

UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY

Minutes

**Meeting of Friday 20 March 2009
Board Room, Statistics House, Newport**

Present

UK Statistics Authority

Sir Michael Scholar (Chair)

Professor Sir Roger Jowell (Deputy Chair, Official Statistics)

Lord Rowe-Beddoe (Deputy Chair, ONS)

Mr Richard Alldritt

Mr Partha Dasgupta

Ms Karen Dunnell

Ms Moira Gibb

Sir Alan Langlands

Mr Steve Newman

Professor Steve Nickell

Professor David Rhind

Secretariat

Mr Robert Bumpstead

Apologies

None

Other Attendees

Mr Ross Young (Secretariat, UK Statistics Authority) (Item 5)

1. Apologies

1.1 There were no apologies.

2. Declarations of interest

2.1 There were no declarations of interest.

3. Minutes and matters arising from the previous meeting

3.1 The minutes of the previous meeting held on 20 February 2009 were accepted as a true and fair account.

4. Reports from Committee Chairs

Audit Committee

4.1 Professor Rhind reported on the meeting of the Audit Committee held on 2 March, 2009. The Committee had considered reports from both the internal and external auditors on a range of topics, and had also considered a report from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) on development of its Information Technology (IT) systems. The risks posed by reliance on older IT systems were considered together with the programme of work to mitigate these risks.

Committee for Official Statistics (COS)

4.2 Professor Jowell reported on the meeting of the COS held on 10 March, 2009. The Committee has considered and agreed a draft Monitoring and Assessment Note on the recent ONS statistical release concerning foreign-born workers and a specification for the *Strengthening the User Voice* Monitoring Report. A draft interim *Migration Statistics* Monitoring report had also been considered and remitted to the Project Board.

4.3 The Authority considered the processes for finalising the content of outputs from the Monitoring and Assessment Team. A protocol formally specifying the appropriate roles of producers and assessors was in development.

Office for National Statistics (ONS) Board

4.4 Sir Alan Langlands reported on the meeting of the ONS Board held on 10 March, 2009. The Board had received a substantive paper on change activities taking place at ONS. Revised proposals would be considered in June, with particular reference to developing plans for communication and presentation of the work.

4.5 Other issues considered by the Board included implementation of arrangements for shared departmental IT services, the ONS property estate, and the Migration Statistics Improvement Work Programme.

5. UK Statistics Authority Press Office (SA(09)14)

5.1 Mr. Young introduced a paper which reviewed arrangements for the provision of retained press office services for the Authority and set out options for the future.

5.2 In March 2008 the Authority engaged the Central Office for Information (COI News and PR). COI had provided day-to-day press office support, and other media handling support activities.

5.3 The meeting considered the available options for future press office provision and agreed to re-engage COI for a further period of one year. The Authority also resolved to review alternative options in greater detail over the next six months, and develop further the specification of the full range of its communication needs.

6. Issues around Management Information

- 6.1 Ms. Dunnell provided the meeting with a progress report on the work of the Government Statistical Service (GSS) group which was developing guidelines intended to distinguish between official statistics and management information. A report was nearing completion.
- 6.2 The meeting considered the timeliness of the work, and its relevance to the work of the Monitoring and Assessment Team in particular. It was agreed that the group's findings would be considered by the Authority at the May meeting.

7. Any other business

- 7.1 There was no other business.
- 7.2 The meeting of the Authority continued with a strategy workshop. The Authority considered its progress in 2008/09, aims and objectives for the year ahead, roles and responsibilities of members of the Authority's Board, priorities and corporate governance.
- 7.3 The next meeting is on 17 April 2009

UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY

Agenda

Friday, 20 March, 2009

Board Room, Statistics House, Newport, 10:30 - 11:30

Chair: Sir Michael Scholar

Apologies:

1	Minutes and matters arising from previous meeting Declarations of interest page 1	Meeting of 200209
2	Reports from Committee Chairs	Professor Rhind Professor Jowell Lord Rowe-Beddoe
3	UK Statistics Authority Press Office page 5	SA(09)14 Mr Ross Young
4	Issues Around Management Information	Discussion Item
5	Any other business	

Next Meeting: Friday, 17 April, 2009
Statistics House, Newport, 11:15 - 15:00

UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY

SA(09)14

UK Statistics Authority Press Office

Purpose

1. This paper reviews current arrangements for the provision of retained press office services and sets out options for the future.

Timing

2. Pressing. The current contract expires on 31 March 2009. While an extension of the current contract can be negotiated, a decision on the future mechanism for the provision of press office services to the Authority is required.

Recommendations

3. Members of the UK Statistics Authority are invited to:
 - i. consider the options for the provision of press office services to the Authority;
 - ii. agree the recommendation to engage Central Office for Information (COI) News and PR (option 1 below) on a longer-term contract on revised terms;
 - iii. review the current services provided by the COI (Annex A);
 - iv. review the other communication-related activities (Annex B) managed by the Authority Secretariat and provide comment and suggestions for enhancement.

Discussion

4. In March 2008 the Authority engaged the Central Office for Information (COI News and PR) on a six-month contract. COI provided day-to-day reactive press office support, organisation and media handling of the Authority's launch events in London and Scotland, senior (Director-level) consultancy and advice on specific communication issues, and organisation and media handling for Authority-hosted Publication Hub events which took place in July and August 2008.
5. COI have considerable experience of working with independent and arms-length public bodies and they routinely support media handling for independent public inquiries (for example, the Food Standards Agency and the Sutherland and de Menezes inquiries). The rationale for engaging COI was to provide the Authority with independent external media handling and communication expertise, and to provide press office services distinct and visibly independent from those of the Office for National Statistics and its interests. The Authority and Office for National Statistics (ONS) press offices maintain regular contact to alert each other to issues of common interest and to refer media enquiries to be handled by the other party as appropriate.
6. The Authority re-engaged COI in September 2008 for a further six months.
7. Since June 2008 the contract with COI has been managed within the Authority Secretariat by the Head of Communications and Parliamentary Relations, and regular account review meetings are held. The Authority Secretariat and COI work in partnership. The Secretariat are primarily responsible for co-ordinating the drafting of News Releases and other Authority announcements, as well as reactive "lines to take" in response to media enquiries, routinely seeking the advice of COI professionals. The Authority Secretariat also co-ordinates COI in its provision of consultancy and advice to the Chair and non-executive members of the Authority, as required.

Option 1 - Re-engage COI News and PR on a longer-term contract on revised terms

8. COI have worked in partnership with the Authority since March 2008. Over time they have developed a good subject knowledge of the Authority's work and they have provided valuable advice and operational support. COI have demonstrated a strong capacity to handle large-scale, complex media events in a consistent and professional way, reducing the associated risks to the Authority. We believe they provide good value for money. They bring unrivalled expertise in working with public-sector bodies and arms-length organisations.
9. COI do not compete with alternative providers in competitive tender processes nor are they required to do so where the procurement of their services is sought by a Crown body.
10. COI have indicated that, were the Authority minded to re-engage their services, they would welcome longer contract security than has so far been provided in six-monthly renewable contracts. Contract security would enable COI to plan their own resources more effectively to maintain service delivery to the Authority. The re-engagement of COI would further give the Authority added certainty that the existing press office team, with whom good working relationships have been developed, would continue and be further enhanced to the benefit of both parties.
11. Initial discussions have identified that COI would provide ongoing press office, senior consultancy, and related media and communication services to the Authority. Provision has been made for additional support surrounding periods of intense media activity. The contract would retain existing levels of consultancy and press office support.
12. COI have an existing relationship to Government. They are formally attached to the Cabinet Office and they provide support to many Government Departments. Associated with this is the risk to the Authority that the re-engagement of COI would be perceived as being insufficiently independent of the government 'machine'. The nature of COI's work is that they are engaged with multiple clients - the Authority is not their sole customer. Effective day to day contract management is required.
13. These risks are not considered to outweigh the benefits of re-engaging COI on a longer-term contract on revised terms.

Option 2 - Undertake a competitive procurement process to select a provider of press office services

14. This option sets out what would be required from a competitive procurement exercise to select an alternative provider of press office services from the private sector.
15. The value of any contract is likely to exceed the EU procurement threshold. If the Authority were to undertake a competitive procurement exercise to select a provider of press office services, it would be necessary to undertake a formal EU Official Journal procurement exercise. This process is likely to take in excess of four months from advertisement to short-list, with a further two months for selection, contract preparation and signing, and start-up. It would therefore be necessary to re-engage COI for, at least, a further six months to ensure that press office support is maintained until an alternative supplier is in place. There would be significant additional costs in running a competitive EU-level procurement exercise.

16. Following selection it would be necessary for the Authority to spend considerable time working with the new provider to ensure they are fully able to respond on the Authority's behalf and to brief them on the Authority's work. It is likely that an alternative supplier would not have the range of public-sector experience that COI offers, nor the extensive contact base among journalists and other media involved in the reporting of social and economic issues, including statistics.
17. There is a risk to the Authority's reputation in selecting a private-sector supplier in that it may be perceived and reported as the Authority recruiting a "firm of media spin-doctors". We believe this risk to be significant. In deciding to undertake a competitive exercise in which COI would not itself compete, there is also a risk that the existing goodwill of COI will dissipate during any six-month extension of the contract.
18. For these reasons it is recommended that the Authority does not pursue this option.

Option 3 - Authority Secretariat to assume responsibility for provision of Authority press office services

19. This option sets out what would be required from the transfer of press office and related functions from COI to the Authority Secretariat.
20. The transfer of press office and related functions from COI to the Authority Secretariat requires the recruitment of additional and experienced staff to provide sufficient support and leave cover to maintain the level of existing press office support. This option presents several significant challenges:
 - there is no guarantee that new recruits would bring with them the level of experience or contact base that is required;
 - the current volume of press office and consultancy support is spasmodic meaning the retention of dedicated press office support staff would not deliver best value for money or efficiency, and;
 - dedicated senior-level consultancy and communications is likely to cease.
21. For these reasons it is recommended that the Authority does not pursue this option.

Option 4 - ONS Press Office to assume responsibility for provision of Authority press office services

22. This option considers the transfer of press office and related functions from COI to the Communications Division of the Office for National Statistics, specifically the ONS press office.
23. The transfer of press office functions to ONS is inconsistent with the Authority's scrutiny role being independent of the ONS.
24. The transfer of services to ONS is likely to require ONS to recruit additional experienced staff to provide sufficient support and leave cover to maintain the level of existing press office support to the Authority. There is no guarantee that new recruits would bring with them the level of experience or contact base that is required. Alternatively, to commit existing ONS press office staff to provide support to the Authority within current resources would require a reduction of press office support deliverable within ONS.
25. This option therefore presents significant risks, including:
 - transfer of press office services to the ONS is likely to be perceived and reported as being insufficiently independent from the ONS and the interests it

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represents;

- it would not be possible for a press officer to respond effectively to an enquiry which required an Authority response while simultaneously being required to provide an ONS response, particularly where the Authority response was itself critical of the ONS;
- integration of Authority and ONS press office support would require routine balancing of the day-to-day operational requirements of both parties, posing difficulties where sudden and unexpected media interest in the Authority is experienced at the cost of ONS press office support;
- the spasmodic nature of media interest in the Authority's work means that a retained resource does not deliver best value for money, and where support is not required it would provide a degree of cross-subsidy to ONS beyond current budgetary plans, and;
- dedicated senior-level consultancy and communications advice could not be guaranteed.

26. For these reasons it is recommended that the Authority does not pursue this option.

Ross Young, Head of Communications & Parliamentary Relations
March 2009

List of Annexes

Annex A Press office and media consultancy services to the UK Statistics Authority provided by COI News and PR

Annex B Other communication-related activities supervised by the UK Statistics Authority Secretariat

Annex A Press office and media consultancy services to the UK Statistics Authority provided by COI News and PR

The COI News and PR team who provide support to the UK Statistics Authority are:

- Neil Martinson (Director, COI News and PR)
- Emma Thwaites (Associate Director)
- David Mencer (Senior Consultant)
- Suzanne Halls (Consultant)
- Mark Fenwick (Information Officer)

The core services provided to the UK Statistics Authority by COI News and PR are:

1. In partnership with the Authority Secretariat, to act as a central contact point for media relations and liaising with media professionals as required. Advise directly when the Authority is asked to comment. Assist in answering reactive media enquiries.
2. Maintain a watching brief of the UK Statistics Authority and statistics-related issues in order to alert and advise the Authority accordingly
3. Provide assistance and coaching to the Authority Chair and other spokespersons for the Authority
4. Advise on presentational issues, for example News Releases and other announcements, reviewing and advising on "lines to take".
5. Identify opportunities for pro-active engagement with the media, and manage related media handling.

Annex B Other communication-related activities supervised by the UK Statistics Authority Secretariat

1. **Authority public enquiry telephone line** (0845 604 1857) - this service is run under contract to the Authority by the National Statistics Customer Contact Centre (NSCCC) based at ONS in Newport. The Authority enquiry line is answered by NSCCC operators using a dedicated enquiry handling routine such that callers understand they are speaking to a representative of the UK Statistics Authority staff. Enquiries are handled by NSCCC operators or referred to Authority Secretariat. Media enquiries are referred to the Head of Communications and Parliamentary Relations and COI News & PR, as appropriate.
2. **Authority email central enquiry point** (authority.enquiries@statistics.gsi.gov.uk) - incoming emails managed by Authority Secretariat and referred to Authority Secretariat or Monitoring and Assessment Team, or referred to ONS Private Office or National Statistics Customer Contact Centre, as appropriate. Immediate acknowledgement provided. Response target time is 10 working days. Freedom of Information Act requests handled separately - liaison between Authority Secretariat and ONS FoI team.
3. **Authority consultations email** (authority.consultations@statistics.gsi.gov.uk) - email service for handling responses to Authority consultations. Used extensively for Code of Practice consultation. This service is also used for seeking and handling feedback to Authority monitoring reports, for example the interim report on *Improving Migration Statistics*.
4. **Authority assessments email** (assessment@statistics.gsi.gov.uk) - email service for seeking and handling feedback to Authority assessments against the Code of Practice. Service supervised by Monitoring and Assessment team.
5. **Press cuttings service** - daily press cuttings service provided on contract to ONS Communications Division by Durrants, and passed on to Authority. Additional "keywords" added in June 2008 to seek to widen coverage to newspaper stories of specific interest to the Authority (for example, "Statistics Authority", "Sir Michael Scholar", "Code of Practice", "public trust/confidence in statistics"). Authority Secretariat currently reviewing service provided.
6. **Parliamentary monitoring** - services provided on contract to the Authority Secretariat by DeHavilland include monitoring and alerting of business in the UK Parliament and devolved legislatures, with a particular focus on statistics-related issues. Monitoring of debate contributions, parliamentary questions (written and oral), secondary legislation (e.g. pre-release access, official statistics, and data-sharing Orders), committee oral evidence sessions, reports and recommendations. Separate contract with TSO for provision of hardcopy UK Parliament Hansard and business papers.
7. **Stakeholder and contact management** - maintenance of database systems with records of individual stakeholders and influential voices, (e.g. respondents to consultations, politicians, academics, statistical user groups, journalists, international contacts, individual correspondents with the Authority). Database used to provide contact lists and sub-samples for the purposes of consultation, feedback, and encouraging the "user voice".