
Director General for Regulation

John Pullinger
National Statistician
UK Statistics Authority
(by email)

6 March 2019

Dear John,

NATIONAL STATISTICIAN'S RESPONSE TO OSR JOINING UP DATA REPORT

Thank you for your [response](#) to OSR's [Joining Up Data](#) report about data sharing and linkage across government. Your [work plan](#) sets out examples of initiatives that will help achieve our shared vision of analysts across government being empowered to make data linkage a core part of their efforts to innovate and improve official statistics production. However, there is still much work to do before this vision is realised. ONS occupies a unique position in the UK data landscape as the UK's national statistical institute, with important powers conferred by the Digital Economy Act 2017 (DEA), and new responsibilities to deliver via the Administrative Data Research Partnership. We expect ONS to use that position to take the lead on identifying ways to develop and deliver this vision in full collaboration with other departments and the devolved administrations.

The [case studies](#) you have developed highlight examples of linkage work already happening across government in all parts of the UK. The challenge now is to ensure that effective mechanisms exist to help share learning and ensure that good practice is replicated consistently and efficiently. The new [data linking](#) pages on the GSS website will help meet that challenge as they develop over time. We suggest you increase the prominence and reach of these resources beyond the GSS to enhance their impact.

We welcome the proposal for a cross-government data linking conference later in 2019. This is an excellent way to foster links between departments and different professional groups, and engage with external experts in this field.

There are some gaps in the response that we expect to see addressed in the future. For example, we convened a round table in February to discuss the role of public engagement in building trustworthiness around data use. Based on the discussion there we are confident that the second recommendation in our report must remain a priority for the statistical system: identify clear, consistent and meaningful language to use when engaging with the public about data safeguarding, linkage and use. Conversations with senior leaders across government have also reaffirmed our concerns about resourcing.

Our interest in this agenda continues. We are currently conducting our review of NHS Digital's data access processes. We are also developing new regulatory guidance about public engagement, which will include engagement activity around data use, and about the quality and methods information that should accompany official statistics based on linked data.

Despite the positives we can all point to, significant challenges remain. We share your disappointment that, even with the DEA in place, it has not yet been possible for data held by the DWP and HMRC to be shared with ONS. This is hindering the UK's ability to conduct analyses of important issues for society, such as migration. We support your continuing efforts to change this.

We plan to produce a one-year follow-up to Joining Up Data in autumn 2019 where we hope to be able to highlight progress on this and the various initiatives in your work plan.

Your sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Humpherson', written in a cursive style.

Ed Humpherson

Director General for Regulation