

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Governance of Statistics, HC 1820

Tuesday 5 March 2019

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Members present: Sir Bernard Jenkin (Chair); Ronnie Cowan; Kelvin Hopkins; Dr Rupa Huq; Mr David Jones.

Questions 139 - 227

Witnesses

I: Paul Allin, Chair, Statistics Users Forum, Mike Hughes, formerly Director of Policy, Office for National Statistics, and Will Moy, Director, Full Fact.

II: Professor John Salt, Migration Unit, University College London, and Matt Leach, Chief Executive, Local Trust.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Paul Allin, Mike Hughes and Will Moy.

Q139 **Chair:** Welcome to this session on the UK Statistics Authority and welcome to the first panel. I would ask you each to identify yourselves for the record.

Mike Hughes: Mike Hughes, former Director of Policy for the Office for National Statistics and latterly head of the National Statistics Advisory Group at the RSS.

Paul Allin: Good morning, I am Paul Allin. I chair the Statistics User Forum and I am a visiting professor in statistics at Imperial College London. I retired seven years ago from a career in the Government Statistical Service.

Will Moy: I am Will Moy, I am the Director of Full Fact, the independent fact checking charity, and I have also been asked in that capacity a couple of years ago to review the communications function of the Office for National Statistics.

Q140 **Chair:** Thank you all very much. We have lots of questions. We will be as quick as we can in our questions. If you could be crisp in your answers,



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and as clear and as direct as you would like.

I will ask an opening question. You are all representing users in different formats for different forums. How well do you feel that official statistics actually meet the needs of users and the needs of user groups who you represent?

Paul Allin: These are the kinds of views of the Statistics User Forum. We are passionate about the value of official statistics to society, so you are getting a slightly biased view. We recognise many strengths in the official UK statistics system. There is a range of releases. Thirteen releases came out at 9.30 this morning—3,600 over the last year—so there is lots of data. There is strong methodology. There are pockets of good practice and user engagement but—there is a “but” coming—there is a real need to improve overall the use and usefulness of official statistics. Our evidence majors on that.

It is not the first time we have said that and that is why we are calling for a fresh focus on the use. The paper that we put in has that title. One of the key issues is around balancing Government policy needs and wider user needs. We put in some case studies for you to consider and we are happy to talk about them. They really show how usefulness could be improved. One of the key issues is around the balance between meeting Government needs and those of wider users. There is evidence that the statistics meet a specific user need, and that is invariably a specific policy need. They could also be used to support a better understanding of this topic in public discourse more generally, and that does not seem to be happening so much, so the use and usefulness can be improved in ways that I hope we can discuss as we go through this morning.

Q141 **Chair:** A very good general explanation. Thank you. Before I go to the other witnesses on this, can you give a couple of examples of what makes you frustrated?

Paul Allin: Sure. Let’s take an example where things are now working well in terms of health and care. The frustration there was: why did it take so long for the UK Statistics Authority to get around and realise that things need to be done to look more generally at health and care? On education, the frustration there really is very much about what the Government think is important in terms of education. There is very little consideration given to wider considerations—a wider picture of education in this country.

Q142 **Chair:** That is very interesting because UKSA is meant to be independent, to be doing its own work and not working for the Government. We have a lot of questions about that relationship. How does that affect your relationship in education? How does that affect the education statistics?

Paul Allin: That relationship steers the fact that official statistics tend to be just those that come out of the Government processes in terms of the Government’s assessment of the education system. We have lots of



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statistics about education performance in state schools; we have very little about a broader picture of the education system.

Mike Hughes: If you look at the results of the vast number of assessments that were done, the recurring comment in virtually all of them was a lack of engagement or not sufficiently adequate engagement with users. There is a very strong evidence base there to illustrate that particular point.

Q143 **Chair:** Can you give an example of where that lack of engagement undermines public confidence in statistics?

Mike Hughes: There is a large series of connections before you get to trusting statistics. Clearly the user community—and I was part of the process of helping prepare that paper with Paul—is very frustrated at the lack of that opportunity. I do not think it changes the trust that has come about through the SRSA, which is another subject, but the business with the health statistics, for example, was largely because the RSS were knocking on the door and saying, “You have to do something about it”. It was not immediately obvious to the system that there was a problem.

There are pockets, and it would be wrong to damn it in entirety. There are some excellent examples of good user practice and good consultation but there is a cultural problem there as well. I have managed three big statistic divisions in my career: in housing, in transport back in the old employment days. Culturally, some statisticians think their job finishes when they produce the numbers and that is part of the process. It was a continuing battle for me, as the Chief Statistician, to get them to think beyond that and the use of that data.

Q144 **Chair:** When we use the word “culture” it tends to reflect attitude. What is the attitude that needs to be encouraged?

Mike Hughes: To be more outward focused; to think about the use that those statistics are being put to and the purposes that they are there for. I just think that they have been doing it this way for a number of years and they carry on doing it that way. We are moving into an area now that is so dynamic, so fast-moving that engagement with users must be your top priority to make sure that what you are doing is still relevant and appropriate.

Will Moy: Nobody knows how well statistics are serving users and we do not know for two reasons. First, there is no mechanism for finding out in any systematic way and the second is that there is no agreement on what is meant by users. It is interesting that the Committee has chosen to have this panel. If you take the Statistics Authority’s strategy of better statistics and better decisions seriously, you might argue that what you should have in here is the Prime Minister, the First Minister of Scotland and a few other senior Government Ministers or representatives, followed by senior business people and so on.



If users are decision makers, there seems to be a very limited means of finding out how well they are served than just to talk to your colleagues and find out how well informed you feel about the issues you have to make decisions on, and how well you think those frustrations are fed back into what is produced and given to you and how it is given to you.

That mechanism does not really exist. The first question is: who are our users? In the Statistics Authority's own evidence to you I thought there was an interesting line in its work on health statistics, which has been valuable. It noted that, "Health statisticians often focus on servicing their immediate policy and operational users, and only within the NHS, with insufficient effort devoted to working collaboratively to address the important issues of coherent and accessible statistics to support public understanding and accountability—statisticians appear to be tentative about engaging with a broader user community". That seems to me a fair summary of how statisticians engage with the wider world generally. It is unsystematic. It is restricted to a relatively narrow group of what you might call consumer statistics: people who use spreadsheets for a living rather than the ultimate decision makers.

In a democracy, when we are talking about decision making, the apex predator is the public. That is what Full Fact is all about. It is about giving information to the public and other decision makers.

In terms of engaging with public debate and public awareness that is an area where the Authority has been largely absent, and that is deeply regrettable. There has been far too little focus on understanding the impacts statistics have on public debate and how that can be improved. This needs to be done with a rigorous evidence base. Therefore, two of the changes I would like to see straight away are a serious commitment to research into how statistics are understood and used, both by decision makers in Government and by the public as democratic decision makers, and by other decision makers that there should be a decision as to who is cared about. Secondly, there needs to be a process of looking forward to the future needs of people who need to make decisions with statistics.

Rather than asking people now, "What is it you need?", the Office for National Statistics and the GSS need to recognise that they are the experts in what statistics will be capable of doing in five years' time, which is radically different to what is currently available. They need to understand what decisions they need to be trying to inform in a world where we are not just relying on survey data—for example, to find out how people travel—we are relying on mobile phone data, which is individual level to the meter, to the transaction, to the place.

The world is changing fast. It is not enough simply to ask people and it is not enough simply to ask people who are consuming the data directly. It is ultimately about what effect this is having on the world.

Q145 **Chair:** If I could ask a general question, which may be a little bit pointed: when people refer to the UK Statistics Authority, what do you think they



are referring to? Is it the producers of statistics or the regulators of statistics?

Paul Allin: I would say very clearly that users just tend to see the UK official statistics system. They do not share Richard Alldritt's precise understanding of the phrase "UK Statistics Authority", what that means and what that means in different ways. The main contacts we have as users and user groups are with parts of the ONS or parts of the GSS. We also have some involvement with the Office for Statistics Regulation, which is part of the UKSA formally. In a sense, to ask the question about the UKSA is a question that users find very difficult to answer. They just tend to ignore it and move on.

Will Moy: Only about two-thirds of people have heard of the Office for National Statistics so, from the public's point of view, the only one to worry about is the ONS. Everything else is administrative details that can be worried about by people like us but it does not have a public profile.

Mike Hughes: I agree with what has been said. Fundamentally, people will be thinking in terms of ONS rather than the Board. We are going into a different area now altogether. We are talking about the reason for the legislation in the first place and the construction that followed from it. UKSA is a combination of two separate entities. It is the production function of ONS and its wider responsibilities for the GSS. On the one hand the producer function and the regulation or what was originally the assessment function at the beginning, and people tend to think in terms of the producer side much more than the regulation or assessment side when they are talking about the uses of statistics.

Q146 **Chair:** What is the consequence of this lack of interest or confusion for users?

Paul Allin: I am not quite sure, Chairman, that it is either of those things. I think it is that it is not particularly relevant. It is closer to the lack of interest but what users want are the data, the statistics, and they want some reassurance about the quality of those statistics. They want to be able to find them and do basic things like that.

At this stage we are not clear that the Authority helps in any way with that, to be frank. Where it could help is what Will has already started to mention, which is about thinking ahead: what if there were to be a more strategic plan and we could think that there was this body called the Authority that was going to come in and consult with users and engage with users on it. Then I think we would have more focus about what the role of UKSA is.

Q147 **Mr David Jones:** Continuing very much with that theme, as you know the Statistics Act imposes a statutory duty upon UKSA to safeguard the quality of statistics, including—and I am quoting—"The impartiality, accuracy, relevance and coherence with other statistics". To what extent would you say that UKSA is fulfilling its statutory duty in that regard and



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to what extent would you say that statistics fulfil those criteria? By all means use examples if you wish.

Mike Hughes: I think the assessment process is directed specifically at those objectives. The assessment process is predicated on the code of practice and all of those different aspects are considered as part of that process. In terms of the criteria or the principles that are in the code of practice, it does exercise those quite well. Where it does not go far enough, and why some of the problems have occurred in recent years, is that the whole area of quality is not addressed sufficiently adequately. There is not that depth of going into the methodology and the accuracy of those statistics. What it is looking at are the principles of user engagement, timeliness, all of what I would call the softer quality measures—they are quality measures—and so on, but quality in terms of accuracy is not there. You only have to look at the situation where most of the removal of the designations has occurred with statistics that had already passed the initial assessment. In terms of the main objectives, it does fulfil that well.

Q148 **Mr David Jones:** Would you say that it fulfils those objectives in terms of the relevance criteria and also the coherence with other statistics?

Mike Hughes: That goes back to the point I was making earlier: the one area where the assessment processes have continually identified that the producers are not performing to the full effectiveness is in the engagement with users. That is where relevance should be questioned at times. It is quite remarkable the consistency on which that appears in these assessment reports.

Q149 **Mr David Jones:** Can you give examples?

Mike Hughes: I would quite happily take it away and write to the Committee.

Mr David Jones: Perhaps you can write to us. That would be very useful.

Mike Hughes: Yes. There are 350 of them, Mr Jones, so I could not remember each one.

Q150 **Mr David Jones:** By all means, do write to us. Mr Allin?

Paul Allin: I was just seeing if we had given any examples in our evidence. I think I quoted one a bit earlier: "Evidence that the statistics meet a specific user need, however they could also be used to support a better understanding of this topic." That is the kind of quote that Mike was talking about.

Just to echo what Mike was saying, all the standards of quality are addressed but they are not addressed in an even sort of way. The starting point seems to be: let's look at the statistical quality, the robustness, the reliability of the statistics we are producing. That is important, but it is also important that those statistics meet a need and



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that they are relevant and they cohere. It is just getting that balance, which is not quite what was there.

Will Moy: We generally trust official statistics to be produced impartially and that is very important. That reflects not only on the governance system but the integrity of official statisticians, on which we do rely. We also trust them to be statistically robust most of the time and there are others far better qualified to comment on the robustness of particular statistics.

In terms of relevance and coherence, that is another story. Also, in terms of accuracy in a broader sense, which is telling us what is going on in the real world, there is a question as to how often gaps open up between robust data and an understanding of the world as it really is. One of the areas where that is politically potent at the moment—and people on different sides of the House will see this issue from different sides—is employment statistics.

The Labour Force Survey is recognised as a robust source of employment data but we also know that the labour force has undergone a lot of change in the last 10 years, in terms of things like part-time working, in terms of relatively insecure work and very high levels of employment. There is a question about whether simply measuring employment in the traditional Labour Force Survey sense is telling you enough about the nature of work to inform the kinds of decisions that you will have to make. As Mike suggested, there is an emphasis on producing certain kinds of statistics. There is not enough thought going into whether this is telling us enough about the real world as opposed to what the right outcomes of that survey should be to really inform the debate.

We find whenever we quote official statistics on employment we get a lot of push back and people saying, “Well, what about part-time work?” “What about zero-hour contracts?” Frankly, I think the Office for National Statistics ought to be doing much more to justify that its statistics relate to the real world.

That takes us neatly on to the point of relevance. They are overlapping points. If we look at relevance in the broader sense of, “What is the total set of things we need to know about the world in order to run our democracy?”—or run our businesses, or whatever it is we might want to do—why on earth would we think that the set of statistics we currently have is the right answer to that problem?

There has been no attempt to ask that fundamental question, “What is it that we need to know?” except for a project that was initiated by Full Fact—which we were delighted that the Statistics Authority, the House of Commons Library and the Economic and Social Research Council joined in on—called the Need to Know project. That did ask the question of: what are the major decisions that we as a country will make over the next five years? Do we have the data we need? Do we have the analysis we need? Has it been effectively communicated?



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Unfortunately that project got run over by the 2017 general election and we could no longer resource it, but that set of questions remains valid and there needs to be an institutional way of answering it. It probably extends beyond the Statistics Authority as a set of questions. This Committee is in a unique position to promote that question of what do we as a country need to know, and to rally the set of public bodies that we are lucky to have to provide more relevant and more coherent answers.

The last point I want to make on this is recognising that I am perhaps the only witness you will have who is a digital native. Full Fact works online. That is our world. You are all well aware from the Committee's previous work that the ONS website was formerly labelled as a national disgrace, quite fairly. It has really grown into something that is on its way to becoming world class, but if it stops where it is now it will go back to being a national disgrace remarkably quickly. This is a hugely fast moving area.

We are lucky that the people behind the ONS website have been robust and careful in their thinking about how to build based on open data standards, on integrating data into the web in a really thoughtful way that has allowed the building of a foundation on which genuinely world-class communication, presentation and sharing of statistics and use of statistics can be made possible. That is only going to be delivered and deliver for the country if that work continues, if it accelerates and if it focuses on how we can link data between different places. Coherence in the digital age means something much more ambitious than it did even 10 years ago.

Q151 **Chair:** They will very much appreciate that praise and encouragement.

Will Moy: They have earned it, and it is a relatively small team as well of exceptional people who really deserve our support.

Q152 **Dr Rupa Huq:** It is good to hear about accuracy in the age of fake news and before that, "Lies, damn lies and statistics". Just a quickie for you, Will Moy: wasn't there some controversy about your funding because you were acting for Facebook?

Will Moy: The controversy, I guess, is up to you. Essentially, Full Fact has always been funded by charitable donations, largely by charitable trusts. Until very recently the Nuffield Foundation that funds social science research was our biggest funder. In January we announced a project with Facebook, where it came to us and asked us to become a third party fact checking content on Facebook, which it refers to us as it thought it potentially might be false.

Q153 **Dr Rupa Huq:** That will not compromise your service? I think the accusation was—

Will Moy: That is obviously the question. The way that we have tried to protect our independence is that every three months we will be reporting publicly on how that programme is working.



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For Facebook to work with us, it went through six months of conversations with us agreeing the safeguards that we required. That was vetted by our cross-party board of trustees, who have been discussing this issue for over a year. We have these safeguards, including public reporting on how that programme is working. You will hear us reporting very publicly and very robustly on whether we think Facebook is doing enough and what more we think it needs to be doing. We will be saying it needs to do more than it currently is, as we have always said publicly.

All of our funding is declared on our website. You can see it and you can make your own mind up about it. I don't think you will have questions once you hear what we say after our first three-monthly report.

Q154 **Dr Rupa Huq:** The original founder is not exactly—

Will Moy: Full Fact is founded by a cross-party board of trustees. I know because I have been involved from the beginning. That cross-party board included Michael Samuel, our chairman, who is a Conservative Party donor. It included Peter Archer, Lord Archer—now sadly deceased—who was a former Labour Solicitor General, and it included Julia Neuberger, Baroness Neuberger, Britain's second ever female rabbi, who was at the time a Liberal Democrat Member of the House of Lords. We have always had a cross-party board of trustees. We have always had a range of funding. The two original funders were Michael Samuel, the Conservative Party donor, and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, which will be seen by a lot of people as left-leaning.

There is no such thing as neutral money, so we have always had to show that range of both trustees and governance and of funding to demonstrate our independence. Ultimately, you can listen to me and make your own mind up. You are the Committee; you are the ones with the power in this situation.

Q155 **Dr Rupa Huq:** I want to take a step back and ask the three of you: would you say that official statistics that are out there are easy to find and use for the user community? Are they a bit opaque?

Paul Allin: There is certainly more that could be done. If you know your way around the system then it generally works. I am a great fan of the release calendar, so you can look at the statistics that are due to be published. Their release dates are preannounced. That is why I knew there were 13 coming out this morning. I have not actually checked they are all published but I am entirely sure that they would have been. A slight quibble: there are two versions of the release calendar. The ONS has its own and the whole of the official statistics output also goes on to gov.uk. There are just occasionally little differences between ONS entries in both cases.

If you know that a release is coming and you want to find some statistics, that is a good starting point. Will has already talked about those people who find their way directly to the ONS website and how that has greatly



improved. There have been a number of attempts over the years to have a more user-friendly portal or front entrance or way of starting off a journey around official statistics. They have tended to fall away because there is so much. It is such an extensive system. For people who do not know official statistics then there is a real job to be done. I was very interested in one of your questions about statistical literacy. To my mind that is about thinking about where there might be some information that could be useful to the topic that I am interested in.

There is clearly lots more that could be done at various levels. For those who are already into the system then they are generally accessible. There will be lots of individual examples where this does not work, where people get so far and they find that something is not available or the data behind the statistics are not immediately downloadable or available. It is far from perfect, but for those who are—I hesitate to call them expert users—familiar users. then you can continue to find your way around the system. For others it is more of a challenge.

Mike Hughes: I am not a major user these days. Most of my time I spend abroad with consultancy work, but what Will said about the website itself is a great encouragement after the very poor state of affairs. When I went into ONS it was third on the Government list at the time. When I left ONS it was 73rd or something like that. It was that bad, so to see those improvements.

Just stepping beyond that, one of the big problems when anything goes online is you lose out a lot of the colour that you get with commentary and so on that was available in some of our previous publications. I am thinking in particular of things like social trends, which I know you mentioned two weeks ago, and something like that. I know that John Pullinger is very keen to try to get back on to the website and so on. That is something you can address with him. That helps newcomers and people like that much better than just stark press releases with a limited commentary.

That is the other thing, going back to the point earlier about: where does the work stop? Statisticians have a big job in explaining the numbers. That is very often where things fall down. That is the missing part of this process. I have spent my entire career in policy departments, so my definition of a statistician is actually using the numbers to engage in the policy development and so on. That is my experience. That has been a downfall or a problem that you get when you go online, but simply for the economies that had to be made we dropped most of our publications in that period. As a board member, we sat through several meetings gnashing our teeth about dropping things but that was the only way forward.

Will Moy: I would just echo that. The statisticians spend too long explaining what is happening to the numbers when they should be explaining what is going on in the real world and why, using the



numbers. The Statistics Authority needs to give a very clear steer to the whole of the Government Statistical Service saying that that is the expectation. We gather these numbers to explain what is going on in the real world and why, not just to understand what is happening with the numbers.

I would also like to raise a question back to you. You are a Member of Parliament and you have very important responsibilities. If you pick the 10 topics you care most about, do you feel you have the information you need that would inform those decisions, and are those given to you in a way that you find useful and easy to access, or are you reliant on your staff doing a lot of work to convert it into a form that is useful or is the information you need simply not there? My guess is that that will expose a lot of needs. We should be talking about users as decision makers. You are some of the most important decision makers in the country, so the question does come back to you: do you feel well served?

Q156 Dr Rupa Huq: It is the first I have heard of the release calendar, for example. That is something I will now inform myself of more and I do not know if the general public know. I was a social scientist before and worked with statistics.

Mike Hughes: When we set up the new arrangement, the first thing that Michael Scholar insisted on was that we put all of the Government statistics in one place, so an uneducated user could just go to this and put in whatever it was—fire statistics or whatever—and you would get in and know where they were and when they were coming out. It has gone through several iterations. It is interesting to hear Paul say that ONS is running its own separately from the GSS one, but it is intended to be all-embracing.

Q157 Dr Rupa Huq: Yes. It should be more known about, I guess.

Will Moy: It should be more known about, but you as a Member of Parliament should not have to navigate official statistics based on what day they come out. You should be able to say, "This is the issue I care about. What is the total set of what we as a country know about this and can somebody explain it to me, preferably in less than five minutes because I am a busy person?"

The release calendar is a good start in trying to bring some order to the 855 or so national statistics releases, but the next step has to be, "This is the place where I go to find out about this topic and collate that information in a useful way". We are a long way from that ambition being adequately met.

Q158 Dr Rupa Huq: I also want to ask if producers of statistics sufficiently describe them. I know you said that the commentary is missing and it is just bald figures now, but is there a cautionary note on the weaknesses of the data published and how they should or should not be used?



Paul Allin: I can answer in general terms. I wish I could give you lots of examples, but there are lots of examples where that sort of thing is not really available. Many years ago there was a wonderful paper series of volumes that looked through each area of statistics and went into some depth as to how statistics were compiled, their strengths and their weaknesses. We seem to have lost all that in the modern world. It is much more about getting the figures out and looking at them. There is very little guidance on how they should be used and how they should not be used.

Q159 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Even the methodology, the sample size and all that kind of stuff?

Mike Hughes: In a perfect world every set of statistics should have what they call metadata supporting it, which outlines how they are produced, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and how they can be used for some things and not others. That should be standard. That should be just a natural part of the process.

Paul Allin: It probably is there and it tends to be the factual stuff about the sample size or the source, administrative data. What is less obvious is how it should be used, what it actually means and what other statistics have some bearing on the same topic. Those are the kinds of things that are missing, in the main.

Will Moy: Those are the things that as fact checkers, you learn over time. Without that familiarity with the sources you can come a cropper very quickly. The challenge is for that information not just to exist in a 200-page PDF but to make it possible for a non-specialist user—like your researchers—to land there, very quickly get a sense of what people can and cannot do with those numbers and pick up from there.

The other thing I would add is that this is a 20th-century conversation, like so much of the evidence that has come to the Committee. The 21st-century conversation is that this needs to be machine-readable so that computers can reason about how to use the datasets. We have software, for example, that can listen to you talking in Parliament, automatically identify when you make a statistical claim such as, “The economy is growing”, automatically get the data from the Office for National Statistics and automatically work out whether the economy is growing or not. That falls flat if it turns out that one particular quarter of the GDP data is affected by a royal wedding or snow or something.

Q160 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Or stockpiling.

Will Moy: Or stockpiling or lots of other things. Unless you have both the numbers and the information you need to reuse the numbers, you need to be very careful about what you do with them and how. In the future, that information is going to need to be made machine-readable. One of the reasons I respect ONS Digital so much is that it has started thinking about these problems, but it needs to go much further up the food chain.



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Chair: We have got through three questions in more than half an hour. We are going to have to go much faster; short questions, short answers.

- Q161 **Dr Rupa Huq:** The 2007 Statistics Act requires UKSA to ensure that official statistics are comprehensive. Can you give examples of where the creation of UKSA has led to new statistics being produced that address gaps that were previously there in the data?

Paul Allin: Our evidence, Chair, is that there are huge numbers of such statistics. I was probably doing down what is there, but that is not how it comes across to use it.

Mike Hughes: One of the big developments in that period has been the whole area of wellbeing. There is a whole plethora now of different measures of wellbeing as an alternative to GDP. That is an area where Paul did an awful lot of work. It has not come out of the Act but it is a development. I do not think the Act, of itself, would create that kind of situation.

Will Moy: I cannot.

- Q162 **Dr Rupa Huq:** How active is UKSA in planning for future user demands or how to use new sources of data?

Will Moy: I think I have made my view on that clear.

Paul Allin: It could certainly be more active than it is at the moment.

Mike Hughes: They are doing an awful lot of good work now, in terms of alternative sources of data to the classical ones and the creation of the Data Campus and so on. The analysis techniques that that provides are a big improvement. Those are big ticks or big pluses for ONS in that sense, but that innovation has to continue. It cannot be just a one-shot device. We have to keep improving all the time. The big issue is getting that kind of mentality that comes from John Pullinger down into the troops, if I can use that expression.

Paul Allin: Maybe just a quick addition. One thing that the OSR has done with its refreshed code of practice is to try to invite other bodies beyond the strict definition of official statistics to sign up to that code of practice. That can only be a good thing from the point of view of users because many users do not recognise the strict barrier. Some statistics that were previously produced within the official statistics world are, for various reasons, now produced outside it but are still part of what users see as "official statistics".

- Q163 **Ronnie Cowan:** Let me pick up that last point, Mr Allin. How well do UKSA and other bodies responsible for official statistics engage with users of statistics and understand the needs of users, briefly?

Paul Allin: To briefly summarise the good in parts, there are strong messages given out at the top about the intention of putting users truly at the centre of the system. The refreshed code of practice has the



subtitle “Ensuring official statistics serve the public” and there are some helpful resources available on the website to support that, but there is probably a long way to go to put that into practice. You need to substantially improve the use and usefulness of official statistics.

Q164 Ronnie Cowan: How does UKSA know who their users are? Apart from putting it on a website—which is an easy cop-out—how do they ensure it is getting to the users who require this information and could benefit from it?

Paul Allin: To be fair, they do a number of outreach exercises. ONS has recently held a couple of events where it looked at areas, like data on children and young people, and tried to identify people who might be interested in that, bring them together in a room and have a session. It uses social media quite a lot to broadcast out—

Q165 Ronnie Cowan: Could you not disseminate that information through every school in the United Kingdom, to use the facts and figures?

Paul Allin: There are all sorts of things it could do, but unfortunately it does not tend to do that automatically.

Q166 Ronnie Cowan: Why is UKSA not thinking of that? It is one thing doing the research and putting the figures together. It is a completely different thing getting that into the hands of people who will benefit from having those statistics.

Paul Allin: Exactly.

Will Moy: We look forward to you asking it those questions.

Paul Allin: We think it needs some kind of strategy for approaching this and your suggestion could well be an important part of that.

Mike Hughes: Our point is basically that what is being done now in these particular areas is great but while UKSA is looking at, say, social care and young people and so on, it is not looking at other areas. This needs to be a continuum across the piece. It needs to have a strategy that is engaging users coherently and that is not the case at the moment. However, as I say, for the answer you will have to ask UKSA.

Will Moy: I would go a little further than that. Not only do you have to have a process of foresight about future needs, but you also have to have an evidence base for how these things are used in practice and how they can be presented in ways that can make them more useful to people. That process of foresight needs to include talking to people like yourselves and other senior decision makers in public life, not just talking to the kinds of people who sit as intermediaries to decision makers. That is important too but ultimately the question is whether you are getting what you need to do your jobs. That is a question for lots of other people in important roles.



It is reasonable to recognise that the Authority or its branches seem to be doing more of this than it has in the past. Work on the migration system statistics does seem to have had more of a programme of both explaining what the Authority is doing and talking to people about it, although I think it is probably true that that is still limited to a relatively small group of people. If you got, for example, the Home Secretary, the Shadow Home Secretary and the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee in here, I would be very interested in what they had to say about migration statistics.

The other thing that is important to say is that we spent so long talking about the system as it is and how to nudge it forward. When John Pullinger came in as National Statistician he said that radical change was needed and was coming. Radical change is still needed. The right question is not: how do we take what we have and make it slightly better? The right question is: what do we need now as a country? It probably is one of the biggest opportunities for public administration in the next 10 to 20 years to use data more effectively. We have seen data transforming every other part of our lives. We must assume that it will transform Government and make it possible to do things much more efficiently and much more effectively.

That process will involve important political choices about what data we collect, about whom and how that highlights or hides different problems and opportunities in society. We need to recognise how political the process of choosing what data we collect is and how we collect that data, and the need for those value judgments that are hidden behind the final statistics to be made more obvious and more open to scrutiny. This is a sensitive area. It is not a time for incremental change, it is a time for radical change, still, and it will continue to be a time for radical change for the next 10 to 20 years at least. I would like to see a statistical system that is built for continuing radical change because that is what we are going to have to live with.

Ronnie Cowan: Thank you very much.

Q167 **Kelvin Hopkins:** Does the UK Statistic Authority give sufficient attention to all types of users of statistics, for example those outside of Government? One that immediately comes to mind is journalists, who often have a literary turn of mind but may not necessarily be very numerate, and avoiding ambiguity, misinterpretation and sometimes mischief as well.

Paul Allin: I think you will find that official statisticians do spend quite a lot of time looking at particular groups of users that they have identified, and the journalists that they know have an interest in a topic are people who they would be talking to. The conversation has traditionally been, "These are the figures that have come out", in a briefing at 9.30 am or shortly afterwards on a new set of figures, but that hardly covers the full range of ways in which statistics are reported and covered in the media



and in social media. I am sure you are right that there is much more again that could be done to raise the level.

To be fair, it is not only the official statistics' role to do that. The RSS has a role to discuss society and has taken a number of initiatives to raise statistical literacy, including among journalists. There are a number of players here but I would not excuse the UK Stats Authority, the ONS and the rest of the GSS from doing more about improving it with journalists.

For all the other user groups, the same sort of thing applies. They broadly know that there are users in business. They broadly know that there are users in the third sector, in education and in academia, but the extent to which they get out there, meet those people, try to understand their needs and understand the ways in which they use statistics, is certainly quite lacking.

Q168 Kelvin Hopkins: Just in passing, my mind goes back to Claus Moser's report over 20 years ago when he found that more than 50% of the population are not basically numerate. He said that more than 50% of the population do not understand what "50%" means, for example.

The Bean review examined issues with economic statistics. Is a similar review needed for statistics in other areas, to be a bit more rigorous in other areas too?

Paul Allin: I am not aware that there is anything like the Bean review taking place in other ways but—as I think we have all tried to suggest—rather than picking off another area, it is much more about a process needed to identify the areas that are important and to address those.

Mike Hughes: One of the things that got lost in all the churn, when we were moving from the pre-SRA to the new world, was that we used to undertake in-depth quality reviews with external experts brought in to assist. That looked at everything. It looked at a topic from top to bottom, inside-out and backwards, and it was an opportunity to engage with users. It addresses many of the things the Committee's raising today, including what the users want, whether we have the methodology right and all of those things.

I said in my short note to the Committee that this is one of the things that they really ought to think about reinstating in ONS. I think it is an OSR function rather than an ONS function but it has to be done complementarily between the producers and the regulators to do those kinds of reviews.

Q169 Chair: Are you saying that less is happening as a result of the institutional structure we have created?

Mike Hughes: We had a programme, Mr Chairman, before the introduction of the SRA, of quality reviews. My directorate was responsible for undertaking them but we just ran out of resource when we were putting all our effort into setting up the new system and this



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thing fell by the wayside. There are probably about 25 or 30 quality reviews that were undertaken in that period.

Q170 **Chair:** How much is that a product of the public expenditure squeeze rather than a failure of the institutional structure?

Mike Hughes: Essentially, it was simply a resource issue at the time and it got lost in the noise with all the churn that took place. We were setting up this big entity, the UKSA with the ONS side and the regulation side. If you ask Ed Humpherson, when he comes in in a couple of weeks' time, he will probably say to you, "Yes, I agree. This is something that we should be doing".

Q171 **Chair:** It has been put to us that there was something more activist about the Statistics Commission because it was a separate body and tended to be more proactive than the OSR within UKSA.

Mike Hughes: It did some very good work. The only problem with the Statistics Commission was two things. First of all, it did not have any powers. That meant that whatever it did it did not go anywhere. Secondly, I am sad to say that at the outset there was a distinct personality gulf between the National Statistician and the Chair at the time, and so it never really worked. It was running its own agenda, which did not necessarily agree with ONS's at the time. I do not want to labour that one too much.

The Commission did a lot of good work of that sort and the expectation was that that kind of work could have been incorporated. The problem that Richard Alldritt faced was that he was tasked with reviewing 350 statistical series and that, for the first four or five years, took all their energy and all their resource. That was a commitment that they undertook.

Will Moy: Can I quickly respond on the UKSA point? The short version is it is not engaging with the full range of users. That is obvious. There is a comfort zone. The Authority's own evidence reflects that comfort zone. The place where we should be particularly worried about this is in the wider GSS and not just the ONS, because in Government Departments there is a very big incentive for the Department not to encourage statisticians to go out and find other people who might care about what is being collected, who might have desires that go beyond what Ministers want to know or want to be widely known. Thinking about user engagement as a means of ensuring independence within the GSS is probably important.

Q172 **Kelvin Hopkins:** Some Governments have been mischievous in the use of statistics. It is very important to avoid that.

Will Moy: They have.

Q173 **Chair:** In the case of the Bean review, what does the need for the Bean review say about the UK Statistics Authority's work or lack of it?



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Will Moy: Nothing good.

Q174 **Chair:** What conclusion should we draw from the need for the Bean review?

Mike Hughes: You could argue—and I think it has already been said to you previously—that it was one of the failings of the Board that it did not anticipate the issue sufficiently well to pre-empt the need for the Bean review. The Bean review, of itself, has been terrific for the Office. It has given it a lot of money, a lot of impetus and there will be some big benefits, but in terms of governance it should not have been necessary for the Chancellor to—Charlie did some wonderful work and his report covers a lot of good things, and the great news is that ONS has picked up and run with most of them. That is good.

Q175 **Chair:** It has had a good outcome.

Mike Hughes: As far as I am concerned, it has been a terrific outcome. The problem was: why was it necessary in the first place?

Will Moy: I would reframe it slightly. It should not just have been about pre-empting the discontent, although once you got that far that certainly should have kicked in. The other thing is that we know the world is changing. The Authority has started using this phrase “data revolution” constantly, which is presumably its way of signalling that it has spotted that the world is changing. Where is the foresight, the farsighted, ambitious sense of where we could be in 10 years’ time if we invested in this? Where is the case being made enthusiastically and committedly—in the Spending Review, for example—that this country and its citizens could be better off if we invest in better understanding of our economy, of our healthcare system and of our education system? Instead we sit back and wait for the point where we reach breaking point. It should have been about a higher ambition.

The thing that I think is worst for the statistical system is the low expectations of users, starting from the Prime Minister down. We ought to have much higher expectations of what can be achieved now than we do. That needs to be felt from Parliament. It needs to be felt from Government. It needs to be felt from all of us and the Authority should feel carried on that wave of high expectations.

Q176 **Chair:** On that question of foresight, what evidence is there that UKSA is thinking ahead sufficiently?

Will Moy: I do not have very much confidence in that at the moment. All I can point to is the knowledge that UKSA is looking at its next five-year plan. I hope that that will reflect this level of ambition but it remains to be seen.

Paul Allin: One thing that came out of the Bean review was not carried out into other areas. The Bean review was great for economic statistics but the things it said about change of culture and the things it said about



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more foresight—which Will has picked up on—are not being carried forward in other ways. We think there should be a more strategic approach and foresight to be able to anticipate that, so there would not be a need for another Bean review in another area.

Mike Hughes: If I could just take that a step further, Mr Chairman, one of the big issues that really does cause me concern is the wider GSS and the fact that this needs to go right across the whole of the Government Statistical Service. When you look across the piece at all the different aspects of society, the vast majority of the statistics are produced by the GSS. The ONS produces a lot of economic statistics and some social ones, but we must not forget that the bulk of the statistical service is still out in the Departments and that needs to be spread there.

Q177 **Ronnie Cowan:** I feel I am pushing at an open door here but I will go for it anyway. The Economic Affairs Committee of the House of Lords published its “Measuring Inflation” report on 17 January. It was critical of UKSA’s failure to correct errors in the retail price index: changes in 2010 to the way prices for clothing were collected as part of that led to an immediate widening of the gap in RPI and CPI. The report states that in publishing an Index that it admits is flawed but refuses to fix, the Authority could be accused of failing in its statutory duties. Do we agree?

Mike Hughes: Prima facie, you could say yes, but I think that would be unfair of ONS in the sense that since that decision was taken about the RPI, it has consistently warned about not using it and also it de-designated it. Where you could say it fell down is in not pursuing the logical development of that. If you say this is no longer a suitable statistic, it should have pursued the requirement that comes through section 21 of the Act to engage with the Bank and the Treasury on the next step.

I was very pleased to see the Lords inquiry report in the way that it was because I thought, “At long last we are going to get some resolution of what Bean saw”. Four years after the event, still not being any further down the road, but I am not a lawyer, Mr Cowan, so I am not sure whether you would say it has failed in its statutory duty or not. The fact that it has been continually saying it is not fit for purpose was the right thing to do, but it did not follow through.

Paul Allin: The only thing I would add to that is again the point that this is an example, in my mind, of getting the balance right between Government users and other users. I am not sure that the ONS did give enough attention to users beyond the Government and the Bank of England, who said they wanted a particular measure of inflation.

Q178 **Chair:** The impression that we get from UKSA is that it cannot do anything about inflation without the permission of Government. Is that the position that they are meant to have?



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Will Moy: UKSA has been doing a lot about inflation so that is certainly too simple a response, if that is the one it is giving you. We are not heavily involved in this debate. It is highly technical and it is, in that sense, outside of our purview, but it has been alarming to watch this rumble on for years with no apparent resolution.

I very much respect the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee and if they are saying something like that, it should at least be seen as a very clear warning. Whether or not your Committee decides to agree with in those terms, it is deeply concerning that any Select Committee would reach that conclusion.

Q179 **Chair:** Is it something for us to address with UKSA or is it something for the Government as a whole to address?

Mike Hughes: I think it is for you in the first instance, Mr Chairman, to press UKSA on why it has not actually prosecuted the case. We do not know—because we are not privy to it—what has been going on for those three or four years between the Bank, the Treasury and ONS. That is for UKSA to say.

Could I just raise one point about the Treasury report, which I think is quite important? While I would agree with most of it, there was one recommendation that it did make which we, the RSS and the user community would not agree with, and that is the pursuit of a single index measure for CPI. There is a manifold range of different uses for pricing indices and the RPI provided one as it was a good measure for household experience. The CPI is a macroeconomic indicator and therefore you need at least those two. I do not accept that recommendation, or we would not accept that. We do not agree with it. We have already said in writing that we do not accept that particular recommendation. That is one part of that report that I would not concur with.

Q180 **Kelvin Hopkins:** It is also a historic time series. The RPI is long-term to retain that time series because it is so valuable, looking back.

Mike Hughes: I think that is true to a point, but at the end of the day, what you need is the most effective measure that reflects household experience of inflation. That is the dilemma that was faced at that particular time, Mr Hopkins. This is why it was called the “legacy measure”, was it not, a legacy issue? This is a very difficult area, this one, but to go back to your question, Mr Chair, I would say it is for you to be probing.

Q181 **Kelvin Hopkins:** Just a question for Mike Hughes specifically. You have analysed differences between the UK’s statistical system and the new Generic Law on Official Statistics produced by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. What are the most important differences?

Mike Hughes: I sought to provide a fairly comprehensive review. The ones I would flag as the most important are the programme of work,



where I do not think we have a sufficient insight into what is happening. It is still very ONS-centric. It has produced a business plan and that comes quite close to what the GLOS would say should be the multi-angle one but, if you look at it, the first year is quite comprehensive but it peters out quite quickly into years two and three. That is only ONS and what the user wants to know is what is happening across the whole piece. That would be my main one.

The second point I would make is the fact that, as I said earlier on in the session, in terms of quality it needs to do many more deep dives, in the phrase that we were using looking at the code of practice the second time around, to make sure you really have the right statistics for the right purpose and so on. I would not advocate—and I said this in my note—that you need to change the legislation. The legislation is just a device to put things in place to enable these things to happen. You do not need new legislation.

I do think what is missing—and we did not get it at the time because Treasury lawyers said it was not appropriate—is there does need to be a generic description of the statistical system, all its players, their roles and responsibilities, so that anybody would clearly understand it. Once again, we had that document at one time. It was called the framework document, which was introduced in 2000 with the introduction of national statistics, but that too, I fear to say, got lost in the noise.

Q182 Kelvin Hopkins: International comparability of statistics and consistency is fundamentally important, I hope you would agree. How can the UK system benefit from the UN's work?

Mike Hughes: What I am saying here is it can pick up some of these particular things. It does not need new legislation. It could be doing them. It needs to get a programme of events in place. It came up last time, did it not, in your discussions in the previous session? Who is UKSA responsible to? It is not clear, is it? It is very ambiguous. These sorts of things could be compassed in this framework document that I am talking about. You do not need to change the legislation.

At the risk of repeating myself, I do think that the whole question of the quality reviews is something to return to. I would say those are the two main things.

Q183 Chair: Who will write this framework document and who will ensure that it is complied with?

Mike Hughes: I think it is something that UKSA could do quite easily. There is a model there already. It existed before.

Q184 Chair: What incentive is there for UKSA to do that?

Mike Hughes: One of the messages that are coming across very clearly is that people do not understand the respective roles of ONS, OSR, and the accountability that UKSA has and where that accountability lies. I



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think the main benefit of this is not for the centre, because the centre is well-defined. It is what is going on in Departments with the heads of professions, the roles of the heads of professions and so on.

Q185 Chair: If Parliament has set into law these ambiguities that exist in the legislation, if we have Richard Alldrift telling us that the term “the Board” in the legislation has different meanings at different parts of the Act, and if the Bill as it passed through Parliament was also modified in a way that was not envisaged by its original authors to take on this regulatory role, is the Act not part of the reason why we are sitting here discussing these problems and the problem of the governance of the system? You say, “Who is in charge?” Who is in charge? It is not clear in the Act.

Will Moy: I have some sympathy for that. Naturally, every Act of Parliament could be clearer—unless there is one word, there is a lot going on—but I also think an awful lot of clarity could be provided without changing the legislation, and thinking what the parliamentary timetable looks like for the next few years it might have to be. The Authority could—

Q186 Chair: Thank you for that advice.

Will Moy: Just being pragmatic, the Authority could on its own initiative clarify a lot of these things. The Cabinet Secretary could clarify a lot of these things. The Committee can look to what existing bodies ought to step up and provide more clarity in what areas as well as what could be done by legislation.

Q187 Chair: How much of this reluctance to recommend legislation is a concern that to reopen the legislation opens a can of worms that might lead off in the wrong direction? One senses a lot of this reluctance among the statistical community—“Let sleeping dogs lie because you might make it worse”.

Mike Hughes: My reluctance, Mr Chairman, is simply the one that Will has just outlined. I think Parliament has better things to be doing with its time.

Chair: I understand that.

Mike Hughes: That is my only reluctance. In a perfect world we could have another go at it. I know Richard Alldrift expressed that view. I do not tend to agree with Richard about his many different definitions of the Board in the cases that he does. It is just a question of interpretation at different times in the law. I think most of the things that I have identified could be remedied outwith a change of legislation.

There is a recurring debate about the confusion between this dual-headed animal of ONS or the producer on the one hand, and the regulator on the other. I do not see that as a difficulty. If you look at many large organisations, they have a production function or a business function, they have an audit function and those two can survive alongside one



another quite clearly. As long as the Board is doing its job properly and can see the separation then I do not see there is a problem.

Q188 Mr David Jones: Mr Moy, you are on record as telling the International Conference of Information Commissioners, “We are at a turning point between two possible alternatives. One is that we could have the best-informed Governments and democracies ever. Another is that we could end up awash with data that nobody trusts”. How do we achieve the former and avoid the latter?

Will Moy: First, we set our ambitions high. We recognise that data is transforming the world and that we want a piece of that for the way we run the country. We need to set that as a key goal of public administration for the next 10 and 20 years. We have to recognise that that takes time. If you want better data about borders, we are probably about to revise our border system because of Brexit, and that means we can bake that data collection into the way the system is designed. That will take a few years to deliver information but, if we do not do it then, we will be stuck with it for 30 years without that information. We need to think long-term. We need to think very ambitiously. We need to be prepared to throw out the old to create space for that. Radical change is needed. We need to make sure it is coming.

That is one side of things—the ambition in terms of delivering the capability. The other is about trust and the usability and usefulness of this data. We need research. We need an evidence base about what makes data and statistics useful to people and what makes people feel able to trust it. One of the recommendations Full Fact has called for is a centre of excellence in the public understanding of official statistics that can do this kind of research. The Government Communication Service, the BBC, lots of public bodies would have an interest in understanding how information can be provided of greatest value to the public.

We need to recognise that different parts of the public are more and less trusting of official statistics. We need to understand that more clearly and understand what needs to be done to remedy it. Partly it about building trust actively and not taking it for granted. I do feel that there is a sense of taking it for granted, but trust is changing. People are becoming more and more sceptical as they are exposed to more and more sources of information. The public sector and public bodies are going to have to work harder to earn and maintain trust.

Then we just need to improve what we are providing. As I said earlier, we need to do that reflecting the fact that higher-resolution information can give us insights into particular communities, particular groups of people and particular sectors of the economy that we have not previously had. That is likely to prompt awkward conversations. We need to be ready for the fact that new information will create new political questions that have to be confronted.

Q189 Mr David Jones: What is UKSA’s role in this?



Will Moy: First, to set that ambition; secondly, to sell it and to get other people behind them on it; thirdly, to deliver it. It is really that simple. It needs to set the bar high. It needs to encourage others and show the level of opportunity. I do not think it has done either of those things yet but John Pullinger, to his great credit, over the last five years has set UKSA in that direction. I just think it has further to go. Then it has to prove that it can deliver 21st-century levels of information and communication. We are a long way off that.

Can I just add one more to that, seeing as you asked me such a large question? On the Statistics Act, I have no difficulty with it being reopened at all but it is probably too narrow a question. If you were to think about this in terms of possibly another inquiry, you might think about what a Public Information Act would look like that did not stop at the boundaries of statistics specifically but looked at everything from, "How do the National Archives need to be updated for this world?" through to statistics and data much more generally. What does that ambition look like? This Committee could take a lead on that question. I think the legislative ramifications are wider than the Statistics Act, but the principles behind the Statistics Act will continue to apply even in that wider sphere.

Q190 **Chair:** Thank you. A very comprehensive answer and very helpful. Mr Moy, Full Fact looks at a mixture of official statistics and statistics produced from outside of Government. How do you weigh up the credibility of different sources of statistics?

Will Moy: It is very specific to the individual cases. The obvious advantage of official statistics is that there is a quality assurance system in place that is often able to be relied on and then external challenge to that quality assurance does happen, for example in the case of employment statistics, which I was mentioning earlier. In other areas it is much more variable.

In things like polling, the British Polling Council provides some guarantee of transparency and methodological clarity about proper surveys. In academia we think the quality is deeply variable and the level of impartiality is deeply variable. You have to try to reach a reasonable judgment about the methods involved. Often in those cases we go out to external experts and ask them for their opinions on how things are done. We are a relatively small team. We do have social researchers and statisticians on staff but we will work with top academics and other external experts to get their advice on methodology questions or research questions.

Q191 **Chair:** To give one example, the use of food banks is measured and quoted in Parliament and used by Government to guide policy, and yet the only data seems to come from one organisation, the Trussell Trust, which is deeply politically involved in lobbying for changes in Government policy. How do we give public assurance about the quality of statistics from a source like that? Do you have any particular comments on their data?



Will Moy: Sure. This is going right back to 2015, I think it was, when I had a conversation with the National Statistician asking whether the ONS could produce data in this area because it was a very significant public debate and it needed genuinely independent data. That has remained our view right to the present day. I was very pleased to see last week, I think, an announcement made that there are going to be official statistics on food insecurity as a result of various people pressuring for it.

There are some cases where it is just better to try to find an independent route to the information. The fact that it has taken years to get to this point—and it will be a couple more years before we actually get any data from the official statistics—is deeply frustrating. It is a good illustration of how official statistics need to be more on point, more nimble and more relevant to public policy and decision making.

On the Trussell Trust specifically, I have no privileged access to their information collection or anything like that so I am talking from an external point of view. My understanding is they worked with a retired official statistician to try to develop robust methods for data collection. The first caveat you need to know is that the Trussell Trust runs about half of the food banks in the country—speaking very roughly—and therefore its data is inherently partial. Because other food banks collectively are less structured than the Trussell Trust ones, it is hard to extrapolate out—

Q192 **Chair:** “Partial”. You do not mean it is not impartial, you mean it is only part of—

Will Moy: No, sorry, it is only part. Literally, it is a subset of is what I mean. Obviously they have been used as a proxy for all food banks or people have tried to extrapolate out, neither of which is ideal.

Then you have how the Trussell Trust presented its data. If you accept that its data was collected as best it could in the circumstances—which is probably reasonable—the big confusion in the Trussell Trust’s food bank data came from the presentation of each individual use of the food bank as being a different person relying on food banks, when actually the work the Trussell Trust ended up doing has shown that probably each person uses food banks twice in a year on average. The number of people using food banks is probably roughly half of that headline figure. I am going from memory. There are detailed facts on this on our website.

What happened in the presentation back in 2015 was that the people got mixed up with the uses, so we had these headlines that 1 million people are depending on food banks. That I remember because during the 2015 election we were running 18 hours a day, seven days a week, tracking everything. I remember having conversations with the Trussell Trust at that point and saying, “You have this headline that is going out but deep in your press release it is clear that the headline and the meaning of your data are not quite the same thing”.



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As a result of those conversations, the Trust ended up issuing a corrected press release the next day to clarify what was meant and that difference between uses and people. Since then, it has taken our advice. The Trust came to us and asked us how to present things. It has made efforts to clarify that presentation. Our assessment is that the correct version and the incorrect version are coexisting with about a 50:50 ratio now as a result of that work. The old misunderstanding has lingered but at least the correct understanding has a foothold in public debate.

It is a really good example of where you have a monopoly provider of information in an area that, as you say, has skin in the game. There is a need for them to present that information in ways that everyone can rely on and draw their own conclusions from. The Trust also has a need to achieve what it sees as its charitable objective and its purpose to make its case. Those two are clearly in tension, and when it comes to a topic as important as food banks that is why I think ONS should have stepped in earlier. It was so central to public debate from so many directions. There was a clear opportunity for an independent statistics organisation to make a real contribution and I think they fluffed it.

Q193 Chair: Before I come to Mr Cowan, can I just ask to what extent you are doing the job that UKSA should be doing in a matter of high public controversy and public debate where statistics are being bandied around?

Will Moy: I have a lot of respect for the work that UKSA is doing and I think they should be mutually supportive roles. Full Fact and the UK Statistics Authority both want informed public debate where statistics are well-used, able to be relied on and well understood. We have a slightly punchier role, a slightly more public role and the ability to be quicker, but we do not have the official voice and the sanctions and so on that come with that. They should be slightly slower and slightly more deliberative. They should not be more careful—everything we do is fact-checked independently by two people and carefully reviewed—but they have different clubs to wield and they should be wielding them differently than us.

Inevitably, because nobody can do everything that ought to be done, sometimes we will cover the same things, sometimes we will cover things that they do not cover and sometimes they will cover things that I wish we had covered. What we are working on that I have talked to them about is software that can monitor public debate and try to automatically identify the most important and recurring statistical claims, so that we can start to put that work on where we put our effort on an increasingly evidence-based basis. Going back to “data will transform everything”, data is transforming fact-checking and it certainly should be transforming statistical regulation too.

Q194 Ronnie Cowan: I agree with what Mr Moy is saying. It is really annoying when people read a headline and base their view on the headline rather than reading the detail of the report. In the case of the Trussell Trust, it pointed out exactly what it was talking about in the detail of the report.



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The controversy started when Ken Loach said that 1.1 million people would starve otherwise. The political lobby jumped on the back of that and said, "It is not 1.1 million people because some people are going there twice. They have the audacity to go to a food bank twice".

I would thank Full Fact for clarifying this because on your website you do say that the Trussell Trust only runs about half of all food banks, and on your website it says that means that these figures will underestimate the number of parcels going out so Mr Loach's figure for those people could be close to the reality.

On the back of that, we also point out that there is a strong dynamic relationship between people having their jobseeker's allowance stopped and increased use of food banks according to the University of Oxford. I would like to thank you for clarifying that point. The number of people who are actually claiming from food banks is possibly close to 1.1 million people.

Will Moy: Yes. We do not know but that is a possibility. One of the roles of a fact checker is not to inject certainty into the debate where there is no certainty; it is to say, "This is the range of reasonable conclusions from the data and you have to make your own mind up".

Q195 **Ronnie Cowan:** It is a bit like the £350 million that was going to come back into the NHS after we leave the EU.

Will Moy: The £350 million figure that was quoted was just wrong. There are times when things are just wrong and it is possible to say so. There are also times when it is important to set out, "Here is the range of possible interpretation, this is what we do not know and what we do not know, and it is up to you". In the case of the £350 million there are again several possible correct things you can say but what you could never say is, "We send £350 million a week to the EU and we could spend it on the NHS instead". That was just plain wrong.

Fact checkers have to be careful of our limits. When it comes to offering a judgment about what is a reasonable interpretation of the data, we can offer one but it is ultimately up to you to make up your own mind. The same is true of my evidence today.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, a very comprehensive session. Thank you for your devotion to the cause.

Will Moy: Likewise. We really appreciate the Committee putting so much time and effort into such an important topic, so thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor John Salt and Matt Leach.

Q196 **Chair:** Our second panel today on the work of the UK Statistics Authority.



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Could I ask each of you to just identify yourselves for the record, please?

Professor Salt: I am John Salt. I am Emeritus Professor of Geography at UCL, where I co-direct the Migration Research Unit.

Matt Leach: I am Matt Leach. I am the Chief Executive of Local Trust, which administers the Big Local programme on behalf of the National Lottery Communities Fund, working with 150 deprived and peripheral communities across the country, many of whom have a particular interest in defining the areas of need they need to work with.

Q197 **Chair:** Thank you both very much for sitting through the previous session, which I hope you found as interesting as we did. Can I ask you both to start with to give a brief overview of some of the official statistics you use and how you use them?

Professor Salt: I am something of a historical document in that I have been using these statistics for a long time. Since 1985 I have written the UK report on international migration to the OECD, which brings together the whole spectrum of migration data and different forms of movement. I have also been involved with the ONS Migration Statistics Improvement Programme, initially in 2002, and have sat on the ONS Population Team Advisory Board since 2007. Between 2013 and 2018, I was Chair of the Migration Statistics Users Forum. I also still do some teaching. I teach international migration statistics at UCL.

The range of statistics is really quite broad, in terms of the international migration theme, but I operate principally at the national level rather than at local level. That is partly because of the poor statistics that exist on migration at the local level but there are other people who do fill that gap to some extent.

Matt Leach: I feel at a slight disadvantage compared to all the other people today giving evidence in that I am not a professional statistician. I do not engage with statistics from that point of view.

I do spend a lot of time working directly supporting groups of local residents in peripheral, disadvantaged areas to come up with plans for spending the money that we have given them over 10 years to try to make their estates better places to live in. Each of our 150 Big Local communities get £1 million over 10 to 15 years that they can spend on anything, provided local residents get together and come up with a plan. What is vitally important for them when they make those sorts of decisions is having access to statistics that enable them to make sense of the challenges that they face.

What has been very clear throughout our experience as an organisation has been the extent to which communities typically do not have access to relevant information, whether from observatories, local authorities or other sources, and where relevant data does exist they can find it quite hard to access it or interpret it. The notion that was cast around perhaps



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10 years ago about creating a nation of data scientists really has not come to pass.

Also, when you start to put together packages of local area relevant statistics with appropriate support and interpretation, people voraciously consume it and use it in a big way. They want to find out more and want to use that to influence both the decisions they make but also their engagement with statutory agencies, with local authorities and health authorities.

Q198 Mr David Jones: The 2007 Statistics Act sets out a duty on UKSA to safeguard the quality of statistics, including impartiality, accuracy, relevance and coherence with other statistics. To what extent would you say that official statistics do meet those criteria?

Professor Salt: I can only really speak for the ones I know about, which are the international migration ones. I was on the monitoring board for the UKSA first report on migration statistics, "The Way Ahead", which was published in 2009. I have the impression that since then, with all the disadvantages of the nature of the subject, international migration and the difficulties of counting it, the attempt to produce good and better data has been a continuing one. Over the period since then, the data we have are immeasurably better on international migration but they are a long way from being ideal or perfect.

Matt Leach: There are two real issues for local communities in dealing with statistics. The first goes around the other side of your question. For most communities, they want good enough statistics. They will trust them if they are there. Typically, particularly at a local level, they are more for purposes of information rather than wider politicking, so good enough information is better than perfect information. The challenge is accessing it, and accessing it in a form that can then be used, digested and applied.

The other side of that is the extent to which—again, for many working and living in deprived and disadvantaged areas—there is a sense that they are done to, that their weakness and their powerlessness is driven by bureaucrats making decisions they do not understand on a basis that they cannot engage with. We sometimes see that reflected in the way that statistics are published. They are published in tables. They are published in spreadsheets and they are published on websites that are not particularly capable of being engaged with or interpreted, and often they appear to be collated in a way that suits the needs of Government or parliamentarians but not necessarily the interests of local people.

Q199 Mr David Jones: That brings me to my next question. How accessible are statistics generally? You tend to indicate that they are maybe not that accessible.

Matt Leach: They can be accessible. In January we brought together 20 of our communities for a workshop on data and, of those communities,



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only four had previously been able to access data in a way that they felt confident to use. I do not know if that is a particularly scientific sample but it suggests that, even when you give communities power and you give them resources and decision making, they find it quite hard then to access data or know where to look.

It is possible to create tools that are useful and useable. In my previous life running a housing charity—HACT—we created a fairly simple data explorer that enabled you to draw a line around a housing estate, pull in the best fit of data from most Government sources and create an easy-to-interpret dossier that you could make decisions with. We have adapted that for use in local communities and it seems to be working very well.

We have one here for Brookside Estate in Telford. It is simple. It gives you 60 pages of all the stats you want with half a page next to each stat explaining what it is in simple language. It tells you how often it is updated. It provides comparators for your region and national figures so you know where you sit. If you are in Brookside you can tell—for example, using police statistics—that antisocial behaviour is well above average, that violent behaviour is accelerating quite significantly and has done over the last three years, but that vehicle crime is not something that, as a community, you might want to worry about.

You could look at unemployment statistics and see how—in comparison to the West Midlands, in your particular estate and your ward in Brookside—unemployment is about double the average for the region and tends to go up much more significantly when you hit hard economic times. That is the sort of useful information that people can deal with, in graphical form, with useful comparators, which you simply cannot get from official sites even if you were to look.

Q200 Mr David Jones: This is what I wanted to ask you. There you have an intermediary, so to speak, interpreting the statistics that have been produced by obviously an official source. To what extent do the official sources make it clear that there may be weaknesses with the data that is produced or that they should be interpreted maybe not in this way but in another way? Is it always necessary to have that intermediary interpreting the figures?

Matt Leach: It is important that the information and interpretation that is provided is accurate and presented in a way that people can engage with and understand. Most people who look at statistics in the communities we work in are not statisticians. Many of them may not have had jobs that required working with numbers or may not have completed formal education, so you need to create information that is useful and useable.

We have worked with an organisation called OCSI—Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion—which we chose largely because it is the contractor that MHCLG uses for preparing the index of multiple deprivation. We felt that if, as an organisation, Government were willing to work with it on a



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very important set of statistical figures that would be appropriate as a route through to providing some useful and reliable interpretation for local communities.

I do not think that local communities necessarily want to get sucked into whether inflation is exactly right or whether unemployment figures are right down to the last three or four digits. What they want to know broadly is how their community compares to everywhere else on the statistics that are generally accepted as being valid. They would not see themselves as getting sucked into debates around the adequacy of the UK Statistics Authority, for example.

Q201 Mr David Jones: Should it be made clearer by the producer of these statistics that there may well be weaknesses or that they should not be interpreted in other ways? I take your point but you are still having a filter applied by a third party.

Matt Leach: I accept that absolutely. From the perspective of local people trying to make decisions—and clearly we are going to see more of that—whether it is the Stronger Towns Fund, which was launched earlier this week, where it is clear there is going to be an element of community decision making in relation to some of that resource or the growth of community commissioning.

I am going to a new local government network roundtable this afternoon where they are looking at public service commissioning by local people. You need to have strong and reliable data. I would say that most people in those circumstances are less worried about the weakness of particular bits of data than accessibility of data in general. There has not been a culture to date in the UK that has prioritised making data useful, useable and presentable to ordinary people as opposed to making it accessible and reliable for people like me or my colleague here.

Professor Salt: I think the question is: access by whom? At the local level—since we are talking about the local level—it is very difficult to come up with anything like a reasonable picture of the stocks and flows of migration. In the UK we have the census every 10 years and that gives us the information. The data for the most part cannot be broken down. One thing we found with the Migration Statistics Users Forum was the frequency of cries of help and anguish from local authorities wanting to know what was going on in their areas and the impossibility, for various reasons, mostly related to sampling and getting hold of the information.

There are all sorts of political ramifications, for example the time of Brexit. I took a map of the leave versus remain and a map of the number of people by country of birth and different local authorities. They were almost the opposites of each other. It is important at that local level that there is a reasonable picture of what is going on. The difficulty at the moment is that, for the most part, the data just do not allow that reasonably accurate picture to be built up.



As far as access to data is concerned—which is your first point—it is a darn sight better now that it was. There are enormous numbers of tables that can be accessed relating to the field but, at the end of the day, they come down to a relatively small number of sources. Each has major disadvantages, so that very often the access can only be at national or some kind of aggregate level and not in any way broken down into forms that would be helpful to particular interest groups for example.

Q202 Kelvin Hopkins: The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 requires the UK Statistics Authority to ensure that official statistics are comprehensive. Can you give examples of where the creation of UKSA has led to new statistics being produced that address gaps in data?

Professor Salt: I have a list in front of me. I do not think that the fact that there are gaps is a problem created by the data authorities. I have already mentioned the difficulties of getting hold of local data.

As far as my field is concerned there are a number of big problems, one being emigration. We have a political emphasis on net migration, which by definition includes ins and outs. We are very good now at getting the ins and the Government Statistical Service over recent years—particularly the last two or three years—has made great strides in inter-departmental fusing of data sources. There are problems there, which you may or may not want to talk about.

When it comes to emigration, this is where we are in trouble, because pretty well everything we know about emigration comes from last year, 1,081 contacts in the International Passenger Survey, so that is 1,081 people aggregated up to around about a third of a million. In those circumstances, it is very difficult to get an accurate picture of the real balance of flows in and out of the country. We now have increasing information coming from exit checks but the exit checks relate only to those people who have visas. They do not include European Union nationals, at least for the moment, and they do not include Americans, Australians, Canadians; all the other non-visa-free people.

The exit checks are providing some information for specific groups. Students were one example. I talked at my last appearance before this Committee in 2013 about the e-Borders cavalry charging over the hill. I think they are still the other side of the hill, because we seem to be no further forward with providing some kind of e-Border assessment of what the flows are. That is emigration.

I will mention one more and that is illegal or irregular migration. The Home Office did produce an estimate in 2005 of the number of people who were irregular or illegal—whichever word you want to use—in the country and nothing since. Except last week the Home Office and the Office for National Statistics organised a workshop, which was to look at the possibility of coming up with a new estimate of the irregular population of the UK.



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There is a tentative work programme that is being drawn up that will do that, but that constitutes another gap. It is bedevilled by difficulties of definition: what constitutes somebody who is living irregularly or being illegal? Is an international student who works 21 hours a week instead of 20 in an irregular situation? How does that compare with someone coming in on the back of a lorry?

Those are some of the big gaps at the moment and—whatever the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 said—there has been very little progress in filling those gaps. There have been attempts but they are still largely not filled.

Q203 Kelvin Hopkins: Presumably, to get a comprehensive grip of all of this, it would mean a much bigger resource being put in to do the job. Is that fair?

Professor Salt: Yes. It is very difficult to see how one might stretch the existing sources of data, particularly the International Passenger Survey, which is the only one that gives us two-way flows. It is difficult to see how that can be stretched even further. It is probably beyond its limits now.

Chair: Have you dealt with 21 and 22, do you think?

Kelvin Hopkins: I have not done them yet.

Chair: No, I know but it is on the migration question. Shall we just deal with those now?

Q204 Kelvin Hopkins: Yes, fine. I shall carry on because clearly we have the expert on migration with us and it is my question area. The inquiry that we undertook, or its predecessor Committee, which was tasked in 2013 found that, "Migration statistics are not adequate for understanding the scale and complexity of modern migration flows", and you have partly explained that. The Committee made a number of recommendations. How has the migration statistics improved since 2013? I think you have answered that to an extent. Would you want to elaborate a bit more on whether they have and how they improved?

Professor Salt: I think the big improvement has been through the inter-departmental co-operation bringing together administrative statistics from different departments. At the MSUF, Migration Statistics Users Forum, one of the recent conferences, for example, we had someone from HMRC and someone from DWP producing a combined study using both of their datasets to give some indication of who was at work and what work was being done. This has been tied in with ONS's work on the census, post-census and post-2021, what is going to happen and movement towards producing a more comprehensive and fairly continuous emigration statistic, better data at emigration.

We saw that with the report on students, which was initiated by UKSA of course, where the students were being misrecorded and so there was a study to try to look at how that was being done. There was the use then



of the exit checks data on non-EU international students to show that most of them did seem to go home rather than stay when their terms had finished.

The other work I know that is being done is within the ONS now. That is trying to reconcile differences that have emerged between the two surveys, the International Passenger Survey and the Labour Force Survey. What has happened over the last few years is that the output of those two surveys—as far as immigration is concerned—seems to have been diverging in that it is very difficult conceptually, particularly, to use the changes in stock as a flow measurement but you can get some kind of trend and that trend seems to have diverged.

There is now a work plan in ONS that is going to be undertaken over this spring and summer that will try to reconcile the differences between the two surveys. I have already mentioned the small scale of the survey in the IPS. It is not the easiest statistic to come across, but the Labour Force Survey is also a sample survey and last year there were 7,016 contacts. That aggregates up to about 6 million people working, which means that every contact in the LFS equals 866 people. Therefore, what you are trying to do is to get some kind of accuracy out of data where there is a very large confidence interval initially at the beginning, at the aggregate level.

As soon as you start to break it down, that confidence interval widens, so you are looking at a figure of 20,000 plus or minus 18,000, and so it goes on. It becomes a difficult technical operation then to deal with those.

Chair: We are getting into very technical areas. It is none the less extremely interesting but we are going to have to press on. Anything else, Mr Hopkins?

Kelvin Hopkins: It is a subject I could go on forever, but I think I will stop here, thank you.

Q205 **Ronnie Cowan:** In summary, how well do the official statistics that exist meet your needs as a user?

Matt Leach: In parts—and I guess I am more looking at it from the perspective of people in communities trying to use data to make decisions and to engage with statutory authorities—you can see that there is data that would be useful to people. I do not know whether it is useful to Government, which does not exist but could exist. If you looked at small area data around health indicators, obesity or healthy eating or binge drinking or smoking, that is incredibly important to disadvantaged communities when they think about how they engage with their neighbours about changing behaviours or, indeed, access to funding to try to deliver change.

There has been no new data on that since the model data created by the Department of Health from 2006 to 2008. That is critically important,



both nationally and locally, but there is no small area data on those health indicators.

More topically, if we are starting to talk as a nation about left behind communities, we know from our work with peripheral communities that quite often it is the absence of community centres, the disappearance of shops, the closing of pubs that makes a real difference to whether people feel that they live in a community—the loss of places to meet and engage—and that is almost as important as economic circumstances when it comes to a perception that perhaps the social contract is breaking down, you have been left behind.

It is very hard to get hold of reliable official information on that. We have been trying to build some with some analysts, effectively doing density plots using address-base data from an ordinance survey, but those quite topical and important issues do not seem to exist in a statistical dataset. That seems to be more about top down administration of large government funding pots.

Q206 Ronnie Cowan: Professor Salt, anything to add?

Professor Salt: Simply, as an individual user, I am in a privileged position in that, in writing the UK report for the OECD, I have very good relations particularly with the ONS, and also the Home Office, in providing the information that goes into that at an aggregate level.

If I put my own research hat on, which is more concerned with managing labour migration, then burrowing down into the data becomes more and more difficult. There are sources of data that are published and there are management data that are unpublished. Management data are often the ones that you want to look at and they are not easy to get at.

Geographical information systems work increasingly has allowed feeding into—as my colleague here suggested—geographical areas data that exist relating to those areas to come up with patterns; for example, work registration data. When we used to have those data at a local authority level by nationality and by occupation it allowed a very detailed local authority breakdown. That was all done with publicly available information. You have the geographical system as a pot where you can then pour the data into increasingly small pots within that.

The sort of information that I have had has not been too great a problem but until I start, “Well, it’s all right, but,” and when you get to the “but”, what happens at the individual firm level, for example, is when it gets difficult.

Q207 Chair: The UK Statistics Authority was created in 2008. What changes have you noticed as a result?

Matt Leach: Speaking for the communities that I work with, they would have no knowledge of its existence and it would have no relevance to them.



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Q208 **Chair:** Professor Salt. For example, it took our 2013 inquiry to jolt the Home Office on statistics and, indeed, the Police Recorded Crime inquiry jolted the UKSA to de-designate police recorded crime as a national statistic. What has UKSA done of its own volition?

Professor Salt: I am probably out of my comfort level with this, but what I think has been vital is the role of the UKSA in helping to co-ordinate data brought together from different sources into some kind of single number or easily manipulated trend data provision.

I mentioned the inter-departmental data. At some point where you have data coming from three or four Government Departments all being combined to come up with one statistic—which may be the migration flow into a particular area or particular local authority—perhaps you need some authority that can say, “Okay, you have your own individual statistics and they’re all right, but what happens when you bring them all together, when you create a sort of omnium gatherer? Is that an official statistic?” I think there is a need for something like UKSA to give the perimeter to that—

Q209 **Chair:** The net migration statistic is just such as example, yes.

Professor Salt: The net migration statistic is an example but—

Q210 **Chair:** Given that 95% confidence interval on 100,000, should that be a national statistic?

Professor Salt: It is the only one we have.

Q211 **Chair:** That is their only answer, isn’t it?

Professor Salt: Yes and the answer is: it is yours. If you would like to institute a population register and we will have much better data—it would cost a lot of money, though—and it might cost a lot of political time but we are looking then at a set chain.

Q212 **Mr David Jones:** Mr Leach, having regard to the shortness of your last reply, I think I can guess how you will answer the next question. How well would you say that UKSA and other bodies responsible for official statistics engage with users and understand their needs?

Matt Leach: I think I would certainly field to ONS there is an awareness that it needs to think about the future. I sit on the ONS Data Science Campus Advisory Board and it is clear there that it is trying to think 10 years off at the new sorts of data that might emerge and, as that data emerges, how it might be applied and presented in ways that are relevant to communities.

Almost on a trivial level it has been mapping green coverage of our urban areas by speed running a computer through Google Street View to map every single tree and bush in every town in the country. At some point that should provide an interesting new set of data from a completely alternative source. That will be relevant to conversations around: what is



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happening to the places we are living in? It is very open to conversations about how that data might be useful or useable. When it comes to—

Q213 **Mr David Jones:** When you said “open to conversations” what conversations are they?

Matt Leach: It has invited the local trust in to engage, to sit on its advisory board and to talk to it about these things. I am fairly clear about the relative importance and influence of both my organisation and the communities I work with on the machine that is national statistics, but certainly ONS has shown a willingness to start those sorts of conversations and I think that is very welcome.

Q214 **Mr David Jones:** Sorry, the question was: how well does UKSA engage with the potential users of statistics?

Professor Salt: I am not aware of UKSA engaging directly with me, except through at least one or two workshops that have been held jointly with the ONS in my particular field. As far as UKSA is concerned it is something that I am happy to see there but it is not something that I feel in any way part of.

Q215 **Mr David Jones:** What would improve your user engagement do you think?

Professor Salt: More information coming out on what requests have been made to statistical authorities and what the results have been. The one example that I know of is the student thing, of course, and that was almost the only major revamp that has emerged, as far as I am aware, from UKSA and ONS in this migration field.

Q216 **Mr David Jones:** Mr Leach, do you think that user engagement could be improved and if so how?

Matt Leach: I think it would be very interesting to start to try to define an approach to statistics that was bottom up. I think it would have to be an entirely new conversation but if we were to bring together representatives of the sorts of areas that might benefit from the Stronger Towns Fund and ask, “What is the information you need to make the most of the £1.6 billion that will be coming into your areas?” It might be a very good start to the conversation.

Of course, at the moment, the distribution mechanism that is being used for that fund is via LEPs and via local authorities who are already plugged into the current statistical paradigm. They know how to operate it. I think it would take a brave person to remake our statistical architecture from the bottom up, but perhaps there needs to be a little bit more of a meeting in the middle.

Q217 **Ronnie Cowan:** Mr Leach, the neighbourhood statistical system was closed in 2017 and ONS has been criticised for not providing a replacement. What has been the impact of this closure on local community groups?



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Matt Leach: I guess for the communities that we work with because we have been providing them with an alternative statistical source in practical terms, but it has had no impact.

Q218 **Ronnie Cowan:** Is there an alternative? Is it enormous?

Matt Leach: Again working with OCSI we have something called Local Insight, which effectively allows communities to access almost any government statistic on their area within 24 hours, up to date form, any time they want it. Of course they are very lucky, because I am spending money every year to provide that service to them and there are only 150 housing estates across the country.

More generally given the extent, when provided with this sort of data, it appears local people value it and want to use it. It is a bit of a shame there is not a similar service available to them. Having looked at the discontinued service it was all right but again it was a service for people who knew their way around statistics rather than a service based around the needs of ordinary citizens.

Q219 **Ronnie Cowan:** I am confused. The Neighbour Statistical System and something called NOMIS—

Matt Leach: Sorry, I thought you were talking about the Neighbourhood Statistical Service, which was discontinued in 2017.

Q220 **Ronnie Cowan:** Yes. What has taken its place then?

Matt Leach: What I am saying is that, within the communities that I serve, we have effectively commissioned a replacement that provides—

Q221 **Ronnie Cowan:** What about the communities that you do not represent?

Matt Leach: Sadly, I have no responsibility for them or the finances to provide them with those statistics. What I can say is that the evidence is that when you provide communities, even communities that are relatively disadvantaged with relatively low levels of numeracy or perhaps in some instances advanced education, with accessible digestible statistics they grasp them and they want to make use of them.

I suspect, if you extended this service to other areas, it would make a difference. Of course, the relevance of handing over statistics to communities only comes into play when you devolve responsibility for decision making. You devolve power and you devolve resources to those communities because that is when they have to take responsibility for—

Q222 **Ronnie Cowan:** That is an interesting theory, devolving powers to people. Yes, absolutely.

Matt Leach: It is a radical idea, but it is—

Ronnie Cowan: I would not have thought of it.

Q223 **Chair:** Thank you very much. How important is data from the census to



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local community groups?

Matt Leach: Hugely. I guess every year we move on from the census it becomes less important because some of the key stats become more out of date. You can certainly see in transient communities the differences in population, particularly migration driven differences can happen over a course of one or two years.

I visited an estate in Milton Keynes that had briefly, for two years, been the home of a Somali community who had all moved on somewhere else and instead there was a new group of Eastern Europeans and some Ghanaians who had moved in. As a group of local people trying to make decisions in their neighbourhood about the services they needed to deliver, the sorts of agencies that they needed to engage with, it was very hard to get a handle on that because there was no live information. There was a bunch of information from 2011 and that was about it.

The census can be very good on things like broad demographics, age and gender balance. It can provide quite a lot of useful information around a whole bunch of other characteristics of the area but we are now, what, 2018 to 2019, it becomes much less reliable as a source for communities and they start to look for other sources of data.

Q224 **Chair:** The prospect is that we will lose the granularity of that data even on a 10-year basis. In order to increase the amount of survey data and have perhaps much more survey data available than we can afford to count in the census, what is the balance of risks and advantages of that shift?

Matt Leach: From the point of view of people working and living in specific housing estates, their interest is in how their housing estate compares to their town or their region. The loss of small area data is potentially problematic. As I said in relation to health data, it is quite frustrating that data on obesity or healthy eating or smoking on a small area basis, even on a model basis, has not existed reliably since 2006 to 2008. If we start to see a move away from that sort of granular data and other datasets then I can see that being potentially quite frustrating for people wanting to understand their communities in context.

Q225 **Chair:** Bluntly, would you or would you not keep the annual census because there is talk of doing away with the whole thing though not in 2021? When Francis Maude first became Minister he wanted to abolish the national census as some kind of antiquated Victorian thing that—

Matt Leach: I think there are two separate questions there, aren't there? What communities want is not necessarily a census every 10 years. What they want is reliable accurate data or reasonably accurate data that relates to the places that they live. If it is provided by a census or through a set of other surveys does not matter. What is important is that whatever mechanism is adopted it provides people with useful relevant local information. It is very hard to hold local government to account if you do not know how your community compares to somewhere else.



Q226 **Chair:** I agree with that but it is like the annual Passenger Survey, most people are amazed when they realise that the entire migration into the United Kingdom is based on a sample of about 5,000 people after you have taken out the other 795,000 people who have been surveyed who are not migrants and you get very poor data when you try to break that down. The same happens at local areas if you are basing it upon survey data. All you are anticipating will do a lot of local surveys—

Matt Leach: I would absolutely agree. From the point of view of communities looking at their lives, looking at the nature of the places where they live, having accurate granular data is vitally important and the census is an extremely good way of delivering that. I have to say sitting in 2019 and looking at data from 2011 it is much less useful than if we were able to do it every couple of years but clearly there is a limit to how much Government can spent on anything.

Q227 **Kelvin Hopkins:** Just on this census; I am one of those who spoke up very strongly for retaining the census. Just because there are minority communities that are fairly mobile the great majority of the population, I think you would agree, are relatively stable over quite long periods in fact and particularly in certain areas. I represent a constituency that has very large minority communities within it, 120 different languages spoken and so on. Even then, our own political records show that people are pretty stable in the majority but just because some people are mobile is not an argument for getting rid of a census.

Matt Leach: Absolutely. I would agree. I would not say that transience is an argument for getting rid of the census. If anything, it might be an argument for finding ways to supplement census data usefully in-between time.

Chair: It has been a very interesting session, both this panel and the previous panel. We are very grateful to you and do please send any supplementary information that you think would be of use to us. In particular, if you think there are any further recommendations you want us to make please do let us know. Thank you very much indeed.