



**Public Administration
and Constitutional Affairs
Committee**

From the Chair
William Wragg MP

Professor Denise Lievesley CBE
Leader Reviewer – UKSA Review
Cabinet Office
Via email only

13 July 2023

Dear Professor Lievesley,

Review of the UK Statistics Authority

Thank you for your invitation to submit evidence to the review of the UK Statistics Authority (the Authority).

The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC), and its predecessor Committees before it, have scrutinised the work of the Authority since the organisation's establishment in 2008. In practice, this scrutiny has generally taken the form of:

- regular sessions on the work of the Authority, which focus on the organisation's success or otherwise in delivering against the objectives defined for it under legislation, and the more specific milestones defined in its strategies and business plans;
- more detailed inquiries on, for example, data transparency and accountability in the context of Covid-19,¹ the governance of statistics,² or our recently launched inquiry, *Transforming the UK's evidence base*³;
- pre-appointment hearings with the government's proposed candidates for Chair, and post-appointment hearings with incoming National Statisticians; and
- regular correspondence with Authority leaders on topical matters.

Our most recent session with the Authority was held on 23 May 2023, at which time we explored issues including: changes in leadership; the adequacy of governance arrangements; the Authority's progress in delivering against its current five-year strategy; the organisation's financial settlement and spending plans; its success in delivering the 2021 census; the ongoing transformation of the UK's economic statistics; user engagement; and, the Authority's role in monitoring the use of statistics

¹ [Data Transparency and Accountability: Covid 19 inquiry](#)

² [Governance of Statistics inquiry](#)

³ [Transforming the UK evidence base inquiry](#)

in public debate.⁴ This submission draws together the evidence we gathered as part of that inquiry, as well as our broader programme of work, to answer the questions set out in the review's Terms of Reference.

Relationship between PACAC and the Authority

Under its Terms of Reference, the Review seeks to understand whether the relationship between PACAC and the Authority is effective, and whether the Committee are satisfied with the relationship as it currently stands. We are satisfied that Authority leaders engage constructively with the Committee about both progress made and challenges faced. Further, the relationship between the two bodies has helped bring about a range of improvements to the UK's statistical system, a selection of which are detailed below.

Governance arrangements

The Authority's operating model – a single Board, which oversees distinct regulatory and production functions – is unique, and has been a point of focus for both current Members, and our predecessors. A 2019 report from our predecessor Committee recommended that government introduce legislation to create an entirely separate regulatory body, but also – recognising that it was unlikely legislation would be introduced – set out steps that might be taken to more clearly delineate the two functions in the absence of legislative change.

Much has changed since our predecessor Committee published its report. It is the view of this Committee that the steps taken by the Authority to more visibly separate its production and regulatory functions in the period since have been helpful and sufficient to address previous concerns.⁵ The results of recent *Public Confidence In Official Statistics* surveys demonstrate that members of the public place a great deal of trust in both our official data, and the institutions that publish them,⁶ suggesting that the Authority's governance framework is no impediment to the delivery of its legislative objectives. In our recent scrutiny session, we also noted with interest Sir Robert's view that the current structure offers several advantages for the regulatory function in particular.⁷ On this basis, we do not see the need for legislative change in the near future.

One thing that has not changed since our predecessors reported in 2019 is the continued necessity of the Authority's independence from government. Impartial data, which reflect the needs of decision-makers across the country – not just in government, but in schools, business, the media, and of course in Parliament – are invaluable to the success of our nation. Supporting the Authority's independence has been, and will continue to be, a priority for Members of this Committee.

⁴ A transcript of our evidence session with Authority leaders is [available online](#).

⁵ As set out in correspondence with the Committee ([May 2020](#) and [September 2019](#)), the Authority have taken steps including introducing a separate digital presence for Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR); publishing separate Annual Reports for the regulatory function, and appointing the head of the OSR as a Secondary Accounting Officer.

⁶ NatCen, [Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021](#), April 2022.

⁷ [Q2](#)

NED appointments

We welcome the reference within the review Terms of Reference to the processes by which Authority Board members are appointed. During our recent session, we heard concerns from Sir Robert about “regrettable” choices made by the government to remove non-executives after a period of three years.⁸ It would be helpful for the review to consider this issue.

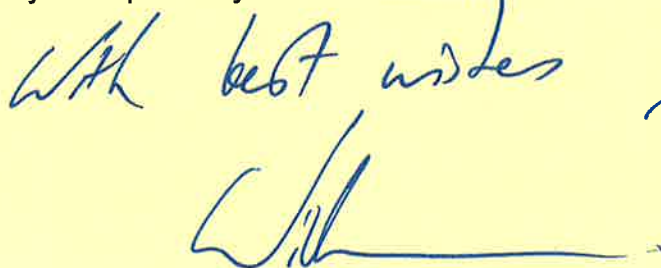
Pre-release access to official statistics

We note references in the review Terms of Reference to pre-release access, and specifically, to the changes introduced by the then National Statistician, John Pullinger, in 2017 which ended the sharing of ONS data ahead of publication in all but exceptional circumstances. This change came on the back of a recommendation from one of our predecessor Committees, the Public Administration Select Committee, in its February 2013 report on the statistical system.⁹ As part of its consideration of pre-release access arrangements, we would encourage the review to consider how pre-release access rules are applied in Departments, where Ministers – rather than the Authority – are responsible for their implementation.

User engagement

We welcome the focus within the review Terms of Reference on the Authority’s engagement with users. In our recent session, Mr Humpherson (head of the Office for Statistics Regulation) suggested that while engagement with expert users was generally strong amongst producers of statistics, there is more to be done in the context of broader outreach.¹⁰ The Terms of Reference make several references to the needs of government, but this Committee hopes the review will look too at the broader range of users that the Authority was established to serve. As part of this work, we hope the review will carefully consider, in particular, the needs of Parliamentarians, who rely heavily on official statistics in their work.

I look forward to meeting you in the near future to discuss some of these matters in more detail in person. In the meantime, please do not hesitate to get in touch with Committee staff if you require any further assistance.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Wragg', followed by a long horizontal line.

William Wragg MP
Chair, Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

⁸ [Q2](#)

⁹ [Public Trust in Government Statistics: A review of the operation of the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007](#), February 2013

¹⁰ [Q34](#)

