

# The Statistics & Registration Services Act and the UK Statistics Authority

Quick Guide

March 2008

## Introduction

In November 2005 the then Chancellor Gordon Brown MP announced to Parliament his intention to legislate for the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to become independent of government, making the governance and production of official statistics the responsibility of a wholly separate body at arm's length from government. This announcement was driven by a motivation to increase public confidence in the independence and integrity of official statistics.

**Official Statistics** are any statistics that "fall within the managerial responsibility of any official working for the state"<sup>1</sup>. They can include:

- Statistics collected through formal censuses, surveys or inquiries;
- Statistics generated as a by-product of an operational or administrative system, such as tax or benefit systems;
- Other statistics generated to help with the work of government, for example internal operational statistics on performance or personnel.

**National Statistics** are under the control of government statisticians and must meet national standards of quality and integrity. They are expected to undergo regular quality assurance and are produced free from political interference.

## The Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007

After a period of consultation and parliamentary scrutiny, the Statistics and Registration Services Act was given Royal Assent in July 2007, coming in to force on 1 April 2008. The Act is mainly concerned with the structure of the organisations that deliver official statistics and registration services. It covers the whole of the UK and creates a Statistics Board, a non-ministerial body accountable to Parliament, which will oversee the production of official statistics. The Board will be known as the UK Statistics Authority.

## The UK Statistics Authority

The UK Statistics Authority replaces the current Office for National Statistics and the Statistics Commission, with the current ONS acting as the Statistics Authority's executive office.

The Statistics Authority's main functions are:

### Monitoring and reporting on all official statistics

The Authority is required to monitor and may report on all official statistics, regardless of where they are produced and whether or not they are National Statistics. As part of this, the Authority must lay a report annually before the National

<sup>1</sup> *National Statistics Annual Report, 2006/07*, July 2007. The full legal definition of official statistics can be found in Section 6 of the Act. See the *Further Information* section at the end of this Quick Guide for a link to the Act.

Assembly for Wales, showing that they have considered issues of devolution in their work.

### Independent assessment of key statistics

The Authority is required to publish a Code of Practice against which it will independently assess the quality and integrity of key official statistics before being formally approved as National Statistics.

### Oversight of the Office for National Statistics

The Authority is the top level of governance for the Office for National Statistics, a role that was previously undertaken by HM Treasury Ministers.

## Membership of the UK Statistics Authority

The Chair of the UK Statistics Authority is a non-executive position appointed by Her Majesty the Queen. In July 2007, Sir Michael Scholar, a former Permanent Secretary to the Welsh Office, was appointed as Chair of the Statistics Authority<sup>2</sup>.

The Statistics and Registration Services Act stipulates that, in addition to the Chair, there should be at least five non-executive members. Non-executive members are appointed by the Cabinet Office in consultation with Ministers in the devolved administrations<sup>3</sup>.

The remaining members of the Statistics Authority are the National Statistician and two other executive members, as appointed by the non-executive members. The National Statistician, in addition to being the Authority's Chief Executive and chief statistical adviser, is directly responsible for the work of the ONS and reports to the Authority.

The post of Head of Assessment is established in the Act. The Head of Assessment is the Authority's principal adviser on the assessment of official statistics and the awarding of the National Statistics "kite mark". He or she can be an executive member of the Authority, but is not required to be, unlike the National Statistician.

## Other areas covered by the Act

**Pre-release Access:** Secondary legislation should set out the arrangements for granting access to official statistics in their final form prior to publication. Currently, relevant Ministers and officials can view official statistics up to 40.5 hours before publication for market sensitive statistics and up to five days before publication for all other official statistics. The UK Government has committed to reducing pre-release access to 24 hours in the Governance of Britain Green Paper. Devolved administrations will determine their own pre-release arrangements. The UK Statistics Authority has a statutory responsibility to assess compliance with pre-release arrangements.

**Confidentiality:** The Act stipulates that information held by the Statistics Authority which relates to or identifies a person or business is confidential and should not be disclosed. Unlawful disclosure is an offence punishable by a fine or imprisonment.

<sup>2</sup> A biography of Sir Michael Scholar can be found here: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/statboard0707.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> The names of the non-executive members of the UK Statistics Authority are available from the Latest News section of the ONS independence website: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/data/independence/latestnews.asp>

**Data Sharing:** The Act contains powers to allow the sharing of information between public authorities and the Statistics Authority where it is for statistical purposes. Such proposals will be enacted through secondary legislation.

**Registration Services:** Registration functions previously undertaken by the ONS, such as the registration of births and deaths, do not come under the remit of the Statistics Authority. They remain under ministerial responsibility and are transferred to an executive agency of the Home Office.

**Employment Status:** All employees of the UK Statistics Authority will be civil servants. The Act also includes provisions to establish proper employment status and rights for Registrars in England and Wales as local authority employees.

**Sponsor Department:** The Cabinet Office takes over responsibility from the Treasury in circumstances where the Statistics Authority requires a route into Parliament, for example when progressing secondary legislation.

## Publication Hub

Although not set out in the Act, the idea of a publication hub has been closely associated with statistical independence. The aim is for all National Statistics to be released through a central publication hub divorced from any political content or commentary. From 1 April 2008, [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk) will become the publication hub for National Statistics. The hub is planned to be introduced incrementally and should be fully operational by April 2009. The devolved administrations can choose whether or not to make use of the hub.

## Further information

For further information on the topics below, double click on the links.

- [Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007](#)
- [Office for National Statistics independence mini-site](#)
- [HM Treasury and Cabinet Office consultation on limiting pre-release access](#)
- [Welsh Assembly Government pre-release access arrangements](#)

View our [full range of publications](#) on the Assembly website: [assemblywales.org/research](http://assemblywales.org/research)

You can also follow us on Twitter: [@NAWRsearch](https://twitter.com/NAWRsearch)

We welcome your comments. These should be sent to: **Research Service, National Assembly for Wales, Cardiff, CF99 1NA** or e-mailed to [Research.Service@wales.gov.uk](mailto:Research.Service@wales.gov.uk)

The Research Service has produced this Research Note for the benefit of Assembly Members and their support staff. Authors are available to discuss the contents of these papers with Members and their staff but cannot advise members of the general public.

**Enquiry no: 07/3104**  
**Stephanie Howarth**