

# **Official Statistics in the UK**

## **Present and Future**

**Mike Hughes**

**Office for National Statistics**

# Outline

---

- **Background to present system**
- **National Statistics**
- **Legislation - the New Vision**

# History

- **1941 - Central Statistical Office (CSO)**
- **1969 - Government Statistical Service (GSS)**
  - **Business Statistics Office (1969)**
  - **Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) (1970)**
- **1996 - Office for National Statistics**  
(merger of CSO and OPCS + Labour Market statistics)
- **2000 - Launch of current 'National Statistics' system**
- **2008 – Enactment of Statistics and Registration Service Act**

# Current Characteristics - 'Statistics UK'

## Advantages and Disadvantages

- **Decentralised (GSS = 30+ statistical offices)**
- **Coordinated – through National Statistician**
- **Devolved ( 4 'UK' Nations )**
- **Integrated – Economics, Research, OR**
- **Europeanised ( 27 'Other' Nations )**
- **Globalised ( UN, IMF, World Bank )**
- **Largely non-statutory**

# Role of ONS in the UK System

**ONS carries out a number of roles on behalf of the GSS.....**

- **Governance, Policy and Planning**
- **Methodology**
- **Survey Control**
- **International relations and co-ordination**
- **Dissemination (Website)**
- **Recruitment of professional staff**
- **Statistical training and development**

# Genesis of Reforms

## Statistics - part of the Political Process ?

- **Counting 'fiddles' ?**
  - **Unemployment**
  - **Crime**
  - **Asylum Seekers**
- **Release 'fiddles' ?**
  - **Pre-release 'Spin'**
  - **'Burying' bad news**

# Political statements

---

- **Labour Party Manifesto (1997)**  
An independent national statistical service
- **Green Paper on Statistics Reform (1998)**  
Tony Blair (the then PM).....
  - Government is pledged to clean up and modernise politics. We want a new relationship between Government and citizens, based on openness and trust

# National Statistics June 2000

- **Framework Document**
- **New post- National Statistician**
- **New body - Statistics Commission**
- **New Logo**
- **New Code of Practice**
- **New emphasis on Quality ( Quality Review Programme )**
- **Greater accountability (NS Work Programme and NS Annual Report)**
- **New beginning ?**



# The phrase 'National Statistics'

- Not an organisation
- Not a group of people

A designated set of statistical products which:-

- are produced in accordance with *Framework for National Statistics*
- meet standards set in *National Statistics Code of Practice*
- are subject to regular *Quality Reviews*

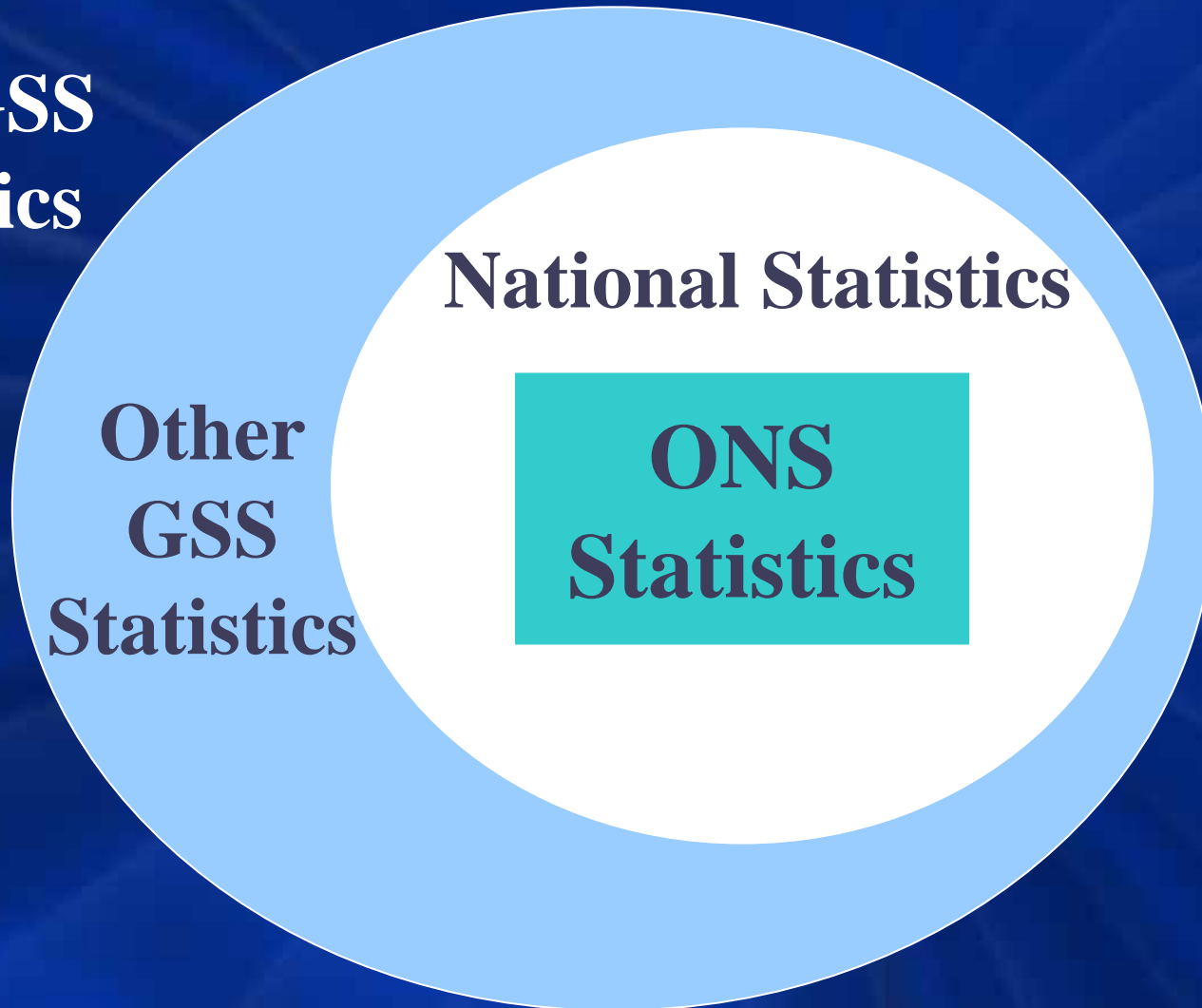
# UK Official Statistics - 4 Types

**Non-GSS  
Statistics**

**National Statistics**

**Other  
GSS  
Statistics**

**ONS  
Statistics**



# Role of National Statistician

- **Head of - National Statistics system**
  - **ONS**
  - **GSS**
- **Registrar General**
- **Government's Chief Professional Adviser**
- **Professional responsibility for quality of official statistics**
- **Owner and Arbiter of Code of Practice**

# Role of Statistics Commission

- **Independent 'Watchdog'**
- **Represents suppliers and users**
- **Advises Ministers of concerns about quality**
- **Comments on NS Work Programme, Code of Practice, Quality Reviews**
- **Operates with total transparency**
- **One-off Task - Review need for statistical legislation**

# Strengths of current system

- **More rigorous external oversight (via Statistics Commission) and greater internal focus on:**
  - **Professional standards**
  - **Quality Management**
  - **Relevance and Customer Service**
  - **Confidentiality**
  - **Joined-up Government**
  - **Transparency and Consultation**

# Fault Lines in current system

- **Ministerial control of 'Scope'**
- **Confusion between 'National Statistics' and 'Other Statistics'**
- **Pre-release Access**
- **Lack of funding and commitment**
- **Lack of accountability to National Statistician**
- **Lack of enforcement powers**
- **Inconsistent compliance with Code**
- **Low impact on public trust + confidence**

# Statistical Legislation

Provides the answer ?



# Public Trust in Official Statistics

- Only 17 percent (1 person in 5) believe that UK official statistics are produced without political interference
- 60 percent (3 persons in 5) think that the government uses official statistics dishonestly
- Most common reasons for not trusting official statistics are:
  - They contradict people's personal experience
  - They are perceived to be open to manipulation



# Confidence in Official Statistics

## However.....

More confidence in:

- Quality / Methodology of official statistics
- The Office for National Statistics itself

## Conclusion.....

- Production/Outputs = Good quality
- Delivery and Presentation = Untrustworthy

# **Public Trust – A general problem**

**Average Level of Trust in:**

- **Journalists – 15%**
- **Politicians – 18%**
- **Judges – 72%**
- **Doctors – 90%**

**Hostile Media provokes ‘News Management’  
Result - Cynicism / Alienation ?**

**Participation Rate in Elections – Less than 50% ?**

# CONTENTS OF ACT : MAIN FEATURES

- Creates a new body - The Statistics Board – independent of Ministers – directly accountable to Parliament as ‘Non-Ministerial Department’
- Replaces oversight role Treasury Ministers have over ONS
- Creates new Executive Office of Board (= ONS)
- Abolishes the Statistics Commission – functions subsumed within the new Board
- Statutory Code of Practice and new Assessment function
- Covers United Kingdom

# THE STATISTICS BOARD

---

- Board will be majority Non-executive with a Non-executive Chair
- Executives on the Board comprise the National Statistician and two others
- Staff within the Board and 'Executive Office' to be civil servants
- Special funding arrangements – 5 year budget

# THE STATISTICS BOARD - OBJECTIVES

---

## Statutory objective

To promote and safeguard the production of statistics that serve the public good.

By promoting and safeguarding:

- the quality of official statistics
- good statistical practice
- the comprehensiveness of official statistics

# THE STATISTICS BOARD - OBJECTIVES

---

Objectives are delivered through three main functions:

- monitoring and reporting on official statistics across the system, wherever produced (as the Statistics Commission does now)
- independent standard setting and quality assurance of National Statistics
- independent oversight of Executive Office

# ASSESSMENT FUNCTION

Board has particular legal duties to:

- independently set professional standards in a new Code of Practice
- ‘assess’ all National Statistics against those standards (both current NS and additional statistics nominated by Ministers)
- prepare and publish a work programme for the re-assessment of National Statistics
- prepare and publish a Statement of Principles of Assessment

# THE NATIONAL STATISTICIAN

The National Statistician's statutory role comprises advisory and executive functions

- the Government's (Board's) Chief Advisor on statistical matters
- the Chief Executive of the Board
- the establishment of an Executive Office (i.e. the ONS-as-is).
- may not exercise the Board's functions relating to Assessment and the Code of Practice



# INFORMATION SHARING

- Existing gateways for sharing of data preserved
- Order-making powers will allow two-way sharing of data between Statistics Board and public authorities/Devolved Administrations for statistical purposes, subject to the following safeguards ...
  - Only possible where otherwise prohibited by law or public authority/DA has no power
  - Subject to bilateral Ministerial agreement and Parliamentary scrutiny
  - Disclosure only for specific purposes and subject to public interest test
  - Criminal penalties for unlawful disclosure

# PRE-RELEASE ACCESS

To be excluded from Code of Practice

- “Appropriate authority” will consult and agree rules and principles relating to the granting of pre-release access
- “Appropriate authority” means HMT, Scottish or Welsh Ministers or NI Dept
- Rules and principles include circumstances, persons, period and conditions
- Order to be laid before Parliament for scrutiny

# **Non-Legislative Provision**

---

## **A 'Publication Hub'**

**Government is committed to the principle of creating a central 'Publication Hub' –through which all National Statistics would be published under the new system, thereby separating statistical release from policy comment**

# STRENGTHS OF LEGISLATION

- **2000 Reforms embedded in Legislation**
- **Ministerial Role transferred to Board**
- **Board's UK-wide remit**
- **Statutory Code**
- **Statutory accreditation of statistics**
- **Opportunities for Data Sharing**