

## NEWS from the SBE

# LIVING WITH A STATISTICAL FOG

By **Ulric Spencer**

'Monetary policy, data uncertainty and supply-side: living with a statistical fog' was the enticing title of a recent talk (15 September) given by **Marian Bell**, Monetary Policy Committee member, Bank of England to the Society of Business Economists. Reading it (in [www.bankofengland.co.uk](http://www.bankofengland.co.uk)) underlines the by now well-known fact that the Bank's staff are major statistics users and therefore their viewpoint gibes with the experiences of others out here.

Statistics are a means to an end – decision-making, and **Ms Bell** looked at the various ways in which data uncertainty might arise and discussed how the monetary policy maker should respond.

It is inevitable that official statistics, especially in timely first releases, are subject to significant uncertainty and revision. "Indeed, insofar as they bring us to a better understanding of the underlying reality, we welcome them," **Ms Bell** said. "And it is incumbent on us, collectively and individually, to try and make the best decision possible each month in the light of the information available to us at the time and our interpretation of it."

A particular difficulty for statisticians can be in allocating movements in nominal variables to price and volume changes. This is especially so at times of change, and

rebasings can result in large revisions to statistics. When such uncertainty is high and the structure of the economy and relative prices have changed notably from the base period "looking at a money value measure of activity may be informative", particularly if other reliable inflation data are available, **Ms Bell** argued.

The estimated level of real activity "appears more prone to mismeasurement than growth rates, and we should be wary of conventional, mechanical estimates of the output gap, which rely heavily on levels information. We should not ignore other relevant information, such as inflation data, the labour market and surveys of capacity utilisation, in gauging inflationary pressure and the relative price data used in the rebasing process may itself be informative".

"Revisions to data stemming either from more information or methodological improvements will inevitably lead us to reassess our view of the underlying truth", **Ms Bell** concluded. "This is not always comfortable. But it is an inevitable part of the policymaker's job, and that of other users of statistics, to make sense of revisions. Improvements to statistics should be something we welcome, not criticise. Understanding the nature of data uncertainty and revisions should inform our judgments about the world."

## THE ATKINSON REVIEW INTERIM REPORT

### MEASUREMENT OF GOVERNMENT OUTPUT AND PRODUCTIVITY FOR THE NATIONAL ACCOUNTS

The National Statistician commissioned Sir Tony Atkinson to "advance methodologies for the measurement of government output, productivity and associated price indices in the context of National Accounts", recognising various aspects of the factors involved. The intention is to improve the quality of National Accounts and to influence future development of UN and European systems. The Interim report, published in July 2004, floats a number of ideas to stimulate discussion, which can be reflected in the final report due in January 2005 and also gives a breathing space to obtain results from several work-in-progress projects which will be reviewed to firm up conclusions on the desirability and feasibility of the new approaches put forward.

In the space available here, it is impractical to elaborate on the amount of detail covered in the 180-page report. A scene-setting Chapter 2 underlines the traditional difficulties of expressing government outputs other than in terms of largely labour inputs. But since 1998 attention has increasingly been given to moving on to measuring outputs. This is resource-intensive, needs considerable care and is highly complex. Chapter 3 examines the international context – both over-arching Systems of National Accounts published by the UN and Eurostat, and the developments in a number of OECD countries. Perhaps one of the more surprising features is how relatively unprogressive the US has been in moving on from using input measures. However, there are concerns about the quality of output measures and in the treatment of output change. Chapter 4 discusses various aspects of National Accounts and their uses; it warns against misuse such as their being a measure of total economic welfare or as performance targets. Chapter 5 elaborates on a methodological framework and lists eight principles with Chapter 6 describing implementation. The next four chapters report on progress in applying the approach to four sectors – health, education, public order & safety, and social protection. Chapter 11 summarises the conclusions – the eight principles – on inputs, direct outputs, input data, presentation, documentation, resources and the four sectors reviewed.

The report is available from: [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk)

## EDITORIAL

### NAVEL-GAZING

BSUG is largely concerned with production statistics and it may be worthwhile dwelling for a moment on trends in production, which has been steadily declining and currently contributes just over a quarter of GDP. Correspondingly, services have expanded their share to around three quarters. Many major manufacturing industries have already all but disappeared. As the saying has it, 'if present trends continue', will there ever come the day when manufacturing ceases

altogether? And long before then, what about BSUG itself? To keep introspection at bay, in recent years **BSUG NEWS** has tried to take a wider view of its range of interests by reporting as appropriate on topics which may be relevant to other statistics user groups concerned with business matters, for example the complementary ITSUG, particularly as few of them have equivalent publications, and online reporting varies from group to group.

## NEWS FROM ONS

### ONS STATISTICAL MODERNISATION PROGRAMME

**Karen Dunnell**, ONS writes "The ONS Modernisation Programme has been put in place to ensure that statistics and the needs of users and key stakeholders, through the attainment of world class statistical systems in terms of methods and processes used and the quality of statistics produced. The Statistical Modernisation Programme (SMP) is funded as a key element of ONS Modernisation. It will enable an integrated public surveys operation within the ONS by:

- re-engineering key statistical systems
- moving ONS surveys and other data into a corporate database system, called the Central ONS Repository for Data (CORD)
- introducing a set of standard tools
- standardising and systematising the processing and presentation of statistical outputs

In the 2002 Spending Review, HM Treasury allocated £75m to fund ONS Modernisation over the period 2003-4 to 2005-6 inclusive. A small proportion of the funding was allocated specifically for 2003-4 to begin work, gear up and undertake detailed planning. With the majority of the funding becoming available through the following two years, and following an independent review of the programme early in 2004, implementation of SMP has begun in earnest.

A detailed 5-page summary of the objectives, structure and current status of the programme is available. Information can be obtained from:

Sue J Smith (01633 812004;  
sue.j.smith@ons.gov.uk) or  
Philippa Brimicombe (01633 819028;  
philippa.brimicombe@ons.gov.uk)

## A GUIDE TO THE 2001 CENSUS, ESSENTIAL INFORMATION FOR GAINING BUSINESS ADVANTAGE

## BOOK REVIEW

*Keith Dugmore & Corinne Moy, eds., The Stationery Office, in association with the Office for National Statistics and the Market Research Society, 2004, 179 pages, £35.00.*

Although the UK Census legislation (GB 1920, Northern Ireland 1969) enables there to be a census no more often than every five years, in recent years there has only been one inter-decennial exercise (in 1966), the possibility of one in 2006 has once more been rejected, and reading through this attractive illustrative **Guide**, even the existing ten-year frequency, pattern and methodology of Census-holding may change totally. This is to an extent influenced by closer contact and comparison with other EU Member States, particularly the Scandinavians, who rely more on administrative sources and registers, which are continuously updated, though their philosophy may be less acceptable given the UK's attitudes to 'Big Brother state' and ID cards. An ONS consultation paper on proposals for future population measurement in a Continuous Population Survey, which would combine five existing surveys: Labour Force, Annual Population, General Household, Expenditure and Food and the National Statistics Omnibus, has been posted on [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk) with a closing date of 15 October.

This latest **Guide** points up the radical shift in many aspects from the 1991 to the 2001 exercise, not least the wholesale availability of free on-line disaggregated data, subject as always to confidentiality constraints. Such are the benefits of technological advances and a shift in official pricing policy. The book's sub-title, **Essential Information for Gaining Business Advantage** identifies the target readership and, to an extent, explains the treatment. In some of the fifteen chapters, the style suggests that the reader is accustomed to using statistical sources and handling the data. In others, one gets the feeling that the businessmen being addressed are being

led through unfamiliar territory. It is certainly clear that Tesco, Sainsbury and similar large organisations are well into both the existence of the data and how they (or in this book consistently and perhaps influentially throughout, it) can be used. Due emphasis is placed on the existence of and potential uses of neighbourhood statistics; the difficulty lies more in getting those in SMEs first to be aware of this book and then to apply its lessons to their own circumstances. By contrast, local authorities are well into this area; indeed it was a number of them who loudly drew attention to some of the anomalies of the population figures relating to their patch compared with previous benchmarks, which despite initial defence of their accuracy by ONS, have subsequently been 'adjusted' for a number of the persistent objectors' areas.

The book's fifteen short chapters authored by contributors from market research and marketing consultancies, academia and the ONS, discuss the importance of the statistics, collection and processing methods, classification, geography, outputs, access, variations between parts of the UK, geodemographics, adding value from other datasets, international comparisons and future developments. Almost inevitably, there is some repetition but this does no harm. A questionnaire for England, a description of variations from it used in the other devolved countries, a glossary and references/further reading list complete the text.

Reviewers are perforce obliged to plough through books from cover to cover in one fell swoop. In this instance, the reader may be better advised to absorb a chapter at a time and contemplate subsequent action.

## NEWS FROM THE STATISTICS COMMISSION

### ANNUAL REPORT 2003-2004

The Commission's annual report from Chairman, David Rhind and Chief Executive, Richard Aldritt, published in July, reflects a change of tone and gear. The lists of ground covered during the year, ongoing issues and plans for the forthcoming year (which is already half-way over) have both lengthened and broadened.

Highlights which the report notes include: urging government statisticians to expand text information along with official statistics to improve users' ability to judge reliability; a review of revisions to economic statistics, concluding that, despite scope for some improvements, public criticisms were largely unjustified; a report on national accounts forecasting recommending improvements in monitoring performance, communicating with users and releasing more information about models used. Other issues addressed included pursuit of concern about the Census results for 'hard to count' areas (which may have contributed to the publication in July of revised figures for 15 local authority areas, including Westminster and Manchester, as well as Southwark, Wandsworth, Bristol, Cardiff, Derby, Newcastle and Sunderland) and making recommendations for improving future Censuses; the review of the need for legislation, recommending a statutory Code of Practice and a

statutory Commission accountable to Parliament; the need to give a clear and specific meaning to the term 'National Statistics'.

The Commission is now focusing its work on the following aspects: Are appropriate data collected? Are appropriate messages from the statistics communicated? Are appropriate procedures followed to ensure openness, impartiality, use of the best methodology, rapid and universal availability, and meaningful analysis?

Among twenty headings for 2004-2005 plans, are: broad subject-area reviews – first a report on health statistics, to be followed by one on education statistics; improvement of pension statistics, starting to map the 'use made' of official statistics in substantive decision-making inside and outside government, an essential element in analysing value for money in new investment in statistical outputs; examining cross-UK statistics comparability.

At the open meeting held on 22 September an innovative feature was the inclusion of three guest speakers: **Robert Chote**, Director, Institute for Fiscal Studies, **Ian Diamond**, Chief Executive, ESRC and **Keith Dugmore**, Director, Demographic Decisions/Demographics User Group and a lively Q&A session with them and members of the Commission.

## Latest International Statistics from TSO

### Yearbook of Tourism Statistics 2004

*World Tourism Organisation*

The best source of international tourism statistics in the world, this yearbook contains detailed data on arrivals and nights for over 207 countries and territories.

ISBN 9284406765

£130.00

Jun 04

### World Investment Report 2004: The Shift Towards Services

*United Nations Commission for Trade and Development*

Offering the latest trends in foreign direct investment, this report explores the shift towards services, with a special analysis of offshoring service activities.

ISBN 9211126479

£46.00

Sep 04



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## NEWS FROM BSUG

# Producing Boundaries and Statistics for Town Centres. Operation 2007; NACE, SIC and all that.

### Report of meeting on 21 July 2004

Following the background and description of the ODPM Town Centres project (described in **BSUG NEWS 25**), **Jacob Willcock**, ODPM, and **Mark Thurstain Goodwin**, Geofutures Ltd, elaborated on some aspects of the outcomes of the project. For example, the Neighbourhood Unit was using the data to assess deprived areas and ONS was using the model for RPI sampling. The statistics are essentially spatial and the relevant employment data for 4- or 5-digit SIC are not directly comparable. There is a need for consistent definitions for all local authorities. The model components are economic types of organisation, property and diversity.

Indices of Town Centre Activity, resulting in 'surface' (contour) maps, and boundaries of retail cores have been produced for about 1000 town centres. Data used so far relate to 2000; an update to 2002 is planned. Post Code boundaries have sometimes led to misconceptions; for example, Post Boxes are linked to Sorting Offices. Attempts were made to use turnover data, but following some criticisms, further analyses showed their unreliability. The Annual Business Inquiry was unsuitable and therefore use of turnover data was dropped from the project.

Planned developments included extending the analysis to 'out-of-town' centres eg

Bluewater, smaller town centres, bearing in mind the constraints of possible disclosure, and time series 1998-2002 due in January 2005. A short descriptive leaflet, Boundaries and Statistics for Areas of Town Centre Activity in England and Wales, 2000: An Overview, including a request for feedback, is available from the Town Centres Team, Zone 3/K9, Eland House, Bressenden Place, London SW1E 5DU or [www.odpm.gov.uk/statistics/towncentres](http://www.odpm.gov.uk/statistics/towncentres).

**Michael Clary**, DTI gave an outline of the current status of the exercise to update the NACE classes, which were intended to more closely align with ISIC and from which the UK SIC would stem. SIC is more detailed than NACE, which in turn is more detailed than ISIC. Operation 2007, in addition to making NACE more up-to-date, is intended to reflect the (conflicting) needs of users, as well as to improve its consistency with NAICS, the North American equivalent, a 'convergence scenario'. Whilst desirable in principle, change implies discontinuities; initial discussions related to 'low level' convergence, which would have entailed widespread changes, but current proposals now seek 'high level' convergence.

The major changes affect NACE more than NAICS, which is more up-to-date; NACE must be consistent with ISIC, but NAICS does not need to be. Changes include a new

Information Sector embracing Publishing (formerly in Manufacturing), Telecommunications, Computer Services and broadcasting and films, but not theatre. Electronic and electrical goods are more clearly split; there is general interest in IT.

Repair & Maintenance has not been hived off into a separate sector: that of cars remains with motor trades, repair of capital goods will be a separate division within manufacturing and repair of consumer goods is moved from distribution. Motor trades will not be split between wholesale, retail or repair, but petrol stations move into retailing.

More detail is proposed within services, whilst manufacturing retains broadly the current level of detail. Though relatively little change was originally proposed for Retail, there has been a proliferation of proposals from other EU member states. **Michael** listed some of these and discussed the considerations concerning repair and maintenance.

Comments were required by ONS by 6 August to enable UK comments to be sent to Eurostat by the end of August. Near-final NACE is expected by October 2004, final by September 2005, UK sub-classes finalised by March 2006 and implementation is planned for January 2007. Contacts are: manufacturing: [michael.clary@dti.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:michael.clary@dti.gsi.gov.uk); retailing: [bill.nuttall@dti.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:bill.nuttall@dti.gsi.gov.uk).

## BSUG AGM

held at the RSS on 21 July 2004

The Chairman, Ian Maclean referred to the Group's three meetings during the year: Productivity and competitiveness indicators (**Chris Moir**, DTI); Statistics for management decision (**David Mort**); and Use and value of census and neighbourhood statistics, jointly with FSUG. Also to a disappointing fall in membership, which would need to be reversed; and the BSUG quarterly newsletter and its associated DTI website. He commented on relations with National Statistics, the Statistics Commission and the forthcoming

new arrangements with the RSS for user groups due to start on 29 September.

The Treasurer, John Cunningham reported a small surplus, due to lower costs for meetings and the 4-page BSUG NEWS, despite lower membership subscriptions and a reduction in the membership fees. It was agreed that the membership subscription would remain unchanged at £35.

The current officers and committee were re-elected.

## FUTURE FSUG MEETING

Tuesday 19 October 2004 at 2.00 pm

at Bank of England, Threadneedle Street,  
London EC2

### PENSION STATISTICS – IDENTIFYING THE GAPS AND HOW THEY MIGHT BE FILLED

Speakers will include representatives from the following organisations: The Pensions Commission, The Office for National Statistics, The Government Actuary's Department, The Pensions Policy Institute.

Notification of attendance to  
[sally.doherty@bankofengland.co.uk](mailto:sally.doherty@bankofengland.co.uk)

## FUTURE SBE MEETINGS

CIPFA, 3 Robert Street,  
London WC2 (6 pm)

Tuesday 12 October

### THE VALUE OF LONDON

BRIDGET ROSEWELL, Consultant Chief Economist, GLA & Chairman, Volterra Consulting

Wednesday 17 November

### SHORTCOMINGS OF UK ECONOMIC STATISTICS AND THE IMPACT ON POLICY DECISIONS

CHRIS ALLSOPP, Fellow, New College, Oxford

All enquiries about attendance or membership to: [admin@sbe.co.uk](mailto:admin@sbe.co.uk)

## NEWS FROM DCMS

### NATION STATISTICS QUALITY REVIEWS NO. 33. TOURISM STATISTICS

Following the creation of National Statistics, a series of Quality Reviews of specific areas was instituted in 2000, some of which have been reported in **BSUG NEWS**. UK Tourism, a complex industry which does not fall neatly into a single SIC, is the subject of a recent addition commissioned by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, work on which began in April 2003 by a team led by **Denis Allnutt**, formerly Director, Analytical Services Branch, Department for Education and Employment. The purposes for which statistics for this sector are used include: its economic evaluation, planning, marketing, sustainable development aspects and advocacy.

Several major gaps in statistics were identified concerning accommodation provision lists, day visitors, short-term market trends, tourist expenditure, and local statistics. Some of the

existing major surveys need greater expenditure. Timeliness, dissemination and organisation of responsibility for tourism statistics were among other aspects reviewed. A number of criticisms emerged on the quality of some of the existing surveys, such as sampling and response rates.

The report makes fourteen recommendations: major redesign and improvements to major surveys (UK Tourism Survey, Leisure Day Visits Survey, International Passenger Survey, UK Occupancy Survey and Survey of Visits to Visitor Attractions) and supports the development of Tourist Satellite Accounts. Because of the fragmentation of 'players' in this area, the creation of a focal Tourist Statistics Unit is recommended. Since inevitably there are resource constraints, an Action Plan which would state priorities is suggested.

## NEWS FROM ITSUG

### EG LEGISLATION AND EU ENLARGEMENT

Report of meeting on 30 June 2004

Two members of the Statistics and Analysis of Trade Unit (SATU) at HMRC ( HM Revenue & Customs, the new name of the merged Inland Revenue and Customs & Excise reported in **BSUG NEWS 24**) gave updates to ITSUG. New EC legislation on Intrastat was described by **Margaret Kingston**, in the form of two new Regulations, which must be implemented by 1 January 2005, and the repeal of three others. The effect of the changes include: the VAT tax point can be used as the reference period, Member States can decide how long to keep Intrastat returns, assimilation thresholds need to be set to capture at least 97 per cent of trade by value, and aggregated returns will have to be sent to Eurostat within 40 days of the end of the reference period.

Why have changes been made? To remove no-longer-required references, and to clarify (tidy up) the Intrastat system with the benefit of over ten years experience. What has been changed? Data from EC sales lists collected for VAT purposes can be used to improve statistics quality; data for more than one year can be used to calculate assimilation thresholds; rules for specific goods have been expanded and simplified. Other changes include: quality requirements are included in the legislation; repairs are excluded from Intrastat, changes to the first digit of the Nature of Transaction Codes concerning, for example, goods travelling for processing.

Specific goods and movements and the changes, which may allow or require departure

from normal Intrastat rules, include: industrial plant (threshold, coding); vessels and aircraft (establishing ownership changes, calculating statistical value); motor vehicle and aircraft parts (simplification); goods delivered to vessels and aircraft (deletion of reference to arrivals, optional use of country code, optional reporting of quantity) and to offshore installations (simplified coding, optional reporting of quantity); sea products (nationality of fish still being discussed, reporting of fish landed in another country); spacecraft (changed statistical value calculation method); electricity (problem resulting from changes in VAT rules on place of supply, inter-country transfers have been reported as net rather than gross and clarification is awaited). Work is starting on changes to Third Country legislation for implementation on 1 January 2007.

**Tricia Williams** summarised the current position resulting from EU enlargement, which had been covered by a detailed plan to manage the changes, previously reported in **BSUG NEWS 23**. There were about 1000 traders new to Intrastat; the focus had been on trader education. A micro website had proved to be popular, and initial response had been good. The system changes generally went well and most methodology changes had been completed. The new trade would be monitored, in particular checking the asymmetries with the new countries, on the lookout for indications of MTIC fraud and errors. Threshold assimilation methodology for 2005 would be reviewed, as would the effects of channels and delivery of information.

## BSUG CONTACT ADDRESSES

**CHAIRMAN** : Ian Maclean  
Lancaster House, More Lane  
Esher, Surrey KT10 8AP

Tel: 01372 463121 Fax: 01372 469847  
Email: [ian@worldtradestats.com](mailto:ian@worldtradestats.com)

**SECRETARY** : Geoff Noon  
MTA, 62 Bayswater Road,  
London W2 3PS

Tel: 020 7298 6400 Fax: 020 7209 6430  
Email: [gnoon@mta.org.uk](mailto:gnoon@mta.org.uk)

**HON. TREASURER and GROUP PUBLISHER** : John Cunningham  
69 Warwick Park, Tunbridge Wells,  
Kent TN2 5EJ

Tel: 01892 534 599 Fax: 01892 514 955  
Email: [jacunningham@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:jacunningham@tiscali.co.uk)

**BSUG NEWS EDITOR** : Ulric Spencer  
Silchester Hall, Silchester, Reading,  
Berks RG7 2LX

Tel: 0118 970 0219 Fax: 0118 970 0751  
Email: [uspencer@silch.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:uspencer@silch.fsnet.co.uk)

**FINANCIAL SERVICES** : David Fleming  
Applied Business Statistics Limited  
Beech Hayes Office, Clayhidon,  
Cullompton, Devon EX15 3PJ

Tel: 01823 680 920  
Email:  
[david.fleming@business-statistics.co.uk](mailto:david.fleming@business-statistics.co.uk)

## NEWS FROM ONS WESTWARD HO!

Following the finger-pointing Lyons Report showing numerical estimates of potentially relocatable civil servants (mentioned in **BSUG NEWS 24** editorial), it has been announced that by March 2008 the jobs (not necessarily the current postholders) of some 400 of the ONS Pimlico-based staff are to be moved to Newport, 100 to Titchfield and 200 at Titchfield will be transferred to Newport. This will leave between 400 and 500 in London mainly concerned with national accounts, labour market, and reports and analysis on UK society. Newport will become the corporate headquarters and will be the location for business and household surveys, economic and social analysis and reporting, health statistics, survey design and statistical methodology, and technology and information management for development and operations. Titchfield will be the home for population, regional and demographic statistics. So the chief honcho, the National Statistician, and most executive board members will be going west. For more details, visit [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk) - news releases 20 September 2004.

### ON-LINE INFORMATION 2004

30 November - 2 December 2004, Olympia, London

View the full conference programme online and book your place at [www.online-information.co.uk](http://www.online-information.co.uk). On 30 November at 11.45am there will be a 1-hour SUC presentation on 'Statistics in Business'.

Free exhibition tickets are available to all Business Statistics User Group members. There is also a 25% reduced fee for the conference if booked before 2 November, thereafter, 15%, remembering to select 'association delegate' and state that you are an SUC member to benefit from the discount. See insert.

**BSUG WEBSITES** [www.bsug.org.uk](http://www.bsug.org.uk)  
[www.dtistats.net/bsug](http://www.dtistats.net/bsug)

The **bsug.org** site gives the history, aims and objectives of the Group, Committee members' names and contact details, and information about forthcoming meetings, which can be booked on-line. The **dtistats.net** site gives access to current and back copies of **BSUG NEWS** and, in addition, reports of meetings.

## ADVISORY PANEL ON PUBLIC SECTOR INFORMATION

### 1ST ANNUAL REPORT 2003/04

Given the welter of public sector quangos and their activities, it is perhaps not surprising that one may have missed the appointment (on 14 April 2003) of the Advisory Panel on Crown Copyright, subsequently renamed the Advisory Panel on Public Sector Information (APPSI). There is now no excuse as the Panel's first annual report has recently been published ([www.hmso.gov.uk/appsi](http://www.hmso.gov.uk/appsi)). An EU Directive on PSI, which applies to central and local government as well as trading funds (eg Ordnance Survey and the Met Office) was adopted at the end of 2003, and has to be implemented in the UK by 1 July 2005. The report contains four key messages and eight recommendations:

Awareness of the importance of the re-use of PSI is low; government policy is too fragmented, there is conflict and confusion; government's commercial exploitation of PSI needs greater scrutiny; and HMSO is performing well.

Government should make efforts to stimulate interest and action on PSI re-use similar to what has been done on Freedom of Information (FOI); there needs to be clarification of the confusions on terminology (access to PSI, re-use of PSI, use of PSI; core data and added-value data); there should be a single coherent set of policies on PSI for the whole public sector; for the short term, a joint working party for implementing FOI and PSI initiatives should be set up; in the longer term, a single inter-departmental group should formulate a single, cost-efficient, coherent policy and strategy for information management for the public sector; there needs to be a more systematic and rigorous measurement of PSI activity; benchmarks and targets for increasing PSI re-use should be established; HMSO would be well-suited to be responsible for implementing and regulating PSI in the UK.

The report also describes the APPSI's activities hitherto and includes its work-programme for 2004/05. Government statistics are mentioned in passing.