**Statistics regulation for an age of “post-truth”: The UK’s new Office for Statistics Regulation**

**Ed Humpherson, Director General, UK Office for Statistics Regulation**

****

Abstract: The last 18 months have seen significant shifts in the UK’s institutional environment, resulting from the Bean Review of Economic Statistics; the increased scrutiny placed on statistics in a shifting political context; and a broader society-level concern about a “post-truth” era. Into this environment, the UK Statistics Authority launched a new regulator – the Office for Statistics Regulation – in November 2016. This new body stands up for statistics in public; takes a whole-system view of statistics in areas like health, migration and crime; and raises the quality of individual statistical outputs. In this presentation, Ed Humpherson, the head of the Office for Statistics Regulation, will explain the vision for a public champion of statistics – to celebrate when statistics serve the public good and challenge publicly when they do not. He will explain what the Office for Statistics Regulation is doing to drive up trustworthiness, quality and value of whole systems of statistics; and how it has intervened publicly in high profile uses of statistics, including crime data, migration and the UK’s contribution to the European Union. It’s a story of organizational development; of reimagining statistics for a data-rich world; and of why statistical producers should have nothing to fear from the term “post truth”.

**Introduction**

This paper summarises the significant changes to the UK’s governance of statistics that led to the creation of the Office for Statistics Regulation.

The UK has had a governance regime with independent scrutiny and assessment of statistics since 2007, under the Statistics and Registration Services Act. The Act gave the UK Statistics Authority the power to set a Code of Practice, assess compliance with the Code, award the designation of National Statistics, and monitor how far statistics are serving the public interest. In November 2016, the UK Statistics Authority relaunched the governance role through a new Office for Statistics Regulation. There were three main factors leading to the creation of this new Office:

* The Bean Review of Economic Statistics emphasised the need for a stronger, more separate identify for the Authority’s regulatory function.
* Statistics were increasingly at the centre of public debates, including on the UK’s trading relationships, migration to the UK, and evidence on the efficiency of the housing market and the provision of health services.
* There was an anxiety that, in a world of abundant data, appropriate use of and respect for statistics was under threat, crystallised in the term “post-truth”.

*Old wine in a new bottle?*

The Office for Statistics Regulation absorbed the regulatory functions of the Authority, which had previously been undertaken by a less visible team called Monitoring and Assessment. But there was no change in statutory function.

This begs a question: what was new? Was this simply a case of a cosmetic change in name? The answer is that, while the functions and powers are the same, there are significant changes in purpose and strategy. And these changes make all the difference.

*It all starts with purpose*

Before launching the Office for Statistics Regulation, we spent a huge amount of time developing, refining and agreeing an organisational purpose. We wanted to make sure the purpose was clear to staff, the Board, the statistical community and wider audiences like the media. Purpose was the crucial animating force that brought the whole process of creating the Office for Statistics Regulation together.

We recognised that the existing team – the Monitoring and Assessment team – lacked a clear statement of its role. Even the name ‘Monitoring and Assessment’ seemed to lack a focus, being both passive (to ‘monitor’ does not sound particularly dynamic) and vague (what is being monitoring and assessed?)

The purpose statement we agreed was:

Statistics are an essential public asset. We enhance public confidence in the trustworthiness, quality and value of statistics produced by Government. We set the standards they must meet. We celebrate when the standards are met, and challenge publicly when they are not. We are champions of relevant statistics in a changing public world.

*Public, philosophy, and proportionality*

The main features of the organisational personality in this purpose statement are:

* The emphasis on the public: The purpose is all about the public role of statistics. The phrase “statistics are a public asset” represents a core belief of the Office – that statistics are not produced for elites (experts, policymakers), but for citizens. The word “public” appears 4 times in the purpose.
* The philosophy of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value: the purpose emphasises that public confidence in statistics depends not just on statistical *quality*, but on the *trustworthiness* of the organisations that produce the statistics, and the *value* of those statistics to users.
* The balance of celebrating and challenging: it was important to communicate that we are not simply here to criticise poor production and use of statistics – though we are not shy of doing so where necessary. We also celebrate statistics when they do a great job of serving the public – through the National Statistics designation and by highlighting great work when we see it.

*Value: from a mechanical to a social view of statistics*

The purpose statement gives equal weight to the *value* of statistics as to the process of production (trustworthiness) and to quality – which had been the focus of assessment of statistics before the creation of the Office. This emphasis on value sends a very important signal: it is not enough to produce high quality statistics in a well-managed way. Statistics must also be useful to users. They must be accessible, meet user needs, provide insight and answer user questions. This raises the stakes for Government statisticians – they cannot simply publish a set of numbers and think their job is done. They must also provide insight, by connecting to the questions and interests of their audiences. The focus on value de-emphasises the mechanical and priorities the social communication aspects of statistics – a profound change in perspective.

*Happy families*

From this focus on value flows another consequence. The preceding Monitoring and Assessment team tended to focus on individual statistics, by reviewing whether they complied with the Code of Practice. This remains a central role of the new Office, but the focus on value requires us to widen our focus to consider families or systems of statistics. We focus on groups of statistics shed light on broader questions about society: how well are people treated by the health service? What is happening to jobs and wages? And societal questions like this cannot be answered by just one set of statistics. Instead one needs to consider ‘families’ of statistics, in which each ‘member’ captures different aspects of a question. So the Office for Statistics Regulation now focuses on reviews of the value of groups or families of statistics.

*A new organisation*

The Office is a quasi-separate entity, and organisational redesign was an important part of its creation. This redesign encompassed new roles for staff; a new communications function; a distinct brand identity; and policy and business support functions.

*Regulation in practice*

What has this new Office done? Highlights of our first 18 months include:

* a new *Code of Practice for Statistics* (subject of a paper at this conference)
* celebrating good statistics, particularly when we award the National Statistics designation to statistics producers for their outputs – including for high profile statistics like the ONS’s Consumer Prices including Housing statistics (CPIH)
* publicly challenging the inappropriate use of statistics, by Government and other political parties, and we have intervened to emphasise the importance of making data available publicly where they are used in key debates
* a series of systemic reviews, which have led to improvements in families of statistics –including for health and care statistics, and migration statistics; and
* reporting publicly on the quality of statistics, for example statistics on waiting times in hospital emergency departments and estimates of student migration.

In all this work, we highlight the importance of public value – of the statistics being meaningful and insightful, answering key public questions. This focus on public questions formed the theme of our Annual Review, published in November 2017. And through this 18-month period of change, we have maintained a high level of staff engagement, as shown by the annual UK Civil Service-wide People Survey.

**Conclusion**

The creation of the Office for Statistics Regulation marks a step change in the governance of statistics in the UK. We consider that we are better equipped to play this role than our predecessors. But we are under no illusion - there is an ongoing task to sustain public confidence, and we are still in the foothills of what we need to achieve.