

Systemic Review of Economic Statistics produced by ONS

December 2025

The Office for Statistics Regulation

Statistics should serve everyone, helping enhance knowledge about every section of society and the economy, and people's place within them.

The Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) provides independent regulation of official statistics produced in the UK. Official statistics are statistics produced by Crown bodies and other organisations listed within an [Official Statistics Order](#), on behalf of the UK Government or the devolved governments.

We aim to enhance public confidence in statistics produced by government by setting the standards that they must meet in [the Code of Practice for Statistics](#). We ensure that producers uphold these standards by conducting reviews of statistics against the Code. We also report publicly on system-wide issues and on the way statistics are being used, celebrating when the standards are upheld and challenging publicly when they are not.

Systemic Reviews

Our key driver is to improve the value provided by statistics.

Our ability to examine issues across the statistics landscape allows us to influence how the statistics system responds collectively to maximise quality and public value. When we want to improve public value of a set of statistics or examine a cross-cutting statistical issue (for example, data linkage or classifications) rather than one particular series, we adopt a systemic review.

We have undertaken such reviews where an accumulation of evidence indicates there might be issues around gaps, overlaps, coherence, accessibility and other system-level issues. Systemic reviews often prove to be at their most useful when barriers to improvement and maximizing value exist around clarity of leadership, lack of collaboration or skills gaps. We can also use systemic reviews to highlight good practice and innovation in elements of public value, with a view to sharing lessons across the system.

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Executive summary

Why we did this review

The aim of the Office for Statistics (OSR)'s Review of Economic Statistics produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) was to identify, and respond to, high-level, cross-cutting issues and concerns, covering data sources for economic statistics, stakeholder needs and engagement, and related organisational issues.

Findings

The [interim report](#) of OSR's review (published in April 2025) concluded that ONS needed to take **urgent action to rebuild trust in its core economic statistics** and placed four immediate requirements on ONS.

This final report of the review **confirms the findings of the interim report** and assesses the **progress ONS has made** in responding to the requirements set out in that report.

To some extent, this review reflects the recent history of ONS's economic statistics. However, we recognise that there have been important activities and developments since our interim report. Since the summer, ONS has also taken several positive steps to strengthen its approach, with an emphasis on openness, transparency, and prioritisation. This openness marks an important step in rebuilding trust and fostering confidence in the future of UK economic statistics, we welcome these developments and will consider them in further detail as part of our response to ONS's forthcoming quarterly progress report.

This report **sets out OSR's expectations for further progress** and its **planned approach to the future regulation of ONS**. This is intended to ensure that the progress made so far is maintained.

The four immediate requirements set in the interim report were:

Requirement 1: To restore the confidence of its users, ONS should publish a fully resourced plan to recover its social survey operation and reduce risk in its business survey operation.

Requirement 2: 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.

Requirement 3: 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.

Requirement 4: ONS should implement a prioritised rolling programme of regular reviews of individual surveys and other data sources focusing on maintaining quality.

In parallel with the OSR review, Sir Robert Devereux undertook a [review](#) into ONS's organisation and culture. Sir Robert's review judged that the problems with ONS core economic statistics reflected issues with ONS organisation and culture, including ineffective prioritisation.

Our judgement on progress and future expectations

In response to the OSR interim report and the Devereux report, ONS published improvement plans for economic statistics and for the associated surveys. ONS has subsequently set out the initial steps it is taking to make progress with these plans.

OSR judges that these plans meet OSR's immediate requirements to take action to restore confidence, ensure strategic transparency and enhance focus on the quality of data inputs.

In this final report, OSR sets out its expectations on the steps ONS should take to maintain progress over the longer term. These are as follows:

- ONS should meet its commitment to publish a data sources strategy and roadmap covering **the integrated roles of administrative and survey data**.
- ONS should include within future versions of its plans **data on the resources allocated to, and between, individual core economic statistics**.
- In future versions of its Plan for Economic Statistics, ONS should set out **a prioritised programme of quality reviews**.

Future approach to the regulation of ONS economic statistics

To provide assurance on progress, OSR's future approach to the regulation of ONS economic statistics will be multi-faceted, consisting of:

- assuring and supporting progress against the ONS plans as a whole
- assuring compliance of individual sets of statistics and key improvements with the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#)
- providing a systemic view of ONS's recovery, including ONS's effectiveness in moving resources to support economic statistics and engaging effectively with its stakeholders on its approach to prioritisation

Interim report approach, conclusions and recommendations

Approach to evidence gathering

OSR formed the judgements set out in the interim report by gathering evidence from four main sources:

- OSR's own assessments of economic statistics, consisting of 26 assessments. 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.

Conclusions

The interim report set out core findings (for a full description, please see the [annex](#)) and drew three key conclusions:

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

Despite good progress in some areas (for example, more-granular data on the economy from the Annual Survey of Goods and Services), 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 were a key focus of the interim review, we also sought more assurance that ONS has sufficient steps in place to regularly review and improve sample design and representativeness, bias, survey methodology and imputation.

2. Making progress with administrative data has been 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, overall progress in using administrative data from other government departments has been slow, reflecting in part practical and cultural challenges across government (including, of course, the costs of delivering data to ONS). Stakeholders 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.

The interim report concluded that ONS could increase the confidence of its stakeholders by providing clearer explanations of the pressures and trade-offs it faces, the priorities it has set and the resource allocation decisions it makes.

The report found that insufficient investment had been a key factor in the data quality issues that emerged over recent years. However, it was harder to draw firm conclusions on the funding of economic statistics production overall.

The report also concluded that there had been a lack of transparency about what ONS regards as its core purpose for economic statistics and noted that ONS staff and stakeholders have expressed concern about the effectiveness of its decision making in allocating resources.

Requirements placed on ONS

The interim report placed requirements on ONS aimed at improving the quality of economic statistics and resetting stakeholders' perception of these statistics.

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**. 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.

Requirement 2. 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.

The interim report noted that [ONS's Strategic business plan: April 2025 to March 2026](#), published a few days before the interim report, made an important contribution to this requirement.

Requirement 3. 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. 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.

Devereux Report findings and recommendations

Findings

The Devereux report, published in June 2025, made major recommendations on ONS organisational matters that have important implications for its production of economic statistics.

Sir Robert Devereux judged that most of the problems with ONS's core economic statistics were the consequence of ONS's own performance.

Three inter-related underlying cultural issues were highlighted by Sir Robert, as paraphrased below:

- A commendable interest in both new approaches to statistics (including the use of administrative data) and ensuring the relevance of ONS activity to wider political debate has had the (unintended) effect of de-prioritising the less exciting, but nonetheless crucial, task of delivering core economic statistics of sufficient quality to guide decision making. The opportunity cost has been both the constraint on organisational bandwidth, and the restricted funding for core economic production teams.
- This interest in the 'new' might have been better managed if ONS had a stronger system of planning and budgeting. There was little evidence of re-prioritisation at the organisational level, with, for example, substantive reductions in lower priority work. Instead, the four leaders of the principal teams within ONS were invited to make their own decisions on how best to balance their final budgets, even though each core economic statistic requires collaboration across all four teams.
- A widely reported reluctance of senior leaders to hear and act on difficult news. The organisation had performed exceptionally during the pandemic when an overwhelming emergency understandably de-prioritised many other activities. It was not realistic to expect the exceptional level of delivery to continue without the effects of the de-prioritisation becoming increasingly apparent. Senior leaders should have acknowledged and responded to the warnings of staff concerned about the quality of population and economic statistics.

The failures of economic statistics which have occurred were not best thought of as isolated issues, but rather as the almost inevitable consequence of the choices made (and not made) at the top of ONS over several years. This included choices about what to prioritise in seeking funds in the 2021 Spending Review.

Sir Robert's conclusions on these issues are fully consistent with the findings set out in OSR's interim report.

Devereux report recommendations

Sir Robert's recommendations are paraphrased below:

Recommendation 1: ONS needs a **focused and consistent effort to improve core statistics**: the statistical system is complex, and many elements need action, which must be carefully sequenced; past actions appear to be too piecemeal, driven by individual failures.

Recommendation 2: To support this new direction and strengthen delivery confidence yet further, there is a need to change the way ONS is led. Since the passing of the relevant legislation in 2007, the National Statistician has also been the Permanent Secretary for ONS. Sir Robert's view was these roles require quite different sets of skills and that, while they have been found in the same individual before, the combination is rare. Sir Robert judged that the balance of advantage now lay in **separating the roles of Permanent Secretary and National Statistician**, at least for a temporary period, in order to appoint as ONS Permanent Secretary someone with a track record of leading an operational business, including turning round such an organisation.

The key factor underpinning this recommendation was a judgement that most of the problems that have arisen with core statistics have resulted from inadequacies in the way ONS has made decisions, planned and budgeted, and managed risks.

Sir Robert also highlighted other management issues requiring urgent attention. These included the resolution of a dispute over working from home, the management of, and responsibilities for, the deployment of technology, the effectiveness and consistency of performance management, the development and retention of deep technical knowledge, and challenges in recruiting and retaining skilled staff more generally.

Overall, Sir Robert judged ONS lacked a consistent and compelling narrative about how the organisation sees and addresses its challenges and responds to external critiques. And such a narrative was a necessary cornerstone for effective engagement of staff across ONS, and to motivate and support each person's contribution.

Recommendation 3: **The 'turn round' period should be used by various parties to reflect on the appropriate governance of ONS** and of the wider statistical system for the long term, and if they conclude that legislation needs to change, to do so well before further appointments are needed. (In the Cabinet Office's [response](#) to the review, it committed publicly to reviewing the governance arrangements and potentially changing these via primary legislation if necessary.)

ONS response and maintaining progress

Introduction

Simultaneously with the publication of the Devereux report, ONS published improvement plans for economic statistics and for the associated surveys. These plans – the [Plan for Economic Statistics](#) and the [Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan for Economic Statistics](#) – responded both to the requirements that had been placed on ONS in our interim report and to the recommendations in the Devereux report.

ONS plans for economic statistics

In the **Plan for Economic Statistics**, ONS clearly acknowledges the quality issues that have arisen.

The plan sets out proposed improvements to the ONS's 'common capabilities' that form the foundation for high-quality statistics (these are the indexes, classification systems and registers which drive survey designs and enable data linking; surveys; and collection systems for non-survey data) and to ONS's core economic statistics.

In the plan, ONS's core economic statistics are grouped into five statistical themes: labour market, prices, public sector and balance of payments and trade, and their aggregation with other data to create the National Accounts (and calculate Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and other headline indicators). The plan provides detailed plans for each theme.

For **labour market statistics**, a particular challenge has of course been the sharp decline in response rates since the pandemic, exacerbated by capacity constraints within the field force of interviewers. ONS plans to continue its transition to the Transformed Labour Force Survey (TLFS) with its plan for the way forward, which has been endorsed by key stakeholders and is set out in the recent [Labour Market Transformation: update on progress and plans publication](#).

Detailed plans are set out for **improving GDP** and the balance of payments, reflecting the context of changing international macro-economic statistical standards (IMSS), such as the new System of National Accounts (SNA25). These changes aim to ensure that economic statistics better reflect the modern economy. Adopting these new international standards within the UK National Accounts requires changes across the common capabilities and statistical themes described above.

Core **population statistics** also play a vital role in compiling economic statistics. Population estimates and projections are used in economic statistics as denominators and informing survey weights. They underpin productivity and GDP per capita estimates. The

plan therefore also includes proposed improvements to population statistics, including the 2031 census.

In the plan, ONS recognises the urgency with which its challenges need to be addressed and sets out new proposals for additional expenditure of £10m (including funding for around 150 skilled people) on core economic and population statistics. This investment will be reflected in a re-prioritisation of the original business plan, including the rapid deployment of skilled people to the work from other areas of the office. In addition, ONS has committed to additional investment in later years to support the effective implementation of the System of National Accounts (SNA25) changes and updates to associated International Frameworks.

The plan set out clear and time-bound milestones for developments across its common capabilities and core economic statistics. It also described how ONS assesses the quality of its core economic statistics and how ONS plans to address associated issues and risks.

In the **Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan**, covering both social and business surveys, ONS addresses more fully the urgent need to respond to recent challenges faced by its social surveys and describes an associated re-prioritisation aimed at sustaining social surveys into the future.

The plan outlines a strategy and roadmap to restore confidence in ONS survey operations, to enhance data quality, to (re) build resources and capability, and to modernise systems and methodologies. Key developments include progress towards the completion of the transformation of the Labour Force Survey and the development of a new Statistical Business Register, both of which form cornerstones of the over-arching Plan for Economic Statistics. The survey improvement plan includes a range of milestones against which progress can be measured during the current year, 2025/26.

In November 2025, Darren Tierney, ONS permanent secretary, [wrote](#) to Penny Young, deputy chair of the Statistics Authority, setting out the next steps ONS is taking to re-prioritise its activities. These steps include prioritising quality over quantity, by stopping, reducing, and slowing activities in areas judged to be of lower priority. This will enable the increased focus on core outputs, including prices, GDP, the labour market and population.

ONS plan to focus on consolidating outputs across the statistical system as a whole, with reviews covering health, crime and subnational statistics.

In a recent [speech](#) James Benford noted that ONS has also initiated an organisational “reset” including changes in organisation structure, new governance arrangements, and the launch of a new 3-year business planning process. In the same speech he pointed to

ONS leadership's commitment to cultural change, with greater emphasis on transparency, and a firm intention to build trust and encourage challenge.

Expectations for maintaining progress

Following the publication of the plans, in August 2025 [OSR wrote](#) to the new ONS Director General for the Economic, Social and Environmental Group, James Benford.

OSR confirmed that the plans met "OSR's immediate requirements as a plan of activities to restore confidence, ensure strategic transparency and enhance focus on the quality of data inputs".

However, OSR also noted that it expected **further actions** from ONS over the longer term to continue building confidence. These further actions include the following:

- ONS should meet its commitment to publish a data sources strategy, as recommended by the Statistics Assembly. The data sources strategy should set out a clear, if evolving, road map for the data sources used in the preparation of economic statistics, covering the integrated role of administrative and survey data.
- ONS should include within its plans **data on the resources allocated to, and between, individual core economic statistics**. This should include the production of ongoing outputs and planned developments. This information should be sufficiently detailed to inform stakeholder engagement on the trade-offs ONS faces in its prioritisation. Over time, we would hope to see this approach applied across the range of ONS activities.
- Further proposals on quality, including providing increased challenge through a **prioritised programme of quality reviews**, should be set out in future versions of the plans.

OSR considers that the plans, and the development of future iterations, particularly with these enhancements, should form the basis for **more-effective stakeholder engagement**, as it will set the consideration of options for developing individual economic statistics in the context of overall resource availability and the inevitability of trade-offs.

[James Benford responded](#), welcoming our judgement and acknowledging early progress at ONS. ONS also committed to our request for public quarterly reporting of progress against the milestones, with the first report expected to be published before Christmas. This frequency of reporting will be reviewed, subject to delivery and the views of stakeholders.

Sir Robert Devereux has also welcomed the strategy as set out in the plans and noted that the approach has several important properties: it is focused on core economic statistics, it is comprehensive (covering all the elements of statistics production from registers and classification, through data collection and validation, to production and

dissemination), and it is honest that some necessary improvements will take time to deliver, while setting out specific short term actions.

Future approach to the regulation of ONS's economic statistics

ONS's plans for economic statistics and associated surveys cover a very large suite of statistics and include around 160 milestones which span from March 2026 to March 2029.

OSR considers that a multi-faceted approach is needed to regulate economic statistics during this period, consisting of:

- crucially, assuring and supporting progress against the ONS plans as a whole
- assuring compliance of individual sets of statistics and key improvements with the Code of Practice
- providing a systemic view of ONS's recovery, including ONS's effectiveness in moving resources to support economic statistics, taking account of other pressures (including the next census).

Assuring progress against ONS plans as a whole

In response to each of ONS's quarterly reports, OSR will write to ONS, publicly setting out its assessment of progress. This assessment will draw on engagement with key stakeholders and on our regulatory work. OSR will publish a more comprehensive annual report, which will draw together our views in the round.

Assuring compliance with the code

Assuring compliance is OSR's 'business as usual'. OSR will continue to assess statistics against the Code of Practice and follow up on ONS's response to the assessments we have already undertaken in our Spotlight on Quality programme.

For key changes, we also plan to assess ONS's delivery of change against the Code of Practice. This would build on the approach we have taken to the [Transformed Labour Force Survey \(TLFS\)](#) and [Consumer Price Index \(CPI\) and Consumer Price Index including Owner Occupied Housing \(CPIH\) accreditation](#).

Our assessments will be prioritised according to the milestones in the ONS plans.

Providing a systemic view of ONS's recovery

The initial scope of our strategic review covered data sources for economic statistics, stakeholder needs and engagement, and related organisational factors. The interim report

focused on data sources, and the Devereux review provided a detailed examination of organisational factors.

OSR does not consider it would be an efficient use of resources for it to duplicate the investigations into organisational issues carried out by Sir Robert. Instead, OSR plans to focus on assessing ONS progress against the requirements set in its interim report, and on the recommendations made in the Devereux review in respect of economic statistics.

To contribute to retaining a 'systemic lens' over ONS's recovery, OSR also plans to supplement our work on assessing ONS's progress with periodic thematic reviews. We propose to begin with a review of ONS's engagement with stakeholders, as this remains the one element from the work originally planned as part of the systemic review which has not been fully addressed by either our interim report or the Devereux review.

We propose that this review will commence next year, once ONS has made progress on engagement with its stakeholders on its new plans. We will also develop a longer-running programme of thematic reviews. Topics could include areas such as quality assurance and progress with replacing legacy systems.

Annex: Interim report core findings

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

ONS continues to be strongly supported by many stakeholders. Multiple stakeholders expressed strong support for ONS's work. 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.

OSR regulatory reports highlight common issues with data quality, administrative data and user engagement. OSR has 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, opportunities to strengthen it had been frequently observed.

Stakeholders would like to see a clearer vision and strategy for economic statistics. While stakeholder discussions revealed some 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.

Stakeholders expressed widespread concern about the quality of survey data. These concerns were focused on, but were not limited to, the widely recognised problems with the Labour Force Survey. Stakeholders welcomed recent improvements, but 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, 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 had not always been welcomed.

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 had intensified in the two years preceding the review. Greater transparency over the prioritisation challenges that ONS faces, the efficiencies it has achieved and the trade-offs it must make would have both explained the situation to stakeholders and contributed to building a case for increased resources.

