



Office for
Statistics Regulation

Systemic Review Programme

Systemic Review of ONS Economic Statistics: Interim Report

7 April 2025

Executive Summary

ES.1 We [initiated](#) this systemic review of economic statistics produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in July 2024.

ES.2 The aim of the review is to identify high-level, cross-cutting issues, focusing on data sources for economic statistics, stakeholder needs and engagement and related organisational factors.

ES.3 This interim report presents the evidence gathered in the initial stages of the review, which has focused mainly on data sources, and sets out our emerging conclusions and requirements for ONS.

ES.4 This report summarises the judgements made by OSR as the regulator of ONS's statistics. We formed our judgements by gathering evidence from four main sources:

- OSR's own assessments of economic statistics, consisting of 26 assessments (listed in Annex 2). Each assessment is an in-depth analysis of how far the statistics in question comply with the Code of Practice, and provides a detailed and comprehensive picture of the statistics that it assesses.
- Stakeholder views, based on semi-structured interviews with 25 key stakeholders, and supplemented by evidence from [the Statistics Assembly](#) (attended by around 800 people), the [Statistics Assembly report](#), and feedback provided by individual stakeholders in the course of OSR's business, such as the Royal Statistical Society and the Better Statistics campaign.
- ONS staff views, based on focus groups and interviews with around 40 ONS staff, predominantly based in economic statistics and data sources.
- OSR's analysis of financial and staffing information provided to us by the ONS finance team.

ES.5 We have based our findings and conclusions on triangulation of evidence across these evidence sources, identifying patterns and issues that recur across the sources. Where we encountered evidence from one source that was not reinforced by another, but was nevertheless a significant observation, we have included it in the body of the report but not formed a judgement or conclusion about it. A fuller description of our evidence sources is provided by the section entitled Approach to the Review.

Key findings

Our core findings are as follows:

ES.6 ONS has made significant progress on a range of outputs in its portfolio of economic statistics. Efforts here have included methodological improvements to the National Accounts, particularly the introduction of double deflation, and a range

of improvements to price statistics, including positive developments on the measurement of private sector rents for dwellings (as described in our [recent assessment](#)) and on car prices.

ES.7 ONS is strongly supported by many stakeholders. Multiple stakeholders expressed strong support for ONS's work. Particular emphasis was given to the general quality of the National Accounts, the confidence that most users have in ONS's consumer price statistics, and approval of the developments made in the use of real-time and other timely indicators, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Stakeholders also noted major improvements in ONS's engagement with users of individual statistical outputs.

ES.8 Our regulatory reports highlight common issues with data quality, administrative data and user engagement. We have conducted a range of regulatory work on economic statistics over the last 5 years. While these regulatory reports note progress on methodology, there are common themes around data quality – including as it relates to survey response rates – and the challenges of using administrative data. And while there are clear improvements in user engagement, we also frequently identify opportunities to strengthen it.

ES.9 Stakeholders would like to see a clearer vision and strategy for economic statistics. While our stakeholder discussions revealed support for ONS, this support would be more consistent if stakeholders had a better understanding of ONS's strategy and a clearer idea of what ONS regards as its core economic statistics. Differing stakeholder views on ONS priorities led us to conclude that there is no single right answer as to what ONS should focus on. It is therefore crucial that it sets out a clear articulation of its priorities – what it has chosen to focus on and why.

ES.10 Stakeholders expressed widespread concern about the quality of survey data. These concerns are focused on, but were not limited to, the widely recognised problems with the Labour Force Survey. ONS has achieved improvements in the performance of the Labour Force Survey in 2025, through recruiting more survey interviewers, running targeted communication campaigns to encourage citizens to respond to the survey, and increasing incentives for survey participations. Stakeholders welcomed these improvements, but it is clear that they remain concerned about the quality of survey data overall. On business surveys, while response rates have held up well, reflecting the mandatory nature of these surveys, we also consider that there is a growing risk to their quality and representativeness. ONS staff told us that, despite some encouragement from senior managers, early warning of emerging problems has not always been welcomed.

ES.11 Making sufficient resources available for its high-priority economic statistics and supporting their data sources has been a consistent challenge. ONS increased the overall level of resources allocated to economic statistics following the 2016 [Bean review](#). But in the context of growing demands and a changing environment, including the pandemic, over recent years ONS has found it difficult to maintain real-terms funding for core economic statistics and particularly supporting data sources. Moreover, resource pressures on economic statistics and on the ONS as a whole have intensified in the last two years. This resource challenge has been exacerbated by “ringfences” in ONS's funding arrangements put in place by HM Treasury, which restrict spending to specific purposes. These

ringfences have reduced ONS's flexibility to respond to new demands and challenges. HM Treasury has relaxed these ringfences from 1 April 2025. In particular, ONS has struggled to allocate sufficient resources to data collection in the post-pandemic period when data collection became increasingly challenging. Greater transparency over the prioritisation challenges that ONS faces, the efficiencies it has achieved, and the trade-offs it has to make, would both explain the situation to stakeholders and build a credible case for increased resources.

Conclusions

ES.12 We have three conclusions resulting from this review:

1. *ONS must fully acknowledge and address declining data quality.*

ONS is engaged in ambitious statistical transformation programmes in a challenging context and has made good progress in some areas. This work has included developing and implementing new surveys which give a timelier (Business Impacts and Conditions Survey) and a more granular (Annual Survey of Goods and Services) understanding of the economy. ONS has also made significant progress in moving its business survey collection online.

However, in some areas, ONS has faced significant challenges in consistently ensuring that data feeding into economic statistics are of high quality. Most notably, the long-term reduction in response rates to household surveys, including the [Labour Force Survey](#), has severely impacted data quality. ONS has made progress in 2025 in securing improved response to the Labour Force Survey, but this long-term challenge has been associated with a decline in the quality and reliability of some of its key economic statistics.

Although response rates have been a key focus of this review, we would like more assurance that ONS has sufficient steps in place to regularly review and improve sample design and representativeness, bias, survey methodology, and imputation. ONS appears to be finding survey collection more challenging than some of its international peers (see section of main report on survey response rates, and Annex 4), suggesting an urgent need to modernise its collection approach and working practices. In social surveys, these challenges already pose a significant quality issue, while in business surveys, we find increasing levels of risk which, if left unaddressed, could significantly impact quality. ONS is working on a strategic response to these challenges.

2. *Making progress with administrative data is difficult.*

There have been some good examples of the use of administrative and big data sources in core economic statistics, including the introduction of VAT data into the National Accounts and rail and rental prices data into inflation statistics. However, as a whole, progress in using administrative data from other government departments has been slow, reflecting in part practical and cultural challenges across government. Stakeholders have highlighted that these broader challenges have been further hindered by the lack of a publicly available effective vision and delivery roadmap from ONS.

3. Greater strategic clarity of purpose and transparency on prioritisation would help reassure external stakeholders.

ONS has taken steps to prioritise and maintain funding for economic statistics and data sources. But it is operating in a challenging financial climate across the public sector. In an environment of funding pressures, ONS can increase the confidence of its stakeholders by providing clearer explanations of the pressures it faces, the priorities it has set and the resource allocation decisions it makes.

After increases earlier years, there was a fall in staff and budgets for data collection. Insufficient investment is a key factor in the data quality issues that have subsequently emerged. It is harder to draw firm conclusions on the funding of economic statistics production overall.

In this context, we consider that there has been a lack of transparency about what ONS regards as its core purpose for economic statistics, and ONS staff and stakeholders have expressed concern about the effectiveness of its decision-making in allocating resources.

In its most recent annual business planning cycles, ONS has sought to prioritise funding for economic statistics, and has reduced some of its outputs to focus on its core priorities for economic statistics. Again, it would help enhance stakeholder confidence if these decisions were more clearly communicated as part of an overall strategy for delivering economic statistics.

In short, a more engaged and transparent process would assist users of all ONS's statistics in understanding the trade-offs ONS faces and how it has addressed them.

Action expected from ONS

ES.13 While ONS has responded to the challenges with labour market statistics, stakeholders have expressed frustration with the slow response to data collection quality risks and other quality issues, and the lack of a clear, strategic public response to address them. ONS's challenges with the Labour Force Survey have damaged users' confidence in the organisation. However, the quality issues we have identified in this review, while serious and demanding of an urgent response, do not extend across the whole portfolio of outputs.

ES.14 This report sets out requirements for ONS that are aimed at improving the quality of economic statistics and resetting stakeholders' perception of these statistics through:

- **Restoring confidence**, by producing a fully resourced plan to recover its social survey operation and reduce risk in its business survey operation.
- **Ensuring strategic transparency**, by clearly setting out the core purpose of economic statistics and what can be achieved with available funding in its business plan, a strategic plan for economic statistics and a strategic plan for data sources.

- **Focusing on the quality of data inputs**, by implementing a prioritised rolling programme of regular reviews of individual surveys and other data sources.

Immediate requirements

Requirement 1: It is critical that ONS takes decisive action to restore confidence. ONS should publish a fully resourced plan to recover its social survey operation and reduce risk in its business survey operation to restore the confidence of its users within four weeks of the publication of this review. This plan should set out the risks that continued data quality challenges pose to economic statistics. Given the impact of these challenges on confidence in the statistics system, progress against the action plan should be regularly monitored by the UK Statistics Authority Board and should be publicly reported.

Requirements in the next 3 months

Requirement 2. Align Resources with Core Purposes: The overarching annual ONS business plan should be explicit on how resources are aligned with its core purposes and outputs as a national statistical institute. ONS should implement a more transparent and engaged approach to the way it prioritises across its output of economic statistics. This work should include an annually updated strategic plan for economic statistics, with clear funding allocations and timebound commitments, to increase both transparency and accountability and to facilitate more effective engagement with its stakeholders on prioritisation. [ONS's Strategic business plan: April 2025 to March 2026](#), published a few days before this interim report, makes an important contribution to this requirement.

Requirement 3. Develop a Vision and Strategy for Data Sources: In addition to the recovery plan and drawing on the overall strategy for economic statistics, ONS should develop and publish a regularly updated vision and strategy for the data sources used to compile its economic statistics. This publication should include a “roadmap” setting out how the use of surveys and administrative (and other non-survey-based) sources will be developed in an integrated way, including the development of methods that combine data sources, as well as any barriers that ONS foresees and the support it needs from others to address them.

Requirement 4. Implement a Systematic Programme of Quality Reviews: ONS should take a more strategic and systematic approach to quality reviews of its data sources. ONS should implement a prioritised rolling programme of regular reviews of individual surveys and other data sources focusing on maintaining quality and considering issues such as the maintenance of samples, validation rules and keeping survey questions updated. ONS should consider how such a programme could be integrated with its existing approach to quality assurance and how quality issues are inter-related with other challenges, including those associated with ensuring appropriate levels of skill and the effectiveness of systems.

Our next steps

ES.15 In the autumn, we will review ONS's response to this report and publish our overall findings.

ES.16 While this interim report has focused on data sources, the persistent challenges that ONS has faced in recent years in this area, particularly the escalating problems with response rates to household surveys and the limited progress with the use of administrative data, suggest that there may be organisation-wide issues. Although we have not directly looked at organisational culture in this review, and issues of efficiency and effectiveness are beyond the review's remit, our discussions with ONS staff and users suggest some concern around the management and business processes through which resources are allocated and the ways in which ONS engages with senior stakeholders.

ES.17 As we have been finalising this report, the UK Statistics Authority announced a [review](#) of ONS's performance and culture to be conducted by Sir Robert Devereux. The review is likely to cover the organisation-wide issues, and we will consider its conclusions as we conduct follow-up work to our report.

Context and Purpose

The aim of our systemic review of economic statistics is to identify high-level, cross-cutting issues across the Office for National Statistics (ONS)'s economic statistics and to make recommendations for change to address those issues. By looking systemically, we can make recommendations which support ONS to improve economic statistics as a whole.

Reflecting the priority that external stakeholders have given to data sources, this report focuses on the issues ONS has faced with its data sources. We will give further consideration to the effectiveness of ONS's stakeholder engagement, and organisational factors including expertise and systems. These stages cannot be fully separated due to potential inter-dependencies; for example, issues with exploiting data sources may have their root in systems limitations. Therefore, while this interim report focuses on data sources, we refer to evidence that relates to the second and third themes, which we will report on in due course together with our assessment of the progress against the requirements in this report and the findings of the review by Sir Robert Devereux.

The review is not considering organisational efficiency and effectiveness.

This interim report presents the evidence gathered in the initial stage of the review and sets out some emerging conclusions and requirements for ONS.

Economic statistics produced by ONS

The economic statistics produced by ONS, the UK's national statistical institute, measure the UK's economic activity, covering the production, distribution, consumption and trade of goods and services. The statistics encompass the economic activities of households, businesses, non-profit-making institutions and government sectors as well as their trade with the rest of the world, and include measures of quantities, prices and values.

Headline official statistics within the scope of this review include:

- the National Accounts, which provide the overarching framework for many of these key economic statistics
- Gross Domestic Product (GDP)
- Consumer Price Index (CPI)
- labour market statistics, including pay growth, employment, unemployment and inactivity rates

Regulatory oversight by OSR

The Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) assesses official statistics against the standards of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value set out in the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#). Those that comply in full are given the status of [accredited official statistics](#) (previously called "National Statistics" status).

GDP and CPI are accredited official statistics. The [Labour Force Survey](#)-based labour market statistics are currently not accredited, following the challenges that ONS has faced with the survey.

In addition to assessments, OSR undertakes systemic reviews where an accumulation of evidence indicates there might be themes best considered at a system level, such as prioritisation, gaps, overlaps, coherence and accessibility.

Reasons for undertaking this review

Three factors contributed to OSR's decision to undertake a systemic review of the economic statistics produced by ONS.

First, we have identified common issues across our previous assessments and reviews of individual economic statistics, including our recent [Spotlight on Quality](#) assessments.

Second, the social and economic context has continued to evolve, with, for example, the pandemic adding to the long-running challenges of maintaining survey response rates and accelerating the trend of undertaking economic activity remotely using digital technologies. These trends can be seen internationally as well as in the UK.

Third, it has now been around eight years since the last high-level review of economic statistics, the [Independent Review of Economic Statistics led by Sir Charlie Bean](#). As such, it appears appropriate to assess the progress that has been made against the recommendations in that review (set out in Annex 1).

We have developed a timeline, based on ONS-published reports and our engagement with ONS staff, of the main areas of progress on the Bean review recommendations:

2017	First Strategy for Economic Statistics and Analysis (ESAS) published, which set a strategy for exploiting administrative data sources and established a team of economists in London to strengthen engagement
	Incorporation of VAT data into National Accounts
	Creation of Data Science Campus
	Digital Economy Act (DEA) passed and Data Acquisitions and Operations Directorate created by ONS
	Centre of Excellence in Economic Statistics (ESCoE) launched
2018	Regional Economic Forums established
	New Annual Survey of Goods and Services (ASGS) to provide improved coverage of service sector
	Administrative Data Research (ADRUk) launched to provide improved access to administrative data for researchers

- 2019 Second ESAS published
- Data from ASGS incorporated into National Accounts
- Purchases Survey published (following reinstatement in 2015/16)
- First set of “Faster Indicators of Economic Activity” published
- Publication of statistics from PAYE Real-Time Information
(joint release with HMRC)
- 2020 Business Impact of COVID-19 Survey (BICS) published to track
economy during pandemic and VAT data used to produce more-
granular GDP data
- 2021/22 Double deflation introduced
- Weekly publication of analysis of real-time indicators of economic and
social activity
- Publication of regional quarterly GDP (since suspended)
- 2022/23 Major improvements to trade statistics (ongoing)
- 2023/24 Use of rail transaction data in price statistics
- Publication of improved research and development statistics
- 2026 (plan) Use of supermarket scanner data in price statistics (delayed from
2023/24)

Over recent years, ONS’s work has, of course, been heavily impacted by the need for new statistics to help assess the progress and impact of the pandemic. This demand has inevitably affected its capacity to push forward developments in other areas.

Approach to the Review

OSR's work is underpinned by the Code of Practice for Statistics.

The Code sets the standards that producers of official statistics should commit to. The Code benefits all of us, as users and citizens. Compliance with the Code gives users confidence that published government statistics have public value, are high quality and are produced by people and organisations that are trustworthy.

Trustworthiness is a product of the people, systems and processes within organisations that enable and support the production of statistics and data. Trustworthiness comes from the organisation that produces statistics and data being well led, well managed and open, and the people who work there being impartial and skilled in what they do.

Quality means that statistics fit their intended uses, are based on appropriate data and methods and are not materially misleading. Quality requires skilled professional judgement about collecting, preparing, analysing and publishing statistics and data in ways that meet the needs of people who want to use the statistics.

Value means that the statistics and data are useful, easy to access, remain relevant and support understanding of important issues. Value includes improving existing statistics and creating new ones through discussion and collaboration with stakeholders, and being responsible and efficient in the collection, sharing and use of statistical information.

We began this review with a significant base of evidence from our regulatory work on economic statistics, including our Spotlight on Quality programme. We used this evidence and some exploratory conversations with ONS and stakeholders to set out a [scope for the review](#), and also framed a series of questions in [our call for evidence](#).

To maximise the impact of our review and recommendations, we focused on what we have judged to be the most important areas for review, drawing on the principal sources of evidence set out below. In making this judgement, we have sought to reflect the balance of evidence and considered the scale of the economic and social consequences of the decisions which rest on the economic statistics in question.

As this review has been shaped in part through engagement with stakeholders and reflects their current concerns, we have not aimed to assess in detail progress against each recommendation in the Bean review. Rather, we have focused on the issues which have been of most importance to stakeholders.

The review has drawn on intelligence from multiple sources and the conclusions presented in this review are triangulated from the principal sources set out below and presented in separate sections of the report. In addition, we have reviewed key ONS-published strategies and reports.

First, we have reviewed previous OSR assessments and identified common and important findings. In line with the objectives of a systemic review, we have focused on high-level and cross-cutting issues and sought to learn from, but avoid duplicating, other OSR activities, particularly in respect of engagement with ONS on

the [Labour Force Survey](#) (LFS) and [Transformed Labour Force Survey](#) (TLFS). A full list of the 26 assessments we have conducted since 2015.

Second, we have engaged extensively with key stakeholders and users including:

- HM Treasury, the Bank of England and the Office for Budget Responsibility
- other government departments, particularly the devolved administrations
- think-tanks and research organisations
- academic users and other researchers
- other informed and engaged bodies and individuals, such as the Royal Statistical society and the Better Statistics campaign
- the Statistics Assembly held in January (attended by around 800 people) and subsequent report

A full list of those we engaged with is included in Annex 2.

Third, we have sought views from, and tested emerging findings with, a wide range of ONS staff. This engagement has taken the form of roundtable sessions with staff at different levels within ONS, and bilateral discussions on specific issues. In total, we gathered evidence from around 40 ONS staff, largely based in its economic statistics division.

Fourth, at our request, ONS provided additional financial information to support our understanding of the funding of economic statistics and the associated data collection.

Our engagement with stakeholders and staff in ONS has been undertaken with the understanding that any views expressed would not be attributed to individuals.

Although this review has focused on identifying high-level and cross-cutting improvements that address specific issues raised by stakeholders, it is important to emphasise that stakeholders who expressed concerns also acknowledged a generally high level of confidence in the trustworthiness, quality and value of many ONS outputs. They also recognised that these outputs have improved in many aspects over time.

Evidence from Previous OSR Assessments

Since 2015, OSR has conducted 26 assessments and reviews of ONS's economic statistics. A full list of these reviews can be found in Annex 2.

Successes in economic statistics

Our regulatory engagement with ONS on economic statistics has identified a range of areas where ONS has made significant progress in recent years. These successes have included methodological improvements to the National Accounts, particularly the introduction of [double deflation](#), and a range of improvements to price statistics, including positive developments on the measurement of private sector rents for dwellings (as described in our recent [assessment](#)) and on car prices.

Issues around response rates, administrative data and user engagement

Some issues regularly come up across our suite of reviews and assessments. These common issues include:

- Falling response rates to household surveys, including the [Labour Force Survey](#) and the [Living Costs and Food Survey](#). Declining response to surveys has negatively affected data quality. While exacerbated by the pandemic, issues with response rates long pre-dated this crisis.
- Challenges in making progress on the use of administrative data obtained from other government departments. These challenges were noted both in our own [review of GDP revisions](#) and the [Independent Review of the UK Statistics Authority 2023-24](#) conducted by Professor Denise Lievesley. Analysis by ONS and OSR in connection with the challenges faced by the Labour Force Survey, in both its original and transformed form, has confirmed that PAYE data can provide relatively reliable data on some aspects of the labour market. These data have been available for several years but not been fully exploited. OSR's [assessment of the Annual Business Survey](#) also pointed to the unexploited potential of administrative sources to improve survey coverage and quality.
- The potential to redesign surveys to complement administrative data, where they are available. Our [review of GDP revisions](#) revealed scope for further exploiting VAT data on sales, and potentially data on business purchases. Doing so could facilitate the redesigning of the relevant surveys to increase the focus on larger firms and thereby improve the quality of results. Our assessment of the Annual Business Survey made similar points.
- Challenges with the performance of legacy IT systems, including the “black box” nature of many processes. These challenges include facilitating the use of administrative data, updating survey questions and methods to stay relevant and reducing risks to quality. The performance of supporting IT systems was a key source of concern in OSR's reviews of the [Producer](#)

[Price Indices \(PPIs\)](#), [business investment statistics](#) and the Living Costs and Food Survey.

- Issues of coherence across data sources. This is particularly, of course, in respect of the labour market, but was also revealed in OSR's assessment of the [Purchases Inquiry](#), which highlighted inconsistencies with data on purchases from the Annual Business Survey.
- Scope for better engagement with users, despite improvements. Enhanced engagement is critical to improve users' understanding of the features and limitations of statistics, including associated uncertainty, and to better understand users' needs. A range of OSR assessments, including those undertaken on [profitability and gross operation surplus](#), [research and development statistics](#), [construction statistics](#), the PPIs, business investment statistics, the Annual Business Survey and the Living Costs and Food Survey, have highlighted the need for better communication with users on such matters.
- The fact that samples and other data sources are not always regularly reviewed, updated and reprioritised, despite the range of measures that ONS has taken to maintain and improve quality. Small businesses may not be adequately covered. Relevant examples of concerns about sample representativeness are provided by the need for a radical revision of research and development statistics and the requirement for ONS to review samples for the PPIs and business investment statistics.
- Under-prioritisation of outputs which do not directly have a high profile, but which nevertheless contribute to the overall quality of the National Accounts. The deterioration of the sample for PPIs identified in OSR's review on these statistics provides such an example.

ONS has responded to issues identified in OSR assessments by making improvements, for example revising the sample for the Research and Development Survey to improve coverage, particularly of smaller businesses; putting in place a programme to introduce a new business register; and improving communication on the quality of GDP statistics and the associated uncertainty. However, several of these issues are present across a range of statistics – and are therefore systemic.

In addition, ONS has sought to address problems with household surveys. Steps it has taken to this end include initiating the Social Surveys Quality Recovery Project (SSQRP), which is increasing the number of field interviewers and sample sizes to boost response numbers; holding communication campaigns to increase response rates; increasing incentives to improve response rates; and investigating pay and benefits options to improve interviewer retention. ONS has also engaged a “recruit, train & deploy” employment agency to substantially further increase field interviewers. These steps have led to an increase in responses for the Labour Force Survey. However, given the long-running challenges with social surveys, these activities should have been undertaken earlier and at greater pace, with the necessary funding put in place, and communicated publicly as a coherent recovery plan.

Evidence from Stakeholders

Approach to engagement

During spring/early summer 2024, OSR held semi-structured discussions with a range of key stakeholders to inform the approach to, and provide evidence for, this review. The topics for these discussions were informed by our existing regulatory work, but we also gave the opportunity for participants to share broader views.

In drawing conclusions from this evidence, we sought to triangulate the views of stakeholders, drawing together common themes from the discussions that we had. Many of these themes echo those that emerged from considering our previous assessments of individual economic statistics. We also tested these conclusions with ONS staff.

These discussions were followed by a call for evidence, which received a small number of responses, and further discussions with key stakeholders. Overall, we conducted around 25 interviews with external stakeholders.

We have also drawn on the views expressed set out in [Independent Report on the 2025 UK Statistics Assembly](#). The Assembly was jointly organised by the UK Statistics Authority and the Royal Statistical Society (RSS) and held in January 2025. We have also drawn on our regular engagement with key users of economic statistics, including the [Royal Statistical Society](#) and [Better Statistics](#).

The stakeholders we engaged with are listed in Annex 3.

Widespread support for ONS

Stakeholder discussions almost inevitably tend to focus on areas of concern. However, multiple stakeholders expressed strong support for ONS's work. Particular emphasis was given to the general quality of the National Accounts, the confidence that most users have in ONS's price statistics, methodological improvements (particularly the introduction of double deflation) and approval of the developments made in the use of real-time and other timely indicators, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Stakeholders also noted major improvements in engagement with users of individual statistical outputs.

The core purpose of economic statistics

Stakeholders regarded the core purpose of a national statistical institute as producing high-quality statistics, drawing on its natural advantages in data acquisition – its legal powers and reputation for impartiality and credibility. It was argued that researchers and academics would often be better placed to use statistics as inputs to analysis, particularly where high levels of assumption are required.

Against this core purpose, most stakeholders questioned whether ONS's approach to allocating its resources is transparent and effective, and whether it had made best use of additional resources allocated following the [Bean review](#).

But stakeholders had differing views as to the specific mix of outputs that should constitute ONS's core activities. For example, some stakeholders further considered that too large a share of ONS resources has been allocated to outputs and activities that do not reflect a clear vision of the core purpose of a national statistical institute and add limited value. The independent report on the statistical assembly highlighted a need to identify key and vital economic statistics to prioritise, particularly when resources are constrained, with the aim of improving trustworthiness and reliability.

Similarly, several respondents highlighted monthly GDP as a statistic which, while high profile, is of uncertain quality and value. Others, however, expressed support for the statistic, arguing that once data are available for two months of a quarter, it is possible to predict the quarterly outturn with high accuracy.

Similarly, views were divided on the relative value of some of the work done as part of the "Beyond GDP" agenda, for example the production of statistics on [inclusive income](#). Some stakeholders were strongly supportive of this work. Stakeholders who expressed reservations about it were not questioning the importance of wider measures of well-being and societal progress, but rather whether work in this area should be a high priority for ONS at present, given the fundamental methodological challenges and uncertainties, including in achieving international comparability. Their view was that this is an example of an area where work might, for the time being, be better taken forward in the academic sphere.

These differing stakeholder views led us to conclude that there is no single right answer as to what ONS should focus on. It is therefore crucial that it sets out a clear articulation of its priorities – what it has chosen to focus on and why.

Survey response rates

Stakeholders repeatedly referred to the problems with the quality of key ONS outputs. The primary concern was with a deterioration in the quality of data sourced from household surveys. Reducing response rates to the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the Living Costs and Food Survey were widely noted. Concerns were also expressed about the Wealth and Assets Survey and the Family Resources Survey (which is funded by the Department for Work and Pensions).

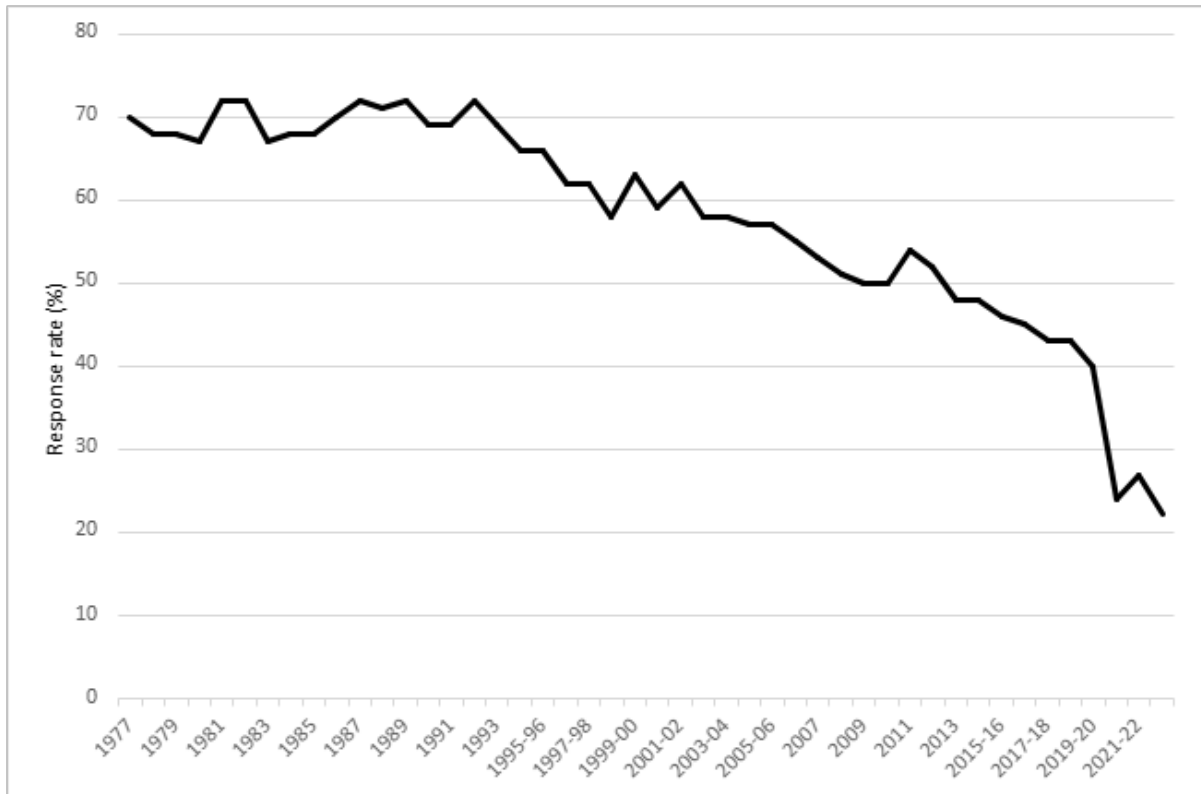
The strong consensus among stakeholders was that ONS has been slow to respond to falling response rates to household surveys and has not put in place sufficient mitigation measures quickly enough. Stakeholders also considered that ONS has not communicated effectively about emerging survey problems.

The independent report on the statistical assembly suggested more proactive research was needed on what influences response to surveys and what is an acceptable level of response.

Consistent with stakeholder concerns, there is certainly evidence across ONS household surveys of longer-term reductions in response rates, which, while accentuated by the pandemic, preceded that crisis.

These reductions can be seen clearly with the Living Costs and Food Survey, for which a long run of data is shown in Chart 1. The decreasing trend in responses can be seen starting in the early 1990s.

Chart 1. Response rate for Living Costs and Food Survey.



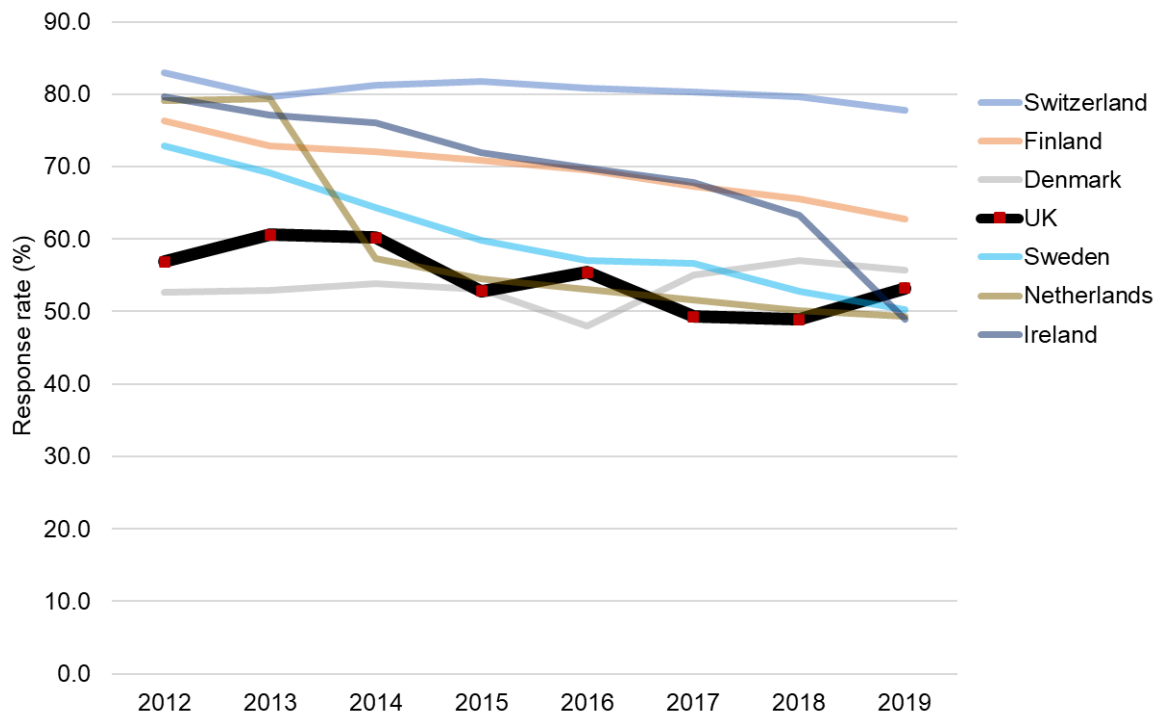
Source: [Office for National Statistics](#).

Chart includes data for predecessor surveys. [Download all underlying data for charts used in this report \(XLSX\)](#).

Additional analysis of response rates to other household surveys can be found in Annex 4.

Falling response rates to voluntary household surveys are to some extent an international issue. In respect of the LFS, medium-term data for the period preceding the pandemic are shown in Chart 2. To support comparability, the chart includes countries in Western Europe and those where response to the survey is voluntary. Over the period shown, the UK LFS has had one of the lower levels of response.

Chart 2. EU-LFS response rates.



Source: [Eurostat](#). Data may not be fully comparable across countries and may differ from the nationally reported results. The data should be treated as indicative. [Download all underlying data for charts used in this report \(XLSX\)](#) should be treated as indicative.

The performance of mandatory business surveys provides a more positive picture:

- ONS has had notable success in moving its business survey collections online; around 2.1 million of the total 2.4 million questionnaires issued are now sent online. Prices data collection has been the latest to move to online capture, with plans to move more surveys online later this year.
- The response rate for monthly turnover in the Monthly Business Survey (MBS) was 83.6% in the most recent available quarter, quarter 4 2024. During the pandemic, the response rate dropped to a low of 79.2% in the equivalent quarter of 2020. Prior to the pandemic, response rates were 85.5% in the equivalent quarters in 2019, 85.1 in 2018, and 88.1% in 2017.
- ONS states that before the pandemic, the achieved sample size for the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) was approximately 180,000 each year. During the pandemic, the final achieved sample sizes were 144,000 for 2020, 142,000 for 2021, and 148,000 for 2022. In 2023, the achieved sample was 164,000, and in 2024 it further improved to 173,000.
- Response rates for the Annual Business Survey (ABS) averaged 77.2% for the three years prior to the pandemic impacting responses (2016–2018). The response rate dropped to a low of 53.0% for the reporting year of 2019, recovering to 77% for 2023.

Data on the performance of mandatory annual business surveys are included in Annex 4.

The response rates to business surveys reflect substantial recovery towards pre-pandemic levels, and do not in themselves give rise to major concerns about the integrity of the economic statistics which draw upon them. However, stakeholders also raised concerns about the quality of business surveys beyond response rates, echoing our own regulatory work, which has identified challenges with sample reviews, rotation and quality assurance. These challenges indicate that ONS needs to make additional efforts to prevent the associated risks becoming a serious quality issue.

On business statistics, the independent report on the Statistics Assembly highlighted issues with, or missing from, official statistics. The issues included definition of market; measurement of innovation; metadata on mergers and acquisitions and firm restructuring; linked employer–employee data; the digital economy not being represented in product or industry; and longitudinal data collection on small businesses. The report also called for better methods to collect data, for example using administrative or more modern direct data collection from business systems, and suggested setting up a forum to conduct research and recommend a communication strategy to explain the importance of data collection to business owners and encourage their participation.

Given the issues that have evolved in household surveys, stakeholders also questioned the extent to which ONS has in place effective early warning systems for emerging quality risks, or how these concerns are best communicated to stakeholders so that action can be taken before risks materialise.

Progress on key Bean review recommendations

Stakeholders generally welcomed ONS's progress on the Bean review recommendations, but most regarded it as slower than they would have expected and preferred.

Stakeholders also identified several mitigating factors:

- Many stakeholders accepted that the pandemic impacted progress and that ONS had appropriately diverted resources towards monitoring this impact. Most stakeholders thought ONS had done this very effectively, drawing on new data sources and real-time data.
- As the [Lievesley review](#) also concluded, stakeholders thought that the slow progress in the use of administrative data has been at least partly due to reasons outside ONS's direct control. There was sometimes a low appetite for risk from other departments and limited resources due to ministerial outputs being prioritised over statistical production and sharing. The lack of harmonisation across complex security requirements has also inhibited cooperation.

Despite these challenges, stakeholders noted that there had also been positive developments, notably in respect of the use of VAT and PAYE data in the National Accounts.

A need for additional focus on administrative data

While noting this progress on the use of administrative data, stakeholders thought that increased efforts were needed. They emphasised the importance of administrative data and other big data sets to support quality in the context of survey challenges. They raised several areas of concern, including:

- how effectively ONS has exploited potential administrative data sources, and how well has it used the opportunity to redesign existing surveys so that they complement administrative data, and whether ONS lacked a strategic approach to do this
- whether ONS has been sufficiently proactive in addressing barriers to the use of administrative data, and, in so far as barriers lie outside its control, whether further action to promote data sharing is required by other parts of government
- whether the [Integrated Data Service \(IDS\)](#) has distracted from a focus on acquiring and using administrative data in core economic statistics

Our data sharing and linkage for the public good [follow-up report](#) finds that these issues around data sharing are systemic and notes that there continues to be a failure to deliver on data sharing and linkage across government, alongside many persisting barriers to progress. It calls for stronger commitments to prioritise data sharing and linkage. Many of the issues here lie beyond ONS's direct control.

Concerns about progress with the use of administrative data were also highlighted in the [Independent Report on the 2025 UK Statistics Assembly](#). Based on engagement with stakeholders during the Assembly, the report identified as a priority the need for the Statistics Authority and Government Statistical Service to take a leadership position in a significant scaling up in the use of administrative data across government. The report also identified an immediate need for official statisticians to be more engaged in the design of digital data architectures for administrative data from diverse sources. The report suggested that a cross-Government Statistical Service group could make a start on this, building on and coordinating existing departmental efforts to enhance standardisation and facilitate more sharing.

Measuring a changing economy

In the view of several key stakeholders, ONS had made virtually no progress on the Bean recommendations to improve measurement of the modern economy, particularly where digital technologies are involved. Specific major gaps included the coverage of:

- internet trade/platforms, including for retail trade
- digital services, including uncharged ones
- open-source and its own account software and cloud computing

The same stakeholders argued that other departments are making more progress than ONS in this area. For instance, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology has introduced a survey on the adoption of AI, in part to replace data from the relatively new, but discontinued, ONS Digital Economy Survey. ONS has noted that the latter survey was discontinued due to budget pressures, and it has asked some questions as part of other surveys.

The independent report on the Statistics Assembly noted a need to revive the e-commerce survey to include modules on AI use, cloud computing, software development and robotics.

Several stakeholders also noted a lack of granularity in the coverage of the digital economy, which extends to other parts of the service sector (notwithstanding the introduction of the new [Annual Survey of Goods and Services](#)).

The role of research

Several stakeholders doubted whether the institutional and organisational changes that followed the Bean review (including, to varying degrees, the creation of the Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence (ESCoE) and the Data Science Campus) and the employment of more economists had effectively and consistently translated into improvements in core ONS outputs.

Noted contributions by ESCoE to improvements in ONS economic statistics included:

- advice on the implementation of double deflation, on the incorporation of VAT data in estimates of GDP and on improved estimates of prices for telecommunications services
- advice on the development of the methodology for incorporating supermarket scanner data in inflation statistics
- the incorporation of new sources of data into rental prices and the development of surveys business management practices and the implications for growth

Some wider and longer-term benefits from ESCoE's activities, for instance in respect of measuring the "green economy" and improving the communication of uncertainty about economic statistics, were also noted. In addition, it was acknowledged that ESCoE has successfully filled the institutional space between producers of official statistics and academia (bringing them together) that is largely unoccupied in many countries, and by doing so has helped develop the next generation of academic experts.

Some stakeholders noted that more recently, they had observed a lack of curiosity, particularly in ONS's understanding and explanation of the coherence between different sets of economic statistics (for example, the various statistics on household income, and at a macro level, the differing picture of the size of the working population provided by ONS's population statistics and its labour market statistics).

We heard that research engagement with ONS has sometimes been inconsistent, perhaps reflecting resource issues and frequently changing research priorities within ONS, leading to a focus on the short term. In addition, it was noted that challenges have arisen within ONS from high staff turnover, loss of expertise, a lack of appropriate career pathways and frequent job rotation within ONS (and the wider Civil Service). Staffing issues may have disrupted longer-term collaboration and eroded institutional memory. These issues will be investigated further as part of our follow-up work to this review.

Evidence from Engagement with ONS

OSR has engaged with ONS to test and explore issues raised from previous assessments of ONS economic statistics and by stakeholders. We have reviewed ONS-published strategies, reports and other documents (such as survey quality and methodology information statements). Additionally, we have held focus groups and bilateral discussions with around 40 ONS staff, largely based in ONS's economic statistics divisions.

Invitations to participate in engagement with OSR were issued to individuals following agreement between OSR and ONS on the roles whose post-holders would be best placed to make an informed contribution to the understanding of issues raised by stakeholders. Since our review has focused on data sources, our engagement with ONS staff has so far reflected this focus, though the roundtable discussions were not narrowly constrained to this area.

The views of ONS staff were summarised and circulated to participants in focus groups and bilateral meetings, with issues where there was a strong consensus identified. Participants were assured that their views were being sought on a non-attributable basis.

Many of the issues summarised so far in this report have been acknowledged by ONS staff in an open and non-defensive way. Concerns about the effectiveness of processes for allocating resources and prioritisation were recognised, as was the slow progress made in addressing the Bean recommendations on measuring the modern economy.

Additional issues raised by ONS staff included the following:

- Despite the existence of a risk-based strategy for quality, many staff thought there has been an erosion of quality in some areas (with, for example, less frequent survey reviews and sample re-allocations than in the past and the lack of a systematic, prioritised approach). There were also calls for additional strategic focus on the quality of data inputs in addition to work done to expand the coverage of outputs and to improve methodology.
- A significant number of staff expressed concerns about a claimed failure to recognise and reward expertise adequately, and the associated loss of expertise to the organisation. Such concerns were even more pronounced among staff at the G6/G7 level than the Senior Civil Service (SCS) level but present in both groups.
- Obstacles created by inflexible and unresponsive IT systems were widely noted. Staff thought that these problems were exacerbated in part by ONS's policy choice to prohibit updates to the legacy systems on which some key business surveys depend.
- Some staff referred to an organisational culture which, despite recent encouragement from senior management, does not always promote or reward challenge and curiosity. Early warnings were not always appreciated or encouraged. As we finalised this interim report, ONS promptly and transparently reported errors in Trade in Goods, Trade in Services and

Producer Price statistics. We will consider whether there are any systemic lessons to be learnt from these errors in our follow-up work.

- Several staff noted that, while the availability of economic expertise has increased, there may have been a failure in some areas to fully exploit economic expertise, and the expertise of other specialists, to increase the level of organisational curiosity, analytic oversight and challenge. It was also recognised, however, that in some areas there is extensive engagement of economists, including from other parts of government. Staff also highlighted examples of good practice, such as the running of regular “curiosity” sessions to provide challenge.

Some staff thought that structural issues contributed to the challenges that ONS faces. It was argued that the separation of statistical production, survey data collection and administrative data sourcing into separate directorates might inhibit a joined-up and strategic approach.

Staff also referred to the pressures on them that have resulted from the level of resources available in some areas, including, for example, unfilled vacancies. Some thought that the persistence of unfilled vacancies resulted, at least in part, from financial constraints, either on ONS as a whole or on those parts of ONS responsible for economic statistics. Several members of staff argued that the balance of resources between economic statistics and other areas does not reflect ONS’s core obligation to produce quality economic statistics.

In respect of the fall in response rates, which particularly affects household surveys, ONS staff pointed to the steps being put in place to remedy the situation. These steps include increasing the number of field interviewers and sample sizes; creating communication campaigns; increasing incentives; and investigating pay and benefits options to improve interviewer retention. But staff thought that increased funding in this area may be needed to drive further improvements.

Allocation of Resources to Economic Statistics

The Code of Practice for Statistics sets out a set of principles and practices that producers of official statistics should follow. These include a requirement that sufficient human, financial and technological resources should be provided to deliver statistical services that serve the public good and that good business practices should be maintained in the use of resources. To inform this review, we have sought information from ONS to help us assess how the level of resourcing for economic statistics has changed over time.

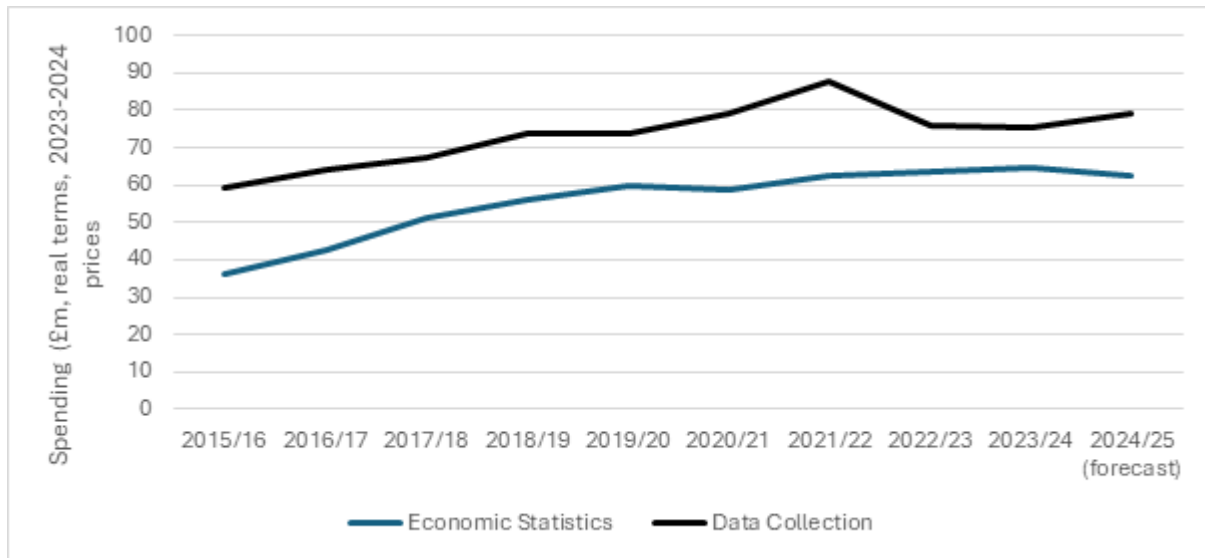
In summary, our conclusion from reviewing the evidence provided by ONS on the allocation of resources is that **making sufficient resources available for its high-priority economic statistics, and particularly the survey data sources on which they are based, has been a consistent challenge:**

- ONS increased the overall level of resources allocated to economic statistics following the 2016 [Bean review](#).
- But in the context of growing demands and a changing environment, including the pandemic, in recent years ONS has found it difficult to maintain real-terms funding for the survey-based sources upon which core economic statistics depend.
- Moreover, resource pressures on economic statistics and on the ONS as a whole have intensified in the last two years.
- This resource challenge has been exacerbated by “ringfences” in ONS’s funding arrangements put in place by HM Treasury, which restrict spending to specific purposes.

Increase in the resources allocated to economic statistics

At our request, ONS provided data on expenditure and headcount (in full-time equivalent (FTE) terms) allocated to the production of economic statistics and the associated data collection (household and business surveys). We have not independently verified these data. Charts 3 and 4 illustrate these data. We have adjusted the expenditure data for inflation using the GDP implied deflator. In interpreting the data, it should be noted that in 2021/22, the Transformation Integrated Shared Services (TISS) team was moved into Surveys Directorate, including around £6m in budget and associated staffing. Support functions (for example, human resources) are excluded.

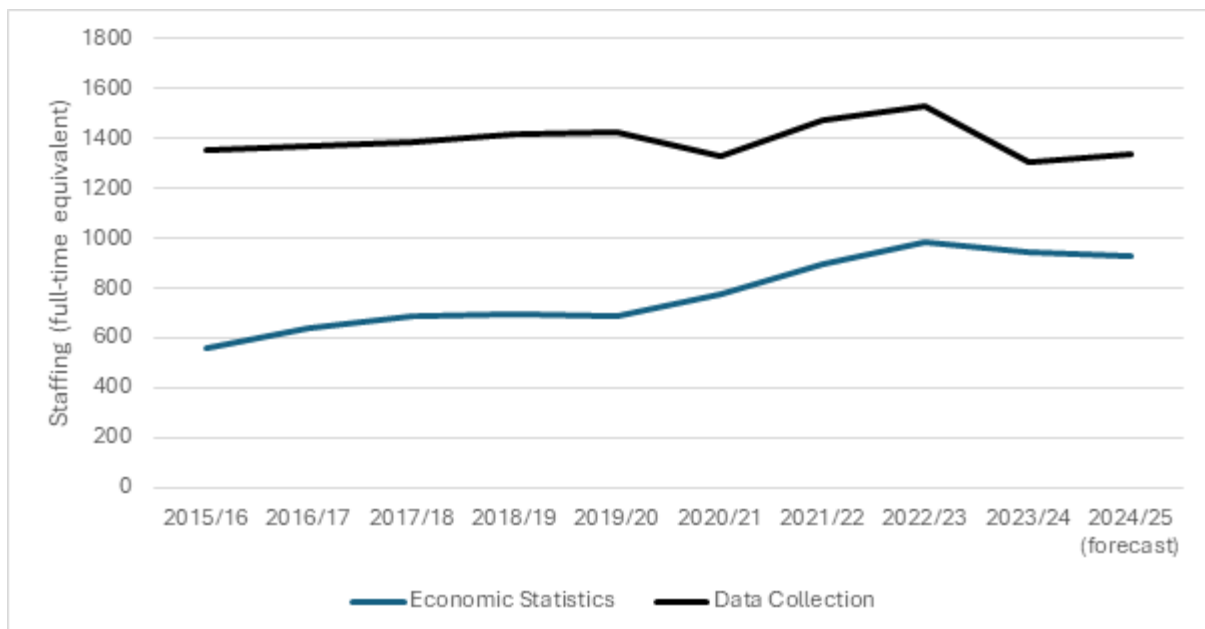
Chart 3. Economic statistics and associated data collection – expenditure (£m, real terms, 2023/24 prices).



Source: ONS provided data. OSR applied the GDP deflator to derive real-terms data. [Download all underlying data for charts used in this report \(XLSX\)](#).

Note: In 2021/22, the Transformation Integrated Shared Services (TISS) team was moved into Surveys Directorate, including c.£6m in budget.

Chart 4. Economic Statistics Development and Production and associated Data Collection – Staff numbers (FTEs).



Source: ONS provided data. [Download all underlying data for charts used in this report \(XLSX\)](#).

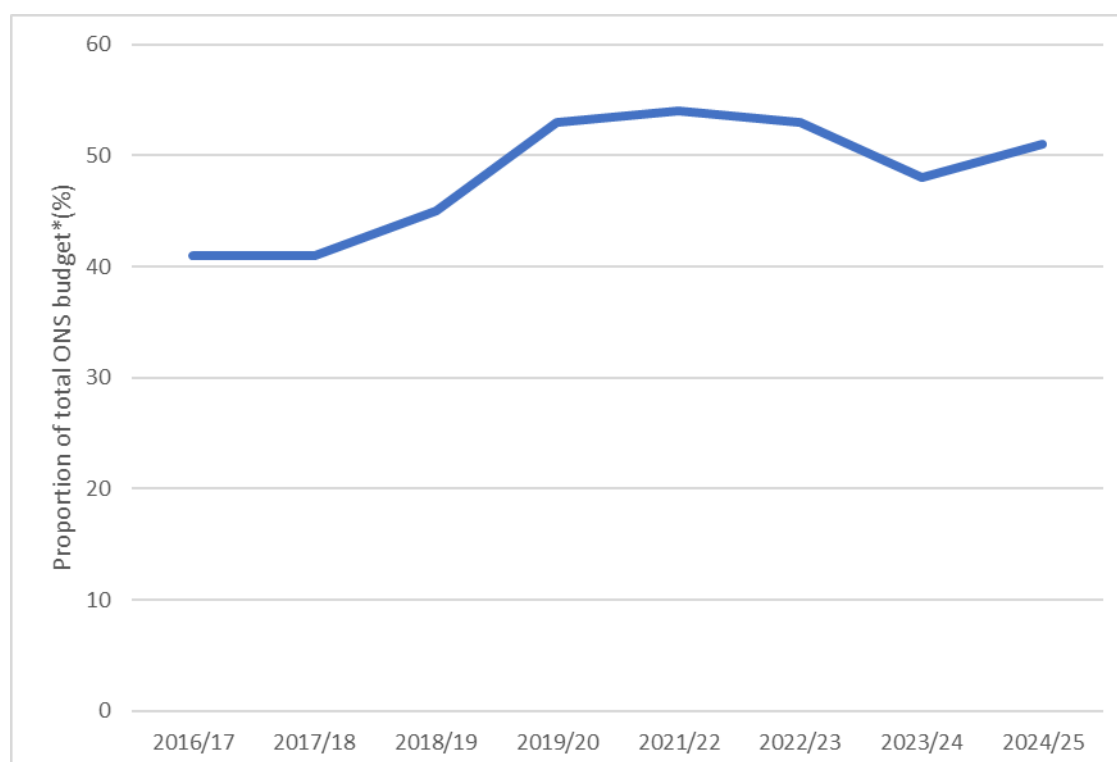
Note: In 2021/22, the Transformation Integrated Shared Services (TISS) team was moved into Surveys Directorate, including c.£6m in budget. There is also an associated increase in FTE, although ONS has not quantified this.

Overall, the real expenditure and headcount allocated to the production of economic statistics (including associated data collection) has increased, with the total headcount growing by 18% between 2015/16 and 2023/24. However, the increase in headcount has been concentrated in the collation of economic statistics rather than in data collection.

ONS notes that given the integrated nature of its operations, there will have been reliance on data operations, digital services, methodology and technical development, as well as overhead costs (for example, licensing and kit provision, support from HR, estates, finance, commercial functions, etc.) that will have supported the delivery of both economic statistics and survey data collection over time. It also highlights the difficulty in separating out such costs reliably over time. But to give a sense of scale, ONS had a gross budget of £425m in 2024/25, of which £170m is accounted for by support functions including estates, data storage and processing, IT kit, software licenses, and business support from corporate services.

Between 2016/17 and 2019/20 ONS increased the proportion of spend available for economic statistics and data collection and has taken steps to attempt to maintain this proportion since, in a challenging financial climate.

Chart 5. Proportion of total budget* allocated to economic statistics, including data collection.



Source: ONS provided data. [Download all underlying data for charts used in this report \(XLSX\)](#).

Note:* To aid comparison over time, total budget excludes spend on census, COVID-19 Infection Survey, ringfenced programmes (other than ARIES and PSP) and reserves.

In interpreting these trends, it should be noted that, over the period shown in the charts, ONS faced the challenges of the pandemic and initiated the [Transformed Labour Force Survey](#), parallel-running it alongside the [Labour Force Survey](#). In addition, ONS had to fund larger-than-anticipated pay increases in 2023/24 and 2024/25 and one-off payments in 2023/24. ONS also does not have full budget flexibility as some budgets are subject to so-called ringfences, meaning that they must be spent for the intended purpose. In 2023/24, ONS's ringfenced budgets were £167.5 million, which amounted to 43% of the ONS budget (this includes some work where ONS recovers its costs from other income sources). In recognition of the impact of the lack of budget flexibility, HM Treasury has relaxed these ringfences from 1 April 2025.

In addition, the expenditure data (and the associated headcount) include some funding from budgets linked to specific new outputs and projects. This includes funding from the [Census and Data Collection Transformation Programme](#) (from 2015/16); the Economic Statistics Transformation Programme (from 2016/17); the Bean review (from 2017/18); the [Ambitious, Radical, and Inclusive Economic Statistics programme](#) (from 2021/22); the Integrated Service Programme (from 2021/22); the Future of Population and Migration Statistics programme (from 2023/24); and the Public Sector Productivity programme (from 2023/24). Outside of those programmes with a core economic statistics focus, ONS has highlighted that the level of expenditure and headcount deployed on these programmes within economic statistics and data collection would be minimal.

Resourcing pressures have intensified over the last 2 years

Spend on data collection increased by in real terms from 2015/16 to 2021/22 (including when adjusting for the move of the TISS team in 2021/22) However, there was subsequently a fall in resources. In 2023/24, there was a fall in the number of staff in data collection. We heard from ONS staff that this decrease reflects both a reduction in the money available for data collection operations and challenges in recruiting and retaining interviewers as people faced increasing living costs. The reduction in the number of interviewers coincided with increasing challenges in achieving interview responses. Insufficient investment, alongside the parallel need to transform surveys, is a key factor in the data quality issues that have subsequently emerged.

Resource allocation to economic statistics increased by 65% in real terms from 2015/16 and 2019/20. After this period resources have increased by 28% nominal terms, but has been broadly flat in real terms. The increases to 2019/20 reflect allocation to economic statistics following the Bean review (including the establishment of the ESCoE and Data Science Campus) and allocation to transformation projects for economic statistics. In 2023/24, costs for the ESCoE were £1.36m and for the Data Science Campus £6.7m.

ONS allocated much of the additional resources following the Bean Review to new activity, recognising the need to innovate to ensure its statistics evolve to measure the changing economy and to use new data sources and methods. The primary focus was on innovation rather than additional money for delivery of existing economic statistics, although innovation in sources and methods would be expected

in time to lead to efficiency savings that would free up resources that could be used to support core outputs.

ONS staff members have highlighted that, as budgets became tighter due to the wider fiscal context, statistical production areas had to make cost savings and efficiencies alongside both running the additional statistical production stemming from the transformation programmes and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. We also see evidence in our regulatory work of resource challenges, including most recently in trade statistics. In this context, producing core statistics has become increasingly challenging, with many areas carrying funded vacancies. ONS has recognised this challenge in recent business planning rounds, placing a focus on protecting funding for core statistics.

Conclusions on Data Sources

This interim report is focused on data sources. However, issues cannot always be fully compartmentalised in this way, and the investigation of issues with data sources has identified other related issues that will require more systemic consideration during later stages of the review.

Some of the issues identified in previous OSR assessments, raised by stakeholders and acknowledged by ONS staff, are the same, or similar, to those identified nearly a decade ago in the [Bean review](#). This indicates the continuing relevance of the Bean recommendations.

Three broad cross-cutting issues have dominated our discussions with external stakeholders and ONS staff and are widely reflected in previous OSR assessments.

ONS must fully acknowledge and address declining data quality

ONS is engaged in ambitious statistical transformation programmes in a challenging context and has made good progress in some areas. This work has included developing and implementing new surveys which give a timelier (Business Impacts and Conditions Survey) and a more granular (Annual Survey of Good and Services) understanding of the economy. ONS has also made significant progress in moving its business survey collection online.

However, in some areas, ONS has faced significant challenges in consistently ensuring that data feeding into economic statistics are of high quality. Most notably, the long-term reduction in response rates to household surveys, including the [Labour Force Survey](#), has severely impacted data quality. ONS has made progress in 2025 in securing improved response to the Labour Force Survey, but the long-term challenges have been associated with a decline in the quality and reliability of some of its key economic statistics.

Although response rates have been a key focus of this review, we would like more assurance that ONS has sufficient steps in place to regularly review and improve sample design and representativeness, bias, survey methodology, and imputation. ONS appears to be finding survey collection more challenging than some of its international peers (see section of main report on survey response rates, and Annex 4), suggesting an urgent need to modernise its collection approach and working practices. In social surveys, these challenges already pose a significant quality issue, while in business surveys, we find increasing levels of risk which, if left unaddressed, could significantly impact quality. ONS is working on a strategic response to these challenges.

Making progress with administrative data is difficult

There have been some good examples of the use of administrative and big data sources in core economic statistics, including the introduction of VAT data into the National Accounts and rail and rental prices data into inflation statistics.

However, as a whole, progress in using administrative data from other government departments has been slow, reflecting in part practical and cultural challenges across government.

Our [Data Sharing and Linkage for the Public Good Follow-Up Report](#) finds that these issues around data sharing are systemic and notes that there continues to be a failure to deliver on data sharing and linkage across government, alongside many persisting barriers to progress. It calls for stronger commitments to prioritise data sharing and linkage.

Stakeholders have highlighted that these broader challenges have been further hindered by the lack of an effective vision and delivery roadmap from ONS. A near-universal view among external stakeholders, and generally acknowledged by ONS staff, was that progress on the use of administrative data had been much slower than expected at the time of [Bean review](#). Previous OSR assessments, including those of the ABS and GDP revisions, noted the scope to make better use of administrative data, whether as a direct source of data or to inform sample design.

Slow progress in the use of administrative data is particularly problematic in the context of reducing survey response rates. While noting that many of barriers may lie with the suppliers of data in other government departments, ONS staff observed that there was common acceptance that the use of administrative data should increase but no systematic assessment of the role that these data could play across output areas and the implications for the future role of surveys.

Some staff thought that in the past, administrative data had often been regarded and presented simplistically as a direct replacement for survey data. While this could sometimes be the case, the reality was often that a more complex solution was required, for example for quality assurance, sampling, methods or survey question replacement, with administrative data playing different roles in different areas. In some areas, surveys would remain the dominant data source. In other areas, there would be a continuing role for surveys as a complementary source of information and, where administrative sources were dominant, to reduce overall response bias (since administrative sources often have their own sources of bias).

It follows that developing an overarching vision and strategy is important but challenging because there are potentially many ways of using administrative data, and options will vary for each output. Assessing the options requires expertise in individual outputs. At the same time, the efficient acquisition and exploitation of administrative data requires a joined-up and strategic approach drawing on the expertise of those with experience of the data sources in question.

Greater strategic clarity of purpose and transparency on prioritisation would help reassure external stakeholders

ONS has taken steps to prioritise and maintain funding for economic statistics and data sources. But it is operating in a challenging financial climate across the public sector. In an environment of funding pressures, ONS can increase the confidence of its stakeholders by providing clearer explanations of the pressures it faces, the priorities it has set and the resource allocation decisions it makes.

After increases earlier years, there was a fall in staff and budgets for data collection. Insufficient investment is a key factor in the data quality issues that have subsequently emerged. It is harder to draw firm conclusions on the funding of economic statistics production overall.

In this context, we consider that there has been a lack of transparency about what ONS regards as its core purpose for economic statistics, and ONS staff and stakeholders have expressed concern about the effectiveness of its decision-making in allocating resources.

In its most recent annual business planning cycles, ONS has sought to prioritise funding for economic statistics, and has reduced some of its outputs to focus on its core priorities for economic statistics. Again, it would help enhance stakeholder confidence if these decisions were more clearly communicated as part of an overall strategy for delivering economic statistics.

In short, a more engaged and transparent process would assist users of all ONS's statistics in understanding the trade-offs ONS faces and how it has addressed them.

ONS has an internal business planning process and tools to aid prioritisation at an operational level, but the process is not transparent to, or engaging of, stakeholders. So, while ONS's engagement on individual statistics has improved, and is often very effective, there is little coherent engagement with stakeholders on the overall priorities that ONS should follow in maintaining and developing economic statistics. The lack of systematic engagement may also have contributed to the challenges ONS has faced in managing stakeholder demands on individual surveys as stakeholders have not been appraised of the implications of overall resource constraints and the opportunity costs of choices made. In short, a more engaged and transparent process would assist users of all ONS's statistics in understanding the trade-offs ONS faces and how it has addressed them.

After the Bean review, a strategy for economic statistics and analysis was published and updated, with the [last published in 2019](#). ONS publishes an [annual Strategic Business Plan](#). However, this plan is very high level. It includes a commitment to publish high-quality statistics on GDP, prices and employment and refers to the [Ambitious, Radical, Inclusive Economic Statistics](#) (ARIES) programme, which 'will improve our core statistical offering and maintain international standards and comparability, in line with user needs, and exploit new data sources and innovative methods to inform better quality, more timely and relevant statistics'. There is relatively little [publicly available information on the detail of this programme](#) or on

how it will shape the allocation of resources across outputs. Few, if any, tangible and dated commitments are made.

Recently, ONS has placed the so-called “Big 4” output areas at the centre of its business planning process. Three areas identified within the Big 4 (GDP, prices and the labour market) lie within the scope of this review and the fourth, population statistics, plays an important role in economic statistics, including for weighting sampling frames. ONS has taken initial steps to identify the allocation of resources to each of these output areas in total. This work represents useful progress, and we recommend that ONS build on it by providing more granularity below the top-level output areas, with sufficient information on the costs and benefits of specific continuing and potential outputs to permit effective stakeholder engagement.

Emerging issues with stakeholder engagement and organisational factors

A range of issues related to stakeholder engagement and ONS organisational factors have been raised through our engagement with stakeholders and our review of ONS-published material. These issues will be considered in more depth in the review’s next stages. These issues include the following:

- It has become clear from engagement with stakeholders that communicating complex economic statistics remains challenging. For example, stakeholders are not always clear on how far monthly GDP statistics are based on turnover proxies rather than being direct measures of GDP, even though this information is generally discoverable from published documents. And transparency in the annual accounts could be improved by publishing, and exploring in more detail, the differences in GDP levels that result from the three methods of calculating GDP, how these differences are resolved through adjustments within the supply and use framework, and how those differences have evolved over time. This greater transparency would build on the good practice in the quarterly accounts, where differences in growth across the three methods are transparently confronted. Greater clarity on other adjustments, for example for quality and balancing purposes, would also be valuable.
- Some stakeholders also pointed to a lack of adequate, up-to-date and sufficiently detailed material in quality and methodology information. Such information should provide users with sufficient knowledge to be able to reproduce the most recent results were they to have access to input data.
- ONS needs to engage with stakeholders on its whole portfolio of outputs, rather than focusing solely on specific statistics or surveys, as some needs may be better met by other parts of the portfolio than currently. For example, the needs for hourly earnings in combination with demographic information data may be better met by the Family Resources Survey (FRS), or perhaps administrative sources, than the LFS, where questions on income may inhibit response, although the challenges associated with drawing data for productivity statistics from different sources would need to be addressed.

As we have been finalising this report, the UK Statistics Authority announced a [review](#) of ONS's performance and culture to be conducted by Sir Robert Devereux. The review is likely to cover the organisation-wide issues, and we will consider its conclusions as we conduct follow-up work to our report.

Action Expected from ONS

While ONS has responded to the challenges with labour market statistics, stakeholders have expressed frustration with the slow response to data collection quality risks and other quality issues, and the lack of a clear, strategic public response to address them. ONS's challenges with the Labour Force Survey have damaged users' confidence in the organisation. However, the quality issues we have identified in this review, while serious and demanding of an urgent response, do not extend across the whole portfolio of outputs.

This report sets out requirements for ONS that are aimed at improving the quality of economic statistics and resetting stakeholders' perception of these statistics through:

- **Restoring confidence**, by producing a fully resourced plan to recover its social survey operation and reduce risk in its business survey operation.
- **Ensuring strategic transparency**, by clearly setting out the core purpose of economic statistics and what can be achieved with available funding in its business plan, a strategic plan for economic statistics and a strategic plan for data sources.
- **Focusing on the quality of data inputs**, by implementing a prioritised rolling programme of regular reviews of individual surveys and other data sources.

Immediate requirements

Requirement 1: It is critical that ONS takes decisive action to restore confidence. ONS should publish a fully resourced plan to recover its social survey operation and reduce risk in its business survey operation to restore the confidence of its users within four weeks of the publication of this review. This plan should set out the risks that continued data quality challenges pose to economic statistics. Given the impact of these challenges on confidence in the statistics system, progress against the action plan should be regularly monitored by the UK Statistics Authority Board and should be publicly reported.

Requirements in the next 3 months

Requirement 2. Align Resources with Core Purposes: The overarching annual ONS business plan should be explicit on how resources are aligned with its core purposes and outputs as a national statistical institute. ONS should implement a more transparent and engaged approach to the way it prioritises across its output of economic statistics. This work should include an annually updated strategic plan for economic statistics, with clear funding allocations and timebound commitments, to increase both transparency and accountability and to facilitate more effective engagement with its stakeholders on prioritisation. [ONS's Strategic business plan: April 2025 to March 2026](#), published a few days before this interim report, makes an important contribution to this requirement.

Requirement 3. Develop a Vision and Strategy for Data Sources: In addition to the recovery plan and drawing on the overall strategy for economic statistics, ONS should develop and publish a regularly updated vision and strategy for the data sources used to compile its economic statistics. This publication should include a “roadmap” setting out how the use of surveys and administrative (and other non-survey-based) sources will be developed in an integrated way, including the development of methods that combine data sources, as well as any barriers that ONS foresees and the support it needs from others to address them.

Requirement 4. Implement a Systematic Programme of Quality Reviews: ONS should take a more strategic and systematic approach to quality reviews of its data sources. ONS should implement a prioritised rolling programme of regular reviews of individual surveys and other data sources focusing on maintaining quality and considering issues such as the maintenance of samples, validation rules and keeping survey questions updated. ONS should consider how such a programme could be integrated with its existing approach to quality assurance and how quality issues are inter-related with other challenges, including those associated with ensuring appropriate levels of skill and the effectiveness of systems.

Our next steps

In the autumn, we will review ONS’s response to this report and publish our overall findings.

While this interim report has focused on data sources, the persistent challenges that ONS has faced in recent years in this area, particularly the escalating problems with response rates to household surveys and the limited progress with the use of administrative data, suggest that there may be organisation-wide issues. Although we have not directly looked at organisational culture in this review, and issues of efficiency and effectiveness are beyond the review’s remit, our discussions with ONS staff and users suggest some concern around the management and business processes through which resources are allocated and the ways in which ONS engages with senior stakeholders.

As we have been finalising this report, the UK Statistics Authority announced a [review](#) of ONS’s performance and culture to be conducted by Sir Robert Devereux. The review is likely to cover the organisation-wide issues, and we will consider its conclusions as we conduct follow-up work to our report.

Annex 1: Recommendations of the Bean Review

Recommendations: Measuring the economy

Strategic Recommendation A: Address established statistical limitations

- **Recommended Action 1:** ONS/UKSA should develop a programme to address established statistical limitations transparently and on the basis of an assessment of costs and benefits.
- **Recommended Action 2:** UKSA should continuously seek to identify shortcomings in its economic statistics, both inside ONS and across departments, through a rolling programme of NSQRs, drawing on both internal and external expertise.

Strategic Recommendation B: Become more agile in the provision of statistics that properly reflect the changing structure and characteristics of the economy

- **Recommended Action 3:** Institute an ambitious work programme to evaluate the quantitative implications for the measurement of economic activity associated with the digital economy.
- **Recommended Action 4:** In conjunction with suitable partners in academia and the user community, ONS should establish a new centre of excellence for the analysis of emerging and future issues in measuring the modern economy.

Recommendations: ONS capability and performance

Strategic Recommendation C: Refocus the culture of ONS towards better meeting user needs

- **Recommended Action 5:** ONS should take action to ensure that the primary objective of statistical producers is to meet user needs, by encouraging staff to: understand better how their statistics are used; be more curious and self-critical in identifying statistical issues; collaborate with users and experts; and create a culture of rewarding innovation.
- **Recommended Action 6:** While building up the capability of its operation in Newport, ONS should also increase its London profile in order to facilitate stronger engagement with users of economic statistics, as well as expanding its engagement with users across the rest of the UK.
- **Recommended Action 7:** Statistical releases should contain clear and prominent commentary on the quality of those statistics, noting any significant limitations and also highlighting any scope for misinterpretation.

- **Recommended Action 8:** Users and commentators should be more alert to the limitations of economic statistics and economics courses should pay more attention to the problems of economic measurement.
- **Recommended Action 9:** ONS should continue to develop its new and greatly improved website in order to ensure that its full range of statistics can be easily accessed and viewed.

Strategic Recommendation D: Make the most of existing and new data sources and the technologies for dealing with them explore the potential for using new techniques of collecting and analysing big data, such as web scraping, text-mining and machine learning

- **Recommended Action 10:** Remove obstacles to the greater use of public sector administrative data for statistical purposes, including through changes to the associated legal framework, while ensuring appropriate ethical safeguards are in place and privacy is protected.
- **Recommended Action 11:** Exploit new methods for collecting data and explore the scope for using information gathered by private sector entities in the production of economic statistics, nowcasting and one-off studies of emerging measurement issues.
- **Recommended Action 12:** Ensure ONS's technology and data systems are capable of supporting the flexible exploitation of very large data sets.
- **Recommended Action 13:** Build ONS's capacity to clean, match and analyse very large data sets, including through the recruitment of a cadre of data scientists.
- **Recommended Action 14:** Establish a new centre for the development and application of data-science techniques to the production of economic statistics.

Strategic Recommendation E: Become better at understanding and interrogating

- **Recommended Action 15:** Increase the economic expertise within ONS and implement a smart and effective system for quality assurance and sense checking across the production of all economic statistics.
- **Recommended Action 16:** Introduce recruitment and training schemes to raise analytical skills across ONS, including offering opportunities for specialists to progress in their careers by contributing to research and development of value to the organisation.
- **Recommended Action 17:** Support the greater use of microdata by ONS and approved researchers by improving the available metadata, and simplifying approval processes, while continuing to respect confidentiality issues.

Recommendations: Governance of statistics

Strategic Recommendation F: Strengthen the governance framework so as to help support the production of high-quality economic statistics.

- **Recommended Action 18:** The government should delegate to UKSA the power to decide that a piece of data be classified as an official statistic; high-profile releases of management information by departments should be treated as official statistics and be compliant with the Code; UKSA should decide whether official statistics should be assessed against the Code for the purposes of National Statistic status.
- **Recommended Action 19:** The independence of departmental statistics Heads of Profession should be reinforced, with any abuses highlighted by the Independent Regulation and Evaluation Office (see Recommended Action 24 below); there should be a formal role for the National Statistician in the appointment and performance management of the Heads of Profession.
- **Recommended Action 20:** In the event of greater use being made of administrative data in producing economic statistics, UKSA should, after consultation with other departments, put in place suitable policies governing their use, together with the appointment of an independent person or body to oversee their application and adjudicate on any difficult cases.
- **Recommended Action 21:** UKSA should provide a more nuanced assessment of the status of a statistic than is conveyed by the binary National Statistic designation.
- **Recommended Action 22:** ONS should establish an effective and transparent process for prioritising and allocating resources, supported by better management information.
- **Recommended Action 23:** A high-level group comprising representatives of HM Treasury, the Bank of England and other key stakeholders and users should be established to facilitate frank and open discussion with the UKSA Board.
- **Recommended Action 24:** The UKSA regulatory function should be subsumed within a new 'Independent Regulation and Evaluation Office' (IREO) charged with assessing the trustworthiness and quality of official statistics as well as ONS's effectiveness; the head of the IREO would report to the UKSA Board and publish an annual assessment of ONS performance and the whole statistical estate.

Annex 2: Previous OSR assessments and reviews

2015
The UK Annual and Quarterly National Accounts
The UK National Accounts: Supply and Use Tables and Input-Output Tables
Measuring 'Real' values: Taking account of price changes over time in statistical analysis
UK Trade
House Price Index Phase 1
Statistics on the Public Sector Finances
2016
Statistics on Consumer Price Inflation including Owner Occupiers' Housing Costs
Statistics on household incomes within small areas in England and Wales
2017
Quarterly Sector Accounts
Statistics on Regional Gross Value Added: Phase 1
2018
Statistics on Regional Gross Value Added: Phase 2
2019
Purchases Survey Statistics
2020
UK employment and jobs statistics
UK Business Demography Statistics
2021
UK Productivity Statistics (Office for National Statistics)
The Living Costs and Food Survey (Office for National Statistics)
Statistics from the Annual Business Survey (Office for National Statistics)
2022
Funded Occupational Pension Scheme Statistics (Office for National Statistics)
2023
Earnings and Employment from Pay As You Earn Real Time Information, UK
Spotlight on Quality: Producer Price Indices
2024
Spotlight on Quality: Statistics on Profitability of UK Companies and Gross Operating Surplus of non-financial corporations
Spotlight on Quality Assessment: Statistics on UK Business Enterprise Research and Development (BERD)

Office for National Statistics' reintroduced Labour Force Survey (LFS)-derived labour market statistics: OSR progress report, July 2024
Spotlight on Quality Assessment: Price Index of Private Rents (PIPR)
Spotlight on Quality Assessment: Statistics on Business Investment
2025
Statistics from the Labour Force Survey (Progress Report)

In addition to the assessments and reviews listed above, since 2015 OSR has also undertaken many compliance checks of ONS statistics. Compliance checks are short, focused investigations, typically providing assurance of the extent to which statistics meet the standards of the Code of Practice for Statistics.

Annex 3: Stakeholder engagement

A call for evidence was made in July 2024.

Bodies which participated in discussions with OSR

HM Treasury
Bank of England
Office for Budget Responsibility
Resolution Foundation
Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence
Welsh Government
TUC
Centre for Cities
Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
Better Statistics

Written evidence

Welsh Government
Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre
DCMS
Science and Research Policy UCL
ESCoE
Better Statistics

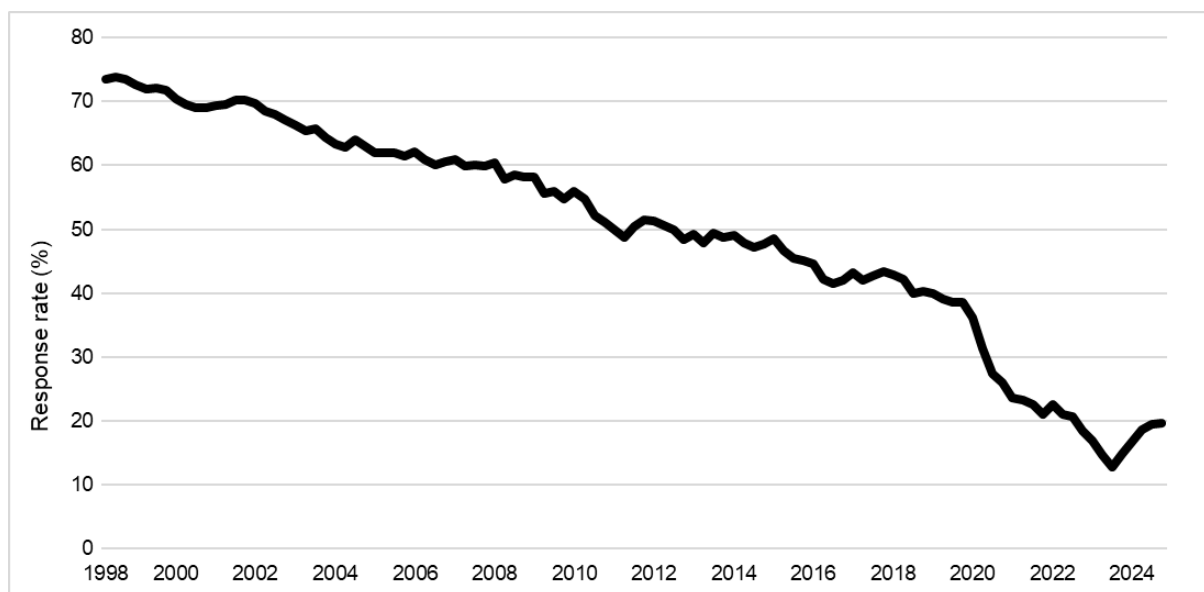
Individuals

OSR also engaged with a number of individual stakeholders who have relevant expertise and interests. This included members of the National Statistician's Committee for Advice on Standards for Economic Statistics (NSCASE). These discussions took place on the basis that views would not be attributed.

Annex 4: Additional information on survey response rates

The long-term trend in the response rate for the Labour Force Survey (LFS) is shown in Chart A4.1. Data are only available for the period from 1998, but from this point onwards the chart shows a broadly similar decline to that seen with the Living Costs and Food Survey.

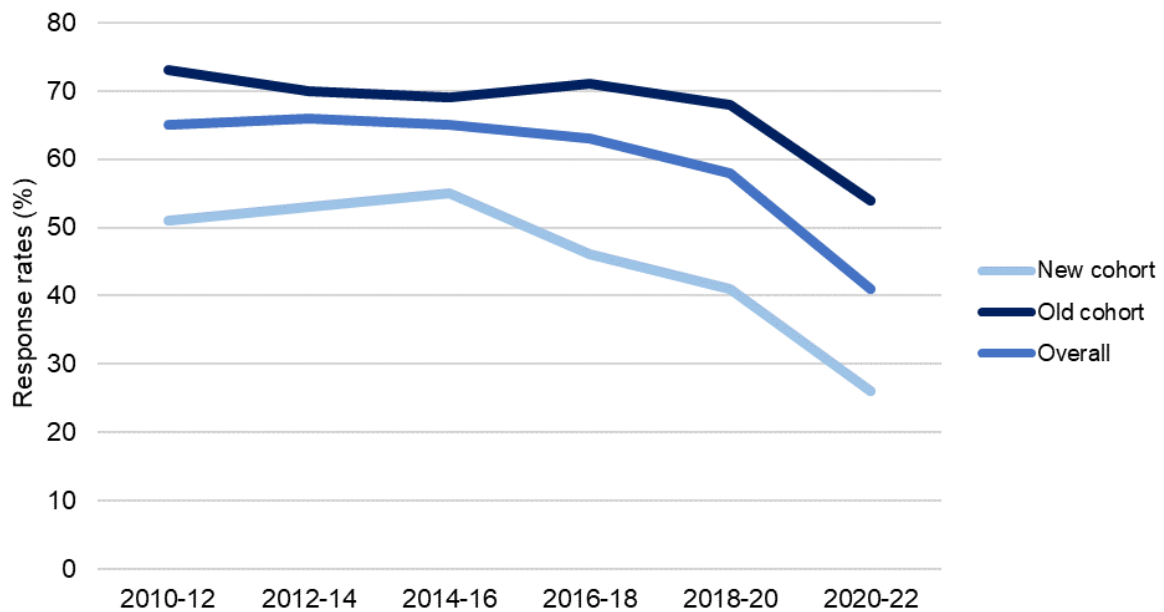
Chart A4.1. Response rate for the UK Labour Force Survey.



Source: Office for National Statistics. [Download all underlying data for charts used in this report \(XLSX\)](#).

Response rates to the Wealth and Assets Survey have also been adversely affected by the pandemic, but again, the medium-term trend shows a reduction that pre-dates the crisis – see Chart A4.2.

Chart A4.2. Response rates to Wealth and Assets Survey.

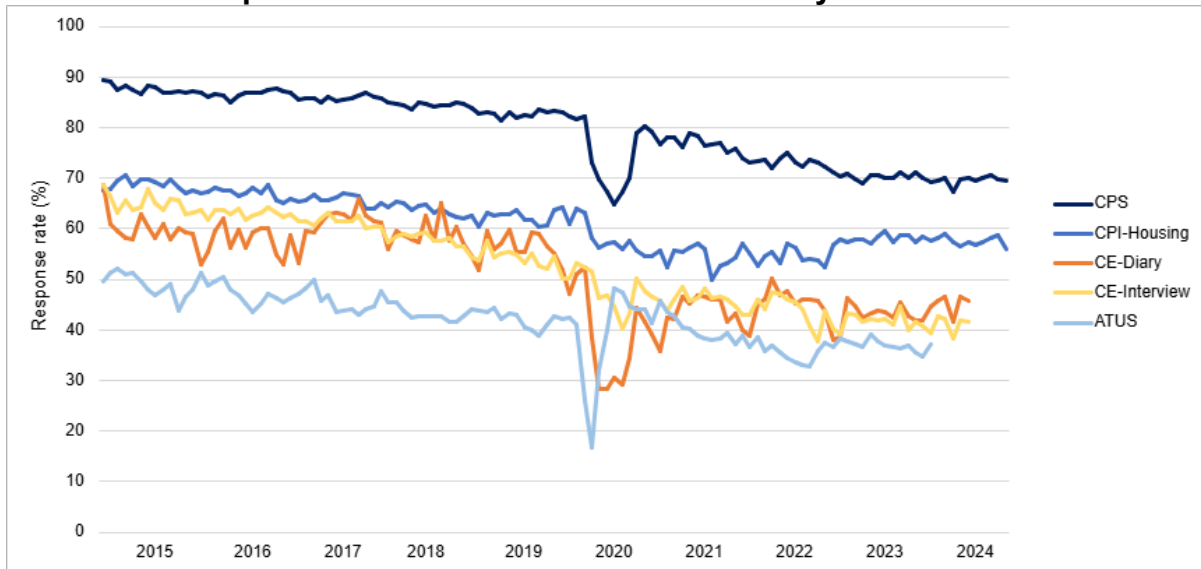


Source: [Office for National Statistics Wealth and Assets Survey QMI](#). The Wealth and Assets Survey, also known as the Household Assets Survey, is a longitudinal survey, where respondents are re-interviewed in each (two-year) period. Newer cohorts are added in each round to mitigate the issues that emerge from attrition – specifically, lower sample sizes over time and non-response biases. [Download all underlying data for charts used in this report \(XLSX\)](#).biases.

A broadly similar pattern is observed with the Family Resources Survey, which, although operated by ONS, is funded by the Department for Work and Pensions. Response rates fell from around 65–70% in the mid-1990s to 50–55% in the years prior to the pandemic and 25% in 2022/23.

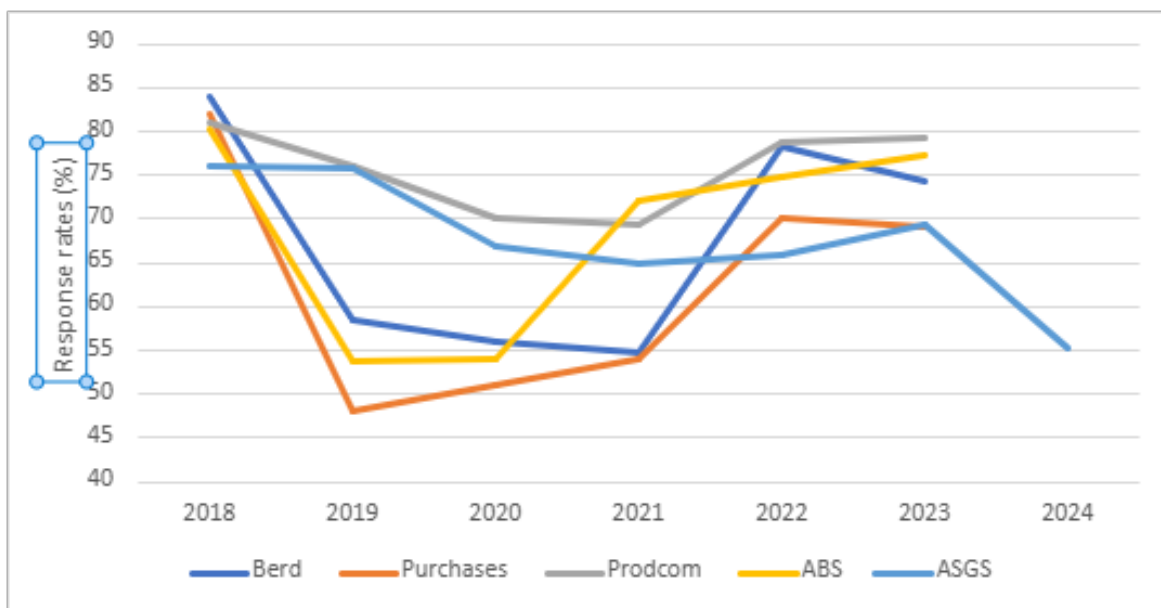
The USA also provides evidence of downward trends across voluntary household surveys, again pre-dating the pandemic in many cases, although the available data only cover the medium term (see Chart A4.3).

Chart A4.3. Response rates for USA household surveys.



Source: [Bureau of Labour Statistics](#) (BLS). Chart shows response rates for the main BLS household surveys: the Consumer Expenditure (CE) diaries and interviews; the Central Population Survey (CPS); the Consumer Price Index-Housing (CPI-Housing) Survey; and the American Time Use Survey (ATUS). [Download all underlying data for charts used in this report \(XLSX\)](#).

Chart A4.4. Response rates for ONS annual business surveys.



Source: Office for National Statistics (unpublished provisional data). [Download all underlying data for charts used in this report \(XLSX\)](#).

Notes:

1. Dates refer to the reference year, not the year of collection, which is typically the subsequent year. Data collection for ASGS 2024 is incomplete.
2. Berd – Business Enterprise Research and Development Survey; Purchases – Annual Purchases Survey; Prodcom – UK Manufacturers Sales by Product Survey; ABS – Annual Business Survey; ASGS – Annual Survey of Goods and Services.