
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Professor David Hand
President
Royal Statistical Society
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Dear Professor Hand

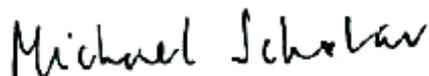
Thank you for your letter of 5 January and for the list of issues that the Royal Statistical Society would like the Authority to address.

I would like first to thank you for taking the trouble to commit these views to paper. This has been of great value to us and has supported discussion by the Authority Board, and by our Committee on Official Statistics chaired by Sir Roger Jowell. I hope that through this exchange of letters, the RSS and the Authority will be setting in train a structured dialogue which will indeed develop into a strong and purposeful alliance.

The enclosed notes respond on the specific issues that you have raised. You draw particular attention to the general points at 1 to 7. The Authority recognises the importance of these and whilst there are some observations on specific aspects in the enclosed notes, we would welcome the opportunity for further round-table discussion of them between the RSS and the Authority. I will ask the Authority secretariat to speak to your staff about the best way to arrange this, and also to arrange regular meetings of ourselves and the National Statistician. I think these meetings will be very important.

May I reciprocate your good wishes for 2009. It is already shaping up to be a year of substantial statistical developments and the advice of the RSS on any of these will be very welcome.

Yours sincerely



Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Statistics Authority response to issues raised by the RSS

1. The needs of users and other stakeholders – We recognise and endorse the thrust of these points. You say that the Authority should start a programme of engagement with all stakeholders. We agree. The mechanisms by which this can best be done are something we want to consider carefully. We need to take account of, and not duplicate, the many forms of engagement that already exist across the Government Statistical Service and some that are at the planning stage. We also need to take account of the developing role of the Statistics Users Forum and the channels through which government user requirements, and indeed resources, are funnelled within government itself. With these considerations in mind, we are starting work on a Monitoring Review with the working title ‘Strengthening the User Voice’ which we expect to report in the second half of 2009. The work on this review will be guided by a project board under the chairmanship of Sir Roger Jowell. We will write to you separately seeking a nomination from RSS and SUF respectively to sit on that project board.

You further suggest that we should give advance notice of topics the Authority intends to consider at its meetings, and thus give stakeholders the opportunity to submit issues and arguments. We would be happy to share agendas for forthcoming meetings of the Committee on Official Statistics with officers of the RSS – though we would note that these agendas are usually only known 2-3 weeks in advance and can be subject to change. We would also welcome any suggestions from the RSS on matters it believes the Authority should be discussing. We will ensure these are accommodated on future meeting agendas.

We will be looking further at the roles and membership of key committees in the course of this year, including whether there would be benefit in inviting the participation of a wider range of individuals (including some from the RSS) in those meetings. We will also be considering holding further events in 2009 at which stakeholders would be invited to meet members of the Authority Board. We are not at present proposing to hold any of our regular committee meetings in public.

2. The need for proper planning – The Authority Board decided in January not to proceed immediately with a Monitoring Review on longer-term planning arrangements but rather to take the work forward in a different way (we will update our website shortly). The National Statistician is putting in place a new structure of cross-government groups to lead statistical planning which will include engagement with SUF user groups; and, as part of that, will lead a high-level ‘horizon-scanning’ exercise to look at the country’s longer term statistical requirements. A report on this will then be submitted to the Authority Board and, at that point, we will consider whether to take any further steps to explore the issues that this exercise highlights. We will arrange for more information on the steps we are taking to be provided to you. We would also be happy to discuss how the RSS might best make an input to both the horizon-scanning and regular planning work.

3. Communication and presentation – You suggest that the Authority should review progress in improving communication both via the National Statistics website and more generally. As you note, the Code of Practice covers this area in some detail; and that means that our programme of Assessment Reports, the first of which should be published in the spring and which should thereafter gather momentum, will also pay close attention to communication and presentation in each area of statistics. It is possible that there will also be broader messages requiring a co-ordinated approach – we have already demonstrated our commitment on such matters by making a major investment in the National Statistics Publication Hub. We agree that steadily improving communication is fundamental to the future of UK official statistics and we will certainly be planning to review progress on a

regular basis building on, for example, our recently published Note on the Presentation of Statistics in First Releases and Elsewhere¹

4. Separation of statistical information from policy comment – You argue that an educational effort is needed across government. We believe that Sir Gus O`Donnell's letter of 16 January to the chair of the House of Commons Public Administration Committee², which will be the basis of discussion at the highest level in the civil service, is helpful in laying the ground for progress in this area. In particular, the three lessons that Sir Gus highlights (the need to raise civil servants' and advisors' awareness of the importance the Government attaches to observance the Code of Practice; the need to develop principles relating to numerical information derived from administrative sources; and the need to involve statisticians at an early stage in the production of publications that contain official statistics) will do much to reinforce the message, and the Authority will be looking to build on those in the course of 2009.

5. The need for statisticians to understand the subject they are measuring - We support this point which echoes a statement of practice in the Code of Practice³. We would note however that, as you acknowledge, one of the strengths of the UK's decentralised statistical system is that statisticians in government departments are often very expert in their subject fields and those in ONS are expert in fields such as macro-economic analysis and demographics. However, we also recognise that at least some of the statisticians in government would benefit from further opportunities to expand their subject knowledge and develop links with experts. With that in mind, we would be glad to discuss further the role that the RSS itself might play in helping the GSS to meet this need, for example in helping the Authority identify suitable experts to provide advice.

6. Statistical coherence between the four UK administrations - We agree with this observation – which, again, echoes a statement in the Code⁴ - and would note that new arrangements for statistical co-ordination between the four administrations have been established by the National Statistician in recent months and will be developed further over the year ahead. The Authority Board will be looking at the effectiveness of the new arrangements in due course.

7. Defining National and other official statistics – We are taking a number of steps in this area. The Authority has now published its report *Priorities for Designation as National Statistics* which, as well as nominating certain sets of statistics as priorities to be brought within the ambit of National Statistics, lists a large number of other sets of official statistics which we will consider again if the responsible government departments do not seek their assessment in the meantime.

The question over official statistics (those that are not National Statistics) is not so much one of definition as properly identifying the point at which raw data or management information should be treated as official statistics – and thus handled in accordance with the Code of

¹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring-and-assessment-notes/monitoring---assessment-note-2-2009.pdf>

² <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/reports---correspondence/correspondence/publication-of-statistics-relating-to-knife-crime.pdf>

³ Principle 7, practice 6 – Ensure that appropriately skilled people are employed in the statistical production process. Use an appropriate competence framework to set the requirements of statistical posts and the development needs of staff, and support staff in developing their statistical, management and subject area knowledge.

⁴ Principle 4, practice 6 – Promote comparability within the UK and internationally by, for example, adopting common standards, concepts, sampling frames, questions, definitions, statistical units and classifications.

Practice. We will be producing a statement within the next few weeks on the Authority's views on such questions and under what circumstances such figures might be released.

8. Inadequacy of population and migration statistics – The National Statistician has initiated a cross-departmental programme of work to improve population and migration statistics and there is also now a ministerial group overseeing developments in this area. We are planning to publish an interim monitoring report on the progress being made, and the extent to which current plans meet user needs, at the end of March.

9. The need for a national address register – We agree that the issue needs to be tackled with vigour. Although ONS is preparing the address information it needs for the Census, the longer term solution is likely to lie with some or all of the other bodies you mention. We believe that a single address register will be an important component in the delivery of many government objectives, and we will do all we can to encourage Ministers to take forward for the longer term the development work that ONS is currently undertaking.

10. 2011 Census – We look forward to a dialogue with the RSS about the planning of, and preparations for, the 2011 Census. ONS and the devolved administrations have begun work looking at options beyond 2011 and the Authority will ensure that those options are fully considered, recognising that a decision on whether to plan for a Census in 2021 will need to be taken soon after the 2011 Census is conducted. An RSS/Statistics Users Forum session on user needs is being planned for May 2009.

11. Housing market – Following an exchange of letters with the Secretary of State for Justice⁵, the National Statistician will be chairing discussions on how to ensure that all the information on the housing market that will be of value to the public and policy-makers is brought together and well explained. The Authority has asked for a report on these matters in March.

12. Measurement of inflation – It is too soon to make a definitive statement on the scope of our forthcoming review of the communication of measures of inflation but it is likely that the review will look at the differences in coverage and methods of compilation between the different inflation measures currently produced and the extent to which these measures are perceived by users to meet their requirements.

13. Retail sales series – We agree that, in view of ongoing concerns about different messages about retail sales, it is important to check that there are no unidentified problems with the official series. ONS have undertaken some further work in this area and will publish a short report in the context of the documentation for the planned change to introduce annual chain linking of the retail sales index. They expect to publish the methods documentation in April and publish the series on a chain linked basis from May. They will also be publishing some analysis of the current series and the new one in the Economic and Labour Market Review. The Authority will keep the need for an independent review under consideration.

14 and 15. Environmental statistics and crime statistics – the points raised will be covered in forthcoming Monitoring Reports. The review of barriers to trust in crime statistics is now being established under the chairmanship of Partha Dasgupta and we will invite RSS involvement in that project shortly.

⁵http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/ukxa/Letter_from_Sir_Michael_Scholar_to_Jack_Straw_MP_2_2122008.pdf
http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/ukxa/Letter_from_Jack_Straw_MP_to_Sir_Michael_Scholar_1_2012009.pdf

16. **League tables** – The publication of the basic data from which league tables, say of schools or hospitals, can readily be compiled is largely a direct consequence of that information being available in government – the Code of Practice would not permit the suppression of such data. However, we recognise that the public presentation and explanation of such material is a matter of concern and also that the Code requires that the quality and reliability of statistics should be explained in relation to the range of potential uses, and we will explore this via the Assessment process initially.

17 to 19. **Education statistics, Adequacy of regional economic statistics, Atkinson Report** - We will add each of these to the list of ‘candidates’ for future Monitoring Reports and note the priority that the RSS attaches to an examination of the issues.

20. **Coverage of internet transactions** – We agree that it is important to keep our statistical coverage and analysis up to date with ‘new economy’ developments. ONS led a Eurostat funded project on ‘ICT Impacts’ to review practice in different countries on measuring the impact of information, communication and technology.

21. **Use of administrative records for statistical purposes** – We would be pleased to discuss your concerns about Protocol 3 of the Code of Practice. More generally, you will be interested to know that in collaboration with DCSF, the first Data Sharing Order has been passed in Parliament to give ONS access to School Census data to improve migration data and further data sharing opportunities are being pursued.

22 to 24. (Other) **Issues relating to general statistical practice** – We agree with the importance of these points and will make sure they are examined within the framework of the Assessment programme. We would also be happy to consider any specific instances where the RSS believes there is a particular problem.

25. **Pressures on ONS and the relocation to Newport** – we note the RSS’s concern about the pressures on ONS and the potential loss of expertise which might arise as a consequence of the relocation of posts. The Authority is aware of the risks and these issues are being actively managed by ONS with a view to finding the right balance between the drive for efficiency and innovation on the one hand and the need to maintain expertise and standards of service on the other. The National Statistician, the ONS Board and the Authority Board all share responsibility for oversight of these issues and we are keeping them under close review.

26. **Statistics to serve democracy** – we understand your suggestion to be that we should consider whether, when a major election or referendum takes place, it would be in the public interest for special statistical publications to be produced that would inform the public objectively on the issues. There are, as you recognise, some major obstacles to such an approach and whilst you identify one international example, we suspect that such examples are relatively few and far between. Nonetheless, we would welcome further discussion about the scope, and need, for perhaps rather basic statistical products at the time of elections.