

Speech by Sir Michael Scholar at the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency conference, Limavaddy, 29 September 2008

Thank you, Norman. And thank you so much for inviting me to this year's Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency conference. It is clear to me from what I have seen and been told already that you have a very strong team and are rightly proud of your statistical output.

The title of this session, *UK Statistics: Quality, Trust and Governance*, goes very wide, but it neatly reflects the formal objectives placed on the UK Statistics Authority under last year's legislation; and I am delighted to have this opportunity to tell you about our thinking at an early stage in the life of the Authority.

Statistical production in Northern Ireland has a substantial and respected history. I mention this as the same cannot, yet, be said about the Statistics Authority, which is a mere infant by comparison. We are 5 months old, to be precise. As befits a well-behaved child, the Authority wants to listen, and learn, and to walk before it runs. So I, and colleagues, are here today to listen as well as to tell you about our plans.

One of the pleasures of my role as chair of the Authority is that it requires me to get out from behind my desk and meet a lot of people, hearing their views. This is an important part of my job. It keeps me realistic and focused on what people think are the priorities for the Authority and for the statistical service as a whole, of which NISRA is an important part.

As some of you will know one of my first visits after my appointment as shadow Chair a year ago was to Belfast, and I had a series of very useful and interesting meetings with NISRA people then.

I am currently visiting government departments and other bodies throughout the UK, hearing the views of Ministers, of Permanent Secretaries, and of statisticians in their own working environment. This month I have been to the Royal Statistical Society's annual conference in Nottingham, I have been to meet statisticians at HMRC in London, and I have been to the Information Centre for Health & Social Care in Leeds. Today's conference, in this very striking and beautiful setting, is another very welcome new experience.

We need to look further at how we will establish the dialogue between Northern Ireland's statisticians and the Authority for the future. The Authority is looking forward to holding one of its Board meetings in Belfast next year, and I am grateful to Norman in helping us to make arrangements for us to do that. We will want to take that opportunity to look jointly with you at whether the dialogue is working as *you* and *we* would wish.

Throughout my career, I have worked closely with colleagues in Northern Ireland, whether that was in Downing Street or the Treasury in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, or at the Welsh Office and then at the Department of Trade & Industry in the 1990s. I used to go regularly to Belfast and Edinburgh in the 1990s when I was Permanent Secretary of the Welsh Office: we used to say that we were going to "pick up some ideas from our Celtic cousins".

While all of us involved in the development of official statistics will work in our distinct areas of specialism, in different parts of the United Kingdom, reporting to different administrations, and bringing our unique perspectives to bear on the issues of the day, I do hope that the creation of the Statistics Authority will reinforce our sense of shared purpose.

With that in mind, I would like to say a few words about the role of the Authority. The *Statistics and Registration Service Act* gives us a clear statutory objective – to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that *serve the public good*. There are a lot of important ideas tied up in those last few words.

Let me have a go at fleshing out our thinking on this.

- The Authority must make sure that the *right statistics* are produced – that is those statistics that help users of our statistics understand our society and our economy; and also help informed decision-making across society.
- We must also make sure that the *highest professional standards* are maintained in the statistical work we undertake.
- And, we must make sure that the statistics we produce are *communicated intelligibly, clearly and as attractively* as possible to users and the wider public who need them.

If we do these things, then we are serving the public good and we will build trust in ourselves and our statistics over time. Of course, doing all of this is a huge challenge but we are already strong in some respects and we mustn't lose sight of that. I think Jil Matheson is going to expand on themes of quality, relevance and communication later on today.

The Northern Ireland statistical service has a very good track record in delivering objective and impartial statistics in a – sometimes – highly charged political environment. I think we will need to think hard whether there are lessons we can draw from this experience that might be relevant in Whitehall or the other devolved administrations.

Talking of independence and impartiality, I wanted to mention the Authority's new Publication Hub, with which some of you may already be familiar.

The Publication Hub is a "one-stop-shop" for users of statistics, helping them to find the statistics they need from one central place on the Web.

Our Publication Hub ensures that National Statistics are released separately from ministerial or policy comment and it is, therefore, a vital – and very visible – tool in establishing a genuinely independent statistical service.

The Publication Hub is a genuine example of cross-country co-ordination and co-operation, and I am very pleased that out of my conversations with Norman and colleagues last evening has come a joint determination to include Northern Ireland statistics on our Publication Hub. I am keen to work with you to progress this as quickly as we can.

I want to turn now to the Authority's two distinct roles as set out in the legislation.

Our *first* role is a scrutiny role – scrutiny over the UK statistical system. Or perhaps I should say ‘*systems*’ in the plural.

The UK statistical system is not really a single, unified entity and is not likely to become one – although we should, I believe, strive to protect and build-up those parts of it where a unified system is justified, and in fact necessary. Of course, the system is highly decentralised and the Northern Ireland system is one of several important pieces in this jigsaw.

I have heard from NISRA colleagues about the extent to which the Northern Ireland statistical service is, itself, also decentralised. While a lot of statistical work is carried out within the Department of Finance and Personnel, many of Northern Ireland’s vital social and economic statistics are produced in other bodies – for example, statistics on agriculture; culture, leisure and tourism; education and learning; enterprise, trade and investment; health and social services; policing; and urban regeneration and social development.

It is a similar picture in some of the other big producer bodies, and central to the Authority’s scrutiny role will be the monitoring of statistical work in all of the relevant organisations. By doing so, we will both help to improve the coherence and quality of the service, and build the confidence of users in that coherence and quality.

Scrutiny also involves the formal assessment of statistics against a Code of Practice that the Authority itself determines. Richard Alldritt, the Authority’s Head of Assessment, will be speaking about that in more detail in a moment.

The Authority’s *second* main role – which may have less day-to-day relevance to you but is nevertheless important to the management of the system as a whole – is our direct responsibility for the Office for National Statistics as the UK’s national statistical institute and producer of many important statistics.

These two roles give us a measure of practical authority in the eyes of the public, which is why my Board decided to adopt the name ‘UK Statistics Authority’. We are not seeking to usurp the formal authority of Ministers for the work of their civil servants but we do want to be seen as acting authoritatively across the entire statistical system.

Central to this practical authority is our formal accountability to the Westminster Parliament and, of course, to the Devolved Legislatures in Belfast, Edinburgh and Cardiff.

We greatly value parliamentary oversight of the Authority’s work, monitoring what we do against the statutory objectives given to us.

And it is right that the Parliaments take a close interest in our work, to ensure that the statistical system delivers statistics that are trusted and that serve the “public good”.

I would now like to say something about the way that user needs seem to straddle administrative boundaries. With that thought in mind, I might first say how important it is that Northern Ireland agreed to be part of the UK-wide arrangements under the *Statistics and Registration Service Act*.

Thinking back to that, I wanted to put on record my thanks to Norman and his colleagues for such crucial support at such an early stage in the passage of that legislation. Such an early commitment to the spirit of what we are now trying to achieve was enormously valuable.

In a sense, by signing up to the legislation you have shared a little bit of your independence in the public interest, and for the support that the rest of the system may be able to offer in terms of co-ordination and public reassurance. I am very conscious that there are obligations on both sides, and the Authority will do its best to meet your expectations of it.

The “four-country” environment is certainly a complex one in which to operate, if only because responsibility for many official statistics is treated as a devolved matter while other statistics covering the devolved administrations are the responsibility of one or more Whitehall department.

But even when we negotiate that issue of ownership, there are the complexities of user need. It is simply not the case that Northern Ireland’s statistical user just wants Northern Ireland statistics, or that there is no responsibility to users in other parts of the UK or internationally. We must look to the public good, and serve the users where it is going to help them do some good – wherever that may be geographically.

What users of statistics want – wherever they live – is a well-organised and co-ordinated statistical service that operates in the public interest across administrative boundaries.

It is our responsibility to have oversight of that service to ensure the needs of users are met to the greatest extent possible.

To help us deliver that, the Authority requires producers of statistics to work effectively *together* to ensure statistics meet the needs of users, to support decision-making on the ground, or individual choice.

I firmly believe – and I said the same at the Authority’s launch in Scotland a few months ago – there are no self-contained geographical or administrative boundaries in the world of official statistics.

While each administration must produce and publish the statistics it needs, the case for harmonisation, common standards, and cross-country co-operation must be examined with an open mind. The same applies at the European and wider international level.

But, while some users of statistics quite rightly argue for greater harmonisation, others continue to put a persuasive case for figures and statistical analysis that focus on local issues that are important to them. They want figures that are attuned to local circumstances.

The Authority needs to balance both cases to ensure that

- the decisions about what statistics are produced, take account of all user needs;
- that these statistics are produced to the highest professional standards; and,

- that statisticians communicate important statistical messages effectively in a way that supports the use of those statistics to deliver public benefit.

I look forward to continuing to work with you in helping the Authority deliver these important objectives.

Thank you once again for inviting me to speak to you today, and for giving me such a welcome opportunity to come back to Northern Ireland.