
James Benford | Director General, Surveys and Economic Statistics Group

Ed Humpherson
Director General for Office for Statistics Regulation
Office for Statistics Regulation
(by email)

6 May 2026

Dear Ed,

Thank you for your comments on the second progress report on the Economic Statistics and Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plans.

I welcome your recognition of the progress we are making and of our transparent approach with regards to the challenges that we are facing and how we are adjusting priorities in response. As I noted in my previous exchange with you, which followed the first quarterly update, this is an iterative process. The Office for National Statistics is currently finalising its high-level business plan, including the allocations of budgets across the office. The next update in July will be the point when we are able to set out a set of key performance indicators, in the context of agreed organisation-wide objectives, the specific milestones we will be working towards on our improvement plans, as well as the proposed initiatives that we will be holding in a 'waiting room' to protect delivery confidence in those milestones. It is critical that we learn from the challenges we've had over the past year and, as the organisation also steps up to deliver the next census including a test in 2027 and implement a new set of macroeconomic statistical standards, to ensure that we do not take on more than we have capacity and capability to deliver.

You note in your letter the achieved response level for the Labour Force Survey is now close to its pre-pandemic level, but there are challenges in other social surveys. Whilst the period of double-running two labour force surveys is constraining what we are able to do, we are doing what we can to stabilise and then increase the achieved sample sizes. For the Living Costs and Food survey, we are forecasting an achieved sample size of 5,200 at the end of the Fiscal Year 2026, compared to 5000 in 2025 and 4200 in 2024, and a consistent 5,000 in the years before the pandemic. On the Wealth and Assets Survey, our achieved sample in 'Round 9' for the period 2022-24 was 11,708 households, 'Round 10' for 2024-2026 will be 11,912 households and for the next 'Round 11' we are targeting 18,000, in line with the pre-pandemic position. Our planned survey response tracker will bring together information on achieved sample sizes and response rates to allow users to track these performance indicators. You will have also heard at the UKSA Board last week that the average response rates on business surveys are approaching an historic high, supported by the move to digital surveys and a changed approach to businesses who initially do not respond to our surveys.

You also note the challenges that we have laid out with the Transformed Labour Force Survey (TLFS) and the Statistical Business Register. On the former, we set out in our first update in December that work to introduce data rotation had been more complex than anticipated and would not complete until April at the earliest, rather than in January as had been planned for originally. We have hit the delayed April milestone and have now implemented all agreed major design changes to the TLFS. The later milestone means we will only have partial information on how the survey has evolved in light of those design

changes and so, having liaised with stakeholders, we have confirmed we now expect that we will not transition to the TLFS as our main headline measure until 2027.

As we set out in our update, following a review, the Statistical Business Register project is working through a 10-week period to strengthen its organisation and approach to delivery. This is focused on clarifying governance and accountabilities, tightening scope and success measures, and establishing an iterative delivery plan that releases value to register users in smaller increments, with earlier and more frequent opportunities for feedback and course-correction. The outputs from this 10-week work will inform an updated plan and timetable for the SBR, including how we will manage dependencies and delivery risks, and we will update users and the Office for Statistics Regulation on our emerging plans at the appropriate point. I welcome your plans to support our work by undertaking an OSR review this summer.

I look forward to working with you and your teams as we prepare and finalise our July update, including our more detailed milestones and plans, to close off the remaining recommendations you have made.

I would also like to thank you for the initiative you took to host with me a workshop bringing together suppliers of administrative sources of data underpinning official statistics and the producers of those statistics last week. I found it to be a highly collaborative and productive event that identified a number of actions to strengthen the broader data eco-system that is vital to the quality of statistics. I suggest we work these up into an action plan that can be shared with the Government Statistical Service and the UK Statistical Authority Board. As I noted in our previous exchange, errors in source data were the root-cause of the majority of major errors to ONS economic statistics last year. It is essential that we collectively take action to learn from these errors by strengthening the system and I really welcome your support on this. I look forward also to learning of the findings of the review you announced last November of HMRC statistics against the Code of Practice. This review is particularly important for improving the quality of public finance and trade statistics produced by the ONS and we will do whatever we can do to support the recommendations that follow from it.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'James Benford', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

James Benford
Director General, Surveys and Economic Statistics Group