the role. At the time only one candidate was deemed suitable to go through the process. Beyond that, I am not aware of any further considerations.

Q350 **Sam Carling:** Okay. And did the Cabinet Office conduct an evaluation of how that post-holder had performed in the role following their departure?

Catherine Little: I am not aware of that, but I will go back and double-check whether there was any evaluation. Normally, an exit interview of some sort is undertaken. I know that Sir Robert did speak to the individuals concerned about the period when there was a second permanent secretary, so I will go and find out more.

Q351 **Sam Carling:** That is helpful. It all ties into this situation around the independence of the ONS versus the accountability, and how Cabinet Office appointments skew that balance and potentially almost create extra centres of power, and the various implications that might have. Do you agree with that point about some of these appointments adding additional centres of power into the organisation?

Catherine Little: First, we should remind ourselves that the ONS is staffed by civil servants. Civil servants are regulated public servants and we are appointed in accordance with the regulations. From our perspective, if there is a need for leadership, which is not unusual at senior levels, to do a very specific task, then it is our job, working with the commission, to make sure that a process is undertaken in accordance with the commission's rules. That process is run independently, so it is not the Cabinet Office that is deciding who is appointed; the creation of roles is always overseen by the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Secretary of the day.

Q352 **Sam Carling:** That is helpful. Just to move to a slightly different post, we have an understanding that as a former director general for data capability, somebody called Alison Pritchard commenced quite a lengthy leave of absence in 2024. Has the Cabinet Office been involved in discussion around that post and potentially filling it?

Catherine Little: The civil service as a whole supports talent management for all our directors general, so yes, we have been involved and we would be involved through our senior talent and recruitment team for all director general posts.

Q353 **Sam Carling:** That is useful as well. Just moving back to the board briefly, the Cabinet Office obviously has a really important role to play in the appointment of non-executive directors on the UKSA board. We have been told that the Cabinet Office set aside some of the advice from the UKSA on several reappointments to that board. Do you think that has had any

impact on the board's efficacy?

Catherine Little: I am not aware of any specific instances where that is likely to have happened. Ultimately, Ministers in the Cabinet Office are responsible for making non-executive appointments and it is an important part of our sponsorship arrangements of the UKSA. In practice, certainly for the last round, which my teams and I oversaw between 2024 and 2025, the advice and support of Sir Robert Chote was essential in making those final appointments. Specifically, he oversaw and was involved in the final submissions that I provided to Ministers ahead of appointments being recommended.

It is important that the board work together, but ultimately it is the decision of Ministers and it is my job to make sure that they have the right information to make those decisions.

Q354 **Sam Carling:** Finally from me, we have also been told that there were issues around the UKSA chair being prevented from providing written advice directly to Ministers and that there was some concern around the board's recommendation to appoint a deputy chair not being taken up until Sir Robert's resignation forced something to happen in that regard. Do you have any comments on any of that?

Catherine Little: I am not aware of any instances where the Cabinet Office has stopped the chair of the UKSA from providing advice. There has been open dialogue between the chair of the UKSA and Ministers for the entire time that I have been in the Cabinet Office, and I think it is incredibly healthy that there is a direct relationship with the chair of the UKSA. Minister Simons will have met with Penny Young without me in attendance; that is important.

As for the delay in appointing Penny as the deputy chair, I believe that the process was paused over the general election. It took a bit of time for us to reinstate the advice. Those are technical delays that are sadly unavoidable in certain circumstances. Ultimately, when we also asked her at the same time to take on the interim chair, that created an expedient need to get that decision made quickly.

Josh Simons: Just to underscore, I obviously can't speak to the historic question about advice that went to Ministers, but I have a direct relationship with Penny Young that I established myself. I have a direct line of contact to her, and intend to maintain that. If she or any future chair that we appoint has any concerns about anything and wishes to come directly to me, they can absolutely do that, and I would encourage them to do so.

Sam Carling: That is useful.

Q355 **Chair:** Is your starting point—or, if you like, batting order—to say to those senior people or colleagues within the Cabinet Office, "Don't let uncertainty or doubt as to whether we can flag or raise something stop you doing so. Do so, because the risk of not doing so and perpetuating the problems is too great to contemplate?"



Josh Simons: I think that is a fair characterisation of my starting point. The fundamental point is that—having met the permanent secretary, the deputy chair and the acting national statistician—I have been satisfied in the last six weeks or so since I was appointed to this post that the problems of culture, personnel and legacy IT, as well as many of the problems outlined in the Devereux report, are understood, top of mind and being worked on by the right people at pace.

If at some point down the road I begin to lose confidence that that is what is happening, it is my job and duty to Parliament and the Government, as a user of statistics, and on behalf of the many other users of statistics that the ONS and the UKSA produce, to raise the alarm as soon as I think that might be the case. As a Minister, I would have no fear in doing so; it is part of my job, and it is why I am here to account for what is happening to you.

Q356 **Chair:** We were seized as a Committee by just how counter-intuitive it is that, in 2024-25, one man, in the case of Sir Ian, could be so powerful and defining for an organisation. I am not saying he single-handedly brought it to its knees, but all roads seem to lead back to Sir Ian. In terms of looking forward and learning from what has happened, is it understood that the checks and balances both within and overseeing the organisation are very clearly set out such that no one individual can be allowed to—for want of a better phrase—get away with what they got away with in the past, creating the damage that was created?

Josh Simons: There are a couple of things I would say about that, and then I am sure Cat would like to come in. First, as I mentioned earlier, the updated framework agreement—which has not been updated in almost five years, I believe—will state the nature of that relationship, the expectations, the ongoing rhythm of meetings and accountability going forward. It will also set out thinking on the nature of those accountability structures.

Secondly, in splitting the post in the way that has happened, which I know you as a Committee have looked into before, we are, in a sense, acknowledging the concern the Chair has just outlined. We are essentially saying that the core skill of running a big organisation, including personnel, operational and HR skills, and the set of skills that you need to be a world-leading statistician who is intently focused on the rigour of the production of statistics over time, are not necessarily best found in the same person. That splitting of the role is a recognition of the point that you just made.

Q357 **Chair:** Minister, you have mentioned the emerging revised framework document on two occasions, and we are grateful to you for that. You will be aware that the UKSA is accountable to Parliament. I am working on the presumption that, as a Committee, we will have some sight of the framework document before it hits the print and HMSO-type run, so that we can be engaged in that process.



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Josh Simons: I am very happy to write to the Committee to set out a proposal for how we might do that and make that happen.

Chair: I think, in the interests of good governance, it would help. It would also strengthen the mutual resolve to get this right, rather than just having it emerge in isolation.

Q358 **Lauren Edwards:** This is a question for Cat. You mentioned earlier in your comments that you will be taking on a line management role for the national statistician. What specifically is that going to involve?

Catherine Little: I line manage both the permanent secretary and the national statistician, and I was previously the line manager of Sir Ian Diamond. As a civil servant, you have a set of performance standards, and particularly as a permanent secretary, the Cabinet Secretary sets out the common performance expectations of all permanent secretaries. It is my job, as the line manager of the permanent secretaries who report to me, to ensure that they have objectives and accountability metrics.

I am also responsible for supporting the individual. These are very tough and difficult jobs. Especially in the instance, where we have two new appointees, one of whom is new to the permanent secretary grade, my job is to support, provide development and ensure that they are operating in conditions that allow for their success as a senior leader under pressure and needing to deliver quickly. It is pastoral, it is about performance and it is about ensuring that, overall, leaders succeed.

Q359 **Lauren Edwards:** Looking at the job description for the national statistician, it did not seem to make reference to the UKSA board, which is where we understand that the legal duties sit, rather than with yourself. How do you see that working in practice?

Catherine Little: The national statistician's role is very heavily prescribed within the Act, as you will know. I think the job description does refer to the responsibilities under the Act. Ultimately, they are responsible to me, from a permanent secretary line management perspective, but for their performance as the national statistician, they are responsible to the UKSA board. That is an important distinction. I am not there to take any view about the effectiveness of the Statistics Authority. In fact, I make an explicit point of not getting involved in the UK statistics system, given its independence. But the role is directly accountable to the UKSA under the Act and the MOU.

Q360 **Lauren Edwards:** In terms of your engagement with the interim national statistician, how often have you met since she agreed to take on the role?

Catherine Little: Multiple times. When she first took on the role, we were on weekly meetings. Since the appointment of the new permanent secretary, it has probably been less frequently—every few weeks.

Q361 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** Does the national statistician still join weekly meetings with permanent secretaries?



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Catherine Little: Yes, as does the permanent secretary of the ONS. Both individuals come to Wednesday Morning Colleagues.

Q362 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** The Minister touched on this, but can you explain why you accepted Sir Robert's proposals that the national statistician role could be temporarily split?

Catherine Little: The Minister alluded to this, but right now the ONS is under significant pressure—quite rightly—to transform itself as an organisation and to transform the statistics system. That is a formidable job for any leader. I think that gets to the nub of the role and what is possible. The reasoning in the Devereux report is that, for a period of time, it is probably necessary to have distinct capability and capacity to undertake those two quite distinct roles. I think Sir Robert is also quite careful to set out that he does not think it is impossible to reunite those roles in the future. That is a matter that the Government will need to take a view on. My view is that we should take a bit of time to turn around the organisation and ensure that we have the capacity and leadership in place. Hopefully, we will then have a strong talent pipeline to undertake that role in the future as a reunited leadership role.

Q363 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** Should we take it that there is an ambition to reunite the roles, or is it very much a monitor and see affair?

Catherine Little: That is a matter for Ministers.

Josh Simons: That decision has not been taken, so I would not take it as there being that ambition. First, we need to see how the splitting of the role improves the performance of the organisation in an urgent and energetic way. A final decision on whether to keep the roles split and, if so, whether to amend the legislation and in what way, needs to be taken in close consultation between the Cabinet Office and the UK Statistics Authority. There is, as you know, widespread interest and concern in that decision, so it is very important that I as a Minister and we as a ministerial team in the Cabinet Office listen and engage as we make it.

Q364 **Chair:** You said "if" there is the need for legislative changes. Have you identified the pathway for that? Is that primary legislation, or can it be done via SI?

Josh Simons: That work is under way now. The legal advice was taken on the splitting of the role, and it was judged, as I think came up in a previous session, that the legislation permitted the splitting of the role. If there were to be legislative change, it is far more likely to be permissive than prescriptive about the permanent splitting of the role—in other words, to leave that flexibility open. As I say, however, a decision has not been taken to amend the legislation at this point, and therefore any serious discussion of what that might look like has not yet begun.

Q365 **Chair:** Could I urge a slight change of approach? There is a legitimate expectation that this parliamentary Session will run until next May, with a new King's Speech. If you need to have a bid for the King's Speech, for primary legislation to deliver whatever is deemed necessary, a bid-in is



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always recommended to be early. That is because, with the greatest respect to what would be at hand, it is not the biggest, headline-grabbing piece of legislation, but it is vitally important. If it can be done by secondary legislation, by definition, it is less pressing, but the Public Bill Office will be taking bids—dare I say it, even as we speak—for consideration for inclusion, and you really would not want to miss the boat.

Josh Simons: We will look into that. It is a great point, Chair, and we will find out what the nature of the change would be and work back from the timelines in the King's Speech.

Chair: If, without committing you to one way or the other, we could have a note on, "Is legislation required and, if so, by what path?" that would be incredibly helpful to us. My apologies, Markus—back to you.

Q366 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** Are we right in understanding that the split of responsibilities between the national statistician and the permanent secretary was not clearly defined for several months after Mr Tierney's appointment?

Catherine Little: No. We immediately set out the responsibilities between the permanent secretary and the national statistician. It is right to say that there are still some ongoing questions about the resources within the organisation. I am aware that there are decisions to be made about next year's budget and how much resource is given to the national statistician within those decisions, but as far as I can see, it is a clear demarcation in roles.

Q367 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** How many people applied for the generalist post, how many were shortlisted and how many were deemed appointable?

Catherine Little: We interviewed, at the time, two people, and one was deemed appointable. Sadly, that individual had to withdraw after that process, and so we had to run a very fast process to identify other qualified candidates for a managed move within the civil service. I should say on the record that I judged it important to make a fast and expedient recruitment, given the status of the organisation.

Q368 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** Given that there were only two candidates, one of which withdrew, and you had to approach Mr Tierney to take on the role, do senior leaders view the ONS as an attractive place to work?

Catherine Little: Every Department and organisation in Government has its challenges and benefits. For anyone who cares about the integrity of statistics and leadership of great civil service organisations, it is a very attractive role. Part of the reason that we split the role, and the cause of some of the challenges in succession planning, is that we are changing the role and it is not yet certain whether it will be permanent. That will raise questions for some people as to whether they would apply.

Q369 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** So it was not that some of the cultural issues that this Committee has touched on over the course of this



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investigation have scared people off wanting to join the ONS?

Catherine Little: Talking to lots of candidates who were thinking about applying, that was lower down the list of reasons for people's considerations. In my experience, this is exactly the sort of challenge that most civil servants relish. Sadly, a lot of our very senior people are substantively appointed to senior roles and it is very difficult for them to move quickly.

Q370 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** Senior leaders were held back from moving from different organisations. Did you find it frustrating that particular candidates could not come and join?

Catherine Little: No.

Q371 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** Did you give any thought to the potential implications of the split on the independence of the UK statistics?

Catherine Little: In what respect? Could I just understand your question more?

Markus Campbell-Savours: It is my understanding that the appointment was made by the Cabinet Office rather than by an independent panel. There has been a direct approach. Is that the right way to approach an appointment of this nature?

Catherine Little: The national statistician is a Crown appointment made by His Majesty the King on the recommendation of the Prime Minister.

Q372 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** Did an independent panel have a role?

Catherine Little: For the interim appointment, we judged that there was only one individual who could quickly undertake that role. As the Committee will know, that individual had also been the acting permanent secretary. I felt that it was important to have some continuity of leadership over the transition period. We are now undertaking the full-time, substantive recruitment of a national statistician. I am very grateful to Emma for providing her continued oversight.

Josh Simons: There are two distinct recruitment processes. It is worth underscoring that they are different because of the nature of the role. One is the permanent secretary recruitment process, which I understand was run via a cross-Government expression of interest in the usual way in the summer of this year and was open to all existing permanent civil servants. That role, as you know, has now been recruited.

Then there is the national statistician, which is an external recruitment campaign and is being run right now. The applications for that position close on 23 November. That campaign is being chaired by the First Civil Service Commissioner, Gisela Stuart. The processes for those two roles are distinct. The Cabinet Office plays a role in both, but a very different kind of role.

Catherine Little: I should say, to your point on independence, that both are independent, regulated appointments by the commission.

Q373 Markus Campbell-Savours: As I understand it, the national statistician role was advertised last month.

Catherine Little: Last week—and last month.

Q374 Markus Campbell-Savours: Despite us having a ministerial commitment that we would see a draft spec before the post went live, I do not believe that we have. Is there a reason why?

Chair: We had a grovelling apology about that, which, of course, I accepted.

Catherine Little: I am very happy to repeat my grovelling apology to the Committee.

Chair: I put it down to cock-up rather than conspiracy.

Catherine Little: As you know, we have shared everything openly with this Committee, and that is absolutely right and proper. I sincerely apologise for the administrative oversight. It is a complex recruitment process, and teams were working at pace to get it out and into the campaign, so I sincerely apologise.

Q375 Markus Campbell-Savours: Not through bitterness, we have noticed that the spec makes the postholder directly accountable to you and makes zero reference to accountability to the UK Statistics Authority. What was the thinking behind that?

Catherine Little: As I just mentioned in the answer to Ms Edwards, the law sets out the accountability of the individual to the UKSA for their responsibilities for the oversight of the national statistics system. They are accountable to me as a line manager, and I hope that the job description made that clear, but we will obviously make sure that, throughout the process, that is very clear.

Q376 Markus Campbell-Savours: It may be a misconception on the part of myself and others on the Committee, but I am not sure we are clear where the legislation gives you that role as a line manager. After today, would you be able to provide us with some clarity on where the legislation gives you that role?

Catherine Little: No, I did not say that, just to clarify for the record. The legislation sets out the responsibility of the UKSA for the oversight of the national statistician, and the national statistician is accountable to the UKSA. It is very heavily prescribed within the legislation. There is absolutely no mention of civil service line management.

The terms and conditions and the contract of a permanent secretary always are to the Cabinet Secretary, and the Cabinet Secretary may choose to delegate that line management responsibility to other permanent secretaries as they see fit.

Q377 Markus Campbell-Savours: Okay. You may correct me again, but our Committee had identified issues around accountability, which we felt that this job description may have exacerbated—a suggestion maybe that we



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were not setting leaders up for success. Do you think it is clear who is actually in charge of ONS?

Catherine Little: I think it is very clear that the ONS is accountable to the UK Statistics Authority; that is set out in the legislation. It is also very clear that the national statistician is accountable to the UKSA, to Parliament and to the Government, and that is why we have the sponsorship arrangements in place and the memorandum of understanding that details that in practice. By the way, that level and range of accountability is quite normal for senior leadership within Government. Most permanent secretaries are responsible to a board, to Ministers and to Parliament.

Q378 **Lauren Edwards:** Obviously, we hope the split works well, but we need to plan for if it does not. Have you given thought to what would happen if there was a conflict between the national statistician and the permanent secretary? An example could be that the permanent secretary was making decisions about how things were being run at the ONS that made the national statistician think that that would compromise what they were trying to achieve and some of their legal duties.

Catherine Little: To be very straight with you, this is untested territory. The theory is that for issues relating to national statistics, the board of the UKSA would ultimately support in making those decisions. I would like to think, as senior leaders in the civil service, that there would not be a need for any sort of arbitration, but the board would ultimately take decisions about statistics. If it was an organisational or personal matter, then obviously I have an important role to play in supporting those two permanent secretaries to reach a resolution.

Lauren Edwards: That makes it clear that you need a strong chair and a strong, effective board in that case.

Q379 **Chair:** It is not quite the “Who guards the guards?” question, but who runs the ONS? The permanent secretary, the national statistician or, de facto, the board? From your answer, Ms Little, it is de facto the board.

Catherine Little: Organisationally, day to day, the permanent secretary is charged with the operational effectiveness and running of the ONS. The board is responsible for overseeing the executive.

Q380 **Chair:** Right. Let’s pretend I am a journalist from the BBC, and I have stuck a microphone under your nose and said, “Right, on whose desk does the buck stop?”

Catherine Little: The permanent secretary is responsible for day-to-day organisational running; as an executive, it is their responsibility. Obviously, the oversight of that executive and the overall assurance of the UK statistics system lie with the UKSA board.

Q381 **Chair:** So do we think—*[Interruption.]* It’s like being at the Box, with officials passing things along—thank you. But the national statistician is the head of the ONS under the law?

Catherine Little: Yes. This is where, as the Minister alluded to, we have had to get legal advice on our interpretation—

Q382 **Chair:** Advisers advise and Ministers, as we know, decide, but that does not stop legal advisers giving legal advice, come what may. Sometimes the legal advice will marry up and sometimes it will be different. You have told us what you have done or what has been done, and nobody will argue that it has been done in anything other than good faith, but the advice on which this Committee relies tells us that you have effectively told us what has been done, but have not necessarily explained the how, because two of the things do not appear to be, from the advice that we are given, consistent with the Act.

The Act, I would suggest, is possibly imperfect and certainly in need of review, both based on immediate past experience and trying to future-proof. Be that as it may, we are all constrained by Acts of Parliament, whether we like them or not. The advice we are given is that the national statistician being managed by the Cabinet Office and ultimately sackable by the Cabinet Office is not consistent with the 2007 Act; likewise, the split of the national statistician roles; likewise, the new framework document, as important as its revision clearly will be, would not be sufficient on its own. The Act is the primary legislation, and unless new legislation overrides or amends it, that is the law that governs—as it relates to the national statistician's role. It may not be perfect, it may be cumbersome, but that is the hand of cards we are dealt. What comfort can you give us that your legal advice is right and the advice that is given to Parliament and its representatives is not?

Catherine Little: I know that the previous Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster wrote to you, setting out the considerations and the basis of the decision that was made. We have taken that legal advice. I can only assure you that we take the responsibility of compliance with the law very, very seriously. Of course, it is our primary responsibility to make sure that we do not just take that advice, but consider it in practice, and that Ministers are content with the decisions that they are ultimately making. I can only give you assurance that my Ministers have taken advice, but ultimately have made decisions in good faith about the way in which we are applying the law in this instance.

Q383 **Chair:** But the Act says: "The executive office is, subject to this Act, to consist of...(a) the National Statistician (who is to be its head)".

Catherine Little: That is absolutely true. The Act is silent on the role of the accounting officer; that is one of the challenges, because obviously we have other legislation that sets out the responsibilities of accounting officers. Historically, the national statistician has always also been the principal accounting officer. What we have done is, in effect, to make the permanent secretary the principal accounting officer, which we are entirely entitled to do in accordance with "Managing Public Money", and the national statistician continues to be, in effect, the head of the organisation, who discharges day-to-day operational responsibilities to the permanent secretary. That is the way in which we have set out the split of

responsibilities. We can certainly debate to what extent that is an interpretation that Parliament is content with, and we would be very happy to give further information if that is useful to this Committee.

Q384 Chair: I think it would be. Let me just underscore the point: I am not suggesting for a moment that anybody is acting in anything other than good faith to try to respond in real and rapid time to a pressing suite of problems that cannot be ignored, but statute law sometimes fetters us from addressing, in the way that we would like to, a circumstance that statute law did not envisage at the time that it was drafted.

You will also be aware that the advice handed up by officials to Ministers, who work under the auspices of the ministerial code, has to be legal—de facto legal, not interpretively legal. I am not suggesting for a moment that we will find an answer to this conundrum now, but can I urge that you set out to this Committee in private correspondence how legal advice was sought and the questions that were asked? Was it Treasury counsel who provided the advice, or was it an external public administration lawyer?

As you know, we are discharging this scrutiny on behalf of the whole of Parliament, not just as a Committee of free-standing individuals, and we as a Parliament need to be certain that the Government are acting in this respect, as in every other, in a watertight and legal way. If they are straining at the boundaries of legal interpretation, which need to be corrected through changes to primary legislation, I therefore suggest that by definition that augments the earlier discussion that the Minister and I were having about ascertaining precisely what in legislative terms needs to be done and finding the swiftest and smoothest path to deliver that, either within or without the King's Speech.

Josh Simons: I can just assure you that, as the Minister, I have not read the original legal advice, but I will absolutely seek to clarify that situation and to find out what advice was taken. We will come back to you to confirm that.

Q385 Chair: So the legal advice would have been seen by Minister Gould?

Catherine Little: By the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and by Minister Gould, and I think the Minister for the Cabinet Office would have also seen it at the time. As you say, our first duty is to make sure that, under the ministerial code and the civil service code, we are compliant with the law. I believe that, in good faith, we have provided appropriate legal advice to Ministers who have then taken decisions, and those were decisions taken by previous Ministers, but obviously I would want to make sure that Minister Simons is also content with the situation and the forward path for resolution.

Q386 Chair: I want just to underscore that I am in no way making a suggestion of anything other than the best of intentions for what has been done. There seems to be a clear underpinning of that in the merit of what has been done and in the timeframes in which it has been achieved, but we have to make sure these things are—legit, I think is the term used on the Clapham omnibus.



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Josh Simons: Kosher is my preferred term.

Chair: We can use kosher, if you will; other words are available.

Q387 **Peter Lamb:** Having spoken to Sir Ian Diamond and having read previously unpublished letters between himself and the Treasury, it has become very clear that Sir Ian is of the view that, without additional funding being made available, the ONS cannot undertake statistics related to mission-led government, statistics related to harmonised data and much else. Besides, it is very clear that HM Treasury's viewpoint is that really it only wants economic statistics and those that are directly in its interest, and it will not fund anything else. Given the central role that your Department plays in mission-led government, do you support the cuts that have had to be made to data underpinning the Government's stated missions?

Josh Simons: It is worth saying up front that I do not recognise that characterisation of what is happening—or the past. Actually, when I dug into the historical funding of the ONS in recent decades, I was quite surprised at the generosity of past settlements.

The first thing to say, of course, is that ONS funding is a matter for the Treasury. As the Treasury set out in its letter, the average annual real rate of growth in the ONS's budget—of 6.5% since 2015-16—means that the ONS funding settlements have been more generous an uplift than those for the NHS over that period. The broader context to think about in relation to the most recent spending review settlement with the ONS is that longer picture.

It is also right to say that in real terms the ONS's core budget, excluding the ringfences, in the most recent SR will still be higher than its total budget in the pre-covid period. Of course there its headcount, partly as a result of what it was required to do during covid, is now 5,049 people at the end of March; that is just under 1,000 higher than it was in March 2020.

It is very important to set out that rounded context for the spending review settlement reached between the Treasury and the ONS in the recent SR.

Q388 **Peter Lamb:** Would it be possible to do this work within the existing budget?

Josh Simons: Any arm's length body has to prioritise and account for how it is spending public money. I have been assured that, in the negotiations that were had, the ONS was clear that its core function of providing population and economic migration statistics was more than possible within that budget. The fact that some prioritisation has to happen within that budget is normal, to be expected and welcome, given some of the problems that existed beforehand.

Q389 **Peter Lamb:** The Cabinet Office is the overseeing Department of the ONS. Does it not have a responsibility to try to advocate on its behalf? I guess



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that in this case you think the ONS has already been issued with the budget that it requires. However, if we are to have mission-led government, if those missions are to be delivered and if the public are to believe the statistics attached to them—bearing in mind that the ONS was set up to give additional independence and credibility because of scepticism over the Government’s internal data, or data that they had put forward—might not the Government’s attempt to deliver on these missions in a way that is credible to the public be weakened?.

Josh Simons: I do not think so. The ONS has been clear that the SR settlement will not entail dramatic cuts, and it is entirely fair and reasonable—and in my view, taxpayers would expect this—that any Government Department, including the UKSA, would be asked to prioritise its resources. That is what is happening.

Q390 **Peter Lamb:** And you are comfortable with the prioritisation that it is giving? That is the question here, really. When it comes to economic statistics, additional resource is having to be put in in order to do the core role. We have seen that across the world: economic statistics are increasingly hard to gather in an effective manner.

As a Government, we are increasingly relying on data. The last Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster set out a very ambitious view on how data would be used by the Government in future to deliver on their goals. In that context, it is not unusual to expect that Departments dealing with large amounts of data would see significant increases in costs, even if they delivered longer-term savings. Do you view that prioritisation as an acceptable consequence of staying within that spending envelope, even if it results in mission-related statistics not being available?

Josh Simons: I will make one short point on that; I am sure that Cat will have views too. The ONS produces less than 50% of official statistics. It is sometimes forgotten that the statistical system as a whole, including all the statisticians embedded in Government Departments, plays a vital role in the production of the greater than 50% of the statistics that it produces. Asking a body that produces less than 50% of its statistics to make sure that its economic statistics are as the ONS and the board, the UKSA, would want them to be, is a fair and reasonable use of public money. The statisticians embedded in Government Departments right across the state and Whitehall do a vital job of making sure that those statistics are up to scratch, and they work with the Office for Statistics Regulation to do that.

Catherine Little: Just to be really clear for the record, I would add that the Cabinet Office has no formal role at all in the funding allocations or the budget setting for the ONS. That is absolutely right and proper. Like any other non-ministerial Department, it directly engages with the Treasury to negotiate its settlements. It is normally the permanent secretary who leads those negotiations—I do not know any permanent secretary who is ever happy with their final settlement with the Treasury.

It is also the permanent secretary’s responsibility to provide advice to the board, and in this case the UKSA, on what can be delivered and what cannot. Ultimately, as the Minister said, it was a generous settlement, and



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we need to make sure that independence with regard to how resources are allocated between the Treasury and the ONS is distinct and clear for the role of the Cabinet Office. We do not get involved.

Q391 **Peter Lamb:** Even if it potentially interferes with the work of the Cabinet Office.

Catherine Little: We would be consulted. By the way, we have very few statistics; of course we are interested in the framework and making sure that the board is content, but ultimately, even as a customer, you would not expect to be fully consulted on final budget allocations.

Q392 **Luke Taylor:** Can I ask this question in a slightly different way, and maybe get a clearer answer? Do you disagree with Sir Ian Diamond's suggestion that the ONS will not be able to offer support on data related to mission-led funding, harmonised data and much else besides, or do you not think that that is important?

Josh Simons: The senior leadership of the ONS has assured me that it will be able to perform the core functions, as set out in the Treasury letter, in the spending review period and as set out in the memorandum of understanding in 2020, within the SR settlement.

Q393 **Luke Taylor:** Do those core functions include the specific independent statistics that mission-led government requires?

Josh Simons: In order for me to answer that, you would have to spell out for me what those statistics are, and then I would have to find out more information from the ONS about its capacity.

Catherine Little: It is quite a broad term. There are lots of statistics that could be deemed as relevant to missions, and of course that is debatable in itself. There is no such body of work called "mission statistics" as such, so, as the Minister said, we would need to better understand which statistics you are concerned about.

Q394 **Luke Taylor:** Who defines what are core functions and what is part of this new raft of statistics that are needed to understand mission-led government? It is a big thing. Who is defining it?

Catherine Little: The UKSA is responsible for making sure that it engages with its customers. Its customers include not just Government, but lots of other stakeholders beyond Government, and it is its job to ensure that it has the resources to deliver the priority things that its stakeholders need. The ultimate answer is the board of the UKSA.

Q395 **Luke Taylor:** In terms of mission-led government, that is the Cabinet Office.

Catherine Little: The missions are run by the individual Departments; for example, improving the NHS is run by the Department of Health. The UKSA and the ONS will engage with Departments to make sure that the statistics required under the plan for change are being delivered with their needs in mind. It is not the responsibility of the Cabinet Office to tell the ONS which statistics must be produced.



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Q396 **Luke Taylor:** But if the Cabinet Office is responsible for mission-led government, then surely it is.

Catherine Little: We are responsible for the overall performance of the missions and mission delivery, but the actual customers are the Departments that own the systems that the missions relate to. We are not responsible for making sure that every bit of data relating to the missions is undertaken, because that has to be the responsibility of the Secretary of State and the SRO in charge. We would not cut across those accountabilities.

Q397 **Peter Lamb:** Is the concern that there is no clarity in the Cabinet Office over what statistics are being used to evaluate the mission-led government that they have been tasked with delivering?

Catherine Little: No, because the plan for change specifically sets out the data and performance trajectories that are being used to assess the missions. I do not know the details off the top of my head, but not every single one of those datasets will be statistics.

Q398 **Peter Lamb:** In which case, given that there is apparently a list of data that would be used to evaluate mission-led government, are you content that the ONS in this case is not required, or is capable of delivering within the spending allocated, those statistics accurately and independently in order to inform mission-led government?

Catherine Little: As I say, not all those datasets—I would need to go and check the detail—will be statistics. In the Cabinet Office, we oversee the plan for change, the stocktakes that are undertaken to track performance, and data monitoring. It is up to the Departments responsible to make sure that they have the combination of data, statistics and performance information, and if they had any concerns about the ONS producing the information they need, they would work directly with the ONS.

Q399 **Peter Lamb:** It is increasingly opaque as to how this is operating. I believe a separate piece of research was taking place on mission-led government, or have we concluded that already?

Chair: I was feeling quite nostalgic at the reference to mission-led government. I have not heard that for several months. I thought I had gone to the funeral of mission-led government, but perhaps I am mistaken.

Catherine Little: There was no intention to be opaque. I am really keen to get to the bottom of your question and to help.

Q400 **Peter Lamb:** I guess the question we are more minded to ask at this point is: how on earth is mission-led government operating in practice? Or, as the Chair suggested, has it been put to bed?

Josh Simons: On another occasion, I am very happy to have a longer chat about mission-led government and the Cabinet Office's role in it if you would like to do that, but that is not what we are here primarily to discuss. Of course, I am happy to talk to you about it as best I can, but



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there are two separate questions. One is about how mission-led government works and the Cabinet Office's role in it, and the other is a question about the ONS and its core statistics.

Chair: Mr Lamb and Mr Taylor have been ploughing a particularly fertile furrow. Correct me if my understanding of recent political history is incorrect, but No. 10 has charged the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and now prime ministerial—

Josh Simons: Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister.

Q401 **Chair:** Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister—that makes him sound like the head typist, but we will leave that there. No. 10 charged the Cabinet Office as an institution to be the ringmaster for the delivery of a new type of government, which is cross-cutting, non-siloed and “Blow the bloody doors off” if necessary to deliver change, rather than the old system. Secretaries of State have been charged with cracking on. We explored with the then CDL, Pat McFadden—I think with you, too, Cat—some of the sensitivities around the big bossy Cabinet Office demanding progress reports from other permanent secretaries and Secretaries of State, as well as giving a bit of a kick, a wiggle of the reins if necessary and a use of the spurs. That was work in progress; it would be done nicely, properly and professionally, but it would be done—the Cabinet Office saw that as its role.

Both Mr Taylor and Mr Lamb are absolutely right, however. With everyone going off to commission willy-nilly statistics, research, data gathering and so on, without anyone taking the strategic umbrella view, how does that add to the overarching strategy? It compounds the problem that Ian Diamond referenced to us, which is that too many people were picking up the phone to the ONS to ask, “Can you do us a bit of research on this?”, “We need some data on that”, or, “Can you tell us what the statistical analysis is for this, that and the other?” They often ended up chasing their tail and never feeling empowered to be able to say, “No. Our budget will not allow us to do that, unless you are prepared to pay us.” Then it comes down to a question of resource.

Whether the answers hitherto have been opaque or confusing, I am left with the impression that HMG have not quite got to grips with how they, in real time and real terms, deliver mission-led government? I know we are creeping into a broader topic. It seems to me that you are trying to deliver a new way of government but are constrained by the old model. Is that a fair assessment, Mr Taylor and Mr Lamb?

Luke Taylor: It is. There is a nice segue into our next question, so maybe we can ask that and potentially revisit this.

Chair: Unless Ms Little wants to come in.

Catherine Little: If your question is getting at what the Cabinet Office's role is in ensuring that we have the right performance data and potentially the statistics to ensure that we are delivering the missions, we have a dedicated No. 10 data science team, and that is all they do. They are



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responsible for making sure that the data, statistics and information that we need are cohered in live data dashboards so that we can monitor missions and the plan for change. That is done in partnership with Departments. Quite a lot of the information we use is not statistics; it is performance data. Small boat crossings on a daily basis—that is live data dashboard information overseen by No. 10 data scientists, which are part of our delivery unit. It depends on the question you are asking.

Q402 Peter Lamb: I think we are very close to the answer. You do not feel that there is any risk that the ONS cannot contribute to that information as you need it on its current budget?

Catherine Little: No. I have no concerns about its ability to provide the information as a sub dataset to the way in which we oversee the plan for change or the missions.

Q403 Chair: But Sir Ian did, and Sir Ian is wrong?

Catherine Little: All I would say is that I have live information now about the budgets we have. We are in the middle of business planning processes, and my teams are working to update our data on a regular basis. I cannot comment on the basis of why Sir Ian has made that comment; all I know is my teams, and from what I know and my responsibilities, I can give you that assurance.

Q404 Luke Taylor: I will keep on this for now—apologies. Have you replaced data that would potentially have been provided independently by the ONS with internal data that is not independent—that is written by the Cabinet Office or spads?

Catherine Little: I am not aware of any statistics that have stopped being a statistic and that we have changed into internal Government data, but I can go away and check. I should say that I am having a dialogue about some of my own Cabinet Office statistics, because we have tended to ask the ONS to do quite a lot of statistical work for us, which I am not sure is entirely needed. Those debates are ongoing. That is an important part of helping prioritise its work. If we are asking the ONS to do things that are not a priority and are consuming its resources, I want to have that conversation with the permanent secretary of the ONS, as a customer. That is not in my responsibilities as his line manager.

Q405 Luke Taylor: We have heard that the Cabinet Office has been instrumental in the senior appointments of the ONS. We heard in previous sessions that the Cabinet Office is also rewriting ONS's responses to parliamentary questions—I reference here when an MP recently sought figures from the ONS on public sector headcount, and the Cabinet Office discarded the analysis prepared by the ONS and instead drafted its own. In response to a follow-up PQ, Cabinet Office Ministers did not deny the involvement of special advisers. The incident suggested that Cabinet Office officials may not understand their role in facilitating access to impartial statistics for Parliament.

Elsewhere, as we have outlined, the Treasury is defining what statistics the Government should and should not have, and the Cabinet Office is not



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necessarily requiring statistics for the mission-led Government to be independent, as we have just heard. Summing up the last 10 or 15 minutes, do you agree that the independence of the UKSA is now a façade, and that ministerial Departments are now running the national statistics institute?

Josh Simons: No. On the specific issue about written parliamentary questions, the Cabinet Office does not interfere with data provided by the ONS. It is absolutely central that any data production is not interfered with by the Cabinet Office in any circumstance. Responding to parliamentary questions, as you know, is my job; it is a matter for Ministers, and it is their sovereign responsibility to make sure that they do so to Parliament. Where there is a framing issue about a particular dataset and what it means and how to understand it, the Cabinet Office can add additional context to it in its response to a parliamentary question, but the dataset itself is absolutely not interfered with by the Cabinet Office. It must not be. It is the Minister's job to respond to those parliamentary questions.

Q406 **Chair:** So it is obliged to only use the data provided by the ONS?

Josh Simons: The Minister could request data that they deem to be a legitimate answer to the parliamentary question from anywhere. That is up to the Minister to decide.

Q407 **Luke Taylor:** Can I phrase the question differently, to be clear? If a Member of Parliament asks the Minister for the Cabinet Office what estimate the Office for National Statistics has, do you think that the Cabinet Office should tell that Member of Parliament what estimate the office for National Statistics has?

Josh Simons: I would have to see the full written question.

Q408 **Chair:** It makes no difference what the question is. The principle is about what estimate the ONS has. It is not asking anything else. It does not really matter what the meat of the question is; it is about the basis on which that meat is sourced.

Josh Simons: I think I have been clear about the principle; Ministers account to Parliament for responses to Ministerial questions. It is their job to decide what is and is not included in a response. If the Cabinet Office, in addition to some data provided by the ONS, thinks it appropriate and advises the Minister to include a framing for the data, the Minister decides whether to do that. It is their job to make that decision and to account for that decision to Parliament.

Q409 **Chair:** That is a very novel way of answering a parliamentary question. What you have just told the Committee is, in terms, that if a Member of Parliament asks a legitimate question deemed to be within order by the Table Office for estimated statistics, about whatever it may happen to be, in the mind of the ONS at the current time, the expectation of the questioner is that the data that he or she receives is the estimate of the ONS.

Yet your reply to Mr Taylor seemed to suggest this—forgive me if I have



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misheard or misinterpreted, and you must correct me very clearly if either is the case. "The first draft, Minister, gave the figures from the ONS. They may be politically embarrassing. They may not be conducive. They may provide ammunition to a Member from a differing political party to that of the Government. We do not quite like the ONS data on that, but we've got some more here produced by Government Friendly Data Services Ltd, which give a much rosier glow to answer the question."

It must be a legitimate expectation that if one asks a question of the Department for Education, you get an answer from the Department for Education. That applies right the way through all the Departments. If the only way you can get an answer from the ONS is to go through the Cabinet Office Minister, it is surely not for the Minister to redirect the questioner to a data source other than that from which they requested the answer.

Josh Simons: If I inadvertently implied the horrific scenario you have just outlined, it is definitely not what I meant at all.

Q410 **Chair:** It is what you said.

Josh Simons: It was certainly not what I intended to say—if it is, as you say, what I said. When a Minister receives a written parliamentary question that specifically refers to such data, it absolutely should be the expectation that they would provide that data.

Q411 **Chair:** From the ONS?

Josh Simons: Yes, if that is what the written question asked for. If the Minister judges that further context in addition to that data is helpful, they should be well within their rights to provide that. Of course, they should provide the data that they have been asked for.

Q412 **Chair:** Prosecuting counsel would say that you answer the question that you are asked and you do not give other information. If a Minister of the Crown is asked for data that has all the imprimatur of the ONS attached to it, the questioner is not asking the Minister for alternative data. If they want alternative data, they need to get off their backside and go and find it themselves. Otherwise, in essence, although I am not suggesting that the written answer would say this, it would be: "That is a frightfully interesting question. Here is a bit of an answer to it from the ONS, but you might find this even more helpful," or, "Really, you should have been asking me this, because this is far more interesting, and so I will provide you with that piece of evidential data." That is not the job of the Minister. The Minister's job is to answer the question asked.

Josh Simons: You seem to have driven again at alternative statistics, which is not a phrase I have used, and it is certainly not what I think Ministers should be doing. They should provide the statistics that have been asked for and, as I have said a few times, if they judge that additional context about what those statistics mean is useful, they should provide that.

Q413 **Chair:** But asked for from the source?

Josh Simons: Sorry; what is the question?

Chair: There could be data that answers the questioner's question from the ONS, which may not be politically helpful at the current time to the then Government, irrespective of who is in Government; and there may be another interpretation of the data provided by another data-gathering group, which is. It answers the question, but it answers the question with data garnered from an alternative source to the one that the questioner requested when they asked, "What is the estimate of the ONS?"

If the question is, "Could the Minister please provide me with the full range of statistical analysis on this issue from a variety of sources?" the Minister is, of course, at absolute liberty to respond with as many data sources as possible to answer the question as fulsomely as he or she can. That is the point that we are trying to get at as a Committee.

Josh Simons: If I have not been clear enough on that point, Chair, let me be very clear. I thought I said this five minutes ago: if the question mentions the source of the data that they are requesting—in this case, the ONS—the Minister would be expected to reply with data from that source. If the Minister then judged that further context was helpful to understand what that source and data means, they can provide that in addition to data from the source that answers the WPQ.

Catherine Little: Chair, Mr Taylor seemed to be referring to a very specific question, and I have not seen the detail behind it. I would be very happy, offline, to provide you with more information about it. We would take it very seriously if there was any interpretation of ONS information, or if that was not represented. There is a theoretical question, but there is a very practical piece of evidence that you have information on that I do not. It would be really good if we could share that information offline, so I can give the Committee and Parliament the assurances that it needs.

Q414 **Chair:** That would be helpful. We have had it drawn to our attention that the Cabinet Office has been changing the commentary that sits alongside the data to something other than that provided by the source of the data—their figures, your words.

Catherine Little: As the Minister said, it is entirely up to the Minister answering the question to provide the narrative and the political context that they see fit in answering the question. As I said to you earlier, I am not aware of any evidence of the Cabinet Office changing data. That would be a very serious issue for us to investigate. Obviously, it is up to the Minister as to how they provide the context in commentary to ONS data, and we would always talk to the ONS to make sure that the context was clear.

Q415 **Chair:** But if it is editorialising commentary provided by the ONS—setting aside motive for a moment—that strikes at the reliability that stakeholders and Parliament can put on the ONS, does it not? It seems to me that the Government have taken upon themselves the power to change the commentary or the interpretation in a way different from that provided by



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the ONS. It may well be that this is a resolvable issue and parliamentarians could table parliamentary questions directly to the ONS, bypassing the Cabinet Office as, in essence, the sponsoring Department. We are doing a piece of work on arm's length bodies and that may very well come up in that work. Questions are tabled in good faith.

Catherine Little: I come back to the point that if there is interpretation of data provided by the ONS, I am not aware of any instances in which we have changed the statistical interpretation. My Ministers will obviously want to make sure that the overall answer is in line with the good faith and intent of the person who asked the question, and it is entirely within their right to do so. I am sorry to be a bit theoretical about it. I would quite like to get into the detail, because the way in which our responsibilities operate in respect of Parliament is incredibly important, and I would be very concerned if there was any evidence of us changing the interpretation or ONS statistics.

Q416 **Chair:** We are advised that, traditionally and by convention, Ministers have agreed not to touch ONS PQs. Has that now changed?

Catherine Little: I am very sorry, but I am not aware of the convention. All I know is that my Ministers are responsible for answering parliamentary questions relating to national statistics, and it is up to their judgment as to how they do so.

Q417 **Chair:** We are aware of that, but given the legislatively underpinned independence of the ONS and the need for it to be able to restore, PDQ, its national and international reputation as a source of good-faith data, it does not help in that endeavour if there is a perception that there is departmental oversight, with the opportunity to change commentary and to tweak and edit text in answer to questions, does it? We know that there are lies, damned lies and statistics, but the statistics will speak for themselves. The ONS has always been allowed to provide those answers to parliamentarians perfectly properly, without any ministerial interference.

Catherine Little: I entirely agree.

Chair: But it seems that, between the two of you, you have set out a new modus operandi.

Catherine Little: I do not think that is the case. I entirely agree with everything you have just said, and it is something we take very, very seriously. If you have evidence, which we are not party to, that my Department or my Ministers have somehow interfered in national statistics, I would like to see that information so that I can properly answer your question.

Q418 **Chair:** It might be helpful if, in the first instance, you could do us a little billet doux on the processes by which a Member of Parliament's question, effectively using the Cabinet Office as the holding office for a question to the ONS, goes through. I say this as somebody who briefly served as a Minister, and the one thing I could never quite get my head around was



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how the Government, per se, have allowed the influence of special advisers to so shape answers to parliamentary questions. They have become, successively, too party politicised, and it has never been helpful.

Catherine Little: I would be very happy to set that out and to discuss the specific incident that you are referring to. I think that would be helpful for both parties.

Chair: Has anybody any further questions?

Q419 **Lauren Edwards:** We have spent quite a bit of time talking about whether the data-led approach to mission government can be delivered within the funding envelope. Something that has concerned me quite considerably about the ONS's recent performance is the deterioration in the labour market statistics, and certain institutions—the Bank of England, the Treasury and others—feeling that they cannot necessarily rely on them. Can you confirm that the remedy to that issue, and to the reputational damage that has been done to the ONS, will be able to be fixed within the funding envelope?

Josh Simons: Yes, that is my primary concern too. One of the thoughts I had when Peter was asking questions about the broader issue was that the labour market survey is fundamental to so many users—the Treasury, but a bunch of others too—so it is utterly vital for our country that it is improved and that they have the assurances that it is what it needs to be. I have asked the permanent secretary directly whether he has what he needs in order to do that, and I have asked the acting national statistician the same question, and both have assured me that the answer is yes.

Chair: Anybody else? Mr Campbell-Savours, you look like you are cogitating a question.

Markus Campbell-Savours: I will be honest: in the exchange on questions, I felt like what I heard from the Minister was not quite what was reflected in the narrative. I wonder if I could ask him one more question, just to clarify.

Chair: The floor is yours.

Q420 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** There was a suggestion that the approach to answering questions might be that the statistics are applied and a narrative, chosen by the Minister answering the question, is provided alongside them. I am not sure that that necessarily means that the narrative would be counter or contradictory to the ONS narrative. Could you clarify whether you were describing in any way something that would add a political narrative that was counter to the ONS's own presentation of the statistics?

Josh Simons: If I gave that impression, then I was not speaking accurately. Narrative is not a word I would use to describe what Ministers can add to written parliamentary questions. The fundamental point—I have said it, but I will underscore it—is that if a written parliamentary question requests ONS data, then the answer to that written parliamentary question should provide ONS data.



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Markus Campbell-Savours: Thank you for that. I admire and fully support your determination to see parliamentary questions of the highest quality. I just felt that perhaps we had been slightly unfair in that last exchange.

Chair: I will not press that motion to a Division. Sometimes we have to ask things in a clear way to cut through some of the stuff.

Markus Campbell-Savours: Indeed.

Chair: I certainly did not intend to impugn the Minister's personal integrity, and I hope he did not take it in that way.

Josh Simons: I have had far worse, Chair, so not to worry about it.

Chair: I am sorry to hear that—from your point of view rather than mine.

Thank you both for taking our questions. I hope the length of this meeting and the in-depth nature of the questions reflects back to you and to the wider Cabinet Office the seriousness with which this Committee has undertaken this piece of work, which we had not intended to be undertaking but obviously felt that we needed to do. I hope it goes without saying that we stand four-square to support—and critique and scrutinise as and when appropriate—moving these things forward in order to get them right as speedily as possible, because the alternative is not a scenario any of us wants to be looking at a year down the line. Thank you both very much indeed.