

**Speech by Sir Michael Scholar to the Royal Statistical Society
Official Statistics Section, 10 April 2008**

Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me to speak to you at such an early stage in the life of the UK Statistics Authority. To address the members of the Royal Statistical Society is a privilege and an important landmark in the life of the Authority.

I was very keen to speak to you at an early stage, to share with you my developing thinking about what the Authority will seek to do as we begin our operations in earnest; and about the manner in which we intend to go about our task.

I should preface my comments today by saying that these are early days indeed. The Authority has met in shadow form on three occasions, and, while we have already taken some important decisions, we are yet to meet formally as the body responsible for UK official statistics and will not do so until next week.

I would like to speak first about the high level goals and objectives for the UK Statistics Authority, about what some would call my Vision for the Authority. I am fortunate to have received a great deal of advice, which I value, about the direction the Authority should take. This advice came from a number of people who have had a much longer or deeper histories in statistics than I have had. These include both the current and previous Presidents of the Royal Statistical Society, representatives of the Statistics Users Forum, representatives of the Local Government Association, professional statisticians within the Government Statistical Service, members of the outgoing Statistics Commission; as well as advice from, and discussions with, members of both Houses of Parliament and the devolved Administrations.

The centrepiece of the Authority's vision will, I am sure, come as no great surprise to you. The central task of the Authority must be to raise the level of public trust in official statistics from its current low level in the UK.

More work must be done – by the Authority - to establish the reasons for this trust deficit. In so doing we will wish to build upon the existing body of work on this complex matter and certainly to draw upon the ideas articulated to the Society last November by Professor Tim Holt in his wide-ranging and thought provoking Presidential Address.

However, it is widely – and, I think, correctly – believed that an important cause of this mistrust is the perception - in the great majority of cases an unwarranted perception - that there is political influence in both the presentation and in the production of official statistics; and that there is insufficient distance between these statistics and the political commentary that so often accompanies them.

In the face of all this I decided that it was essential to do something in substance to begin the attack on this perception from day one of the Authority's formal existence. I was therefore very pleased that we were able to make enough early progress to ensure that from 1st April, all new National Statistics releases were available on the internet, from 9:30 onwards, through our new publication hub, which takes users direct to the statistics published by professional statisticians, without encountering en route any political commentary or announcement provided by Ministers or political advisers or their staff.

It is my ambition that the Authority should go much further in this regard, moving towards a position where all National Statistics are available directly from the Authority's website on the day of release, produced to a common and exacting

standard, and with a common look and feel. I see this as an essential component of our programme to establish a strong National Statistics brand that will be recognised by professionals and the public alike, and which will come, over time, to be widely associated with the highest professional standards and trusted statistical products.

This, however, is only one part of the equation. It is not enough only to deal with the perception. We need to deal, above all, with the reality. It is odd that it is necessary to say this; a sign of the times. So official statistics must be fully worthy of the higher level of trust we seek to achieve. The second part of our Vision is, therefore, that we will seek to ensure that the quality of official statistics is of a sufficiently high standard to warrant public trust; and where this is not the case, we will be firm in our dealings with Departments, and in reporting any deficiencies to Parliament, and in suggesting the steps needed to improve the situation.

In my view the Authority will need to promote quality in a broad sense, not least from the perspective of the users of statistics. Our principal instrument for bringing this about will be our Assessment and (National Statistics) Designation function, as envisaged by the Act. It will need to be a powerful operation, well-designed and well-executed, systematic and rigorous. It will also need to be supported by robust Parliamentary oversight.

The Head of Assessment will be a key appointment in ensuring this function works effectively. We have this morning interviewed candidates for the position and expect to make an announcement about this crucial appointment in the next couple of weeks.

Looking beyond Assessment and Designation, I believe there is also an urgent need for an overview of the official statistics system in its totality – a point powerfully made by the Statistics Commission and, I note, one of the central principles underpinning many of their excellent reports.

We must consider whether the system as a whole, and not only the component parts, serve the public good. To this end, the Authority will wish to look closely at the planning, coherence and resourcing of the whole of the official statistics system – an ambition which I know is shared by the National Statistician. The Authority will work with her to address these challenges.

The Authority will also wish to bring about improvements in the communication of statistical information. We need to make statistics more readily and more widely accessible, and to present them in ways which meet the needs of both professional and lay users.

I do not pretend that these are straightforward tasks, or that our ambition is one which can be delivered in weeks, months or even the four years which I will serve as Chair of the Authority. But this is a battle that needs to be fought if we are to make progress.

It is no accident that when we were choosing a name for the new body we selected the name UK Statistics Authority. I strongly believe that in order to achieve our Vision, we must be authoritative, we must have an authority in the eyes of all with whom we deal, be they users, official or outside officialdom, or the public at large, or those in the media who will shape public perceptions of both the Authority and of official statistics.

I believe that we ought to have this authority because we will be, and we will be perceived to be, wholly independent. We are an independent body by statute, supported by all parties in both Houses of Parliament and in all the devolved Administrations. And just look at the names we have assembled as non-executive members of the Authority. Why should such people be anything but wholly independent? And if you will forgive a personal note – just look at me: I have taken this Chairmanship as my last post in the public service. I will serve until the end of my term of office in August 2011. I will not seek a further term of office. So you should know that I seek no favour from the Government, and I hope you will read my actions against that background.

The Authority must act in ways which are considered, measured and deliberate. This is the advice I have received about the need to bring these qualities to our public face and communications: no spin, no attention-seeking; even, as one serious commentator said to me, no bullshit.

My view is that the Authority should not be just another voice offering its opinions, as the media require, about the issues which arise from day to day in official statistics. The Authority should not blow the whistle every time there is a misuse of official statistics. We will sometimes need to do so, and when we need to, we will do so, without fear or favour. My preference will be to speak with the full weight of the Authority behind me – after all, the Authority with its eight highly-independent non-executive members, must earn its keep. That will involve a delay, in most cases, in its response. But sometimes it may be that an immediate rebuttal will be needed, where the integrity of our statistics, or our statisticians, is being undermined.

Nevertheless, the Authority's success will be measured by its achievements in rebuilding trust and improving the quality of official statistics, not by column inches or successful sound bites.

The Authority will also put a premium on transparency. If we are to be trusted, our decisions and opinions must be open to inspection, so that they can be seen to be well-founded. For this reason, the Authority has already agreed that we will publish the minutes of our meetings in addition to the papers we have discussed.

We will also value persistence. Independence is not a one-off event which happened at the launch on 1st April. Our ambition to increase trust is a long-term project.

Two immediate examples exist where we will need to continue to apply pressure. First in regard to pre-release access, where the Authority's view that access should be reduced to three hours or less seems unlikely to move the government immediately from its position of 24 hours. Secondly, in relation to Parliamentary oversight, as many of you know, I agree with those in both Houses of Parliament who think that the Authority would be more effective if Official Statistics had their own dedicated Parliamentary committee, preferably a joint committee of both Houses. It appears to me that Parliament will not, for a variety of reasons, agree to this request. The Government seems to have set its face against it.

In these areas, as well as others where we do not immediately achieve our ambitions we will persist and I welcome Professor David Hands' recent supportive comments in this regard.

To turn this vision into reality, the Authority cannot work alone, so I would like to turn briefly to what stakeholders can expect of the Authority. I have been asked on several occasions how the Authority intends to engage with its stakeholders. The

Authority has had an initial discussion on this issue, and we will return to the matter again in forthcoming meetings. I hope I do not need to convince anyone that we will take very seriously the interests of our stakeholders, in particular the users and suppliers of statistics: and that we will listen very attentively to what the users of statistics say to us, whether they are part of officialdom or whether they are not.

Some have suggested that the Authority should set up a committee to deal with its engagement with the users of statistics. I feel that this would be a mistake, just as it would be a mistake to set up a committee to deal with Assessment, or with trust. These are matters of such weight as to require the undivided attention of the Authority as a whole. They cannot, and should not be, delegated. I have, however, made one move in this direction. I have asked the non-Executive members of the Authority to consider whether each of them would act as a champion for a particular group of stakeholders. In doing so, the Authority will have members who will become highly attuned to the interests and concerns of particular stakeholders, or groups of stakeholders, who can alert other Authority members to these concerns, thereby helping ensure that the views of stakeholders are fully taken into account in the decisions we make.

It is a painful truth, but an obvious truth, that not every decision or position taken by the Authority will be popular. For example, for us, as for everyone, resource constraints mean that trade-offs will be necessary. We know that this universally understood position will not prevent us from becoming unpopular, certainly on specific issues. However, by pursuing our policy of transparency, the Authority will make it clear where such trade-offs exist and why particular conclusions are reached. While you may not always like our position, I would hope that you will be able to see that the decision was properly considered and, I hope, firmly based.

Furthermore it is my intention to have at least one open meeting, perhaps an Annual General Meeting of the Authority each year, to which all our stakeholders would be invited.

So far my comments have been about what you can expect from the Authority. We – all of us in this room – are a part of the official statistics system of the United Kingdom, whether as producers, suppliers or users. All of you, through the way you communicate with your colleagues and peers or the public statements you make, influence the way in which official statistics are perceived and consequently the extent to which they are trusted.

The principles I have sketched out today represent work in progress for the Authority and they will be developed further over the coming months. I believe that they are fundamental principles, both to permit the Authority to fulfil its role, and also to provide the foundations for those who are part of the wider official statistics system to become advocates for the quality and trustworthiness of UK official statistics; and also to become partners and active lobbyists in pursuit of the changes necessary to bring about the improvements to official statistics that will benefit us all.

I thank you again for inviting me this afternoon.