**Reflections on UK official statistics in and after the COVID-19 pandemic**

While Mark Zuckerberg apparently urges his teams to move fast and break things, this is not normal practice in official statistics. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on official statistics was hugely disruptive, both in terms of the organisation of official statistical workplaces, including survey field forces, and through the demand for new statistics. There is no doubt that ONS and the rest of the GSS moved very fast to respond to this, breaking many long-established statistical production routines, replacing them with new processes, and adding many new products. These include major and complex surveys of COVID-19 infection in the population, shielding behaviour, and the business impact of COVID-19, to name just a few. Official statistics not only about the pandemic but also about the economy, the labour force, and many other aspects of society are being voraciously consumed across the media and by politicians, local authorities, business organisations, trade unions and many others, notably members of the public tracking the unfolding pandemic through daily figures.

As ONS say in their daily email alerts for their Coronavirus (COVID-19) [roundup](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/articles/coronaviruscovid19roundup/2020-03-26), “We’ve released more than 150 COVID-19 specific publications to help society understand the impact of the virus”. They go on to say that they “need your help so we can keep improving. Let us know how we’ve done by completing our short [survey](https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/HKGK995)”. This deserves a strong response from users, especially those beyond government and with whom ONS/GSS clearly worked closely and undoubtedly for the public good. Do feedback your comments on the new products in that way.

We have seen – and continue to see – huge efforts in unprecedented times. There is talk of shifts to new normal. To ensure that official statistics serve the public good in as wide a way as possible, here are my personal reflections on **four** aspects of official statistics from here on.

**First**, to greatly increase the use and usefulness of official statistics beyond government users. We are waiting eagerly for the GSS’s new user engagement strategy, which we understand will deliver a “change of culture” to ensure that “official statistics meet society’s needs” (taken from GSS Good Practice Team’s presentation at the SUF meeting on 28th September 2020). The pandemic has understandably made great demands on the GSS as the government’s statistical service, but the challenge (as the UKSA recognises) is to provide independent, robust and inclusive information, including to inform public understanding as well as to equip policy makers. To provide the data both to government and to those who want to assess the performance of government is not an easy place to inhabit, but that is the vision for official statistics in democracies.

**Second**, more analysis please, especially to explain how statistics from different sources fit together (or not) and how they help us understand the bigger picture. There have been some helpful examples of this, but they are often tucked away and can get lost among a welter of individual statistical releases. The days of statistical compendia, such as *Social Trends*, are long gone, and there are new analytical outputs, but we do need more products that do draw together – and draw on – all sources relevant to a particular topic or issue. As John Pullinger put it in a 2019 [letter to the FT](https://www.ons.gov.uk/news/statementsandletters/responsetoaletterinthefinancialtimesontheformersocialtrendsonspublication), “the spirit of *Social Trends* is alive and well at the Office for National Statistics. Rather than a once a year publication, our current approach is to release new insights on topical issues as they arise“. Great intention, some helpful analytical outputs, but scope for much more!

**Third**, it seems to me that the crisis exposed a fault line, between official statistics and official figures, which could now be turned into an opportunity, including to embrace non-official sources. This is to ask, as I have written elsewhere, if official statistics might "serve as the bedrock but not the full extent of public statistics? Should we be moving to include producers currently outside the formal official statistics system, if all these statistics can be curated together and underpinned with reference to common standards for quality and trustworthiness?" [[1]](#endnote-1). The Office for Statistics Regulation put a toe in this water some time ago, through its listing of non-GSS organisations who have adopted the Code of Practice on a [voluntary basis](https://code.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/list-of-voluntary-adopters/).

The idea of going much further would be to avoid the opportunities for [“number theatre”,](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/coronavirus-uk-daily-briefings-professor-david-spiegelhalter-a9507286.html) as David Speigelhalter described the data given in the daily UK government coronavirus briefings in May. Daily briefing and news reporting on COVID-19 has inevitably meant that administrative data – official figures – have tended to overshadow the official statistics, which appear less frequently and with a lag. Other sources, including research surveys, are also featured from time to time.

I realise doing things differently is easier said than done: it all turns on the definition of data quality and how this is assessed, as discussed in this [recent GSS blog](https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/blog/data-quality-in-the-time-of-coronavirus-covid-19/). Central is the question of fitness for purpose when there are different and competing user needs: which purposes and how are they identified and prioritised?

**Fourth**, there is another fault line/opportunity over the lack of UK-wide official statistics relating to Covid-19. Of course, there are long-standing issues over differences in health statistics, with devolved responsibilities for health and for health statistics. But it seems that there are still some needs for UK-wide snapshots (and to use these in international comparison), so is there a case for ONS, working with the devolved administrations, to seek to harmonise and integrate statistics across the 4 nations of the UK (including to flag where there are unresolvable differences)?

**Comments please!**

I mentioned at the SUF meeting that I would like to start a conversation about issues, concerns and successes in official statistics in and after COVID-19. I hope these reflections provide a starting point for that, and I look forward to seeing your reflections and reactions. Do add new issues as well as commenting on the four areas above. Comments also welcome on how we might take this forward – what are the key issues here, and what about timing?

The National Statistician met with the RSS’s National Statistics Advisory Group (NSAG) last month and invited them to raise any issues with him, so it would be good to work up our agenda for the development of official statistics, to send to the National Statistician and to share with NSAG and others.

Thanks,

Paul Allin

Chair, SUF 16th October 2020

1. From paper now under preparation in Contemporary Social Science (2021). It's not my original idea but draws for example on MacFeely, S. & Nastava, B. (2019). ‘You say you want a [data] revolution’: A proposal to use unofficial statistics for the SDG Global Indicator Framework, Statistical Journal of the IAOS, 35, 309–327, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.3233/SJI-180486> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)