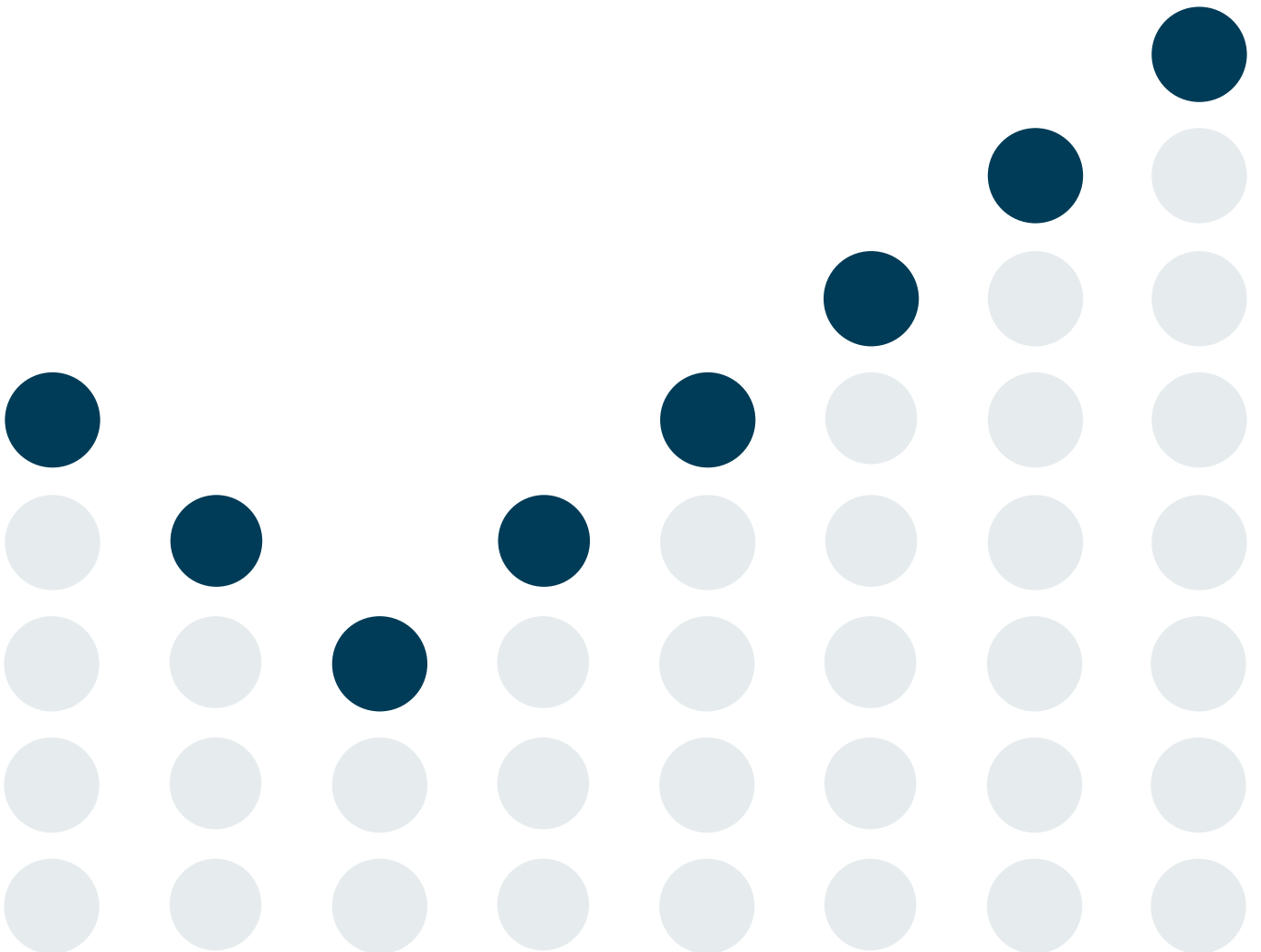




Office for
Statistics Regulation

Office for Statistics Regulation Annual Report 2023/24



Foreword

This time last year, I reported to you about a small team delivering a high volume of outputs with an impressive range of outcomes. I also shared with you that we were ambitious to do more to support the public good of statistics by being more systemic and public-focused.

This year, the productivity of my team has continued to inspire me, but to achieve our ambitions, we have made a fundamental shift in how we operate. This report really demonstrates how we have moved away from delivering high volumes of small compliance checks against the Code to focus our resource on the big strategically important topics – for example, we have delivered a programme of assessments focused on the quality of economic statistics, and focusing on the transformation of the statistical system, including population statistics.

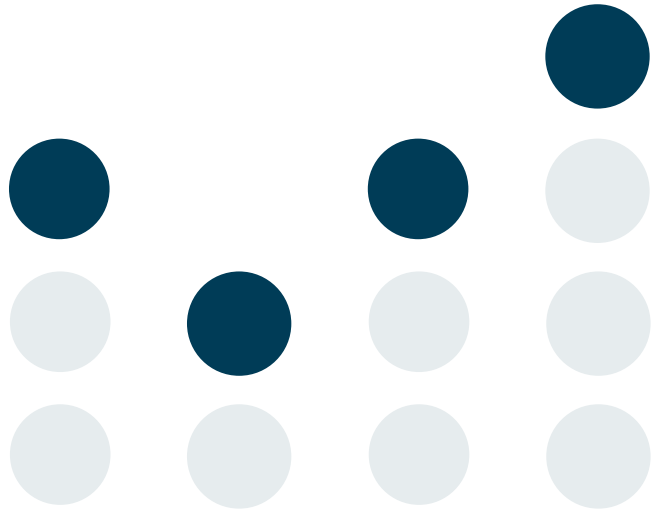
We've made important interventions and shared a broad range of guidance and as we have pressed forwards with our Intelligent Transparency campaign, it has been very positive to see how well the messages are resonating with people. Of course, shortly after the end of this financial year, the UK's General Election campaign started. We continued to stand up for appropriate use of statistics during the campaign. In May, I set out the guidance and support available for navigating statistics during an election campaign and the expectations we have as the regulator for an open, clear, and accessible approach to the release and use of data and statistics. We also published a [series of explainers](#) on key topics that featured in election campaigns for to support members of the public seeing data in debate, and made public statements on issues including the performance of schools, future tax rises, house building performance, and NHS waiting times. And we have brought together our Election work on an [Election web page](#).

Looking into the future, we have a lot more we want to achieve – for example, continuing to advocate for data sharing and linkage. To get a good sense of where we want to see improvements from producers of statistics and data, I would encourage you to read our latest annual State of the Statistical System report alongside this report. This report will form a key input into the forthcoming Statistics Assembly, which was the main recommendation of the Lievesley review – a review which endorsed the role we play as statistics regulator and whose recommendations we warmly welcome. We look forward to implementing the recommendations of the Lievesley review, and to continuing to support the public's right to have access to trustworthy, high quality, and valuable statistics.



Ed Humpherson

Director General, Office for Statistics Regulation



Our vision

Statistics should serve the public good.

What do we mean by serving the public good? Statistics published by public sector bodies should be produced in a trustworthy way, be of high quality and provide value by answering people's questions. In this way, they promote accountability, help people make choices and inform policy.

Statistics are also part of the lifeblood of democratic debate.

Statistics should therefore serve a wide range of users. When they meet the needs of these users, they serve the public good. But they do not always fulfil these ambitions. Their value can be harmed through poor production, a lack of relevance and coherence and misuse.

It is our role as a regulator to minimise these problems. We have observed the increasing relevance of our Trustworthiness, Quality and Value approach to statistics regulation. By championing high standards, we uphold public confidence in statistics that serve the public good.

What we do

The Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) provides independent regulation of all official statistics produced in the UK and aims to enhance public confidence in the trustworthiness, quality and value of statistics produced by government.

We are the regulatory arm of the UK Statistics Authority, being independent from government ministers and separate from producers of statistics, including the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

We regulate by setting the standards that official statistics must meet in the Code of Practice for Statistics. We ensure that producers of official statistics uphold these standards by conducting assessments against the Code. Those statistics which meet the standards are given Accredited Official Statistics status, indicating that they meet the highest standards of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value. We also report publicly on systemwide issues and on the way that statistics are being used, celebrating when the standards are upheld and challenging publicly when they are not.

Longer-term outcomes that we seek

How statistics are produced

We uphold the trustworthiness, quality and value of statistics and data used as evidence.

How statistics are used

We protect the role of statistics in public debate.

How statistics are valued

We develop a better understanding of the public good of statistics.

Our 2023/24 priorities (now extended into 2024/25)

Support and challenge producers to innovate, collaborate and build resilience

We will champion and support statistics producers to build on the innovation, collaboration and resilience they have displayed during the last few years. Our regulatory activities will see us promoting the sharing, linking and reuse of data. We will support statistics producers to maximise the value of their data and statistics through increased innovation and more collaboration. We will also focus on activities which will support statistics producers to develop and build resilience.

Champion the effective communication of statistics to support society's key information needs

We will continue to champion the transparent release and use of data and statistics and argue for accurate and timely statistics to be available on the topics that matter most. Our regulatory activities will see us focus on how statistics

producers communicate uncertainty, and how they mitigate and manage misuse of statistics and data. We will also focus our work on activities which support statistics producers to engage with, understand and meet the varying needs of a wide range of users of data and statistics.

Build partnerships to champion good practice principles for data and analysis that inform the public

We will continue our work with organisations and with teams within government departments, who are not official statistics producers, but who produce and communicate data and analysis that are used in the public domain. These types of data and analysis are often likely to be perceived and used by others as if they are official statistics. We will continue our engagement with data influencers and data users to support us with this focus.

Our governance

Our Director General reports directly to the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority. To ensure independence from ONS, the Director General Regulation has no reporting line to the National Statistician and is an Additional Accounting Officer with budgetary responsibility for the OSR.

OSR's business plan is agreed by the [Regulation Committee](#), which comprises the Director General, OSR and a number of Non-Executive Directors from the UK Statistics Authority. The Committee also commends a supporting budget for the delivery of the business plan to the Authority Board.

Drawing on our work as the UK's statistics regulator, this report shares our views on the performance and challenges facing the statistical system, highlights areas of progress and innovation, and sets out our recommendations for advancing the system.

The State of the UK Statistical System

This annual report reflects on our performance as a regulator in 2023/24. Each year we also publish a more outward-focused report about the UK statistical system which we would encourage you to read to fully understand our work and our ambitions for the public good of statistics. The State of the Statistical System 2024, report will be published in July 2024.

Drawing on our work as the UK's statistics regulator, the report shares our views on the performance and challenges facing the statistical system, highlights areas of progress and innovation, and sets out our recommendations for advancing the system. Key themes for 2024 include the demand for new statistics and insights; ensuring quality; improvement and innovation; and effective communication.

Our story of 2023/24 in numbers

Support and challenge producers to innovate, collaborate and build resilience

9 Assessment Reports published

including a new series that focuses more intensively on the quality of economic statistics

3 new accreditations of Official Statistics, 3 confirmations of accredited status and 1 reaccreditation

We also had 2 temporary suspensions of accreditation (1 now lifted)

18 Compliance Checks and Rapid Reviews

delivered across the statistics system – for example, Winter Covid Infection Survey

6 strategic reviews progressed on important topics

including statistics on gender identity, international migration estimates and mental health statistics

We ran 18 events with over 1100 attendees

(remote and in-person) from a range of audiences to inform our Review of the Code of Practice for Statistics. 51 organisations and individuals also responded to our call for evidence

Champion the effective communication of statistics to support society's key information needs

231 casework cases considered
by OSR and the UK Statistics Authority

Just over half of cases were generated by members of the public
Parliament, media and academics engaged regularly with us and around a sixth of cases were generated internally

Of the 124 cases raised with us by members of the public, we recorded 38 as being duplicate concerns,
relating to doctors pay, knife crime, the Asylum backlog, housing maladministration judgements and the report into the Tees Valley regeneration. There were also clusters of cases we recorded as individual concerns, as they raised unique concerns about the statistics despite the topic being consistent, these clusters related to 20Mph Limit introduction in Wales, the presentation of Council Tax increases, Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) impact reporting and the Census questions on Sex and Gender.

Average time to close a case - median 14 days (-13) and mean 22 days (-4)
Reduced compared with the previous year

Build partnerships to champion good practice principles for data and analysis that inform the public

16 organisations

(outside of official statistics producers) have now published statements of voluntary compliance with the Code of Practice for Statistics

4th annual award for Statistical Excellence in Trustworthiness, Quality and Value given out

in partnership with the Royal Statistical Society – 2023 Award was to Fable Data for their Data for Good programme

21 blogs published

including guest blogs – sharing insights to inspire good practice

11 pieces of regulatory research, development and guidance published

including our Areas of Research Interest and an update on Data Sharing and Linkage for the Public Good

Our performance

Support and challenge producers to innovate, collaborate and build resilience

The change we want to see

We will champion and support statistics producers to build on the innovation, collaboration and resilience they have displayed during the last few years. Our regulatory activities will see us promoting the sharing, linking and reuse of data. We will support statistics producers in maximising the value of their data and statistics through increased innovation and collaboration. We will also focus on activities which will support statistics producers in developing and building resilience.

2023/24 highlights

At the beginning of 2023/24, we said that we wanted to be more consistent in balancing our responsiveness with applying strategic foresight and investing in deep dives – with a particular focus on the scrutiny of economic statistics and issues of quality.

Throughout 2023, we continued to respond to a high public interest in statistics. OSR's work covered a huge range of issues, such as confirming the [National Statistics Designation of Scotland's Census](#), [Data Linkage](#), looking into statistics relating to the [Welsh Government 20 mph speed limit](#) and confirming the [National Statistics Accreditation of Statutory Homelessness in England](#). At the same time, we have shifted our priorities away from delivering high volumes of compliance checks towards more strategic programmes of work. For example, we started to deliver a new series of assessments that focus on the quality of economic statistics.

We have also established programmes to oversee the Office for National Statistics (ONS) as it seeks to transform key statistical outputs including the [Labour Force Survey](#) and [International Migration](#).

In our [State of the Statistical System Report](#), published in 2023, we reported that the UK's statistical system continues to perform strongly, responding flexibly to different social and economic issues. But we also noted that the system was experiencing increasing resource challenges. We committed to actions which will support statistics producers in developing and building resilience, for example, a [blog series](#) with practical advice on balancing scarce resources across a portfolio of statistics.

To ensure that the Code of Practice for Statistics remains relevant and able to effectively support producers as they and the external environment evolve, we

conducted a [review of the Code](#). We publicly invited feedback on all aspects of the Code, alongside a programme of external events and stakeholder engagement, to gather evidence on how the Code can be further strengthened.

Illustrations of how we are delivering impact

Economic Statistics: Following the end of the UK's membership of the European Statistical System, we have developed our approach to provide continued assurance that the UK statistical system produces high-quality, internationally comparable economic statistics. Our Spotlight on Quality programme has significantly enhanced our ability to assure confidence in the quality of economic statistics.

In July we published our first pilot review on [Producer Price Inflation](#) using a newly developed assessment framework that focuses more intensively on the quality of economic statistics. We identified eight actions that are needed to improve the quality of PPIs, seeing the issues with the samples of the three statutory surveys used to collect most price data as the biggest threat to the quality of the statistics. ONS published its [action plan](#) detailing how it intends to address our requirements in October.

In November we published our findings on [revisions of estimates of UK GDP](#). We found that ONS's approach to revisions is appropriate and well managed, concluding that the more extreme criticism that ONS received was misplaced. We highlighted requirements to improve public understanding of the uncertainty surrounding GDP estimates and outlined a need for faster access to data sources when producing these estimates.

In January we published our second pilot quality-focused assessment on [profitability of UK companies and gross operating surplus of private non-financial corporations statistics](#). Our report sets five requirements needed to improve the quality of these statistics. Most importantly, ONS needs to demonstrate a better understanding of whether the data sources used to compile the estimates are of sufficient quality. Additionally, ONS needs to better communicate to users its understanding of the methods and data sources used, along with any limitations and uncertainties in the statistics. ONS published [its response](#) in January, and we expect it to make significant progress on some of these requirements by late summer.

Our third and fourth quality-focused assessments, which centre on Business Investment statistics and Business Enterprise Research and Development statistics, are ongoing.

Population Statistics: We have been working on our assessment of ONS's admin-based population estimates (ABPE). Population estimates have previously been dependent on information collected in the census. To reflect changes in society

and technology, ONS has developed ABPE for England and Wales using the Dynamic Population Model (DPM). Our phased assessment will aim to provide reassurance to users on the new approach and will focus on:

- i. the suitability and quality assurance of the data and methods used in the DPM
- ii. the extent to which ONS is benchmarking the state of readiness of population estimates to replace the cohort component method previously used
- iii. an investigation into user understanding of and confidence in the new method

It is important to note the context for the work that is being undertaken by ONS. The work around producing and developing the DPM is complex, challenging and unique for UK official statistics. It is being undertaken by teams who are working incredibly hard and under considerable pressure. In addition to handling the complexity of this work, ONS also faces a challenge in terms of its financial position. There is ongoing uncertainty regarding the funding for the population transformation work, which adds to the challenging environment that staff members are operating in and presents a risk to the future delivery of the work.

In September we confirmed the Official Statistics accreditation of Scotland's Census. In coming to our decision, we reviewed the evidence, including the progress made against requirements outlined in the [2019 phase-one assessment report](#) and the [2023 phase-two assessment report](#), as well as our general expectations for meeting the standards of the Code. National Records of Scotland (NRS) faced unexpected challenges given that the overall response rate for Scotland's Census 2022 was lower than had been hoped for. This in itself is not a barrier to accreditation, what is most important is the good quality of the output estimate, and it was clear that NRS had undertaken an extensive programme of work to achieve this. We were impressed with the steps taken to ensure that the best-quality estimates were produced and to provide assurance for users. With the assistance of an expert International Steering Group, NRS took a rigorous and methodical approach to the challenges that arose and proactively communicated quality information in order to help users understand, interpret and use these important statistics.

Work also continues on other aspects of population statistics, such as planning for phase three of the assessment of Census 2021, and monitoring progress on other activities, such as ONS's consultation on the future of population and migration statistics and population statistics transformation plans in the devolved administrations. To support this work, OSR's transforming population statistics programme board continues to regularly meet to enable us to share information across the organisation, coordinate activities and identify cross-cutting issues to explore further.

Champion the effective communication of statistics to support society's key information needs

The change we want to see

We will continue to champion the transparent release and use of data and statistics and advocate for the availability of accurate and timely statistics on the topics that matter most. Our regulatory activities will focus on how statistics producers communicate uncertainty, and how they mitigate and manage the misuse of statistics and data. We will also focus our work on activities which support statistics producers in engaging with, understanding and meeting the varying needs of a wide range of users of data and statistics.

2023/24 highlights

Our wide-ranging outputs and high-profile public interventions helped us achieve our ambition to safeguard statistics that serve the public good, supported by our [Intelligent Transparency](#) campaign. At the start of 2023/24, we had hoped to accelerate our interventions programme, stepping into public debate in a timelier way to clarify how statistics should be interpreted. indicate that we are seeing definite gains this year, and we continue to challenge ourselves.

This work will be even more important as we approach a general election. The election will significantly impact our work; electoral campaigns, where parties vie with each other for the electorate's support, typically involve some of the most prominent uses of statistics in the public eye.

In 2023/24 (and continuing into 2024/25), we wanted to focus on factors supporting public confidence in statistics – for example, promoting better communication of statistics. We are in the early days of our Communicating Statistics programme, but one of our most significant reports in 2023 was on [Revisions to GDP](#). While we recognised the effectiveness of ONS's approach to revising GDP, we set a number of requirements that we determined ONS should fulfil to improve communication. In 2024, we will continue to support ONS in implementing these requirements – the last [Quarterly National Accounts of 2023](#) showed that ONS has already taken steps forward.

Throughout 2023/24, we worked on [two issues related to sex and gender identity](#) in data and statistics – updating our regulatory guidance and a review of statistics on gender identity based on data collected in the 2021 England and Wales Census.

Our new guidance provides a framework for the statistical system to support the effective collection, use and communication of statistics on sex and gender identity. We have published an interim report on the gender identity statistics

from the 2021 England and Wales Census which sets out our findings based on the question testing, quality assurance, communication and engagement with users undertaken by ONS. Our final report will be published in early 2024/25.

Illustrations of how we are delivering impact

Asylum Backlog: We have received a number of concerns about asylum statistics and data used by ministers over the last year. In many cases, the concerns related to claims about the size of the backlog or the number of legacy cases that had been cleared by the UK Government since it came to power. Many of these claims were made before the underlying data were available to the public. We judged that the use of statistics in such cases was not in line with our intelligent transparency principles. We engaged with the Home Office at both a working and senior level to ensure that our expectations were clear and to support the analytical team in providing ad hoc data when it was aware that a claim using data that were not already in the public domain would be made. This engagement led to positive results. In [our most recent case](#) relating to claims about asylum backlog figures, while we were clear that the Prime Ministers' tweet lacked appropriate context, the Home Office did present ad hoc data alongside its press release providing necessary context around the statement and ensuring public access to the data.

Gender Identity: We heard concerns from members of the public about the quality of the gender identity data collected in the 2021 England and Wales Census. We reviewed the concerns and wrote to ONS on 24 April advising that we would be undertaking a short review of the gender identity data. We published an [interim report](#) in October 2023 setting out our findings based on a review of the testing, quality assurance, communication and engagement with users undertaken by ONS. ONS has since published its [investigation of the quality of the 2021 census's gender-identity data](#). We will review this research and engage with users before publishing a follow-up report with our updated findings.

Tax and National Insurance Contributions: We received a number of concerns around claims about how much an average employee would benefit as a result of the National Insurance Contributions (NIC) change that took effect earlier this year. We judged that the claim had been clear in its context (as it specifically referred to the impact of the NIC change taking place on the day of the claim and not to the wider range of personal tax changes taking effect this year) and the available data (on what an average employee salary was) were in the public domain for anyone who wanted to check.

Build partnerships to champion good practice principles for data and analysis that inform the public

The change we want to see

We will continue our work outside of official statistics. Our focus will be on working with organisations and with teams within government departments who are not official statistics producers but who produce and communicate data and analysis that are used in the public domain. These types of data and analysis are often likely to be perceived and used by others as if they were official statistics, even if they have not been designated as such. We will continue our engagement with data influencers and data users to support us with this focus.

2023/24 highlights

At OSR, we support good evidence that informs the public. Our focus is on official statistics. But we also recognise the role that evaluation plays in providing insight into what works in government policies and programmes. We have been developing our work to support the transparency of evaluations, in partnership with the Evaluation Task Force – for example, working towards a [guest blog](#) from the head of the task force, published in April 2024.

We set out our [Areas of Research Interest](#) (ARI) in 2023. These are framed around our vision of statistics that serve the public good. We set out research questions we are interested in learning more about, what we can offer researchers and how we decide who to collaborate with. The questions have resonated well with the research community.

We have been building on our analytical leadership work, considering how this can be enabled across all professions. [Our published report](#) sets out the findings from our review and, drawing on case studies, looks at how analytical leadership can be demonstrated and enabled across government. This report is relevant for all who want to foster a stronger, data-driven culture in their organisations, offering actionable suggestions for people in different professions and levels of seniority.

We are seeing an [ever-growing list of organisations](#) who are [voluntarily adopting the Code of Practice](#), and we have announced the latest winners of the [Statistical Excellence in Trustworthiness, Quality and Value Award](#) (run in a partnership with the Royal Statistical Society and Civil Service World). OSR will continue to promote the use of the [Code of Practice](#) for Statistics, drawing on ideas and feedback gathered as part of our [Code Review](#).

Illustrations of how we are delivering impact

Data Sharing and Linkage for the Public Good: This is an area we have been monitoring and commenting on over the last five years. In July we published a [review of data sharing and linkage across government](#). Despite some excellent progress in creating linked datasets and making them available for research, analysis and statistics across the UK, we found there is still uncertainty about how to share and link data in a legal and ethical way and about the public perception of data sharing and linkage. There is also a lack of clarity about data access processes and data availability and data standards across government. Unless significant changes are implemented, we are concerned the progress that has been made could be lost. Our report made 16 recommendations that, if realised, will enable government to confront ingrained challenges and to move towards greater data sharing and linkage for the public good.

We shared our plan to use the report to engage across and beyond government, working with others to help realise our recommendations. Over 20 organisations contributed directly to the review, with many others providing feedback.

We discussed the report with a small group of academics and independent researchers, each of whom has expertise and interest in the social impacts of technology and who generously gave their time. This report represents our ambition to work with partners who share our strategic aims, and to commit to ongoing campaigns that are fundamental to delivering public good from data and statistics. We have followed up this year with a series of blogs, but we know there is still much to do, and our campaign to see our recommendations implemented is at the forefront of our plans for the coming year.

OSR outputs in 2023/24

Assessment Reports Published

- 2022 Census in Scotland
- Earnings and Employment from Pay As You Earn Real Time Information, UK
- Spotlight on Quality: Producer Price Indices
- Accident and Emergency Activity Statistics in Scotland
- Statistics about Butterflies, England and UK
- Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels statistics
- Accident and Emergency (A&E) Statistics in England (NHS England)
- Spotlight on Quality: Statistics on Profitability of UK Companies and Gross Operating Surplus of Non-Financial Corporations
- Personal Independence Payment Statistics (DWP)

Assessments Closed

- UK Business Demography Statistics
- Statistics on Statutory Homelessness in England (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC))
- Key Stage 4 Performance statistics for England
- Statistics from the People and Nature Survey (Natural England)
- Scottish Prison Population statistics
- 2022 Census in Scotland
- Accident and Emergency Activity Statistics in Scotland

Accreditations and Suspensions

New OS Accreditations

- People and Nature Survey for England
- 2022 Census in Scotland
- Accident and Emergency Activity Statistics in Scotland

Confirmations of OS Accreditation

- UK Business Demography statistics
- Key Stage 4 performance statistics for England
- Scottish Prison Population statistics

OS Reaccreditations

- Statutory Homelessness in England (de-designated 2018)

Temporary Suspensions

- Scottish House Condition Survey (Apr 2023) – suspension lifted (Feb 24)
- Labour Market statistics derived from the ONS Labour Force Survey

Compliance Checks and Rapid Reviews

- Domestic abuse question development (Office for National Statistics)
- Northern Ireland Homelessness Bulletin
- England and Wales Mortality Statistics (Office for National Statistics)
- Benefit Sanction Statistics (Department for Work and Pensions)
- Office for National Statistics' transformation of the Labour Force Survey (TLFS): OSR judgment and progress report, July 2023
- Accident and Emergency (A&E) Monthly Waiting Times Statistics (Public Health Scotland)
- Homelessness Accommodation Provision and Rough Sleeping Monthly Management Information (Welsh Government)
- Overseas Development Assistance Statistics (Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office)
- Follow up to Compliance Check of Transformed Migration Statistics
- Sexual Offences in England and Wales (Office for National Statistics)
- Wild Bird Population Statistics (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs)
- Inpatients, day cases and new outpatient statistics in Scotland
- Statistics from the Adult Oral Health Survey
- Experimental Labour Market Statistics (Office for National Statistics)
- Scottish House Condition Survey (Scottish Government)
- Council Tax Statistics (Valuation Office Agency)
- Review of reintroduced LFS-derived Labour Market Statistics (Office for National Statistics)
- Revisions of estimates of UK Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Office for National Statistics)

Strategic Reviews (including Systemic Reviews)

- Review of statistics on gender identity based on data collected as part of the 2021 England and Wales Census: interim report
- Office for National Statistics' transformation of Long-Term International Migration Estimates: OSR progress report
- Review of mental health statistics in England: Update December 2023
- Analytical Leadership: Achieving better outcomes for citizens report
- State of the Statistics System 2022/23
- Annual Review of Casework 2022-23

Regulatory Research, Development and Guidance

- Data Sharing and Linkage for the Public Good
- Collecting and reporting data about sex and gender identity in official statistics: A guide for official statistics producers
- Office for Statistics Regulation's Areas of Research Interest
- How statistics can serve the public good: a think piece
- Clarifying National Statistics: findings from the designation refresh project
- Statistical Practice Capability Framework
- Understanding the difference between Official Statistics and published Management Information
- Guidance on producing official statistics in development
- The Office for Statistics Regulation's Guide to the UK Statistical System
- Future proofing the Code of Practice for Statistics: findings and next steps
- OSR's approach to quality assessing the Covid Infection Survey

Blogs

- There's more to statistical communication than avoiding truncated axes...
- Why does analytical leadership matter? What we've found so far
- Guest Blog: The Algorithmic Transparency Recording Standard
- Remember how far you've come, not just how far you want to go
- Guest Blog: Improving ethnicity data quality in the public sector
- Why misleading statistics should never become a catchphrase
- Intelligent transparency – or how the sausage gets made
- How do people use official statistics to make decisions?
- Shining the spotlight on the quality of economic statistics
- The sociotechnical nature of data sharing and linkage
- Keeping your statistics (and your garden) sustainable
- Guest Blog: The public good of statistics – narratives from around the world
- Guest Blog: Mental health data quality
- You're planning to do what? Statistics, resource constraints and user engagement
- Guest Blog: Producing, reviewing, and always evolving: UKHSA statistics
- The success and potential evolution of the 5 Safes model of data access
- Transparency: bringing the inside out
- Guest Blog: How do we use statistics in everyday life?
- A statistical jigsaw: piecing together UK data comparability
- Our current position on regulating, responding to and using AI
- What does it mean to be an accredited official statistic?

Our capability as a regulator

Overview

The change we want to see

Our maturity as a regulator is at the heart of determining our success. To deliver the outcomes and impact we want to have, we must be ambitious and continuously improve our capability and our capacity, often within resource constraints. We want our people to have the confidence, knowledge and skills to live OSR's values authentically and deliver with impact. We want our regulatory judgements to be impactful, transparent and easy to find, particularly for those who need to make the changes in the system that we want to see. To enable us to work in this way, we will need to have the right tools and processes to develop our regulatory maturity.

2023/24 highlights

Our people and resources

- A team of around 50 people operating across the UK (Newport, Edinburgh, London, Titchfield and Darlington) delivered our business in 2023/24.
- We were operating with only 2 vacancies by year-end - making use for the first time of flexible contingent labour, including a Senior Copy Editor, and introducing a new Senior Economic Advisor. Resource constraints particularly impacted our Economics, Business and Trade domain and our Data and Methods team in-year.
- Employee engagement rate of 75% in 2023 compared with 64% across the Civil Service.
- We operated within a £3.4 million baseline budget in 2023/24 with a small underspend driven by lower staffing costs (as we filled vacancies) and reduced consultancy costs.

Access to our regulatory judgements and advice

- We had 731K total engagements with our website, down by around 200k from the previous year (largely due to engagement with our January 2023 response to concerns raised about ONS Deaths by Vaccination Status statistics). Publications with high engagement in 2023/24 included our Review of Mental Health Statistics in Northern Ireland and the assessment of the 2022 Census in Scotland.
- We have not identified any specific pattern to the type of outputs that generate the greatest interest - for example, between reports, correspondence or guidance - but our high-profile interventions always generate spikes in traffic.

- 48% of engaged sessions with our website in 2023/24 were through direct access – typing in a url or utilising bookmarks – and 34% were from organic searches through search engines (not paid).
- We had 5902 total engagements with our X/Twitter account. Posts with high engagement included our report on data linkage and our published findings on ONS’s revisions of estimates of UK GDP.
- We had 560 LinkedIn impressions with the topics generating greatest interest being how statistics inform people’s decisions and data linkage.

For 2023/24 we have initiated a programme to invest in our skills, people and processes to enable us to grow as a regulator, and we are making good progress in a number of areas – from revisiting our values as an organisation to developing strong analytics to guide our website and publications. We’ve placed focus on writing skills and the development of communication messages, and together with providing training, we’ve employed a temporary senior copy editor whose role includes strengthening our capability and helping to upskill our team.

We have also initiated work to identify our capability needs for the next five years, and a programme of work will be underway from early summer 2024 to support us in achieving our desired level of maturity.

Managing risk

We have identified, and manage, four areas of strategic risk – relevance; voice; independence; and capability. We assess that our risk exposure relating to our relevance as the regulator is reduced compared with the previous year as we are doing a good job of responding to emerging issues. This impacts our broader capacity but helps us to be a responsive regulator. On both voice and independence, we have also lowered the risk assessment this year as our voice is coming through clearly.

In addition, we identify more specific risk exposures that need to be managed at a senior management level. In 2023/24 we’ve identified and are managing risks related to finance (since resolved and closed), transformation of the statistical system, and the pending general election. We are developing a standardised approach to reviewing transformation programmes and balanced communication. We are preparing for a general election in a number of ways, including providing public-facing materials and building an internal task force.

We have scheduled deep dives on risk at our senior leadership meetings, and we have regular horizon-scanning sessions with the Regulation Committee.

Reviews of OSR

Sturgis Review: In January 2023, we commissioned an independent review of our regulatory work on the Covid Infection Survey (CIS). This was done in response to concerns from representatives of the community interest campaign

group Better Statistics, who raised concerns over the adequacy of the regulatory oversight we provided for the CIS. Professor Patrick Sturgis completed his review in May. The Sturgis review concluded that we had done a good job of identifying the strengths and areas of improvements for the survey. He did, however, raise a number of areas where we could have better communicated our findings to ONS and improved on how we monitored ONS's progress against the objectives. We responded positively to the recommendations, publishing both the report and the response.

Lievesley Review: Professor Denise Lievesley's review of the UK Statistics Authority, including OSR, was published on 12 March 2024. Professor Lievesley's independent review was conducted as part of the programme of Public Bodies Reviews. The review highlighted four recommendations and six suggestions for OSR. We welcome the findings and are committed to implementing all the relevant recommendations to continue to strengthen our capability as a regulator.

Internal audit of our portfolio management: OSR has a monthly Portfolio Review Board (PRB) which monitors the implementation of the OSR 5-year strategy and business plan, and the portfolio of activities that support delivery of our priorities. In 2023 we established programme boards for the first time to provide strategic oversight in important areas – for example: economic statistics; transformation of the statistics system; and building partnerships. Each of these programmes is sponsored by a member of our Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and reports to the PRB.

We need stronger mechanisms to help us deliver a flexible work programme - responding quickly to emerging issues and managing competing priorities for limited resources. We requested an advisory internal audit of our portfolio management approach in 2023, and we are currently implementing the findings from that audit, which we found very helpful. We have strengthened the governance and decision-making role of the PRB, and clarified the connection with our weekly SLT meetings, where a lot of PRB business is taken forwards. The audit trail for those meetings has been strengthened. We have also clarified the risk escalation from programmes to the PRB, and we have developed a skills matrix to help assign our people to best effect.

We have more work to do to progress the remaining commitments. Work is underway to update our criteria and approach to prioritising our work programme as well as a refresh of our portal of guidance on portfolio, programme, project and risk management. We have been limited by resource in 2023/24 and by the suspension of the development of a new automated workflow management system. The systems delay also means we have been unable to make the progress we would have liked on systemising our corporate intelligence, but we are working to develop alternative interim plans in parallel to working with the developers towards securing a restart.

Looking ahead

Our business plan for this last year has had a much greater outward focus than in the past, and our stakeholders have confirmed that the priorities we set out for 2023/24 continue to resonate strongly. We have decided that these priorities should persist into the coming year.

While we will double down on these priorities this year, as we approach the end of our strategic plan for 2020 to 2025, we plan to work closely with stakeholders to lay the foundations for the next 5 years. We plan to run an energised engagement programme with a series of events, and we will be getting out and listening to as many people as we can as we look towards the future.

The coming year will be important for other reasons. The General Election has been called for 4 July 2024. Over the last 18 months, we've established the principle of intelligent transparency – ensuring that, when the UK Government makes statements using numbers to explain a policy and its implementation, it should make the underlying analysis available for all to see. We want to see intelligent transparency applied by all parties engaged in the election, using quantitative analysis to support statements. We are using our regulatory framework and flexing our capacity to support transparency and openness, and responding publicly to any misuse of statistics and data we see.

We will also deliver the outcomes of our review of the Code of Practice for Statistics this year, refreshing the Code and publishing a third edition. We've been running a hugely engaging call for evidence around the Code and our core principles of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value – which are now well embedded within official statistics and increasingly universally across other forms of evidence. The time is right to ensure that the Code remains relevant given the changes we've seen in the data landscape, increased desire for statistics from users and changes in the ways statistics producers are working.

A recommendation of the Lievesley Independent review of the UK Statistics Authority is that the UKSA establish and deliver a Triennial Statistical Assembly with the remit of determining the UK's needs for statistics through a wide consultative process, including an annual public lecture from the Chair of the UKSA. Our annual State of the Statistical System report will play a key role in providing OSR's view on the performance and challenges facing the statistical system, the areas of progress and innovation, and our recommendations for advancing the system.

While we want to continue to move beyond supporting good statistics production – building partnerships and supporting wider voluntary application of the pillars of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value – the state of UK statistics will rightly continue to take up a lot of our attention. We are doing a significant amount of work on the quality of economic and labour market statistics and other areas where we are seeing significant transformation, like population and migration statistics.

