

STATS BILL'S STATELY PROGRESS ENDS IN ENACTMENT

The processing of the Statistics and Registration Services Bill, which began on with the First Reading on 12 November 2006 ended its various stages through the House of Commons and House of Lords with the passage of the Royal Assent on 27 July 2007¹, a period of a little over eight months. It will come into force in April 2008. In real time, it took a total of well over 40 hours of debate, and an untold number of hours which were required for the drafting of amendments and for debaters to prepare their speeches. At the end, though much remained as originally drafted, a number of significant changes were made.

To summarise², its main provisions are:

- The Office for National Statistics will become a non-ministerial department
- A Statistics Board (majority non-executive) will be set up with the dual function of both overseeing ONS and, more importantly, monitoring all official statistics wherever they are produced
- The Board's objective is "promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good" including "informing the public about social and economic matters" (ie no return to the Rayner principle that statistics were primarily for government) and "assisting in the development and evaluation of economic policy"
- The Board has to draw up a code of practice and all statistics deemed to be National Statistics (essentially those considered important enough) have to be assessed against this code
- Those producing national statistics have a duty to comply with the code
- In addition to the National Statistician there will be a separate Head of Assessment responsible to the Board for the Assessment process
- Residual ministerial responsibilities will pass from the Treasury to the Cabinet Office (a reversion to its past linkage)
- There will be provision, via secondary legislation, for official statisticians to make greater use of administrative data
- Pre-release access to statistics is specifically excluded from the Code of Practice
- The Statistics Commission will be abolished (as the Board will effectively cover its functions)
- There will be regular reports to Parliament which will oversee the new system (probably via a Select committee – possibly a committee of both houses but this is to be decided).

Other changes made to the Bill included the fact that the Board could initiate the process by which any statistic becomes a "national statistic" (previously it was only ministers); the Board's request and the relevant minister's response (a timetable if 'yes' and reasons if 'no') have to be laid before Parliament. In addition some changes were made to make the distinction between the Board's and the National Statistician's responsibilities clearer.

The government did not concede the principle that pre-release access should be governed by the code and hence by the Board rather than ministers. However they did announce a number of major concessions in that pre-release access will be restricted to 24 hours, that it will be the subject of secondary legislation, that there will be a review after one year and the Act includes a provision that the Board has to be consulted on pre-release conditions. In addition it was announced earlier that as part of the non-statutory changes associated with the Act there will be a publications hub through which all national statistics will be released – ie they will no longer be released by a departmental press office which also has the job of putting the minister's viewpoint.

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EDITORIAL

STATISTICS AFFECT US ALL BUT RARELY ENGAGE OUR AFFECTIONS

This has been something of a roller-coaster year, perhaps dominated for some of us by tracking the tortuous journey of the once-in-a-lifetime passage of the Statistics and Registration Service Bill to its haven as an Act of Parliament (SRSA). Despite having learnt about the procedural stages of legislation in the Politics part of a degree course, this has never been followed up. Tracking the detailed deliberations of the passage of a Bill, mostly from Hansard reports, as well as from the Visitors' Galleries of both Houses at Westminster, has truly contributed to the generally-recommended pastime of 'life-long learning'. Many of you may have watched TV broadcasts of parliamentary debates and Committee hearings; I have not been aware of the statistics sessions appearing in this slot, even though their outcome, the 'SRSA' (sounds

like a new virus?) will fundamentally affect all our lives. Indeed, one of its key objectives is to "promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good." It is hoped that this will enhance public trust in them.

The Chancellor lost no time in announcing his recommendation for the Crown appointment of Sir Michael Scholar as Chair of the new Statistics Board and the Treasury Select Committee quickly endorsed this in a Report to the whole House, which speedily approved it. There follow the recruitment and appointment of the Board's non-executive members. Let's hope we shall love the Board and all who sail in her; we shall wish them Godspeed.

NEWS FROM THE STATISTICS COMMISSION

ANNUAL REPORT 2006-07

The Statistics Commission published its Annual Report 2006-07 in July.

It reminds the reader that although the Commission recognises that the introduction of the legislation stemmed from the its 2004 report, and it agreed with the Bill's broad thrust, there were some of its features which it did not support, notably the retention by departmental ministers of decisions to categorise 'National Statistics', and their privilege on pre-release access.

Research reports published in the last year covered processes of compiling and publishing crime statistics, suggested revisions to the NS Code of Practice, risks to, and challenges of, the 2011 Census, the use made of official statistics and the recent **Data on Demand**, featured overleaf. A list of cases reported to it by ONS, including some transgressions of the Code of Practice, illustrates how 'mountains can be made out of molehills'.

The report also outlines the Commission's programme for 2007-08, which marks its last year of operation before handing on the 'torch', ignited by its work, to the new Statistics Board. It is engaged in compiling advice for the Board and will be completing a review of the statistical use of tax data, particularly in relation to restrictions on data sharing.

Whilst it is not a new revelation, it is perhaps reassuring to be reminded that the Commission 'has no directly employed staff'; all 10 are secondees from other government departments and public bodies. So closure next year will be less damaging than otherwise.

The report is posted on the Commission's website (www.statscom.org.uk)

THE PERILS OF SENDING WHITE-COLLAR WORK ABROAD

"One apocryphal tale centred on Indian workers who had been given the job of keying the results of the latest British census into a database. The work was done quickly. Everyone was satisfied until the entries were reviewed and it emerged that the most common surname in Britain was "Ditto".

The Economist, 28 July 2007

NEWS FROM ONS

100 YEARS OF THE UK CENSUS OF PRODUCTION

The paper by Stephen Penneck and Paul Smith on '100 years of the UK Census of Production' given to the RSS last November, (reported in **BSUG News 35**) was published in **Economic and Labour Market Review**, June 2007.

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Sir Michael Scholar (currently president of St John's College, Oxford, and formerly permanent secretary of the DTI and the Welsh Office) has been appointed as Chair of the new Board (ratified by the House of Commons after the first ever confirmation hearing by a select committee³ following the changes announced recently) and will start work in September.

The House of Commons Treasury Select Sub-committee⁴ also called for a rethink on the ONS relocation programme to Newport and criticised the combination of pressures that the ONS was working under.

The next stage during 2007 will include the recruitment and appointment of the other (at least five) non-executive members of the Board. And the Statistics Commission will complete its programme early in 2008, which will include offering advice, based on its experience, to the Board.

NEWS FROM HMRC

Consultation on proposed changes to the Intrastat Survey

HM Revenue & Customs is seeking the views of both data providers and users on various Intrastat Simplification options that are being considered, which are:

1. *reducing the volume of trade on which data must be collected from the current level of 97 per cent of value to 95 per cent;*
2. *reducing the volume of trade on which data must be collected from the current level of 97 per cent of value to 90 per cent;*
3. *implementation of a Single Flow system in which each Member State would collect data for one trade flow only (arrivals or dispatches) and then exchange this with other EU statistical agencies. This option may require currently exempt traders to start submitting Intrastat declarations.*

The Government is committed to reducing the burdens on business, but in considering the impact of the various simplification options it is important to try to balance the demands made on data providers with the needs of users. This is why HMRC is launching a consultation to find out the views of data providers and users on the various simplification options for the Intrastat survey, used to collect statistics on trade-in-goods between EU Member States.

Responses will be considered part of the process to agree a UK Government view on the preferred option(s) and negotiating strategy ready for EU discussions to deliver burden-reducing changes to the Intrastat EC legislation as called for by heads and finance ministers of all EU Member States.

How to get involved

The consultation document, which can be found online in the 'News' section at www.uktradeinfo.com, details the various options, any issues related to them and contains consultation questions. You will be able to access the questionnaire from the consultation document.

The closing date for this consultation is 18 September 2007.

Completed questionnaires, comments and further questions can be sent:

by email to uktradeinfo@hmrc.gsi.gov.uk

by post to uktradeinfo Customer Services, Corporate Business intelligence, HM Revenue & Customs, Alexander House, 21 Victoria Avenue, Southend-on-Sea, SS99 1AA

or by fax to 01702 367331

1 The full text of the Act can be found at http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2007/ukpga_20070018_en.pdf

2 Acknowledgement with thanks to Jill Leyland for a summary prepared for the SBE, of which this is an edited version.

3 The Treasury Committee's Ninth Report 2006-2007 **The appointment of the Chairman of the Statistics Board**, including minutes of its Q&A with the recommended candidate.

4 The Treasury Committee's Eighth Report 2006-2007 **The Efficiency Programme in the Chancellor's Departments**, (which includes ONS), Vol.I. Oral and written evidence, Vol. II.

FRUSTRATED USERS WHO SEEK OFFICIAL DATA

The Statistics Commission followed up its March report on **The Use Made of Official Statistics** (No.33) reviewed in **BSUG News 36**, by publishing in June Report No.34, **Data on Demand – Access to Official Statistics**, which should be of vital interest to users.

Although official statistics have long been available in published hard-copy formats to satisfy a healthy appetite for them, the existence and development of the Internet has exponentially increased opportunities to access them. This results in a need to make the access experience as easy and rewarding as possible, with its consequent associated requirement for good and effective website design aimed at both novice and experienced users. "Meeting users' needs is not just a case of putting the information on a website as facsimiles of paper pages."

Accessibility has been a recurrent theme in earlier Commission reports and on this occasion the objective was to "find out how easy it was for non-subject experts to find specific statistical information on the Web, and to review how well the producers of official statistics are responding to the opportunities of the web format. Following a review of literature in the decade to 2006-7, and an internal pilot study to test the feasibility and usefulness of the approach, Ipsos MORI were asked to undertake a 'mystery shopping' survey with some follow-up focus groups using some of the participants to explore their experience.

Some of the findings

Respondents were asked to find a list of specific items of information incorporated in a list of 20 questions grouped by National Statistics theme. Respondents were randomly allocated Google or DirectGov as starting point-sites for their searches. Each took the form of either tracking data (how did this compare with five years ago?), comparative data (across Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland) or increasingly detailed data. Average time taken to find target information was about 15 minutes, with a range of 8 to 26 minutes. Google searches averaged 33 page views, those started from the DirectGov site averaged 39 page views. Google was much the easiest route to finding information for both experienced and inexperienced searchers. Fewer than half the experienced ones found it easy, only a third of the inexperienced ones did so. Knowing which government site would contain the sought-after data was an initial problem; another was the limitations of search engines on sites.

There was widespread dissatisfaction with aspects of presentation, for example data embedded in large text files such as PDFs. What was wanted was 'easy-to-read' charts, bullet points summarising key trends and small tables with headline figures; in other words products tailored for use on screen with a facility for data manipulation, not digitised reproductions of paper products.

Though all eight departments¹ producing the bulk of statistics aimed to base their outputs on the relevant standards of the National Statistics Code of Practice (assessed as the Protocols on Data Presentation and Pricing, Quality Management, and Customer Service and User Consultation), none of them had a separate and distinct policy on dissemination; indeed there seemed to be considerable variation in their approaches and they have shown "limited ambition in responding to the medium."

Other conclusions (space limitations preclude fuller treatment here) resulted in the following recommended principles which emerged as a result of the work undertaken in preparing this report:

1. Statistics are collected to be used and as wide a use of them as is possible should be encouraged, including the re-use of raw data for research outside government.
2. UK government statisticians should adopt an exploratory and experimental approach to dissemination and access to statistical data through the Internet.
3. Government departments that publish official statistics should:
 - a. seek the full involvement of other web professionals in the presentation of statistical data on their websites.
 - b. recognise that web design and web culture are still developing and should set up an appropriate mechanism to keep accessibility issues under review.
4. User needs, interests and capabilities should determine the design and operation of statistical dissemination over the Internet.
5. Statistical products should be specifically designed for the Web.
6. Data should be presented in a layered or hierarchical way to allow users to drill down to the level of detail they desire.
7. There should be one point of entry – a government statistics portal – giving access to official statistics across the government and those of the devolved authorities.

The report is accessible on the Commission's website: statscom.org.uk

¹ Education & Skills, Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, Health, Transport, Work & Pensions, Home Office, ONS, Scottish Executive.



Statistics Commission

NEWS FROM ONS

USER SATISFACTION SURVEY

ONS conducted a user satisfaction survey in July/August 2007 to contribute to an assessment of its compliance with the European Statistics Code of Practice.

Questions asked included: which statistics are used regularly, where they are obtained, purposes for which they are used, which ones are used for comparisons with other countries, soundness and appropriateness of the methodology, accuracy, timeliness, release dates calendar and adherence thereto, information on revisions, ease of accessibility, easy-to-understand presentation, quality, both absolute and compared to other European countries, and suggestions for improvement. The results should make interesting reading; and improvement?

BOOK REVIEW

THE ONS PRODUCTIVITY HANDBOOK, A STATISTICAL OVERVIEW AND GUIDE

The ONS Productivity Handbook. A Statistical Overview and Guide. Dawn Camus, ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. xv + 191 pages, £55.00. (Also available free at the National Statistics website: www.statistics.gov.uk)

This collection of thirteen chapters by authors from ONS, DTI (as was), OECD and QMC is a comprehensive description of the huge variety of UK data which are collected, processed and presented both as separate series and derived compilations such as National Accounts and measures of productivity. There is also a peep at international comparisons. Each chapter lists references to enable the pursuit of even more detailed examination of the subject matter.

Topics covered are: productivity: framework, theory and drivers; output measures: National Accounts; input measures: labour and capital; quality adjustment; productivity - whole economy and multi-factor; market sector, services and industry; public service; micro (firm level); regional; and the way forward. A number of the detailed subjects have been briefly reported as they emerged in past issues of **BSUG News** eg the Allsopp and Atkinson Reviews, the creation of UKCeMGA, the development of various indices of service sector activities, Input-Output Supply and Use Tables. This publication brings them all together within one cover and evaluates the results to date.

Reading through this densely documented text, illustrated with 24 tables, 37 figures and 39 'boxes', one is immensely impressed not only by the range of techniques and the sheer volume of statistical resources now publicly available – key users are specifically identified as HMT, Bank of

England, DTI, DWP, DfES, regional government, Eurostat, OECD and others, with private sector analysts bringing up in the rear – but also by the authors' self-criticism which recognises in every chapter how much more work needs to be done to refine and improve what is currently on offer. Progress in some areas is described as difficult or challenging, where achievement of results is likely to be slow; other areas just need time and effort, for example, to bring data on services to a state similar to those on industry. Perhaps some reference to measured quality of data might have been helpful but no doubt more will be forthcoming on this topic once the assessment function of the new Statistics Board materialises. The book makes a major claim that the UK is in the forefront of many of the developments described; one wonders about the implication for comparable (or perhaps more often, non-comparable) equivalent statistics in many other countries. After all, one of the purposes of measuring productivity is to locate the UK's position in the international pecking order, or to be realistic – on a greasy pole.

This is a 'travel guide' to the terrain, which it is advisable initially to read in its entirety to obtain an understanding from the overview, but thereafter it should be kept handy for closer study of the finer points when dealing with specific smaller areas or series.

"What exactly does an economist produce?" is an arresting question posed on page 103. One answer may be: this book.

Tied in with the publication of the **Handbook** is the simultaneous issue of the July edition of **Economic and Labour Market Review** containing articles on related aspects of productivity.

Ulric Spencer

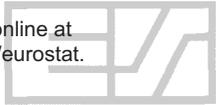
NEWS FROM EUROSTAT

STATISTICS DISSEMINATION IN MEMBER STATES

The 27 articles in the Eurostat Bulletin, **Sigma** (issue 01, 2007), cast their net widely, not just within Europe but also across several international organisations – UN, World Bank, OECD, Mercosur, Comesa, WAEMU, CIS. The overall theme is 'Building bridges: focus on international statistical cooperation.'

The keynote article by Eurostat's Director-General, Hervé Carré, refers to "the new European Statistical Governance Advisory Body and the new CEIES, the European Advisory Committee on Community Statistical Information Policy." The former will be five "experts possessing outstanding competence in the field of statistics, with Eurostat having an observer." It will produce an annual report on the implementation of the code of practice and will be involved in the process leading to a quality label for European official statistics, a kind of *appellation d'origine contrôlée*. The latter will be reconstituted from 79 to 25 members coming from "civil society, such as representatives of universities and scientific institutions and institutional users of statistics, eg the European Parliament and the Council. It is designed to serve a more strategic role in the development of policies, with the majority of members being real users, compared to a majority of national producers in the previous body. It is intended that it should ensure that user requirements and the burden on information providers and producers are taken into account.

Sigma is available free from Eurostat Communication Unit, Bech A4/112, L-2920 Luxembourg or eurostat-pressoffice@ec.europa.eu.

It is also viewable online at  <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>.

FUTURE SBE MEETINGS

Tuesday 11 September 2007

HM Treasury, 1 Horse Guards Road (6.0pm)
**BRICs AND THE GLOBALISATION
OF FINANCE#**

Special Lecture in memory of David Walton
JIM O'NEILL,
Head of Global Research, Goldman Sachs

Tuesday 9 October 2007

CIPFA, 3 Robert Street, London WC2 (6.0pm)
CHINA AND THE WORLD ECONOMY
ANDREW GLYN,

Tutor in Economics, Corpus Christi College, Oxford

All enquiries about attendance (#booking essential) or membership:
Society of Business Economists 01264 737552 or admin@sbe.co.uk

BSUG CONTACT ADDRESSES

CHAIRMAN: *Ian Maclean, MBE*
Email: ian@worldtradestats.com

SECRETARY: *Geoff Noon*
Email: gnoon@mta.org.uk

HON. TREASURER and GROUP
PUBLISHER: *John Cunningham*
Email: jacunningham@tiscali.co.uk

BSUG NEWS EDITOR: *Ulric Spencer*
Email: uspencer@silch.fsnet.co.uk

FINANCIAL SERVICES: *David Fleming*
Email: david.fleming@abs.eu.com

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