

The ideal world!

By Tony Dent, Better Statistics CIC (BSC)

My chosen title paraphrases Sir Robert Chote, Chair of the United Kingdom Statistics Authority (UKSA), in giving evidence to parliament's Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) on Tuesday 1st July. At that time the committee was taking evidence for their inquiry into the performance and governance of the UKSA from Sir Robert, Ed Humpherson (Director General of the Office for Statistics Regulation) and Emma Rourke (interim National Statistician).

That inquiry was initiated because of widespread concern with various failures of the Office for National Statistics in producing key economic indicators, most notably the employment data derived from the long standing Labour Force Survey. Although that was the data of primary concern to policy makers, such as the Treasury and the Bank of England, there were many other matters of concern, including the failure to implement recommendations from the Lievesley Review. As a result, the UKSA Board and the Cabinet Office had already set up a Review to be conducted by Sir Robert Devereux, with the more limited objective of examining *"the performance and culture of the Office for National Statistics, following a number of issues with core economic statistics"*.

The Devereux review was therefore not concerned with the role of the Office for Statistics Regulation or UKSA's oversight of the Government Statistical Service, but was solely concerned with the ONS. He therefore conducted his review 'at pace' and it was already available to PACAC, having been completed and [reported on by 26th June](#); by which time the National Statistician, Sir Ian Diamond had resigned as a result of ill health and Ms. Emma Rourke, Sir Ian's deputy, was appointed in his place.

The details of the Devereux review are well summarised by a [Britain in Numbers Blog](#) by Simon Briscoe, highlighting that the UKSA Board and the Cabinet Office had already accepted Devereux's three primary recommendations:

1. ONS needs a focused and consistent effort to improve core statistics
2. Changes are needed in the way in which ONS is led
3. Governance of ONS and the wider system merits further consideration

Meanwhile, the Devereux report also contained the observation *"I do want to commend the current leadership for their rapid work to develop a strategy for economic and population statistics, which has been published alongside this review today."* Commending that strategy as being *"focused, comprehensive and honest"*.

As a result, the three Board members called to give evidence to PACAC on the 1st July seemed confident that all key issues were already resolved by the Devereux Review. Certainly, following the introduction by Simon Hoare, the Chairman of PACAC, Sir

Robert Chote's opening remarks seemed designed to assure the committee that all was now satisfactorily resolved: *"Thank you very much indeed for asking us. The authority and the ONS do not ...underestimate the importance of improving the quality of core statistics and ensuring that there is public confidence in the robustness of the numbers.... The plans that have been published by the ONS recently....demonstrate the appreciation and importance of that. I know ONS colleagues are going to be pursuing those plans promptly, with determination and the support and oversight of the board. As you say, Chair, the value of those reports is recognising the depth and nature of the challenge that has to be addressed...Crucially reflecting the diagnosis that Robert Devereux helpfully provided is the importance of essentially strengthening the production teams within ONS I am very glad that Robert Devereux has commended the plan that the ONS has put together at pace, partly in response to the critique of economic statistics of Ed and colleagues and through the regulation committee. He commended it for focus, comprehensiveness and honesty.... and I know ONS colleagues will be pursuing it with determination, so there is absolutely a recognition of what needs to be done and the importance of doing it."*

Evidently, members of PACAC were less than satisfied with the suggestion that the Devereux Review had resolved all the issues and they were determined to obtain a full understanding as to what had gone so seriously wrong. Sir Robert then responded to some probing questions with the explanation that matters would definitely have been different in an ideal world! Ultimately, the result was that the session was not completed within the normal time period and it was reconvened on Tuesday 8th July. Unfortunately this article has to be with Ms. Vangelder before then, so I must leave you in suspense as to the outcome, although I am sure you can find out by visiting this [PACAC Link](#).

However, my guess is that there will be major changes at the ONS and UKSA before the plan is implemented, because it is not only members of PACAC who are sceptical of the position. Members of the ONS have also expressed doubts that the leadership responsible for the culture that has brought about the present difficulties has the authority to repair the damage, no one considers that everything was just Sir Ian Diamond's fault.

Better Statistics had also expressed doubts as to the present leadership in our submission to PACAC's inquiry as available on the [PACAC website](#), where we claim that UKSA fails to adhere to the principles of Open Government, as evidenced by the lack of candour in the minutes of Board meetings and in technical reports on economic statistics, such as the RPI.

Finally, it is worth reflecting on what this means to those of us with an interest in the future of Market and Social Research. Not only are our National Statistics vital to our

professional ability to serve our clients with actionable research but we also share the same professional issues. Whether engaged in Social Research on behalf of the Government or Market and Opinion Research on behalf of business or the media, we have exactly the same problems from survey design through to verifying the results (or correcting for bias) using whatever administrative data may be appropriate. In particular, we share the same problem of declining response rates, a factor that has been blamed as the primary cause for the difficulties experienced with the LFS.

One of the primary objectives of Better Statistics is “*Encouraging people to participate in appropriate surveys.*” and we are working for the public and private sectors to jointly re-assure the public of the value of reliable statistics and the importance of participation in bona fide surveys. The ***Integrity in Practice*** meeting of 23rd April, acknowledged the common principles of the MRS Code of Conduct and the Office of Statistics Regulation’s Code of Practice and provides the basis for reassuring the public of the integrity of the information we provide. However, with the increasing use of AI and other developments this needs to go beyond assuring them of the confidentiality of personal data as guaranteed by GDPR and BSC welcomes the [MRS Campaign for Better Data](#) to provide the necessary impetus for better respondent engagement.

That’ll be a step towards the ideal world!

7th July 2025.

[Photos from the PACAC meeting 1st July 2025.](#)



Simon Hoare MP, PACAC Chair



The UKSA team