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## Inspiring Statistics

[IPS035 - Coordinating and prioritising in a decentralised Statistical System]

### Background

1. The UK has a decentralised statistical system with official statistics being produced by more than 150 government departments, devolved administrations<sup>1</sup> and other public bodies. Together these bodies deliver official statistics on more than 1,700 different topic areas. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is responsible for many of the key macro-economic and demographic statistics and is recognised internationally as the UK's National Statistical Institute.
2. Wherever they sit in government, those involved in the delivery of official statistics are part of the Government Statistical Service (GSS) under the professional leadership of the National Statistician<sup>2</sup>. The GSS comprises:
  - the Government Statistician Group (GSG) – who have a professional qualifications in a numerate subject-area and operate under a personnel framework administered by the National Statistician's Office
  - wider GSS staff – who are not statistically qualified but play a vital role in the statistical production - for example, IT and Operational Delivery professionals.
 As at 31 March 2011, the professional Statistician group comprises around 1,500 members.
3. As a decentralised community spread across government departments, devolved administrations and agencies, there is no GSS budget and costs are covered by individual departments. However, government statisticians are professionally managed by a network of Statistical Heads of Profession (HoPs) in each of the main bodies. These HoPs are responsible for professional statistical matters and are professionally accountable to the National Statistician. Each of the devolved administrations has a Chief Statistician (CS) and the GSS also works closely with the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) to ensure, as far as possible, the coherence and compatibility of statistical activities across the UK.

### Oversight and Governance

4. In 2008 the UK Statistics Authority was established with the statutory objective to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good and to promote good practice. As set out in the legislation, the Authority's main functions are:
  - oversight of the ONS;
  - monitoring and reporting on all official statistics, wherever produced; and
  - independent assessment of the compliance of National Statistics with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics<sup>3</sup>.

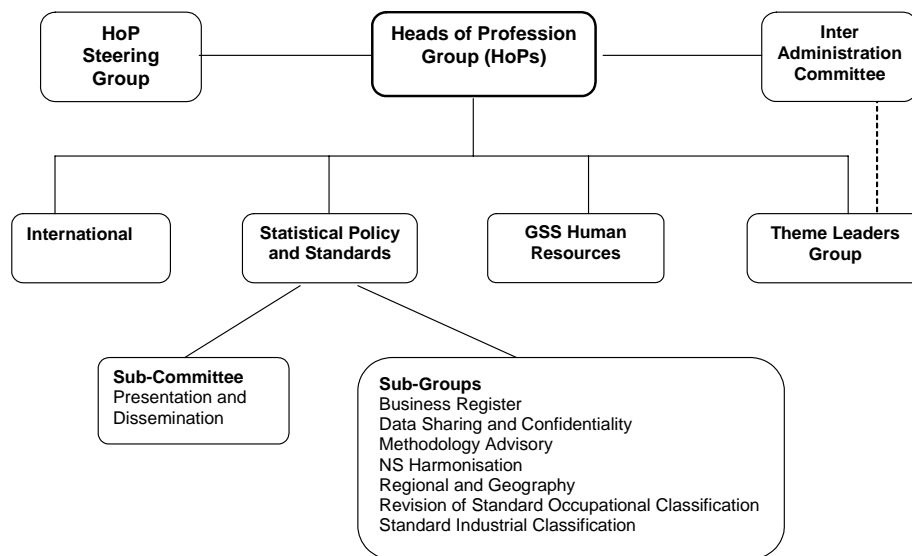
National Statistics are the sub-set of Official Statistics that comply with the Code of Practice.

<sup>1</sup> UK devolution in the late 1990s created a National Parliament in Scotland and National Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland. Varying levels of power were transferred from the UK Parliament to these three nations – usually referred to as the devolved administrations.

<sup>2</sup> The National Statistician is Chief Executive of the UK Statistics Authority Board, the Board's principal adviser on the comprehensiveness, quality and good practice in relation to official statistics, and Head of the Government Statistical Service. The National Statistician is supported in all of her roles by a National Statistician's Office.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html>

5. The UK Statistics Authority Board and National Statistician have formal powers in relation to the work of ONS, but not for the statistical work programme of government departments or the devolved administrations. However, as head of the GSS, the National Statistician has a key responsibility to provide professional direction for the statistical community and to support operational matters. The UK Statistics Authority can also seek to influence the overall strategic direction of the statistical system - for example by commenting publicly on individual departmental decisions or on the overall coherence of the statistical work programme. Recent examples have included public letters by the chair of the Authority over departmental decisions to cut output such as the Citizenship Survey and regarding future funding of the General Lifestyle Survey.
6. The National Statistician seeks to maintain common vision and leadership via the Heads of Profession and a GSS committee and theme structure. The following diagram summarises these arrangements.



7. Together the Heads of Profession and Chief Statisticians form a ‘Heads of Profession Group’ which sits at the heart of GSS governance and is chaired by the National Statistician. The effectiveness of the HoPs Group is enhanced by the Heads of Profession Steering Group which helps identify and propose strategic issues for discussion by HoPs and acts as a think-tank for the National Statistician.
8. Three cross-cutting committees: International; Statistical Policy and Standards; and Human Resources provide a focus on specific areas, and an Inter-Administration Committee addresses those statistical matters which have a bearing on the relationship between the UK government and the devolved administrations.
 

- International Committee - provides oversight and coordination of GSS international activity;
  - Statistical Policy and Standards Committee - exists to develop, promote and implement statistical policies and standards. It also oversees a number of sub groups through which detailed policy and guidance can be developed and implemented.
  - Human Resources Committee - leads in developing and implementing the GSS Human Resources Strategy.
9. In addition to the committees, there are eleven topic based Theme Leaders who, with the National Statistician’s Office, seek to ensure effective user engagement and the identification of strategic priorities across departmental boundaries. The eleven themes are: agriculture and environment; business and energy; children, education and schools; crime and justice; economy; government; health and social care; labour market; people and places; population; and, travel and transport.

## User focus and engagement

10. To the user the decentralised system should not present any barriers to the accessibility or coherence of statistics. Indeed, most users do not think in terms of departmental boundaries. To help users, all National Statistics outputs are pre-announced and made available via a Publication Hub ([www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk)).
11. In terms of user engagement, essential for the delivery of relevant and quality statistics, responsibility is shared by HoPs and GSS theme leaders. Given the many different user types there is a need for a range of engagement channels.
12. A recent example of using a multi-faceted approach to user engagement has been the UK's national debate on measuring national well-being. This has been led by the National Statistician and coordinated across the GSS and other professional groups by the ONS. The vision for the work programme was of credible and effectively presented measures of subjective well-being and of wider national well-being, to meet policy and public needs. The aim was to hold a national debate, rather than simply encourage responses to a consultation document. The debate was conducted using a variety of media and channels, to engage the public, the media, civil society organisations and experts as extensively as possible. Specific approaches included:
  - A high profile launch, by the National Statistician and the Prime Minister, which generated global media coverage including the US, China and Australia. In the UK, there were more than 120 articles and news items in the first month.
  - ONS's Twitter feed was used for first time (making nearly **100 tweets**) to help promote online information (<http://www.ons.gov.uk/well-being>).
  - An online debate ran for 20 weeks generating nearly **22,000 responses**.
  - **175** national well-being debate events held with partner organisations around the country.
  - The National Statistician convened an Advisory Forum of some 40 national and international experts and stakeholders, including business, government, voluntary sector, academia and international organisations.
13. More generally, the 2010 Spending Review prompted many individual departmental consultations on statistical outputs and future priorities<sup>4</sup>. Since October 2010 more than 20 statistical consultations have been initiated. For example, the Department of Energy and Climate Change ran a user engagement survey which received a very strong response on current data and future needs, and the ONS ran a public consultation in late 2010 which gathered evidence on priorities from a range of professional bodies, academics, businesses and private individuals.
14. At the more strategic level, active engagement and coordination by the GSS themes enables theme leaders to articulate a cross cutting view of the strategic issues and priorities. Different approaches are adopted across each of the theme areas with many, for example "Agriculture and Environment", meeting users regularly.
15. Gathering representative views from all across user types can be very difficult. In the UK, accessing the non-government user view is helped significantly by the existence of a strong and active Statistics User Forum hosted by the Royal Statistical Society (RSS)<sup>5</sup>. By working closely with the Royal Statistical Society (RSS), the Government Statistical Service, and theme leaders in particular, have been able to benefit from a clear and externally coordinated view of statistical issues and priorities.

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<sup>4</sup> It is a requirement of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics that users must be engaged, particularly when changes are made to statistical products.

<sup>5</sup> The RSS is devoted to the interests of statistics and statisticians and acts to nurture and promote the discipline of statistics by disseminating and encouraging statistical knowledge and good practice with both producers and consumers of statistics and society at large.

**Adaptable and innovative**

16. Operating in such a decentralised way, even with statistical legislation, can create tensions between central and local guidance and expectations. For example, the UK Coalition Government's drive to make UK public data readily available in an open standardised format via [www.data.gov.uk](http://www.data.gov.uk) has raised the need to balance timeliness, quality, and explanation whilst maximising public access to public data. This has challenged statisticians to become ever more involved with the release of departmental management and administrative data whilst continuing to ensure the coordinated release of quality official statistics in line with Code of Practice for Official Statistics. A recent example includes the release of detailed local police force crime data separately from the aggregate national crime statistics, which was achieved without undermining the integrity of the national statistics.
17. Decentralisation does not prevent Statisticians from working effectively and innovatively across departmental boundaries. On the future of population and migration estimates for example, UK statisticians are working effectively across departmental boundaries using data sharing provisions within the Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007. A "Beyond 2011" project has been established to establish and test alternative models for meeting future user needs for census type statistics and to address the implications of a transformed population statistics system for wider socio-demographic statistics.

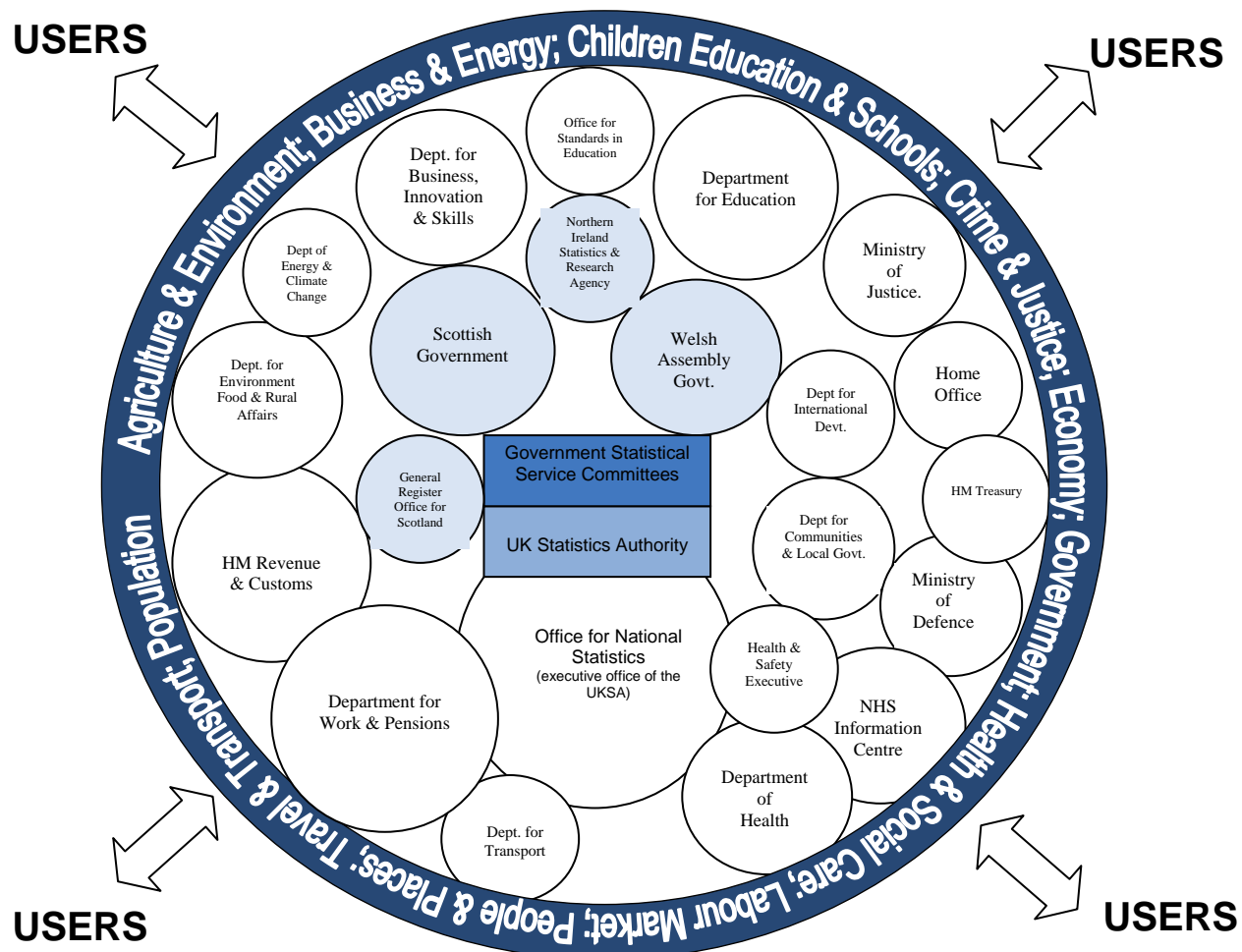
**GSS Capability**

18. Decentralisation does, of course, present particular challenges in the area of Human Resource (HR) management as each department is governed by their own HR policies and practice. The outcome of the UK's 2010 Spending Review, for example, led some departments to take rapid action to reduce their number, whilst others have adopted longer-term job reduction strategies.
19. As a statistics profession, staff are supported by their Heads of Profession, the GSS Human Resource committee and the National Statistician in setting HR requirements and policies in areas such as skills/professional competence, recruitment and professional development/talent management. Particular efforts are also made, through the National Statistician's Office to encourage the sharing of skills and good practice, across departmental boundaries. For example, StatNet (the GSS' intranet site) has been developed to provide easier ways of sharing learning or good practice.

**Conclusion**

20. The decentralised UK official statistics system combines the benefits of close proximity to policy delivery with a critical mass of professional expertise across a coordinated statistical service and within a central Office for National Statistics.
21. Of course, there are challenges too with neither the UK Statistics Authority or National Statistician having control over the statistical budgets or work programme outside of the Office for National Statistics. This requires influence to be applied in other ways and was provided for in the statistical legislation of 2008. For example, independent assessment by the UK Statistics Authority of National Statistics products helps to improve coherence and standards, and public comment on individual actions and decisions helps to enhance the public perception and trustworthiness of statistics and minimise unintended consequences to the overall work programme.
22. Across the system a shared vision and joined up focus on matters such as user engagement and people capability help deliver overall professional coherence and provides the basis for a community which can be rightly proud of the contribution it makes to debate and decision making in the UK and internationally. Going forward, it is the professional and shared leadership of this community that will continue to inspire delivery of the right and quality statistics and advice to best meet user need.

## Annex - Overview of the UK Statistical System



- UK Statistics Authority main functions:**
- Oversight of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) – the executive office of the Authority
  - Monitoring and reporting on all official statistics, wherever produced, and
  - Independent assessment of official statistics

- The National Statistician's priorities:**
- Relevant Statistics
  - Standards and Quality
  - Accessibility and Impact
  - Capability
  - Public Profile
  - International Collaboration

- Devolved legislatures:**
- Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are part of the UK's statistical system.
  - UK devolution transferred varying levels of power and created separate legislatures
  - For devolved powers, these countries may produce devolved statistics.

**Notes:**

Only departments with 10 or more statistical professionals are shown.