



House of Commons
Public Administration
and Constitutional Affairs
Committee

The appointment of Sir Robert Chote as Chair of the UK Statistics Authority

Eighth Report of Session 2021–22

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 29 March 2022*

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the reports of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and the Health Service Commissioner for England, which are laid before this House, and matters in connection therewith; to consider matters relating to the quality and standards of administration provided by civil service departments, and other matters relating to the civil service; and to consider constitutional affairs.

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Powers

The committee is a select committee, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 146. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Gavin Blake (Clerk), Victoria Cummings (Committee Specialist), Dr Matthew Fright (Committee Specialist), Iwona Hankin (Committee Operations Officer), Gabrielle Hill (Committee Operations Manager), Dr Philip Larkin (Committee Specialist), Susanna Smith (Second Clerk), Dr Patrick Thomas (Committee Specialist), Christopher Watson (Assistant Clerk) and Gina Degtyareva (Senior Select Committee Media Officer).

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1 Role of the UK Statistics Authority Chair

1. The Chair of the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA) is responsible for reinforcing the independence, integrity and quality of official statistics produced by Government. They ensure the official statistics system brought about by the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 is one in which the public, Parliament and all users of official statistics can have confidence. The Chair is responsible for building on the reforms brought about by the Act and to consider whether any further changes to the official statistics system are required and successfully implementing change where necessary. The Chair is responsible for providing support, oversight and guidance to the National Statistician, in their role as the Chief Executive of the Authority. The UK Statistics Authority Board defends the public interest in statistics and holds the National Statistician to account.

2 The Appointment of the New UKSA Chair

2. The job description listed the following as essential criteria:
- The ability to analyse strategic and complex issues and to think clearly.
 - An understanding of the role and use of statistics and economics data both within and outside government at a senior level together with an understanding of, commitment to, and enthusiasm for statistical independence and impartiality.
 - The ability to be open minded about reform of the organisation; scan the horizon for future issues; understand both policy issues and the concerns of the public; hold demonstrable independence of view whilst being politically aware; facilitate the resolution of complex debates; and be personally and professionally resilient.
 - The ability to lead a high-profile organisation in a complex and dynamic environment and communicate a sense of purpose and direction to internal and external stakeholders.
 - Drive, energy, resilience, a focus on targeted performance measurement, and a commitment to deliver concrete benefits to the Authority's customers and staff and to the broader public sector.
 - The ability to develop and communicate a strategy working with the National Statistician and to communicate this with a wide range of audiences; and the ability to work under a high level of public interest and scrutiny.
 - Team building and leadership skills, including an ability to maintain and develop a professional and effective Authority Board in which all members, executive and non-executive, are able to play their full part in the organisation's activities; integrity and a strong personal reputation are also essential.

The recruitment process

3. The vacancy as UK Statistics Authority Chair arose following the end of Sir David Norgrove's five-year term.

4. According to the information provided by the Cabinet Office, the role advertisement was launched on 22nd November 2021 on the HM Government Public Appointments website. The original closing date was 6th December 2021, but a short extension was granted, and the final closing date was midnight on 12th December 2021. The initial timeline meant that the application would only have been open for 13 days, which was met with some public criticism.¹

5. A total of 19 applications were received by the closing date, and four candidates were invited for interview. The interviews took place on 9th and 10th February 2022. The panel comprised:

- **Alex Chisholm**, Permanent Secretary, Cabinet Office;
- **Jayne-Anne Gadhia**, Lead Non-Executive Director, HM Revenue and Customs, Senior Independent Panel Member;
- **Sian Jones**, Deputy Chair, UK Statistics Authority, Representative of the Organisation;
- **Clare Lombardelli**, Director General, Chief Economic Adviser, HM Treasury, Other Panel Member; and
- **Dr Graeme Archer**, Other panel member.

6. Diversity data relating to the applicants for this role (gender, disability and ethnic background of applicants) was not provided to the Committee. In withholding this data, the Cabinet Office referred to internal guidance to justify this decision:

Departments should follow ONS guidance on statistical disclosure control to meet this requirement. Where there are fewer than 5 candidates in any given category, diversity data must not be shared as this is potentially identifiable. For example, if you have six women and four men on a shortlist - you should not give any gender information.²

7. In the past, we have received diversity data where there were a low number of applicants, for instance in relation to the recent pre-appointment hearing for the role of First Civil Service Commissioner where there were only 18 applicants. We are therefore concerned by the Cabinet Office's decision to withhold diversity data for this appointment process, for which there were 19 applicants, and by the corresponding implication of such a withholding. The Committee infers from this is that there was little diversity in the applicant pool for this role and if so that the Cabinet Office must work to address this with future public appointments processes.

¹ [Cabinet Office criticised over 'rushed' watchdog recruitment \(civilserviceworld.com\)](https://civilserviceworld.com/cabinet-office-criticised-over-rushed-watchdog-recruitment/)

² [Cabt-Office-Guidance-pre-appointment-scrutiny-of-public-appointments.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/100000/Cabt-Office-Guidance-pre-appointment-scrutiny-of-public-appointments.pdf) page

The Government's preferred candidate

8. Sir Robert Chote was Chairman of the Office for Budget Responsibility from October 2010 until October 2020, having been reappointed for a second five-year term in September 2015. Sir Robert also chaired the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s network of parliamentary budget officials and independent fiscal institutions, as well as the external advisory group of the Irish Parliamentary Budget Office. Previously, Sir Robert served as Director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies from 2002 to 2010, as an advisor to senior management at the International Monetary Fund from 1999 to 2002, as Economics Editor of the Financial Times from 1995 to 1999, and as an economics and business writer on the Independent and Independent on Sunday from 1990 to 1994.

9. Sir Robert was Chair of the Royal Statistical Society's advisory group on public data literacy. He is also a member of the Policy Committee of the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics, the advisory committee of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Centre for Macroeconomics, and the Council of Westcott House Theological College in Cambridge. He is a governor of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR).

10. Sir Robert was educated at Queens' College, Cambridge (where he is now an Honorary Fellow), at City University in London and at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University in Washington DC. He has an honorary doctorate from the University of York. The candidate's main current activities as listed in his curriculum vitae (Appendix 1) are as follows:

- 2021- Chair, Northern Ireland Fiscal Council
- 2021- Chair, Independent Review of Strategic and Low-Income Communities Funding, Church of England
- 2020- Director, Pacific Horizon Investment Trust plc

Oral evidence

11. The Committee held a pre-appointment hearing with Sir Robert Chote on 29th March 2022. This report should be read in conjunction with the transcript of that hearing, available from the Committee's webpage. In advance of the hearing, Sir Robert provided answers to a written questionnaire (Appendix 2) and a copy of his curriculum vitae (Appendix 1).

12. In oral evidence, the Committee questioned Sir Robert about his suitability for the role and his relevant prior experience. Topics covered in the session included:

- Motivation for applying for the role.
- The challenges facing the UK statistical system in the next five years.
- The Cabinet Office's forthcoming review of the UKSA.
- How to promote the responsible and transparent use of statistics.

- The dual role of the UKSA as both regulator and producer of Official Statistics.
- How best to ensure that statistical independence and impartiality are not being compromised.
- How best to implement the outstanding elements of the UKSA's five-year strategy.
- How to manage collaboration between the different administrations in order to ensure coherence of UK statistics.
- Considerations around data ethics.
- The move away from a traditional decennial census and towards the wider use of administrative data.

13. On the basis of his answers to the questions we put to Sir Robert Chote, the Committee endorses Sir Robert's appointment as the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority. We wish him well in his new role and look forward to continued engagement with him during his term.

Appendix 1: Sir Robert Chote's CV

Main current activities

2021– Chair, Northern Ireland Fiscal Council

2021– Chair, Independent Review of Strategic and Low-Income Communities Funding, Church of England

2020– Director, Pacific Horizon Investment Trust plc

Previous career experience

2010–20 Chair, Office for Budget Responsibility

2002–10 Director, Institute for Fiscal Studies

1999–2002 Adviser to the First Deputy MD, International Monetary Fund

1995–99 Economics Editor, Financial Times

1990–94 Economics and business writer, The Independent

Other current and previous responsibilities

2020– Visiting Professor in Political Economy, Kings College London

2019– Trustee, Westcott House Theological College

2017– Chair, Irish Parliamentary Budget Office Advisory Panel

2018– Policy Committee, Centre for Economic Performance, LSE

2020– Advisory Board, Warwick Manufacturing Group

2017–20 Chair, OECD Network of Independent Fiscal Institutions

2015–19 Chair, Panel on Public Data Literacy, Royal Statistical Society

2010–15 Member, Finance Committee, University of Cambridge

1998–99 Member, Statistics Advisory Committee, ONS

Declaration of relevant interest made by the candidate:

The candidate has no relevant interests to declare

Declaration of relevant political activity made by the candidate required under paragraph 9.2 of the Governance Code on Public Appointments:

The candidate has no relevant political activity to declare

Appendix 2: Pre-appointment Questionnaire

The Government's preferred candidates for roles subject to pre-appointment hearings are asked to provide answers to the questions below, alongside their CV, in advance of their oral hearing to help inform and focus the Committee's questioning.

Section 1: Motivation

1. What motivated you to apply for this role?

I have been a user of official statistics throughout my career and passionately believe that comprehensive, timely, high-quality data contribute powerfully to public understanding of the world around us and to effective policy-making. So I would relish the opportunity to help promote the quality, integrity and proper use of official statistics as Chair of UKSA. I am particularly interested in the challenge facing public institutions in combining analytical rigour, demonstrable independence, effective communication and good working relationships with policymakers – and I hope that my experience pursuing this in previous roles will be of use to UKSA.

2. What specific experiences would you bring to this role?

My engagement with official statistics began in the 1990s, writing on economics and public policy for the Independent and Financial Times as an economics reporter, editor and columnist (including directly on efforts to improve the quality of official statistics by the ONS, United Nations and International Monetary Fund).

During this period, I also served on the ONS's Statistics Advisory Committee. After working at the IMF in the early 2000s, I became Director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) where our research used a wide range of economic and social statistics from the ONS, government departments and other sources. At the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), we made extensive use of macroeconomic, public finance, demographic and administrative data from the official system as well as the private sector. As Chair of the OBR I was responsible for providing regular formal feedback to the ONS on its performance. The OBR also engaged with sub-national statistics and stakeholders, which I am now doing in greater detail as Chair of the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council (NIFC). I have also served on the advisory board of the ONS's UK Centre for the Measurement of Government Activity and as Chair of the Royal Statistical Society's advisory panel on public data literacy. I was also a member of an appointment panel for the UKSA Chair in 2011–12.

3. If appointed, are there specific areas within your new responsibilities where you will need to acquire new skills or knowledge?

Lots, I'm sure. One obvious example would be the ONS's IT strategy and the way in which the demands, opportunities and risks around managing new technology, people and processes are brought together in a systematic and coherent way – for example in the implementation of the Integrated Data Service. Relatedly, I would need to get on top of current issues in data security.

4. How were you recruited? Were you encouraged to apply, and if so, by whom?

Applying for this role had already been in my mind as I was reaching the end of my two-term limit at the OBR. When I expressed interest, no-one discouraged me!

Section 2: Personal Background

1. Do you currently or potentially have any business, financial or other non-pecuniary interests or commitments, that might give rise to the perception of a conflict of interest if you are appointed? How do you intend to resolve any potential conflicts of interests if you are appointed?

Currently my other main roles are:

Chair of the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council, focused on bringing greater transparency and independent scrutiny to the public finances of NI. I believe this would be complementary rather than conflicting, as it includes a focus on data availability, interpretation and quality at the devolved administration level and engagement with local stakeholders, including NISRA.

Non-executive Director of Pacific Horizon Investment Trust plc, which invests in Asian companies outside Japan and is managed by Baillie Gifford. There should be no conflict here. The PHIT board meets in Edinburgh, which means I would have additional regular opportunities to meet with UKSA staff and stakeholders in Scotland.

In the unlikely event that any potential conflicts were to arise from these roles or more generally – for example in my use of official statistics in any other capacity – I would ensure robust procedures were in place at Board level to recuse myself from any consideration of my own conduct. This could be placed in the hands of the Deputy Chair or another independent member or members of the Board.

2.If appointed what professional or voluntary work commitments will you continue to undertake, or do you intend to take on, alongside your new role? What impact would they have on your ability to carry out your new role?

I would propose to maintain my roles with the NIFC and PHIT for the time being. Both are part-time and involve time commitments that should be consistent with those of the UKSA role. I have various other charity trustee and not-for-profit advisory roles that I will keep under review in terms of the time commitments involved. I am also an adviser to the FMA governance consultancy, for example on helping countries to develop independent fiscal watchdogs as part of budget process reforms. But I would only undertake work for them if consistent in content and time commitment with my UKSA and other responsibilities.

Section 3: Chair of the UKSA Appointment

1. If appointed what will be your main priorities on taking up the role?

My overarching goal will be to ensure that the statistical system is seen as trusted, transparent, responsive, collaborative, impartial, innovative, ethical and efficient.

To that end, my early priorities would include:

- Getting to know and winning the respect of the Board. Asking members and those who interact it how well they think it is functioning and whether there are ways in which it could operate more effectively. Look at the skills mix and establish what we should be looking for in future members.
- Establish good working relationships with the National Statistician and the DG Regulation, with a proper framework for support and challenge. Ensure that appropriate succession planning is in place for when it is needed.
- To visit the various UKSA, ONS and OSR locations – and meet members across the GSS – so as to understand properly the various parts of the statistical system and to see where people see the strengths, weaknesses, risks and opportunities. Assess the engagement and wellbeing of staff.
- To get up to speed on the key delivery challenges and other live issues confronting the Board and the system over the coming months, including Census 2021 publication, readiness for the 2023 decision on the future of the Census, the roll-out of the Integrated Data Service and the continuing work on the Aries project to improve and modernize economic statistics.
- To ensure that I understand the resource and other constraints under which the system is operating, including its financial settlement, its cost pressures, human resource issues and its technology and data security strategy.
- To assess how the intervention policy is working and to ready myself to work with OSR to discourage and respond to future episodes of misuse. To ensure that generic lessons from such episodes are learned.
- Crucially, to engage with external stakeholders – including members of this committee – to see where they believe the system is performing strongly and weakly. To examine with them how we can ensure that UKSA is outward-looking, responsive and transparent in process and outputs.

All this said, no institution looks the same from the inside as from the outside and my priorities would depend in part on what I found when I got there.

2. What criteria will you use to judge your performance over your term of office?

As noted above, I would hope to ensure that the statistical system is seen as trusted, transparent, responsive, collaborative, impartial, innovative, ethical and efficient and that I am making the greatest contribution I can to achieving that as Chair. In terms of assessing my personal performance, I would use regular 360-degree reviews to get feedback from colleagues and stakeholders (including this committee) on my performance against the various elements of the role specification e.g. ensuring impartiality, providing strategic leadership, offering support and challenge to the National Statistician and DG Regulation, acting as an external ambassador and acting on misuse of statistics etc. In similar vein, it is good practice to undertake regular Board effectiveness reviews to ensure that we as a group are performing effectively and to our best potential and that I am contributing to that as Chair. More widely, I would look to evidence from the regular *Public confidence in*

official statistics publication and other indicators of stakeholder opinion as to the public's perceptions of the performance of the system as a whole, to which my contribution would of course only be a small part. International peer review can also be a useful tool.

3. Sir David Norgrove said that one of the challenges for his successor would be maintaining the scale of change. How would you address this?

David said this in the context of what he described as 'a revolution in statistics using administrative data', presumably referring in particular to its increasing use in population data and the potential future of the Census, as well as the Integrated Restricted Data Service. One important challenge in making further progress in this area will be to encourage departments and bodies that remain reluctant to share data to do so, both by reassuring them about the management of any risks involved and by highlighting potential benefits to them and more widely. A second challenge will be to roll out the IDS successfully and address the technical, political and ethical challenges David referred to. The ONS will need to be clear that while it may be hosting the IDS, it will not be responsible for all the data that is available through it. I will also be keen to ensure that access to the IDS and to its fruits is as widely available as possible subject to appropriate ethical and security safeguards.

More generally, UKSA should maintain the scale of change by continuing to think imaginatively about the opportunities that developments in technology and data collection present and how best the statistical system can take advantage of them to benefit public understanding, research and policy-making. Building on the momentum, nimbleness, imagination and responsiveness that the system has shown through the pandemic will be key. But, at the same time, it is important that ONS in particular does not bite off more than it can realistically hope to chew, given the resources that are available to it. It should not embark on a stream of new initiatives without ensuring that its current ones can be implemented robustly, on time and within the available budget. UKSA has a good strategy to work with, with its focus on building public trust, making data available in a secure way, enhancing understanding of social economic and environmental matters and improving communication. We will need to deliver on it in order to build on it.

4. How do you assess the public profile and reputation of the UKSA?

Realistically, the proportion of the general public who understand exactly what UKSA's functions are with respect to the different arms of the statistical system is always going to be relatively small. Of those who do, my sense is that confidence in the institution and the framework is strong – even among some of those who at the outset were wary of having statistical production and regulation under a single umbrella. I sense little appetite for reopening the 2007 legislation, but I will of course be interested in the conclusions of the forthcoming review.

Public awareness of the ONS is inevitably higher than for UKSA per se and public confidence in its outputs seems strong, helped perhaps in part by the higher profile of ONS statisticians in presenting and explaining new data in the media and online as well as the significant improvements in the ONS website over recent years. The Covid Infection Survey has significantly raised ONS's profile during the pandemic and most stakeholders I have spoken to have been very impressed (sometimes surprised) by the nimbleness and imagination that the institution has shown in responding to the rapidly evolving needs of

the public and policymakers. The collection of data for the Census has also brought ONS more to the forefront of people's minds and the high response rate suggests confidence in the likely use of it. The publication of the Census outputs will further enhance ONS's public profile over the coming months, but clearly involves presentational challenges given the need to interpret and adjust data collected in the midst of the pandemic.

The public is also aware of UKSA and OSR through their efforts to correct significant misuse or misrepresentation of official statistics by ministers and others. Surveys suggest that interventions of this sort are valued by the public as a contribution to honesty and accuracy in public discourse, although judgements regarding how often and how forcefully to intervene are inevitably difficult.

5. If appointed, how do you plan to maintain the independence, trustworthiness and impartiality of the UK Statistics Authority?

I would do everything I can to ensure that the Board is composed of members with a record of and reputation for integrity, and who encompass a broad range of skills, expertise and backgrounds. I would work to encourage a collegiate atmosphere in which all Board members can contribute effectively in setting the strategic direction of the statistical system and in offering support and challenge as required to the executives of ONS and OSR and to the GSS. As noted above, it is important to continue measuring public confidence in these attributes robustly and to try to understand and learn from the reasons for any changes.

I would respond robustly to any attempts by ministers or others to exert inappropriate pressure or influence on any part of the statistical system, including if necessary by bringing concerns to the attention of this committee. Legislative and other formal foundations for independence are important, but transparency day-to-day both in process and outputs is key to securing and maintaining public confidence in that independence – including through regular interaction with PACAC and other stakeholders. When difficult or potentially controversial judgements have to be made, UKSA should be on the front foot in explaining the rationale for its decisions and responsive to outside questions and critiques.

Formal minutes

Tuesday 29 March 2022

Members present:

Mr David Jones

Tom Randall

John Stevenson

Karin Smyth

In the absence of the Chair, Mr David Jones was called to the chair.

Draft Report (*The Appointment of Sir Robert Chote as Chair of the UK Statistics Authority*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 13 read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Eighth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order 134.

[Adjourned to a date and time to be fixed by the Chair.]

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Tuesday 29 March 2022

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

[Q1-38](#)

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Session 2021–22

Number	Title	Reference
1st	The role and status of the Prime Minister's Office	HC 67
2nd	Covid-Status Certification	HC 42
3rd	Propriety of Governance in Light of Greensill: An Interim Report	HC 59
4th	Appointment of William Shawcross as Commissioner for Public Appointments	HC 662
5th	The Elections Bill	HC 597
6th	The appointment of Rt Hon the Baroness Stuart of Edgbaston as First Civil Service Commissioner	HC 984
7th	Coronavirus Act 2020 Two Years On	HC 978
1st Special	Government transparency and accountability during Covid 19: The data underpinning decisions: Government's response to the Committee's Eighth Report of Session 2019–21	HC 234
2nd Special	Covid-Status Certification: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report	HC 670
3rd Special	The role and status of the Prime Minister's Office: Government Response to the Committee's First Report	HC 710
4th Special	The Elections Bill: Government Response to the Committee's Fifth Report	HC 1133

Session 2019–21

Number	Title	Reference
1st	Appointment of Rt Hon Lord Pickles as Chair of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments	HC 168
2nd	Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman Scrutiny 2018–19	HC 117
3rd	Delivering the Government's infrastructure commitments through major projects	HC 125
4th	Parliamentary Scrutiny of the Government's handling of Covid-19	HC 377
5th	A Public Inquiry into the Government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic	HC 541
6th	The Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011	HC 167

Number	Title	Reference
7th	Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman Scrutiny 2019–20	HC 843
8th	Government transparency and accountability during Covid 19: The data underpinning decisions	HC 803