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INDEPENDENCE – AN ISSUE OF TRUST

Submitted by Office for National Statistics, United Kingdom ¹

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Only a third of people in Britain trust official statistics. This is a proportion that has remained intransigent since 2004. An European Union report places the UK 27th out of the 27 EU members when it comes to the public level of trust in its official statistics.
2. Are we hanging our heads in shame? Not at all. Peer review shows UK statistics to be among the most compliant with the high standards across Europe. There is very little wrong with the way UK official statisticians produce high-quality fit-for-purpose statistics. So what's the problem? British people are naturally very sceptical of authority and the motives of its politicians. Equally, public opinion is fed by media that encourage a low level of trust in politicians and the statistics they use to support their policies.
3. The issue is not that the statistics are not fit to trust, it is that there is a public perception that they are manipulated for political purpose. This perception is deep-seated and ingrained in the public consciousness. The public seem unable to separate the fair and accurate production of the statistics from the use that is made of them after their publication. So what can be done about it?
4. There is no doubt that the results of the survey are deeply disquieting. In 2000 the Government introduced measures to create a standard quality mark for official statistics and a non-statutory but independent body called the Statistics Commission to oversee standards. However, it fell short of offering the national statistical institute – the Office for National Statistics – an independent role. The level of mistrust proved intransigent and the Government finally decided in 2005 to legislate to make official statistics independent of ministerial control. The Act came in to force in April 2008 and created a new body called the UK Statistics Authority that oversees and assesses the quality of all official statistics and is the parent body for ONS. The UK Statistics Authority does not report to a Minister of the Government but directly to the Houses of Parliament via a committee with representatives from all political parties.
5. Statistics in the UK now face a key question. Can this new independence pave the way for a new era of better trust in official statistics and what more needs to be done.

II. THE PERCEPTION OF POLITICAL INTERFERENCE

6. The case that there is political interference in the production of official statistics in the UK is weak. Nevertheless, if the public perceives there is interference then the government and the NSI must do all they can to demonstrate plainly that there is not. It must demonstrate that it behaves ethically and independently.

7. The ONS, in conjunction with the former Statistics Commission, carried out three surveys into the public confidence in official statistics. The findings of the most recent, from last year and published in March, still make chastening reading:

- A third of people (33 per cent) thought figures were not generally accurate
- Nearly six in ten (57 per cent) disagreed that figures were produced without political interference
- A similar proportion (58 per cent) disagreed that the government uses figures honestly
- Of those that disagreed that figures were accurate nearly half (47 per cent) included a view that figures were manipulated for political purposes

8. Young single people, those with a higher education qualification and those in managerial and professional occupations were more likely than others to trust official statistics. The associations were not strong but possibly suggestive. These are the people most likely to use 'raw' official statistics directly for research or business. A leap of supposition could say that most of those who don't trust our statistics are those in less direct contact with them and whose knowledge is fed by third parties – mainly what they see and hear on TV and radio or read in newspapers.

9. Nevertheless, it supports a theory that the chief reason people mistrust statistics is a basic fear of numbers and a lack of understanding of what they might say. If we don't address issues of 'statistical literacy' in the wider adult population, little we do to demonstrate independence and integrity will influence that basic lack of trust.

III. THE STATISTICS AND REGISTRATION SERVICE ACT 2007

10. Before the legislation, there were a number of features in the UK statistical system that differed from most other NSIs across the world.

- Non statutory basis: UK statistics relied on a patchwork of legislation that gave a mandate to collect official statistics and these were supported by various frameworks and concordats
- Centralisation: curiously the UK had both centralised and decentralised elements to its statistical service. The ONS is the centralised NSI overseeing the Government Statistical Service (GSS), and sets statistical policy and professional standards; however . . .
- Decentralisation: 80 per cent of UK professional statisticians in the GSS are embedded in 38 other government departments and agencies. It means statisticians are close to their policy colleagues and are paid by the departments but this could create conflicts of loyalty.
- Devolution: responsibility for the production of statistics relating to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland lies with their devolved authorities

11. The National Statistics system was launched in 2000. This created a new body – the Statistics Commission, the National Statistics Code of Practice and a new official – the National Statistician. A kitemark for the quality and standard of official statistics and the reporting accountability was introduced. This set and created high standards but did not dispel the aura of public mistrust.

12. So the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 was introduced and has a number of features:

- It creates an new independent authority accountable direct to Parliament and whose objective is to promote and safeguard:
 - The production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good; and
 - The quality, good practice and comprehensiveness of official statistics.
- It extended to include the devolved administrations.

- It established key posts:
 - The Authority's membership including a chairman;
 - The National Statistician – the head of the ONS and the Authority's chief professional adviser. No longer reporting to Ministers; and,
 - The Head of Assessment – the Authority's principle adviser on assessment of the quality and integrity of key statistics.
- The Authority monitors and reports on all official statistics whether or not they are deemed National Statistics.
- The Authority governs the ONS.

13. The Act also had a number of other features:

- Pre-release arrangements: this has long been a bone of contention in the UK, but the legislation stopped short of giving the Authority complete control. A consultation has taken place and the government is proposing secondary legislation to restrict the number of people with access and the length of time they have it.
- Any disclosure of personal confidential information is a criminal offence.
- Data-sharing: the Act allows data-sharing between public authorities and the Statistics Authority but only for statistical purposes.
- A new Code of Practice

IV CODES OF PRACTICE

14. Codes of practice underpin the UK statistical system. The ONS and other government departments, corporately or as individuals, are expected to comply. The current National Statistics Code of Practice was born in 2000. It sets a standard of best practice to which all UK official statisticians are expected to work and against which all official statistics are measured.

15. Its roots are in the original UK Official Statistics Code of Practice with further inspiration from the UN Fundamental Principles of Statistics, the UN Handbook on Governance and codes from many other NSIs. The Code is further supported by 12 protocols to provide practical and managerial guidance.

16. The European Statistics Code of Practice was published in 2005 and sets out the governance and procedural standards to which NSIs are expected to adhere. It includes 15 high-level principles and 77 associated indicators. All EU countries are being assessed by peer review. UK was assessed in September 2007 and fully complied with nearly all of the criteria.

17. The current National Statistics Code of Practice will be superseded when the Authority produces its own new Code in due course. The Statistics Commission (now defunct) to help the new Authority proposed a revised code that incorporated 10 high-level principles supported by 68 supporting practices.

V STATISTICS PUBLICATION HUB

18. One of the key elements of independence and improving public trust has been creating more pronounced and obvious daylight between the publication of official statistics and their use by politicians and others with a partial point to make.

19. It is clear that most members of the public only see the statistics once they have been re-packed or 'spun' by politicians and their advisers. To counter this all National Statistics are to be published through an independent 'hub' that is managed by the UK Statistics Authority. The hub

isn't actually the repository for the complete datasets but a brief summary of the information and a link to the authoring department's website and release held on a standard statistics release page.

20. On the hub, the releases are displayed alphabetically to avoid any suggestion of outside influence in the ordering of the releases. It is designed not just for the media and experts but also for the general public. Text must be in plain English with succinct titles that clearly describe the statistics in a non-technical way.

IV WILL INDEPENDENCE DELIVER GREATER TRUST?

21. Independence and ethical behaviour must be at the core of any platform to build trust. It is a simple truth that to be trusted you must show that you are trustworthy and you must also show trust in others. In the UK, however, the level of scepticism has reached such a depth that institutional change in itself will not achieve the desired shift in attitude.

22. An example of the problem is the way the UK government has used performance indicators to monitor many of the services it provides. Performance indicators can be valuable in assessing what works well and what doesn't, and what institutions or individuals perform well and which don't. However, a study by the Royal Statistical Society (RSS) said: "Performance monitoring done well is broadly productive. But, done badly, it can be very costly and not merely ineffective but harmful or even destructive of morale, reputation and the public services."

23. The RSS wanted much wider consideration of the ethics and cost-efficiency of performance monitoring; independent scrutiny to safeguard wider-than-government public interest and methodological rigour; reporting of measures of uncertainty to avoid over-interpretation and false-labelling; protocols to ensure standards are met; and better statistical designs.

24. Just before being disbanded the Statistics Commission produced a report on 'Value and Trust' which makes many important points. It draws attention to the different interpretations of the word 'independent' that have been used in the build up to the launch of the new Act. There are several possible interpretations of the word and thus scope for confusion and argument.

25. It points to the fact that the new Authority is not strictly independent from government because it remains a non-ministerial department and staff of the NSI and GSS all remain civil servants bound by many civil service rules and conventions. It also adds that while the Authority is independent of Ministers, many decisions will still be taken by Ministers including decisions to hold a Census and funding.

26. It says the Authority must demonstrate its independence: "The Authority will need to do more than just assert its independence. It will need to convince external bodies, not least the news media that is acts independently of (while being fully informed about) the wishes of Ministers, Government and producer bodies."

27. As with many things, communication is at the heart of, if not the actual key to improving the situation. Examples include improving access to statistics via the web – the introduction of the statistical publication hub is a vital first step. As the Commission says: "Even well-explained and relevant statistics are of limited use if users do not know how and where to find them."

28. We have to be prepared to communicate the existence of information. The ONS website still struggles to keep up with the weight of great information it contains and more is being done to improve accessibility.

29. Clearer explanation of the information produced is probably even more useful to users than increasing the range. In the past there has always been a tendency to respond to requests for more information by loading the user with even more data rather than explaining in simple and clear language what the existing material might mean. The Statistics Commission even recommended that more scarce resources should be spent on publishing and communication and less on data collection.

30. Some statistics are perfectly adequate for the limited purpose of what they measure but they do not measure what many users actually want. For example in the UK current there is huge public scepticism about the Consumer Prices Index. This measures an average in the increase of prices across a big range of products and conforms to the requirements of the EU. But individuals and the media want a more individualised and personal rate. Everyone is seeing big rises in the cost of food and fuel so how can inflation only be 2.5 per cent? The consequence has been that nearly all the popular newspapers have taken to producing their own selective Cost of Living Index which immediately damages and undermines confidence and trust in the official figures.

31. A key driver could be allowing statistical priorities to be driven by the needs of society as a whole rather than solely by the demands and needs of government. Perhaps there could be more trust if the professional statisticians engaged the public more directly and were less vulnerable to the political ripples this might cause. The leading producers of statistics need to be less faceless; they need to be publicly recognised. People are far more likely to trust and respect the integrity of some they know of and some who speaks honestly and with integrity, than nameless people who whisper from the shadows.

32. Statisticians must not only act independently but be seen to be independent. While it is necessary for public trust that the management of official statistics should conform to accepted standards of probity, it is not sufficient in itself. Transparency, accessibility and clarity are all equally important.

Reference:

Official Statistics: Value and Trust (report no. 38, January 2008) Statistics Commission
