

Witness Name: Professor Sir Ian Diamond

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UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF PROFESSOR SIR IAN DIAMOND

I, Professor Sir Ian Diamond, Chief Executive of the UK Statistics Authority and National Statistician, will say as follows:

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The role of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in collecting and analysing statistics and data regarding the UK economy

1. The UK Statistics Authority (the Authority) is an independent statutory body established under the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 ('the 2007 Act'). It operates at arm's length from government as a non-ministerial department and reports directly to the UK Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly. The 2007 Act formally transferred departmental sponsorship from His Majesty's Treasury (HMT) to the Cabinet Office.
2. The 2007 Act established the Statistics Board as a body corporate (see section 1(1)). The 2007 Act also provided that there should be a National Statistician appointed by the Crown as an officer of the Board (see section 5). The National Statistician is the Chief Executive of the Board (see section 31).
3. The Board has adopted standing orders ('the standing orders'). The standing orders explain (at ¶1) that:
The Act created a 'Statistics Board' but by resolution at its first meeting on 2 February 2008 the Board agreed that it would operate under the name of the 'UK Statistics Authority'.
4. The 2007 Act sets out the Authority's objective as promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good (see section 7 (1)). The public good includes *informing the public about social and economic matters*.
5. In practice, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) operates as the Authority's statistical production function. The ONS is the UK's internationally recognised National Statistical Institute (NSI) and largest producer of official statistics in the UK. The ONS is responsible for collecting and publishing statistics related to the economy, population and society at national, regional and local levels. It is the work of the ONS that I will, unless stated otherwise, be referring to in this statement.
6. Economic statistics and analysis are incredibly broad. NR in his review of economic statistics in 2016, defined an economic statistic as: "*any piece of quantitative information that is valuable to either the public or private sector for the analysis of a relevant economic issue.*" (ID11/01)[INQ000130444]
7. The ONS is the major producer of economic statistics in the UK, with the main economic statistics (such as the National Accounts, labour market, prices, trade and public sector finances) produced almost exclusively by the ONS. The sources of such statistics are mainly surveys of businesses and households, although there is increasing use of administrative data from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs

(HMRC) and Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Administrative data refers to data that people and businesses have already provided to government, for example, in the course of accessing public services.

8. The construction of many economic statistics is in line with internationally agreed statistical guidance, such as the UN System of National Accounts (SNA).

Key ONS officials and structures relating to economic statistics

9. I, as the National Statistician (October 2019 – present), am Chief Executive of the Authority, Head of the Government Statistical Service (GSS) and Analysis Function. I provide overall leadership for the ONS and the statistics profession across government. I advise ministers, the Cabinet Secretary and senior officials on the production, dissemination and use of statistics across government. I am responsible for the work of our department and provide direction to ensure we deliver on our strategy 'Statistics for the Public Good'.
10. I am supported by three Deputy National Statisticians. The post of Deputy National Statistician and Director General for Economic, Social and Environmental Statistics (ESEG) was most recently held by Mike Keoghan (January 2022- March 2025). This post is responsible for ensuring the ONS continues to produce the UK's most important statistics about the economy and society, expanding our work on the environment and driving the transformation of economic statistics. Under the ESEG umbrella sits the National Accounts (including Gross Domestic Product (GDP)), labour market, trade, public sector finances, prices, crime, subnational data and environment statistics, as well as the Data Science Campus.
11. Jonathan Athow was Deputy National Statistician for Economic Statistics (now ESEG) from June 2015 to October 2021; he was replaced by Mike Keoghan.
12. I was also supported by the Second Permanent Secretary and Deputy Chief Executive Sam Beckett (September 2020 – May 2023). In assisting with the overall leadership of the ONS, Sam had responsibility for economic statistics. This post was not retained after Sam was appointed Chief Economic Adviser to the Treasury in 2023.
13. Within all formulations of the economic statistics/ESEG group, there have been two core directorates: Macroeconomic Statistics and Analysis (MSA) and Economic Statistics Production and Analysis (ESPA) (to note that until April 2021 ESPA directorate was known as Economic Statistics Development).
14. In February 2021, the Public Policy Analysis (PPA) directorate moved to economic statistics, creating ESEG. In March 2021 the Economic Statistics Change (ESC) directorate was created, incorporating part of the economic statistics development

directorates responsible for transformation and reflecting priorities of the Ambitious, Radical, Inclusive Economic Statistics (ARIES) programme. In March 2022, the Data Science Campus (DSC) joined ESEG.

15. At time of writing and since March 2022, ESEG has five directorates. These are listed below, along with the Directors of each covering January 2020 to present. It is also showcased in an organogram exhibited to the inquiry (ID11/02)[INQ000590492]

- a. Macroeconomic and Environment Statistics and Analysis (MESA)
 - i. Grant Fitzner (November 2018-present); he was also responsible for initial co-ordination of the ONS's Covid-19 response from March 2020 (before the implementation of long-term organisational changes required, detailed at paragraph 53).
- b. Economic Statistics Production and Analysis (ESPA)
 - i. Liz McKeown (January 2024-present)
 - ii. Darren Morgan (April 2019 -January 2024) (until April 2021 the directorate was known as Economic Statistics Development)
- c. Public Policy Analysis (PPA) (since February 2021)
 - i. Jen Woolford (February 2024 – present)
 - ii. Liz McKeown (June 2018- December 2023)
- d. Economic Statistics Change (ESC) (since March 2021)
 - i. NR (September 2022- present)
 - ii. Donna Leong (March 2021- May 2022)
- e. Data Science Campus (DSC) (since March 2022)
 - i. Osama Rahman (September 2022- present)
 - ii. NR (April 2022-August 2022)
 - iii. Tom Smith (January 2017-March 2022)

16. The core responsibilities of each directorate are as follows:

- a. MESA produces a wide range of UK economic statistics, including trade, balance of payments, foreign direct investment, public sector finance, productivity and consumer, producer and housing prices. It is also responsible for economic microdata, real time indicator development, deflator development, and external engagement including research partnerships and capability-building activity. Divisions within the directorate are:
 - i. Prices
 - ii. Public Sector
 - iii. Global Trade & Investment

- iv. Well-being, Investment and Productivity (previously known as Productivity, Investment and Research)
 - v. Economic and Microdata Insights (from June 2022)
 - vi. Environment (moved from PPA in June 2022)
 - vii. Public Services Productivity Review (set up in line with 12 June 2023 announcement by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer)
- b. ESPA produce a wide range of UK economic statistics, including on the labour market, National Accounts (which includes GDP), monthly output of the service, production, construction and retail sectors, quarterly household expenditure and household income estimates, sub-national estimates of GDP, household income and household expenditure, real time indicators including the Business Insight and Conditions Survey (BICS) and data on the UK financial services industry. It is also responsible for large structural surveys conducted by the ONS, including the Annual Business Survey, Annual Purchases Survey, UK Manufacturers' Sales by Product (PRODCOM) and the Annual Survey of Goods & Services (ASHE). Divisions within the directorate are:
- i. National Accounts Coordination
 - ii. Labour Market & Households
 - iii. Surveys and Economic Indicators
 - iv. Financial Sector Accounts & Corporations (set up in June 2022)
- c. PPA is responsible for ensuring policy-makers and the public have the statistics and analysis they need for better formulation and evaluation of public policy. This includes crime statistics analysis, analysis on household income, consumption and wealth, estimates from the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN), measures of national well-being, insights on sub-national geographies and statistics on household finances and housing affordability. Divisions within the directorate are:
- i. Crime statistics
 - ii. Analytical Hub
 - iii. Sub-national Statistics & Analysis (moved from PPA in April 2022)
 - iv. ONS Local (set up in May 2022)
 - v. Household Resilience (set up August 2024)
- d. ESC drives forward economic statistics transformation working with teams within ESEG and the broader ONS. Divisions within the directorate are:
- i. Development Delivery & Support

- ii. Business Statistics Transformation
 - iii. Delivering ESEG Change and Strategy
 - iv. Labour Market Transformation (was Economic Statistics Transformation Support, originally set up spring 2021)
 - v. Prices Transformation (set up November 2022)
 - vi. Architecture Design & Data Sources (set up August 2023, and including Legacy division which was set up in September 2022)
 - vii. Public Sector Systems Transformation (set up July 2023)
- e. DSC applies data science for better decisions and skills-building by building public sector capability, investigating new source of data, enhancing analytical methods and strengthening the evidence base. DSC has two deputy directors.

Relationships with other Government departments in relation to economic statistics

17. Within the ONS, ESEG in particular has significant working relationships with HMT, the Bank of England (the Bank), the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) and the Department for Business and Trade (DBT). Staff from these organisations have regular engagement with ONS colleagues and sit on a variety of technical panels, committees and groups advising on specific aspects of economic statistics. At the time of writing (March 2025), these include stakeholder advisory panels on consumer prices and labour market statistics.
18. The ESEG Deputy National Statistician chairs separate quarterly meetings with HMT, the Bank and OBR respectively, with Directors and Deputy Directors attending depending on agenda items.
19. The ONS also engages with HMT, Bank and OBR colleagues and other Government Departments on new and emerging international guidance as and when required.

HM Treasury

20. As noted at paragraph 1, the 2007 Act allocated residual ministerial responsibility for statistics to the Cabinet Office, as the Authority's sponsoring department. Prior to this, the ONS was an executive agency accountable to the Chancellor of the Exchequer; the change therefore not only reflected the breadth of statistics being produced and assessed by the Authority, but also the importance of independent statistical production and regulation.
21. In 2015, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer commissioned NR NR *Independent Review of UK Economic Statistics* following concerns about quality. Recommendations included greater use of economic analysis and insight, the

- establishment of the Data Science Campus, and development of financial transaction data. All proved to be invaluable in supporting the ONS' pandemic response.
22. HMT, as with other government departments, is a key stakeholder of the ONS. They rely upon the ONS for accurate, high quality and timely economic statistics to inform and evaluate economic policy for the UK.
 23. The ONS work with HMT to jointly produce the public sector finance bulletin.
 24. The same as for all government departments and arm's length bodies, the usual nature of any relationship with HMT includes that of funding.

Cabinet Office

25. As noted, the Cabinet Office is the sponsor department of the Authority. A Memorandum of Understanding sets out the relationship and responsibilities between the Cabinet Office, as sponsoring department, and the Authority, as an independent statutory body (ID11/03)[INQ000590493]

Department for Business and Trade

26. The ONS has working level relationships with DBT colleagues specifically focusing on the production of statistics on international trade and business microdata, but more generally we discuss research, analysis and datasets with them.

Office for Budget Responsibility

27. The OBR is another significant stakeholder and user of ONS economic statistics. We ask the OBR for advice and quality assurance in relation to the public sector finance bulletin, to ensure consistent treatment of economic events.

Bank of England ('the Bank')

28. The Bank is a significant stakeholder of the ONS and a key user of economic statistics, with these informing monetary policy decisions made by the Bank.
29. Equality of access to official statistics is a fundamental principle of statistical good practice. As of 1 July 2017, pre-release access to statistics produced by the ONS was removed in all but exceptional circumstances (ID11/04)[INQ000590494]
30. An example of exceptional circumstances is that of Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) members, who sometimes request exceptional pre-release access to key economic statistics such as GDP, labour market and prices, depending on the timings of releases and the MPC meeting. This needs to be formally requested via an exchange of letters between the Deputy Governor and the Director General for Economic Statistics; all instances of exceptional pre-release access are detailed on the ONS website.

31. The Bank also provides us with survey data and administrative data on financial institutions, mainly relating to institutions that they regulate. This includes data on profits and holdings of those institutions. These data feed into the National Accounts as part of the regular production process. In 2021, the ONS and the Bank signed an agreement in relation to the supply of data (ID11/05)[INQ000590495]
32. Furthermore, Section 21 of the 2007 Act, requires the Authority to produce and publish the Retail Prices Index (RPI) and that the Bank must be consulted prior to the ONS making any changes to its coverage or calculation: this is discussed in more detail at paragraph 40.

Devolved Administrations, including the Chief Statisticians

33. Official statistics are produced by statisticians operating under the umbrella of the GSS, working in either the ONS, UK government departments and agencies, or one of the three devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Each of the devolved administrations has its own Chief Statistician. The Concordat on Statistics [INQ000252611] sets out an agreed framework for statistical collaboration between the Authority, UK Government, and the Northern Ireland, Scottish and Welsh Governments.
34. Our engagement with the devolved administrations is guided by the Concordat on Statistics. It provides assurance that we will work together to meet public need by producing coherent and comparable statistics at the UK and disaggregated levels while recognising differing policy contexts. This approach works in line with devolution settlements, allowing official statistics to best meet the needs of the public and decision makers within devolved regions and capitalise on data sources in devolved policy areas.
35. Formal governance and oversight of cross-UK statistical work is provided by the Authority's Inter-Administration Committee (IAC) that I chair, with membership that includes the Chief Statisticians of the devolved administrations. This Committee meets quarterly and promotes statistical coherence across the administrations of the UK and resolves inter-administration issues should they arise.
36. Feeding into IAC is the Devolved Economic Statistics Coordination Group, which discusses wider strategic issues which affect the production and co-ordination of devolved and UK level economic statistics including the National Accounts. Membership includes representatives from the devolved administrations and the Group meets quarterly.
37. With respect to the collection and analysis of data regarding the UK economy both as a whole and the economies of the devolved nations, the vast majority of economic

outputs are produced for the whole of the UK. I set out below a list of the economic statistics produced by the ONS which include breakdowns by devolved nation. Examples of these publications are also exhibited. These continued to be produced throughout the pandemic and unless otherwise noted were published at the same frequency and timeliness as the UK estimates.

- a. GDP by regions and countries – produced quarterly throughout the pandemic. UK GDP is published monthly (ID11/06)[INQ000590496]
- b. Labour market in the regions of the UK – produced monthly (ID11/07)[INQ000590497]
- c. House Price Index – produced monthly throughout the pandemic (ID11/08)[INQ000590498]
- d. Private rents – produced monthly throughout the pandemic (ID11/09)[INQ000590499]
- e. UK Interregional trade in goods and services – produced annually since 2019 (ID11/10)[INQ000590555]
- f. Country and regional public sector finances, UK – produced annually since 2017 (ID11/11)[INQ000590556]

38. The ONS receive some data from devolved administrations, for example on the labour market and on house prices, so that we can produce UK-wide data as a result. Our engagement on statistical production in this way is conducted at working-level.

The production of economic statistics in normal times

39. Deciding what to collect, how to analyse and in what format to produce statistics is the sole responsibility of the National Statistician for the ONS, and of the Head of Profession for Statistics for other government departments, in line with the Code of Practice for Statistics (the Code (ID11/12)[INQ000092790]: “*The Chief Statistician/Head of Profession for Statistics should have sole authority for deciding on methods, standards and procedures, and on the content and timing of the release of regular and ad hoc official statistics. This should include: determining the need for new official statistics, ceasing the release of official statistics, and the development of experimental statistics.*”
40. There is limited legal prescription on the collection and production of all statistics, not just economic statistics. The RPI is the only economic statistic that the ONS must produce by law (Section 21 of the 2007 Act).
41. Other indirect legal requirements dictate the need for some statistical outputs, for example where the government is bound by international agreements to compile and publish certain data. In addition, the National Accounts are produced in line with the

UN SNA, an internationally agreed standard set of recommendations on how to compile measures of economic activity. These statistics include GDP, household saving ratio, public sector net borrowing, the balance of trade and household consumption. Prior to the UK exiting the European Union, many UK economic statistics were provided to Eurostat (the statistics office of the EU) and used by institutions such as the European Commission. In addition, the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) and related regulations require the UK to continue to produce estimates of Gross National Income (GNI) in accordance with the European System of Accounts. GNI is used to set the EU budget and member contributions.

42. As the National Statistician, my considerations on which economic statistics to produce include whether they are serving the public good, in line with the 2007 Act, and informed by the Authority strategy, *Statistics for the Public Good* (ID11/13)[INQ000590500]
43. We set out in our Strategic Business Plan for 2024/2025 (ID11/14)[INQ000590501] that our key services include “*measuring changes in the value and composition of the UK economy*” and “*providing analysis on and indicators of other economic topics of national interest.*” An updated version of both the Authority Strategy and the ONS Strategic Business Plan will be published by summer 2025.
44. To understand how we serve the public good, we must understand what the public and other users, such as Government, the Bank, businesses and civil society, require in terms of evidence. Our priorities for each year are informed by stakeholder engagement, and this collaboration with users is at the heart of the ONS’s work.
45. In terms of formal governance, reporting to the ONS Executive Committee (ExCo) is the Strategic Outputs Committee (SOC), jointly chaired by the Deputy National Statisticians for ESEG and Health, Population and Methods (HPaM) (replacing the Analysis & Evaluation Committee in September 2023). SOC was established to support the ONS to be ambitious in setting out and answering critical questions which the public and decision-makers want answering, and overseeing analytical work to ensure it is planned, prioritised and consolidated to deliver in the most coherent and impactful way. SOC signs-off on the ONS quarterly analytical priorities, which are based on cross-office horizon-scanning. SOC is responsible for oversight of the strategic risk which is “*ensuring our statistics and analysis keep pace with changing priorities.*”. Outputs Group, which was established in early 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, reports into SOC, and its role is discussed in more detail at paragraph 53.

46. Methods and processes used to compile statistics are based on national or international best practice. In line with the Code, we explain alongside publications why we have used certain methods and data sources in our quality and methodology information (QMI) notes.
47. The ONS provides data, statistics and analysis (insight) on the economy, and user need, accessibility and quality considerations inform how much narrative is published alongside the data. We are guided by the Code's pillars of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value in the production and publication of all ONS data, statistics and analysis.

The production of economic statistics during the pandemic

48. As the UK's NSI, the ONS produced statistics and datasets covering various aspects of the UK's economy during the pandemic, including on the impact of government economic policies during this period. The ONS was responsible for compiling and disseminating these statistics to provide insights into the impact of the pandemic on the economy, and datasets included information on GDP, public debt, public spending, the labour market, financial impacts on businesses, insolvencies, new business incorporations, prices, and other topics. A list of relevant publications is exhibited at (ID11/15)[INQ000590502]
49. Where further insight was required, we introduced and adapted surveys at pace to rapidly inform policy decisions about the pandemic. We established BICS in March 2020. It was initially designed to capture pandemic-related economic impacts to inform the UK response. We also increased the frequency of the OPN to enable collection of data on UK households. Both BICS and OPN were used by a range of government departments to provide timely insights on the impacts of the pandemic and government policies.
50. We also safely procured and provided the Cabinet Office with weekly aggregated and anonymised financial transactions data and analysis during the pandemic to provide novel economic insights for decision-makers. Further detail on the acquisition of these data is at paragraph 107.

Governance

51. The existing governance structures remained in place during the pandemic. However, they were supplemented to reflect the fast-moving and changing picture.
52. Early in March 2020 we established a Rapid Response Group including Directors General, Directors and relevant business area leads. This met each weekday morning from the start of the pandemic.

53. In April 2020 we implemented a new process for ad-hoc analysis to be commissioned and delivered swiftly through the creation of an Outputs sub-group, which met three times a week, to ensure oversight of analytical outputs across the organisation. The organisation worked hard to maintain quality whilst delivering to a fast timeline. Many aspects of production and clearance became more efficient as a result.
54. From April to September 2020, a Covid-19 research and analysis prioritisation group also met bi-weekly to prioritise new data and analytical suggestions and consider key evidence gaps relating to the pandemic. This later merged with Outputs group in September 2020.
55. Decisions on content in surveys involved significant stakeholder engagement, primarily from the Civil Contingencies Secretariat and subsequently Covid-19 Taskforce in Cabinet Office, the devolved governments and other government departments. We also set up the Survey Coordination Group, which held its first meeting on 31 March 2020, with the purpose of coordinating the internal ONS approach to BICS, OPN, CIS and labour market surveys.
56. In November 2020, the Analysis and Evaluation Committee was set up to provide strategic direction and support the development of impactful analysis. This was initially chaired by then Deputy National Statistician for Population Statistics, Iain Bell, later by Mike Keoghan. At least half of the membership comprised cross-system representation from the GSS, Analytical Function and Devolved Administrations.
57. These groups collectively worked to make decisions on my behalf regarding what additional economic data the ONS should produce during the pandemic, alongside the core economic statistics that we committed to continuing to publish. They were informed by stakeholder feedback and the impact of the pandemic on survey response rates.

Publishing Economic Statistics

58. During the pandemic we amended our release times for market-sensitive economic statistics. Before the pandemic these used to be published at 09:30. We would hold a secure 'lock-in' briefing for accredited newswires, to provide them with access to the release prior to publication. This ensured the data were subsequently released in an orderly and timely way to the financial markets, consistent with the Code. These 'lock-in' briefings took place in a secure environment in the ONS London office, however Covid-19 and government guidance on social distancing made delivering these secure briefings challenging, and the security arrangements to protect the orderly release of market sensitive information meant it would not be possible to deliver this in a virtual way. Therefore, from 26 March 2020 we moved to publish

market sensitive releases at 0700 without briefing accredited newswires ahead of publication. This earlier release was outside market hours, so it mitigated the risk of providing an advantage to some traders if there were unexpected problems with the dissemination of data. I wrote to the Director General for Regulation, Ed Humpherson, to explain our proposed approach (ID11/16)[INQ000252616]. He described it as 'sensible and proportionate' (ID11/17)[INQ000252617].

Stakeholder engagement

59. During the pandemic, we circulated an areas of research interest list across government departments and some external partners. This enabled us to identify areas of joint interest, as well as work being undertaken in other government departments to avoid duplication or continue to build the evidence base. We also published analytical plans to ensure transparency of our work programme in response to Covid-19 (ID11/18)[INQ000252673] (ID11/19)[INQ000252672].
60. On 31 March 2020 the ONS emailed colleagues across government departments, including HMT, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), OBR and Cabinet Office (ID11/20)[INQ000590505]. This email highlighted the new surveys set up by the ONS and how Government could feed in questions for surveys.
61. To enable rapid analysis and ensure data availability for approved users across government, academics and devolved administrations, the ONS used our Secure Research Service (SRS) on a regular basis to help disseminate detailed data. This allowed the BICS microdata to be shared in a confidential way to approved researchers to complete their own analysis and effectively use data efficiently and quickly. Datasets related to each wave of BICS were uploaded onto the SRS within 10-14 working days.

Statistical advice to government

62. We embedded a member of staff initially within the CCS Data Team which then joined the Covid-19 Task Force in the Cabinet Office from March 2020. This was to ensure ONS data and analysis were fed into decision making, and that ONS teams were aware of analytical priorities or gaps and able to respond. This was the main route by which data and statistics were shared by the ONS and UK government.
63. The ONS engaged with government departments and the devolved administrations to understand data requirements and shape analytical plans. We did this using our established channels such as Heads of Statistical Profession (HoPs) quarterly meetings, Departmental Directors of Analysis (DDAN) bi-monthly meetings, and supplementing these with additional fortnightly calls. The agendas and minutes from

these HoPs and DDAN meetings have been exhibited together at (ID11/21)[INQ000252629] where they refer to Covid-19 workstreams.

HM Treasury (HMT)

64. The ONS worked effectively and efficiently with HMT throughout the pandemic period, often in a fast paced and dynamic environment working to tight deadlines.
65. BICS was designed and implemented for businesses to respond to in record time, with the primary aim of meeting stakeholder and user needs to understand the UK economy at a time of economic shock. The rapidly changing nature of the pandemic required timely decisions to be made by government and its advisors on the pandemic response. To do this, decision-makers needed data that were as timely as possible. Therefore, a short time before final statistics were published, some results were provided for operational planning and decision-making purposes.
66. When the ONS proactively initiated the fortnightly BICS at the start of the pandemic, input was sought directly from key stakeholders, such as HMT, to ensure it could provide relevant and timely information for policy decisions. For example, they input ideas for questions into the first drafts of BICS questionnaires during March 2020.
67. Moving at pace, the first survey (wave) of BICS went live on 23 March to 5 April 2020 to collect data for the period 9 March to 22 March 2020. Initial insights from the first wave were circulated rapidly as part of a weekly cross-government (including HMT) information pack (ID11/22)[INQ000590558]. The final results from the first wave of BICS were then published on the ONS website on 9 April 2020 (ID11/23)[INQ000590506].
68. The fortnightly BICS approach by the ONS allowed survey questions to be changed and updated in a rapid way to reflect user needs and a dynamically changing environment. For example, HMT provided a list of government schemes which was quickly added to Wave 2 of BICS, and then initial results to the question “which of the following initiatives is your enterprise interested in using, if any?” were shared with HMT on 9 April (ID11/24)[INQ000590559]. This question and its results were included in the Wave 2 publication, published on the ONS website on 23 April 2020 (ID11/25)[INQ000590550].
69. ONS engagement with HMT continued throughout the pandemic with questions added or enhanced, such as when new government policies were introduced, policy take ups by businesses, price and turnover impact and expectations and workforce impact. Analysis and estimates were provided to HMT from BICS as part of a regular weekly cross government summary pack which was also sent to other departments.

70. Exhibit (ID11/26)[INQ000643496] records changes made, or suggestions, to add or remove themes or questions to BICS, from the earliest waves of the survey to Wave 59. This is not a complete record due to the different methods by which requests were made, for example via informal conversation.
71. Over the longer period, questions relating to government schemes relevant to Covid-19 remained in the BICS survey until Wave 39, which ran from 6 September 2021 to 19 September 2021. All questions for each wave of BICS are published and available online (ID11/27)[INQ000590507]

Cabinet Office

72. The ONS worked effectively with Cabinet Office colleagues from the start of the pandemic on a range of topics. This included daily mobility data, weekly financial transactions data and analysis, and data collected by the BICS and OPN surveys.
73. Cabinet Office colleagues received weekly slides (together with other government departments) on the BICS preliminary and final data which covered a range of topics such as staff on furlough and staff off sick or in isolation due to Covid-19.
74. In relation to the impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions, data were collected on BICS relating to workforce absences and was shared with the Cabinet Office as part of a request received relating to periods between June 2020 and January 2021. A data request was produced and provided to the Cabinet Office (ad hoc request) which related to staff working from home but also off sick or in isolation due to Covid-19 (ID11/28)[INQ000590551].
75. A detailed slide deck was shared with Cabinet Office in September 2021. This covered a wide range of analysis including on Long Covid; vaccination and variants of concern; behaviours, compliance and economy; and NHS pressures (ID11/29)[INQ000590552]
76. Correspondence between the ONS and Cabinet Office (ID11/30)[INQ000590520] (ID11/31)[INQ000590549] provided insights related to a range of sources, including BICS and the analysis of card data sources available to the ONS. This data was analysed on a confidential basis and insights provided to inform policy. The email correspondence also highlighted analysis plans over the short (immediate week), medium (two weeks) and long-term (one month) and provided an offer for Cabinet Office to discuss further with the ONS (ID11/32)[INQ000590557]
77. A separate slide deck was shared to the Cabinet Office with the date of 13 December 2021 entitled "Evidence to-date on the impact of NPI on spending". This covered a wide range of information in analysis of card data, city centre spending, impacts of

hospitality 10pm closing, stage 2 reopening, comparison impact of lockdown dates, changes in spending as a result of homework; (ID11/33)[INQ000590521]

Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy ('BEIS')

78. Input was sought directly from BEIS on BICS to ensure it could provide relevant and timely information for policy implications. An example of relevant correspondence between the ONS and BEIS regarding input on BICs is exhibited

(ID11/34)[INQ000590522]

79. Two relevant pieces of work in relation to information on key workers were published on the ONS website in June 2020. The first captures key workers by industry section and division (ID11/35)[INQ000590508] the second key workers by housing tenure

(ID11/36)[INQ000590509] Also exhibited is a discussion with BEIS on what information would be most useful; (ID11/37)[INQ000590560]

80. Questions were added onto BICS for the following and subsequent 'waves' to collect information on cash reserves and safety measures (amongst other topics). The questions asked of businesses for the period 18-31 May 2020 are publicly available

(ID11/38)[INQ000590510]

81. These estimates were provided separately as part of the ONS weekly communication across government slides and were also published as part of the regular publication schedule for BICS on 18 June 2020 for Wave 6 (ID11/39)[INQ000590511].

Department for International Trade (DIT)

82. Data was provided to DIT as part of published statistical bulletins, the weekly cross government slide packs and ad hoc requests as and when requested. In an email from June 2020, DIT colleagues expressed their gratitude for insights provided by BICS (ID11/40)[INQ000590523].

83. A separate example of an ad hoc request related to trade impacts from 6 July 2021 is published (ID11/41)[INQ000590524]. The ONS engaged regularly in terms of data requests and when there were new topics or questions requested to be included as part of BICS.

Office for Budget Responsibility

84. The ONS did not work specifically with the OBR on the development of economic statistics during the pandemic, but the OBR were included on the circulation list for the weekly cross government slide pack that was provided regularly to a range of government departments covering the data collected as part of BICS.

The Bank of England

85. The ONS worked effectively and efficiently with the Bank throughout the pandemic period. Data was provided as part of published statistical bulletins, and weekly cross government slide packs and ad hoc requests as and when requested.
86. An example of an ad hoc analysis for the Bank was the calculation of results weighted by employment that were not previously published in the weighted BICS Wave 14 to 24 results. This was published on the ONS website for equal access for all users (ID11/42)[INQ000590512].
87. The ONS engaged regularly in terms of data requests and if/when there were new topics/questions requested to be included as part of BICS. For example, the ONS met with the Bank in April 2021 to detail the methodology used to produce BICS in order for them to replicate similar estimates for their own research publications, specifically in relation to employment weights and how they were calculated.

Devolved administrations

88. At a working level the ONS routinely engaged with representatives from the devolved administrations during the pandemic period, including weekly calls with HoPs.
89. BICS estimates for each UK country were produced and published with wave 3 of the survey (6 April to 19 April 2020) on 7 May 2020.
90. We also safely procured and used new data sources to provide novel insights for decision makers. We worked closely with devolved governments during this process.
91. Data on financial transactions was procured to provide real-time information about the economy ahead of official statistics publication in slower time, and to strengthen and supplement the production process of some official statistics where data collection was disrupted by the pandemic. Data were procured from a number of sources and analysis included breakdowns by country.
92. From May 2020, we published weekly snapshots of online job advert indices covering the UK job market from Adzuna. From August, breakdowns were provided by region.
93. Unpublished, one-off analysis on stock availability was shared as management information with the devolved governments in March 2020. This was based on collection by our in-field price collectors prior to in-field collection being suspended.
94. It is not known the extent to which this was used by the UK government or devolved governments to inform key decision-making.

Other key materials relating to the ONS involvement in, or scrutiny of, the impact of the pandemic on the UK economy

95. The then Deputy National Statistician for Economic Statistics, Jonathan Athow, provided written evidence to the Treasury Select Committee's inquiry on the economic impact of coronavirus on 28 April 2020. He provided oral evidence on 20 January 2021 and followed up with further written evidence on 1 February 2021.
96. Jonathan Athow provided written evidence to the Treasury Committee's inquiry on jobs, growth and productivity after coronavirus on 18 May 2020.
97. For the Treasury Committee's inquiry an equal recovery, Jonathan Athow provided written evidence on 30 July 2020. Liz McKeown, then PPA Director, gave oral evidence on 15 September 2021, and followed up in writing on 18 October 2021.
98. Jonathan Athow submitted written evidence to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee on the impact of the coronavirus on businesses and workers on 20 May 2020. He also provided written evidence for their inquiry on post-pandemic economic growth: levelling up local and regional structures and the delivery of economic growth on 22 September 2020.
99. Jonathan Athow submitted written evidence to the International Trade Committee for the inquiry on the coronavirus pandemic and international trade on 3 July 2020.
100. I wrote to the Education Committee regarding the impact of Covid-19 and school closures on children and young people on 6 July 2020.
101. On 22 July 2020, I gave oral evidence to the Lord's Public Service Committee for their inquiry public services: lessons from Coronavirus.
102. Jonathan Athow provided written evidence on 29 July 2020 for the Work and Pensions Committee inquiry, preparations for changes in the world of work.
103. On 28 October 2020, Jonathan Athow submitted written evidence for the Lord's Economic Affairs Committee enquiry on employment and Covid-19.
104. Jonathan Athow wrote on 6 July 2021 regarding the Lords Covid-19 Committee long-term impact of the pandemic on towns and cities.

New data sources and data collection challenges during the pandemic

105. To ensure the UK continued to have timely and high-quality information throughout the pandemic, the ONS changed how some of our surveys operated and used new data sources. The overall impact on the collection of statistics was outlined in an update [\(ID11/43\)\[INQ000590513\]](#) on the ONS website on 19 March 2020, with further details published on 27 March 2020 [\(ID11/44\)\[INQ000590514\]](#) and 18 August 2021 [\(ID11/45\)\[INQ000590515\]](#)

106. Decisions on changes to survey operations and the introduction of different sources were made on a case-by-case basis, taking into account what information was relevant at the time and the three pillars of the Code.

New data sources

107. The ONS published a statement on 8 December 2020 outlining new data sources relevant to the economy that were being acquired and used during the pandemic (ID11/46)[INQ000252674], which included:
- a. financial transactions data from Barclays, Revolut, Visa, FIS (subsequently renamed Worldpay), Vocalink
 - b. mobile network data from BT and O2.
108. Other data sources used by the ONS during the time period but not listed in the statement, or subsequently developed after the statement, included:
- a. Web-scraped online prices for high-demand products (ID11/47)[INQ000590517]
 - b. Pret A Manger transactions
 - c. Google mobility data (ID11/48)[INQ000590518]
 - d. Opentable bookings
 - e. Retail footfall
 - f. Bank of England CHAPS transactions on direct and credit card
 - g. Xero small businesses accounting data
 - h. Online job adverts (ID11/49)[INQ000590519]
 - i. Eurocontrol flights data
 - j. System Average Price of gas
 - k. Weekly company incorporations and dissolutions from Companies House (ID11/50)[INQ000590525]
 - l. Online weekly price changes (ID11/51)[INQ000590526]
 - m. Shipping data (increased publication frequency from monthly to weekly)
 - n. Traffic camera activities (increased publication frequency from monthly to weekly) (ID11/52)[INQ000590527]
 - o. Value Added Tax (increased publication frequency from monthly publication to weekly)
109. Senior ONS officials, including the Chief Economist, Director of the Data Science Campus, Head of National Accounts Coordination and others, made decisions to obtain new data sources to:
- a. provide real-time information about the economy ahead of official statistics publication in slower time

- b. strengthen and supplement the production process of some official statistics where the traditional data collection was disrupted by the pandemic.
110. The decisions to obtain new data sources were based on a number of factors, such as where the largest evidence gaps were (for example, what we knew about the real-time economic impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions), which official statistics or traditional survey were most disrupted (for example, the International Passenger Survey (IPS) was stopped for a time and alternative data were needed to continue producing estimates of trade and tourism), and the value for money of data acquisition contracts.
111. As listed above, the ONS had obtained and developed a sufficiently diverse range of new economic data. These new data and insights were shared weekly across Government on an official sensitive basis and, where permissible, published weekly on the ONS website as part of the Economic Activity and social change in the UK, real-time indicators (ID11/53) [INQ000590528] statistical bulletins, thus greatly enriching the amount of information and data available to policymakers and the public and improving their ability to make evidence-based decisions.
112. Despite this, not all discussions with potential data providers resulted in the acquisition of new data. The reasons for not proceeding after initial discussions varied but may have included that the new data were not deemed useful enough in their existing definitions and format, as was the case in the ONS' engagement with credit rating agency data, or because the data were not of sufficient quality or national coverage, or too resource-intensive for the ONS to process it, as was the case with one payment data provider. It could also have been because of delays with data providers to start data sharing, as was the case with smart meter data.
113. Even when new data sources were successfully established at first, in some cases the data supply would discontinue after a while. For example, when data providers realised that the costs of supplying data to the ONS were not sustainable in the long term, as was the case with Pret A Manger transactions data and several real-time payment datasets. It could also be because data providers stopped the production of their data altogether, such as Google mobility data.

Data collection challenges

114. The pace of developments and breadth of work that we were conducting during the pandemic posed unique challenges to the accuracy and quality of our data, particularly on survey data collection. However, we continued to follow our well-established quality control processes to maintain quality.

115. Contingency planning conducted pre-lockdown enabled us to rapidly adapt our data collection across the country. Nevertheless, without the ability to knock on doors and interview in respondents homes, public response to our surveys decreased although we introduced a suite of measures to minimise the impact of this. We also adopted alternative methods including the re-weighting of results to manage the impact. We accelerated our transformation towards online data collection, such as the online OPN survey and businesses within construction, which meant all our short-term business surveys were online.

Social surveys

116. The ONS conducts a number of social surveys including the Labour Force Survey (LFS), Survey on Living Conditions (SLC), Living Costs and Food Survey (LCF), Wealth and Assets Survey (WAS), National Survey for Wales (NSW), Family Resources Survey (FRS), Household Asset Survey (HAS), IPS and OPN. In February 2022 the ONS published an article discussing operational changes caused by the coronavirus pandemic, and the impact they had on our surveys [ID11/54][INQ000252698]. Before the pandemic we would collect data for social surveys using three distinct methods: the IPS interviewers, Face to Face Interviewers working across the UK and Telephone Operations (TO) conducting telephone interviews with the public.

117. From March 2020 Telephone Operations colleagues were required to work from home, and we provided the necessary IT kit so that they could continue to carry out their roles effectively. Face to Face interviewers were stood down from operations with effect from 18 March 2020 to implement new arrangements to enable telephone interviews instead of in-home interviewing. We also stood down the IPS as there was limited international travel due to Covid restrictions, and they returned to work fully from 18 January 2021.

118. One immediate and significant impact of the pandemic was an overall drop in survey response rates from the public, which other national statistical offices observed in their household surveys too. The most significant example of this was on the LFS, where response decreased from 55.2% (April 2019 – February 2020) to 28.7% (April 2020 – March 2021). To mitigate increased bias as a result of decreased response, we made changes to the survey analysis and output methods, including the re-weighting of data. We have always been transparent with the challenges we have faced and the measures we have taken to address them. Further information on the impact of the pandemic on the LFS has been published within the LFS quarterly performance quality monitoring report. The re-weighting exercises are captured in more detail on the ONS website

[ID11/55][INQ000590529] With the recognised limitations of the LFS at this time, we

launched the online Transformed Labour Force Survey (TLFS), which is the long-term solution for the collection of labour market data.

119. To address lower contact rates with the public, a new approach was trialled in July 2020 called Knock to Nudge (KtN). This process involved knocking on sampled addresses and obtaining an appointment to conduct an interview over the phone at a later date and followed strict Covid health and safety protocols. From April 2021 KtN became part of the Face to Face interviewer role, with mixed-mode data collection techniques including in-home interviewing returning in full from March 2022.

120. We also adapted our surveys in consultation with stakeholders to enable telephone interviewing. This included shortening longer surveys such as SLC, focusing on questions across our suite of surveys to inform government priorities related to the pandemic response, and adapting questions for telephone interviewing.

121. Overall, we were able to implement a suite of measures to minimise the impact on quality: introducing KtN to improve response rates, adapting surveys to suit telephone interviewing, and increasing sample sizes for surveys.

Economic statistics

122. The pandemic also created challenges for the production of our economic statistics. A high-level article was published in July 2020 (ID11/56)[INQ000590530] providing an overview of the implications for our regular data collections, the methodological and conceptual challenges and the changes to our publications.

123. In May 2020, the ONS published three articles looking at the effects of Covid-19 on National Accounts (ID11/57)[INQ000252699] Prices (ID11/58)[INQ000252695] and the Labour market (ID11/59)[INQ000252700]. These were complimented with two further articles in June 2020 on Sector Accounts (ID11/60)[INQ000252701] and Balance of Payments (ID11/61)[INQ000252702]. The main issues were:

- a. Conceptual: how we measured the price of goods that were not available
- b. Data collection: how we keep collecting data when some companies were not trading
- c. Methodological: how we adjust, given the way that the economy was functioning had changed so significantly
- d. Internal workforce: how we continue to produce quality statistics whilst our staff are unable to work in the office environment or face Covid related illness

124. One such conceptual challenge was how we should treat the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) when calculating GDP. We took the decision to count the scheme as a subsidy to business, netting it off the income measure of GDP, as the furloughed employees continued to count as employed and the payments they received

from their employer as wages and salaries. Another example is that we adjusted education output to reflect the number of students in school and added in learning from home. We also accounted for unavailable goods and services by using methods such as assuming their prices would have moved in line with the average movement for related goods and services. This was the simplest approach that came as close as possible to reflecting that the supply of certain goods and services had been interrupted.

125. As with social surveys, survey data collection for economic statistics also posed a challenge. To produce economic statistics, we survey businesses to measure GDP, and individuals to understand whether they are in work or unemployed. As noted in paragraph 137, we also collect prices from shops to measure inflation. We transitioned quickly to rely more on email contact and data collection over the phone or online. This change resulted in fewer people responding and collecting less information than normal, and we carefully monitored the outcomes of our data collection.
126. The effects of the outbreak on ONS capacity and capability during this period meant we reviewed the existing labour market releases and suspended some of these publications, and continued to provide updates on our review of labour market releases. This action protected the delivery and quality of our remaining outputs as well as ensured we responded to new demands as a direct result of Covid-19.
127. One of the most common issues we dealt with was when firms or businesses did not respond to our survey, or where data were late for other reasons. When that happened, we filled in gaps in our data collection, technically known as imputation. Under normal circumstances, we could do this by using historical relationships between different data sources however these historical relationships may not have held in such unprecedented times. Despite the challenging context we considered each challenge as it arose.
128. We published details of the impact of using an alternative imputation method on main labour market estimates: (ID11/62)[INQ000590531] (ID11/63)[INQ000590532]
129. We also drew upon new data sources, such as new surveys (at paragraph 49) and new administrative data (at paragraph 107).

National Accounts

130. The ONS publish monthly, quarterly and annual National Accounts, along with related statistics including monthly trade and quarterly balance of payments statistics. We are one of the few NSIs to publish monthly GDP; this provided timely insights into the state of the UK economy over the course of the pandemic.
131. A challenge to recording National Accounts that was identified in the early stage of the pandemic was the measurement of non-market output, specifically regarding the

- provision of healthcare and education. Estimating the value and volume of these services is challenging, as there is typically no market price for which this output is sold.
132. For health and education output, we follow international best practice and produce volume estimates based on cost-weighted activity. These depend on direct volume measures such as the number of students in different educational settings and the reported number of patients treated for various conditions. These are in turn weighted by their cost per unit. However, traditional "activity" measures were challenged by the pandemic.
133. The ONS engaged with Eurostat to establish what guidance they would be providing and provided feedback on their proposed approach. We also engaged with the Australian Bureau of Statistics to share information on approaches.
134. We shared draft copies of our first publication: (ID11/64)[INQ000252690] on international comparisons of GDP with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) colleagues, where we were able to take on feedback on the theoretical and practical challenges. This led to further collaborative efforts.
135. We understood that the apparently greater fall in non-market output in the UK compared to other countries could have been due to different approaches to measuring it. The ONS had been making more extensive use of "direct volume" measures, as is preferred in international guidance. However, we had only relatively limited information about the methods employed in other countries. The ONS therefore initiated a programme of analysis with the OECD to interview other NSIs to better understand the methodological differences and the implications of these for international comparisons of GDP.
136. The findings were jointly published by the ONS and OECD (ID11/65)[INQ000252691] and presented to national accountants at the OECD Working Party on National Accounts to assist NSI's in understanding international comparisons in this area. The research has frequently been used to inform understanding of international comparisons of GDP.

Consumer prices

137. The ONS publish monthly consumer price statistics, along with monthly private rents, house prices and producer prices and our quarterly Household Costs Index. One of the main challenges around measuring price inflation during the pandemic was around data collection, given the implementation of social distancing policies and movement restrictions brought into effect. For consumer price statistics, price collectors would usually visit outlets locally across the country every month. Covid-19 restrictions challenged our ability to continue this.

138. The international community came together to respond to the challenge in producing inflation statistics during the pandemic. The ONS was following the guidance and best practice provided by Eurostat, who are responsible for the compilation of the EU harmonised index of consumer prices (which the UK Consumer Price Index (CPI) was compiled to be compliant with).
139. Eurostat provided clear guidance (ID11/66)[INQ000590479] on the best practice for compiling CPI during Covid-19, along with similar advice and guidance circulated by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) (ID11/67)[INQ000252693] and the IMF. The ONS were key contributors to this guidance, and a series of online webinars were scheduled by UNECE (chaired by the UK) and subsequently a handbook to provide best practice for the compilation of CPI during lockdown (ID11/68)[INQ000252694]. Regular engagement with other NSIs, such as the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand was held to discuss issues and share best practice.
140. The ONS followed the guidance from Eurostat in adapting procedures for CPI, although much of this guidance was best practice that ONS was already implementing (or had already implemented). The ONS set out clearly the approach it took to compile the CPI in a series of articles that covered collecting CPI during lockdown (ID11/69)[INQ000252695] resuming price collection post lockdown (ID11/70)[INQ000252696] and updating CPI weights to reflect the impact of Covid-19 (ID11/71)[INQ000252697]. Each of these aligned to the wider guidance from Eurostat (ID11/66)[INQ000590479].
141. Members of the ONS HAPI team are part of the WHO Classification and Statistical Committee and worked with it on a number of technical matters related to recording Covid-19 and post-covid conditions. Colleagues from HAPI are also members of the WHO Mortality Reference Group and throughout 2020 and 2021 attended several ad hoc meetings to make technical decisions regarding Covid-19 classifications. These groups, as well as the Iris Consortium, (the managing body for the Iris cause of death coding software) informed the ONS's actions. For example, by receiving technical updates to process death registrations mentioning Covid-19 automatically and taking part in discussions regarding which ICD codes to use for specific circumstances such as the coding for the long-term effects of Covid-19.
142. We also sought new survey data to produce the strongest possible statistics consistent with international statistical guidance and in making these changes, sought the input of experts. For example, we considered international guidance regarding our approach to measuring education output, where our solution was to contract Teacher Tapp, who conduct weekly surveys of teachers in England, to acquire new information to

estimate the contribution of remote learning to overall education output. In healthcare, the challenge of adding new services to our estimates of output also required clear signposting on our website of our methods changes.

143. As the government responded to the pandemic, new aspects of their response placed new data collection requirements on our fiscal statistics teams. Notably, this included collecting information about the CJRS and the Self Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS), as well as a range of loan guarantee schemes (including the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CBILS) and similar). These were large schemes, accounting for a large portion of the variation in government spending, which we had to incorporate to maintain the quality of our statistics.
144. Data collection for our estimates of the contribution of public sector output (including healthcare and education) to GDP was also affected, with some data sources suspended, some sources of infrequent data becoming unsuitable overnight and the introduction of new public services such as Test and Trace requiring us to seek new data to accurately capture economic developments. These challenges required our teams to continually assess the rapidly developing policy landscape and respond to mitigate any effects on the quality or coverage of our measurement and respond in line with international statistical guidance.
145. For Public Sector Finances, the main impact of the pandemic on our short-term data collection was the need to make changes to our detailed production methods. In particular, the data we use to estimate tax receipts is collected on a cash basis (reflecting the timing of payments made) but is required on an accrued basis (reflecting when the tax liability arose) for our main fiscal and national accounts statistics. The sharp shock of the pandemic, lockdowns and the support measures implemented (such as tax deferral schemes) made our 'usual' methods for converting from cash to accrued measurement inappropriate.
146. We therefore worked closely with our data suppliers HMRC and HMT to produce our best estimates of the profile of tax receipts over this period. For estimates of local government expenditure and receipts which typically arrive with a longer lag, we worked with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and the OBR to ensure that our statistics were as accurate as possible. We also placed a greater than usual emphasis on our cash measures over this period: pointing users towards statistics which are less subject to revision, while reminding them of the associated limitations.
147. Over the longer term, the pandemic also impacted on our 'final outturn' collections of public expenditure and receipts. In particular, the Annual Accounts of Central Government Departments were delayed for the 2020/21 and 2021/22 financial years.

The final set of Local Government Annual Accounts for the same period have been similarly delayed. As a consequence, our statistics on these sectors of the economy remained more uncertain for a longer period than normal.

148. For our estimates of public service output, we took several steps to ensure the quality of our statistics, including working with other government departments and the devolved administrations. For data collections which were suspended, we sought internal assessments from the NHS, Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the devolved administrations to gauge the developing situation as accurately as possible. These assessments covered most of the healthcare activity by weight. We also sought access to those statistical series which continued to be published. As a result, estimates of public service output in early GDP estimates had more data content (as opposed to forecast content) than previously.
149. We sought new, more frequent data where the frequency of our usual sources presented measurement challenges. For example, where we had previously used annual estimates of the number of students at school, we switched to using new, more frequent, daily estimates of school attendances made available by both the Department for Education (DfE) (in England) and the devolved administrations. This meant that we could reflect fluctuations in actual attendance at schools far more accurately than previously, which was important both during and in between lockdowns.
150. Where new activities came on stream, including the Test and Trace and vaccination programmes, we worked with colleagues in the NHS, the Vaccine Task Force, DHSC and BEIS to ensure that we could access the key data that we needed.
151. In producing economic statistics during the pandemic, we were as transparent as possible about the issues we faced and how we addressed them. We communicated with stakeholders the importance of remembering that these were unprecedented times and that all our economic statistics were consequently more uncertain and prone to more revision than usual as we continue to build on and improve the statistical outputs covering the impacted period.
152. As a result of the extra time needed to quality assure data collected during this period, we delayed our GDP and Retail Sales Index publications for up to 2 days from April to December 2020: (ID11/72)[INQ000590533] (ID11/73)[INQ000590534]
153. The pandemic and its impact on consumer behaviour was reflected in additions to the CPI basket of goods and services. The virtual "shopping basket" is reviewed every year to ensure it continues to accurately measure the changing cost of products and services over time and reflects the changing tastes and habits of UK consumers. Some items are taken out of the basket, some are brought in, and others remain unchanged. In

March 2021, several items were added related to the changes in consumer behaviour, and prices of these items began to be collected [(ID11/74)[INQ000590535]].

International engagement during the pandemic

154. Collaboration and engagement with international peers are an important aid to the development of statistics, both in normal times and during the disruption of the pandemic. International engagement continued during the Covid-19 pandemic, albeit virtually. The ONS continued to attend multilateral meetings at the OECD, United Nations (UN), Eurostat, and the IMF, along with bilateral engagement with other NSIs. This would involve the exchange of information on economic statistics, as well as other areas, which would happen at existing groups and workshops at multilateral organisations, or via bilateral relationships.
155. The ONS did engage internationally on matters related to the production of economic statistics, including liaising on GDP and CPI production. This is discussed in more detail at paragraphs 130 and 137 respectively.
156. We engaged bilaterally with Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA to discuss issues and best practice on these subjects. No minutes of meetings or notes exist for these as they were not formalised collaborations.
157. Multilaterally, we engaged with Eurostat, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the OECD. In particular, the ONS took part in a series of OECD workshops looking at the economic impact of Covid-19 and potential responses to them. We joined one task force (or, working group) that was working directly on a Covid-19 related topic, the Task Force on Monitoring a Strong, Resilient, Green and Inclusive Future that created a Covid Recovery Dashboard, launched in October 2022, aimed at measuring countries recovery during the post-covid period.
158. The metrics measured covered economic recovery, ensuring recovery created equal opportunities for all, analysing if the recovery was climate proof and future pandemic resilience. This dashboard is no longer available and has been replaced by an updated model so I cannot provide an exhibit.
159. Overall, our international engagement was a proactive measure, building on business as usual (BAU) engagements, to enable us to deliver against strategic objectives rather than in response to requests from central government.

The Covid-19 pandemic impact on the UK economy

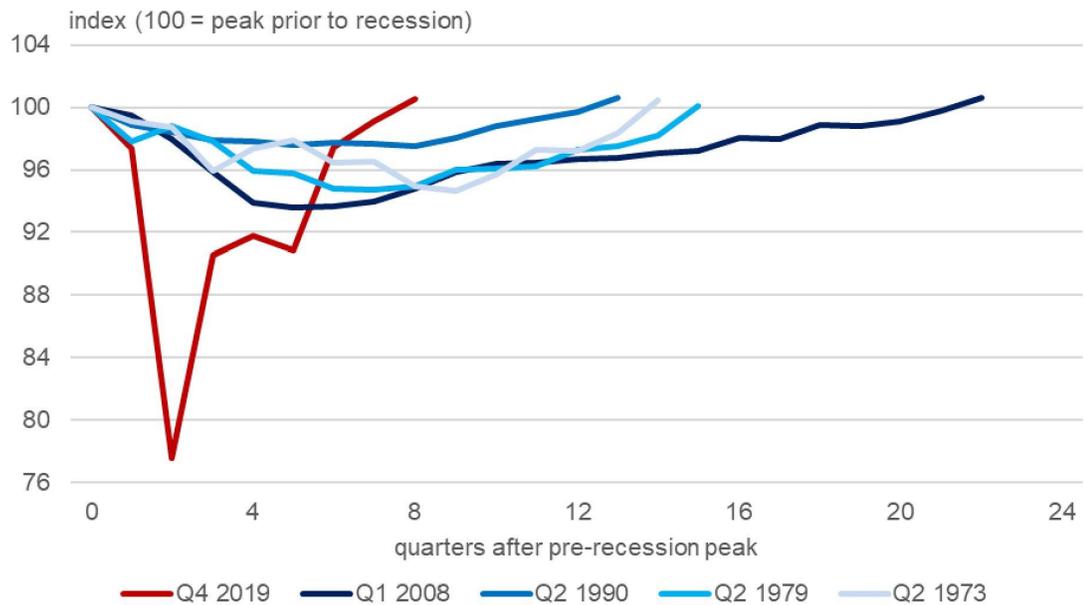
Economic growth

160. The implementation of public health restrictions significantly impacted economic activity through 2020 and 2021, particularly during periods of lockdown when both production and consumption were both well below normal levels. The nature of the Covid-19 pandemic had an impact on both demand for and supply of goods and services. Real GDP declined by a cumulative 22.4% in the first half of 2020 (real GDP excludes any inflationary issues and reflects the changes in volume terms; this is also referred to as volume estimates of GDP). In comparison, real GDP contracted by 6.4% from peak-to-trough during the 2008 financial crisis, while it fell by around 5% in the 1970s and 1980s recessions (see Figure 1). Further historical context is offered in the ONS article '*GDP and events in history: how the Covid-19 pandemic shocked the UK economy*' from May 2022 (ID11/75)[INQ000590536] which looked at the impact of other major events in the UK's post-war history including the Suez crisis, the winter of discontent, and the Global Financial Crisis. After the Covid-19 restrictions were lifted, economic activity started to recover. Real GDP surpassed its pre-pandemic level in Quarter 4 2021¹.

161. Consumer facing services such as accommodation and food services were the most affected, where output contracted by over 80% peak-to-trough. Similarly, the provision of education, health and other social services was restricted, where output fell by over 40%. There was less of an adverse impact on those service industries where output could be delivered remotely. These included financial services and real estate services.

¹ This comparison is based on the most recent National Accounts at the time of writing (Blue Book 2024), which represent our most comprehensive estimate of current and historical economic output. UK GDP (seasonally adjusted volume measure) was £621bn in Q4 2019, and £625bn in Q1 2024. Each annual Blue Book update allows for revisions to previous years' data, ensuring that our economic measures are as accurate as possible, taking account of new data as it becomes available. Older bulletins exhibited elsewhere in this statement may include estimates that differ slightly from Blue Book 2024.

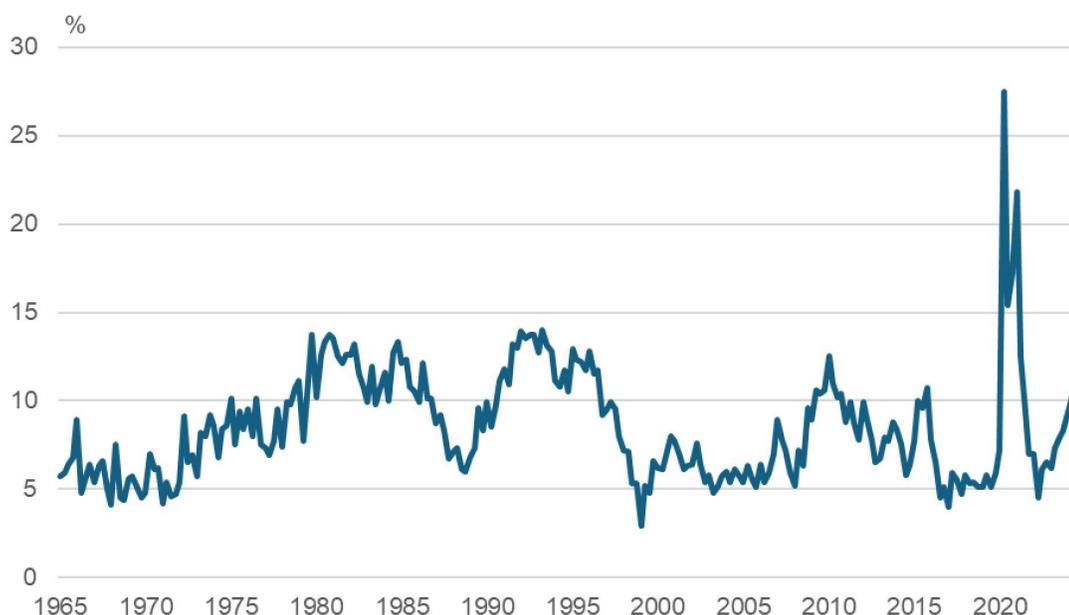
Figure 1: UK Real GDP during the pandemic compared with previous recessions



Notes: Pre-recession quarters have been identified as Quarter 2 1973, Quarter 4 1979, Quarter 2 1990, and Quarter 1 2008; Source: National Accounts from the Office for National Statistics

162. Household consumption took longer to recover. The UK household saving ratio peaked at a record 27.5% in Quarter 2 2020, as Covid-19 suppressed consumption opportunities. The saving ratio subsequently declined as the economy reopened, but it remained above its pre-pandemic levels and trended higher in 2022 (see Figure 2). These increases in the household saving ratio coincided with cost-of-living pressures, pointing to a combination of precautionary and intertemporal savings motives.

Figure 2: UK household savings as a share of disposable income, 1963 - 2024



Source: UK Economic Accounts (ID11/76)[INQ000590537], ONS

Consumer prices

163. The headline CPI inflation rate initially fell at the start of the pandemic. Headline inflation slowed to 0.2% in the year to August 2020, which was mostly led by the fall in global oil prices. Weaker economic activity led to a fall in demand for oil, pushing Brent crude prices below \$20 per barrel in April 2020, from close to \$70 at the end of 2019. Core inflation also moderated during this period, mainly due to lower demand for some services during lockdowns.

164. This initial decline in UK inflation reversed as economic activity recovered. Headline inflation increased above 5% by the end of 2021, while it peaked above 10% by the end of 2022. Global supply disruptions pushed up prices, including higher European energy prices following conflict in Ukraine and the Middle East. Oil and gas prices increased sharply during this period. Food prices and core inflation also went up, mainly owing to the impact of higher energy costs, a further dislocation in global supply chains, and higher wage growth (reflecting an increasingly tight labour market).

165. The impact of higher prices was uneven across different types of households (ID11/77)[INQ000590538]. Households with the highest share of food and energy products in their consumer basket experienced the highest inflation rates. Our Household Costs Indices show that these typically included lower income households, retirees, social renters, and households with children. This trend subsided somewhat in 2023, when

higher interest rates superseded energy prices as the main driver of the increase in household costs, as owner-occupiers and higher income households typically have larger mortgages and pay more mortgage interest compared with other types of households.

Figure 3: Annual rate of CPI inflation, UK, 2006 to 2024



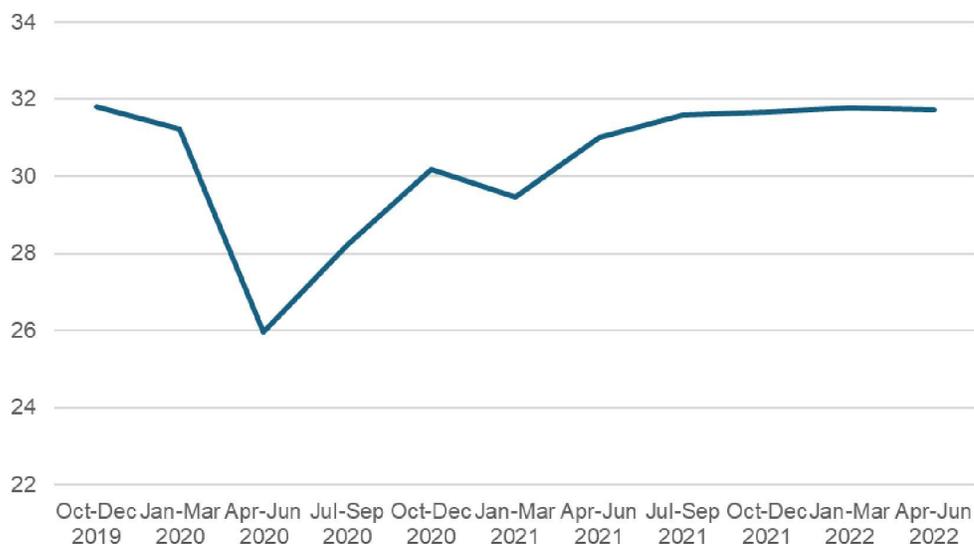
Source: *Consumer Prices Inflation, ONS*

Labour market

166. The ONS produces a wide range of monthly labour market statistics. These include employment, unemployment, economic inactivity, earnings, job vacancies and redundancies, drawing on a range of household and business surveys, as well as administrative data. In the final three months of 2019 (October to December), the employment rate was 76.4%. Over the course of 2020, employment fell as restrictions were enforced curtailing economic activity. In the final three months (October to December) of 2020, the employment rate had fallen to 74.3%. It is likely that the fall in employment would have been even greater had it not been for the large-scale support to the labour market provided by the government. The CJRS supported a total of 11.7 million employee jobs. In addition, under the SEISS, a total of 2.9 million grants were claimed by eligible self-employed individuals who in the labour market statistics remained as self-employed.

167. The pandemic had a significant impact on the composition of UK employment, with falls in self-employment and part-time employment. In the final three-months of 2020 (October to December), there were over 5 million self-employed persons in the UK labour accounting for 15.1% of total employment – one the highest rates of self-employment among advanced economies. The number of self-employed fell sharply during the coronavirus pandemic. In the three months April to June 2022, the total number of self-employed had fallen with the share of total employment decreasing to 12.8%. Part-time employment was disproportionately impacted by the coronavirus pandemic because this form of employment is more strongly concentrated in the face-to-face industries such as retailing, food and accommodation services that were adversely affected by pandemic-related restrictions.
168. The total number of hours worked in the UK labour market also fell sharply during the early phases of the pandemic. Between October to December 2019 and April to June 2020, total hours worked fell by 19.4%. This partly reflected a fall in employment, but the main factor was a significant decline in average hours worked. The CJRS stipulated that furloughed workers would be classified as employed, but temporarily away from their job, in which case their actual hours would fall to zero. It is likely that pandemic-related restrictions on activities and the sharp decline in economic activity also reduced the hours worked by those who were not part of the CJRS.
169. Average weekly working hours were 31.8 hours before the pandemic during October to December 2019. This fell to 25.9 hours during April to June 2020, while further national lockdowns in November 2020 and in January to March 2021 prevented average hours worked from fully recovering to pre-pandemic levels. In the three-month period April to June 2022 average weekly hours worked were 31.7 hours, broadly the same as before the onset of the pandemic.

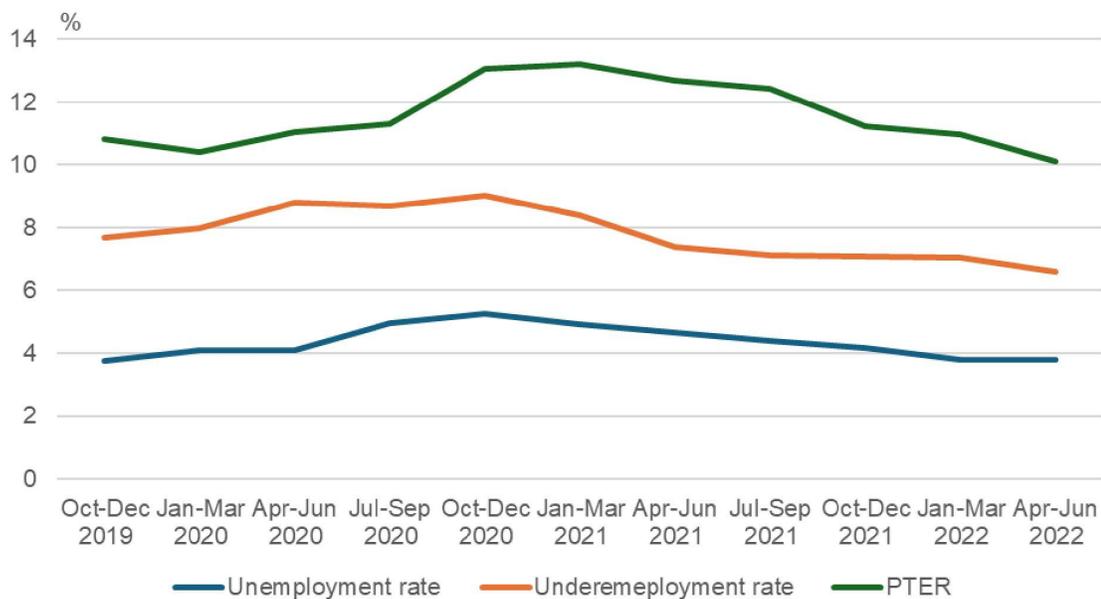
Figure 4: Average weekly hours worked, UK, 2019 to 2022



Source: Labour Force Survey, ONS

170. The impact of the coronavirus on the UK unemployment rate was relatively modest, cushioned by government employment support schemes such as the CJRS and SEISS, reduction in Bank Rate, and other emergency measures including business rates holidays, VAT payment deferrals and low interest loans. In the three-months October to December 2019, the unemployment rate was 3.7%. The peak in unemployment during the pandemic was recorded during the three-months October to December 2020, when the unemployment rate increased to 5.3%. By the time of the three-month period April to June 2022, the unemployment rate was at 3.8%. During the recession associated with the Global Financial Crisis starting in mid-2008, the unemployment rate peaked at 8.4%. It also took more than 5 years for unemployment to eventually return to its pre-crisis rate. This was despite the contraction in GDP from 2008 being much smaller than that recorded during the pandemic.

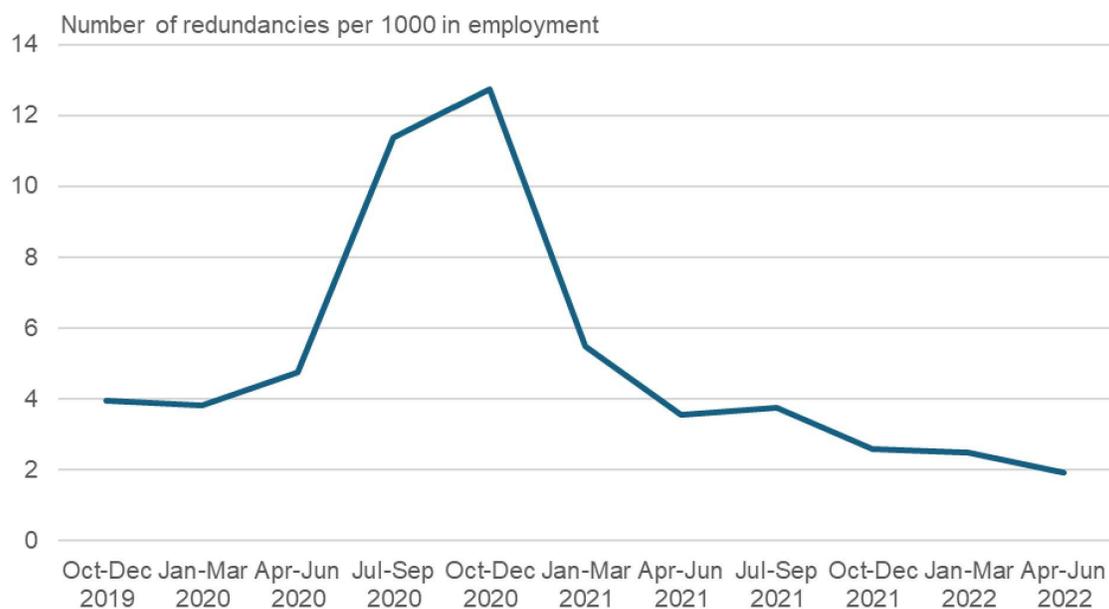
Figure 5: Unemployment and under-employment rates, UK, 2019 to 2022



Source: Labour Force Survey, ONS

171. Redundancies are a form of dismissal from a job and reflects the wish of organisations to reduce their workforce. Changes in redundancies would be expected to be reflected in the level of unemployment. There was a sharp increase in the redundancy rate during the second half of 2020, as businesses responded to the impact of pandemic-related restrictions on their activities and the sharp contraction in the economy. However, this increase in the redundancy rate was short-lived, and during the first half of 2021 fell back below the rate observed prior to the onset of the pandemic as businesses sought to hold on to labour in the face of reported recruitment difficulties and an improvement in the economic outlook. The redundancy rate peaked at 14.3 redundancies per one thousand employees in the three-month period September to November 2020. This was more pronounced than during the peak observed during the recession that coincided with the global financial crisis, which reached 12.2 redundancies per thousand employees in the three-month period February to April 2009.

Figure 6: Redundancy rate, UK, 2019 to 2022

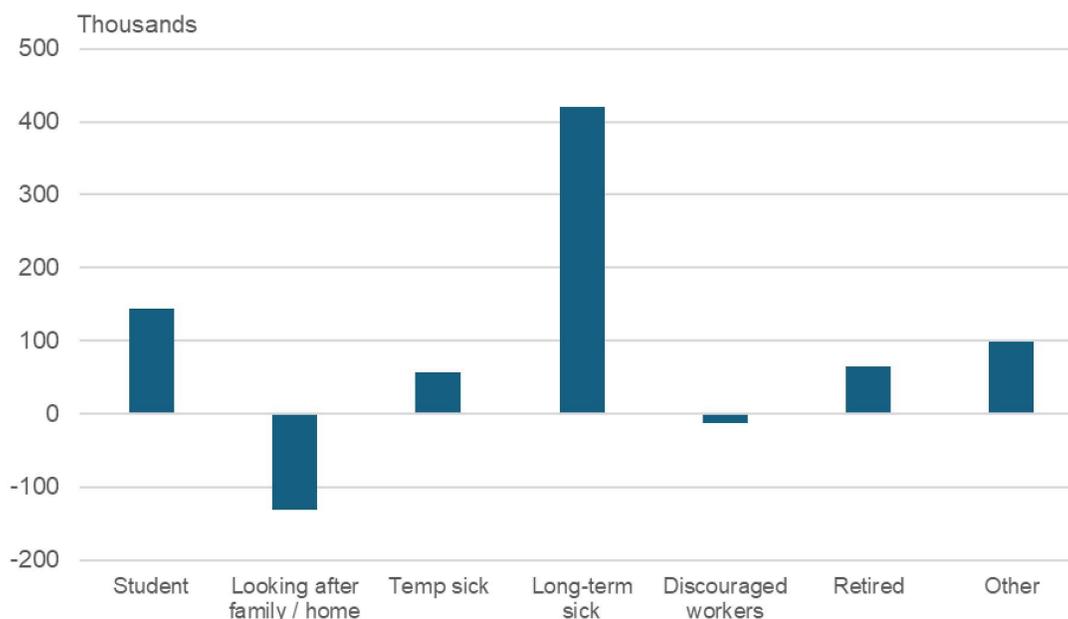


Source: Labour Force Survey, ONS

172. The impact of the pandemic on inactivity (people neither working nor seeking work) has been more significant than the impact on unemployment (people available for and seeking work)². It was also larger when compared with the movements in inactivity experienced in the Global Financial Crisis recession when the increase in the headline inactivity rate was both relatively minor and quickly reversed. In the three-months October to December 2019, the inactivity rate stood at 20.6%, corresponding to 8.6 million people. By the time of the three-month period April to June 2022, the inactivity rate had increased to 21.9%, reflecting a rise of 637,000 in the number of total inactive persons. Rising numbers of students accounted for 143,000 of the total increase, which is consistent with more younger people participating in further and higher education. The largest contributing reason for higher inactivity is an increase in “long-term sickness” which accounted for 420,000 of the total increase in inactive persons of working age.

² The ONS uses internationally agreed definitions recommended by the International Labour Organization (ILO). *Unemployed* people are without a job, have actively sought work in the last four weeks and are available to start work in the next two weeks; or are out of work, have found a job and are waiting to start it in the next two weeks. *Economically inactive* people are those without a job who have not actively sought work in the last four weeks, and/or are not available to start work in the next two weeks.

Figure 7: Change in inactivity by “reason for inactivity” between October to December 2019 and April to June 2022



Source: Labour Force Survey, ONS

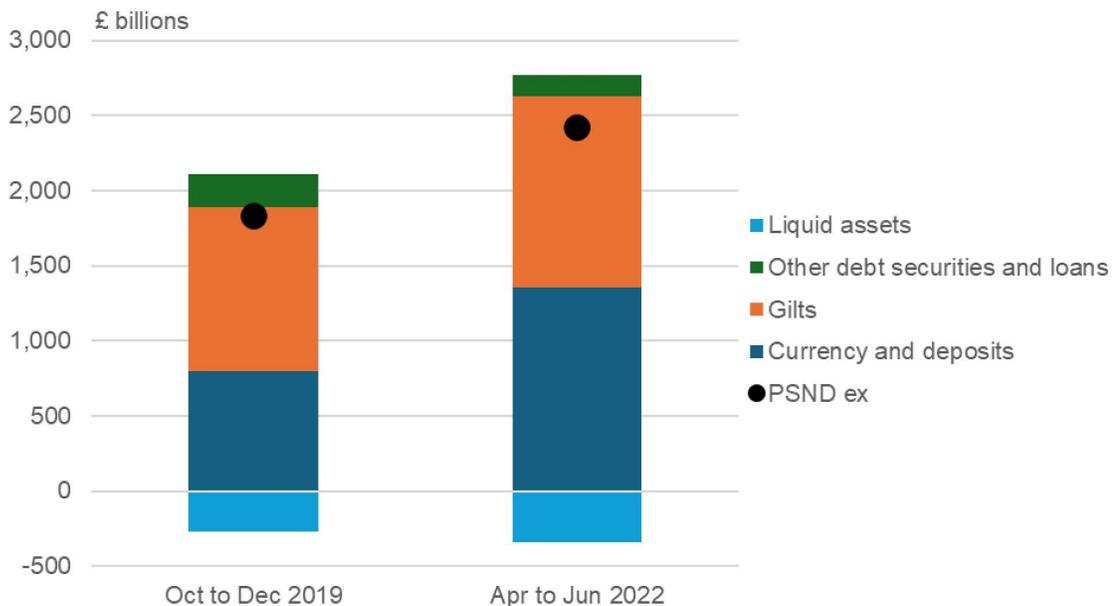
173. The ratio of the number of unemployed to the number of job vacancies (U/V) has become a widely used measure of the tightness of the labour market. Between the two three-month periods October to December 2019 and April to June 2020, the number of unemployed per vacancy increased sharply, mainly due to an abrupt fall in the number of vacancies. However, the U/V ratio then declined as vacancies increased reflecting a significant tightening in labour market conditions. According to BICS, from autumn 2021 to autumn 2022 more than 40% of UK businesses with 50 or more employees said they were experiencing a shortage of workers. Labour retention by businesses looking to avoid future recruitment difficulties of hiring skilled workers and the impact of higher inactivity on the size of the workforce may have been contributing factors to the large increase in vacancies. In the three-month period April to June 2022 the number of vacancies recorded was 1.3 million.

Public finances

174. The ONS publishes monthly public finance statistics encompassing government revenue, expenditure, debt and fiscal balance. Figure 8 shows that Public Sector Net Debt ex (PSND) at the end of the three-month period October to December 2019 was £1,837 billion (85.1% of GDP). By the end of the three-month period April to June 2022, PSND ex had increased to £2,426 billion, equivalent to 96.0% GDP. The rise in PSND ex

through the pandemic period reflects the additional borrowing required to finance the deficit between public sector spending and receipts. Additional borrowing, especially in the early stages of the pandemic, reflected both an increase in expenditure and a fall in tax receipts.

Figure 8: Public sector net debt excluding public sector banks (PSND ex)

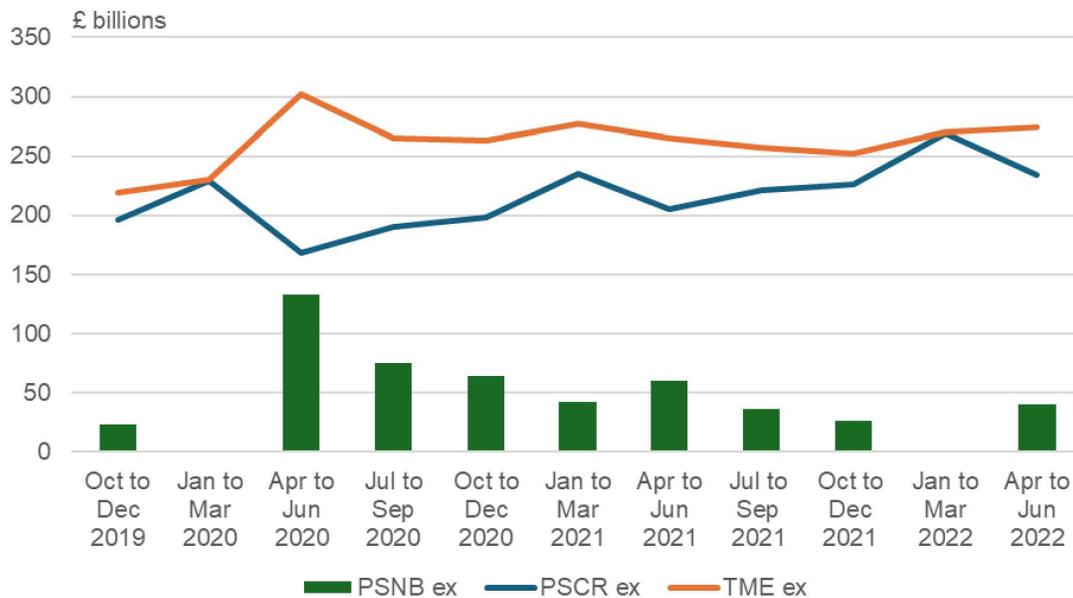


Source: *Public Sector Finances, ONS*

175. It is difficult to isolate the exact impact of the pandemic on specific items of spending and revenue. However, the total cost of providing support to the labour market through two major schemes amounted to nearly £100 billion of which:
- a. CJRS which subsidised the employment cost of furloughed workers. A total of 11.7 million jobs were supported by the scheme during its operation, with the cost to the public sector finances adding to £68.6 billion.
 - b. SEISS which provided grants to 1.9 million eligible self-employed persons with a total cost of £28.1 billion.
176. The government also provided loan guarantee schemes to businesses via the British Business Bank through the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme, the Coronavirus Large Business Interruption Loan Scheme, and the Bounce Back Loan Scheme. These were estimated to increase Total Managed Expenditure by around £20.1 billion. Another important government measure that contributed directly, rather than via

net borrowing, to the rise in public sector debt was the extension to the Term Funding Scheme to small- and medium-sized business (TFSME). This provided four-year funding at or close to the Bank Rate to eligible businesses which added over £45 billion to PSND ex.

Figure 9: Public sector net borrowing (PSNB ex) as the difference between Total Managed Expenditure (TME ex) and Public Sector Current Receipts (PSCR ex)



Source: *Public Sector Finances, ONS*

177. Although the pandemic-induced increase in public sector debt is significant, the overall impact was far less severe from the point of the view of the public sector finances than the recession that coincided with the global financial crisis. This resulted in the debt share of GDP more than doubling because of high government borrowing and the cost of recapitalising several major financial institutions. At the end of the financial year 2007 to 2008 PSND ex was 35.6% of GDP but increased to 81.6% of GDP by the end of the financial year 2014 to 2015.

Measurement challenges

178. The pandemic presented both conceptual and practical barriers to our normal approaches to measuring the UK economy, discussed in more detail at paragraph 122.

179. A significant practical challenge for the collection of economic data was a sharp fall in survey response rates, a long-term trend that rapidly accelerated during and after the pandemic period. This challenge was faced by NSIs around the world. There has

therefore been an increase in the volatility of our LFS estimates, resulting from smaller achieved sample sizes. This has led to some uncertainty as to movements in the labour market, including changes in employment, unemployment, and economic inactivity. Estimates of change should be treated with additional caution, where we recommend using them as part of our suite of labour market indicators.

180. When safe to do so, the ONS worked to re-establish face-to-face survey data collection. By 2023, it was evident that household survey response rates were persistently lower than they had been pre-pandemic. This harmed the quality of the statistics derived from the survey, resulting in the temporary suspension of the LFS as a source of labour market data in October 2023. We have introduced the LFS Recovery Plan to restore the quality of its estimates.

International comparisons

181. The ONS conducted international comparisons on various topics, publishing articles looking at economic indicators from other countries. These related to:

- a. GDP (1 February 2021) (ID11/64)[INQ000252690]
- b. Labour markets (6 June 2022) (ID11/79)[INQ000590540]
- c. Global inflation (22 November 2022) (ID11/80)[INQ000590541]
- d. Purchasing power of GDP (8 February 2023) (ID11/81)[INQ000590542]
- e. Non-market output (21 February 2022) (ID11/82)[INQ000590543]
- f. Productivity (20 January 2022 and 11 January 2023) (ID11/83)[INQ000590544]
(ID11/83)[INQ000590544]

Long Covid

182. ONS statistics on self-reported Long Covid were developed from the Covid-19 Infection Survey (CIS) with the general aim of estimating the population prevalence of the condition. Beyond this general aim, the statistics were not developed with any specific use in mind; they could be used for a variety of purposes, including understanding the potential impact of Long Covid on the labour market and broader economic modelling. To facilitate such usage, we published monthly estimates of the population prevalence of self-reported Long Covid (ID11/85)[INQ000590545] broken down by employment sector (Tables 4-6 of the dataset), and by employment sector and degree of activity limitation due to Long Covid (Table 10 of the dataset).

183. We also conducted research using the CIS data (ID11/86)[INQ000590546] demonstrating that in people with self-reported Long Covid, there was an increased risk of economic inactivity 30-52 weeks post-infection and long-term workplace absence 18-30 weeks post-infection compared with pre-infection. This translates to an estimated

27,000 working-age adults in the UK being economically inactive because of Long Covid in July 2022.

184. We are not aware of any specific ways in which our data and analysis on Long Covid were used to inform the economic response to the pandemic.

Long-term impact of the pandemic

185. Our economic statistics remain relevant to informing understanding of the long-term economic impact of the pandemic. A number of our statistics, including employment, GDP, and inflation have long time series and pre-pandemic trends can be considered alongside more recent statistics to help understand the long-term impact.

186. We modified our usual methods of measurement of the education sector (as set out in *Coronavirus and the impact on measures of UK government education output*), (ID11/87)[INQ000590547] measuring both the differences in the learning materials covered by remote learners compared with in-school learners and the dependence of the learning received by remote learners on the input of parents or guardians. This enabled us to account for differences in the quantity of education delivered to remote learners relative to in-school learners and discount for unpaid parental input which falls outside of the national accounts production boundary. Analysis of remote learning was published in September 2021 (ID11/88)[INQ000590548].

187. From March 2020, the OPN was adapted to become a weekly survey collecting data on the impact of Covid-19 on day to day life. Through the Covid-19 Taskforce, the Cabinet Office were the primary users of the data, and the ONS consulted with a wide range of other government departments on a regular basis as it developed questions for the survey. The OPN also allowed the ONS to provide a comparison of life satisfaction scores throughout the pandemic period (ID11/89)[INQ000271407]. The flexibility of the OPN survey enabled us to add questions relating to topics of interest. For example, the survey included a question on if/when respondents thought life would return to normal. In a module on household finances, we asked respondents whether they expected to save money in the next 12-months.

188. Similarly, the BICS survey included questions about adapting to working from home as a permanent business model and the general expectations of the business welfare in the future and comparisons to business operations pre-pandemic.

Lessons learned

189. Teams across the ONS routinely reflect on their outputs and ways of working in an informal manner to ensure that they meet our organisational strategic goal to deliver

statistics for the public good. Since January 2020, ONS colleagues have conducted or been involved with work reflecting on both the role and work of the ONS and GSS during the pandemic, and those specifically relating economic statistics are listed in this return. In addition, we have contributed to Parliamentary Select Committee inquiries relating to economic statistics during the pandemic and have engaged with lessons learned reviews written by the OSR.

190. Reflections that took place across the ONS to consider our work during the pandemic, including production and dissemination of economic statistics, were summarised in a response to a Cabinet Office commission in April 2022. This sought to capture innovations during the pandemic period. Our return to Cabinet Office is exhibited (ID11/89)[INQ000130462] as part of this statement.

191. Most notably, it highlights that in November 2020, then Deputy National Statistician Jonathan Athow and Economic Statistics Directors Grant Fitzner and Darren Morgan brought a paper '*Economic Statistics: Lessons Learned from the Pandemic*' to NSEG which highlighted lessons learned covering the areas of prioritisation, speed and flexibility, 'core' statistical production and analysis. The overall conclusion of that paper was that: "*Overall, the response from across economic statistics has been positive. There is a great opportunity to keep the positives in terms of flexibility and a one-ONS approach. But we need to keep on top of the risks to our statistics.*"

Reflections and recommendations

192. Looking back on the use of ONS economic statistics during the pandemic, the principal lesson I offer to the Inquiry is the importance of investing in advance in high quality data, and in systems and people that can adapt quickly in a crisis. The cost of maintaining this capacity is not trivial, but should be considered alongside the very great costs of a response to a major crisis.

193. Almost by definition, any civil emergency or crisis will have a significant economic impact. The response to a crisis inevitably depends on a decent statistical understanding of the macroeconomic conditions and the behaviour of households, businesses, and government. Sufficient resource is required to build up granularity and agility in normal times, otherwise it can be very difficult to scale up at pace to meet the needs of a crisis. I am very proud of how statisticians and analysts across government 'stepped up' to produce novel economic indicators during the Covid-19 pandemic but, unless we prepare, it is not reasonable to assume that it will always be possible to do this from scratch in any future crisis. Current ONS work which will improve this kind of resilience includes our development of methods to produce inflation statistics directly from

supermarket sales ('scanner') data, and our transformed labour market survey, which collects responses online.

194. A capability which proved indispensable during the pandemic was the ability of the ONS to conduct and scale up to ad hoc surveys, allowing us to collect, via BICS and OPN, information from businesses and households on questions which we could not have known in advance that we would need. Sitting as they do outside of the production process for regular statistics on traditional topics, it is challenging to provide ongoing resources for these flexible surveys. However, I consider this spending an investment in the ongoing ability of the ONS to respond to unknown shocks.
195. Another example of an investment in the ONS which paid dividends during the Covid-19 pandemic is the improvement of in-house data science resource in the Data Science Campus, which was created in response to the 2016 Bean Review. Staff from the Campus were able to address data gaps (for example, their very swift and open-source work on web-scraping Google Maps mobility data) using skills that the ONS could not have reliably called upon before.
196. The ONS benefitted from data sharing from both other Government departments, such as HMRC, and private data, such as financial transactions data. Some of these relationships have endured and allowed the ONS to continue receiving useful data. Other data sources, for example weekly Universal Credit management information from the Department for Work and Pensions, have ceased to flow to the ONS. It would be useful to maintain much of this data sharing outside of emergencies, that we might be better prepared for them.

Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR)

197. The OSR's 'rapid reviews' of statistical outputs during the pandemic were a timely and valuable source of assurance to users and feedback for producers like the ONS. These reviews would be most helpful in any future crisis, alongside the usual regulatory activity of the OSR.
198. I highlight this work for the awareness of the Inquiry. The OSR has its own governance arrangements and operates independently of the National Statistician and the ONS. As the Authority's separate regulatory arm, the OSR reports directly to the Authority Board and its Regulation Committee.

Future readiness

199. There is a broad programme of work currently being undertaken in the ONS to reinforce and expand crisis preparation and capability, both internally and by providing leadership across the Analysis Function. This includes working closely with the National

Situation Centre (SitCen) embedded within the Cabinet Office to develop our resilience to each of the risks identified within the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) and support cross-government workshops on data relating to these risks, including those on emergent human and animal diseases. This is to make sure the ONS' analytical and operational machinery can respond to a crisis, and that data is at the centre of HMG crisis response. Outputs have included guidance for data sharing in crisis, published in August 2023 (ID11/90)[INQ000590553]. Preparation includes:

- a. high-level analysis plans based on NSRA risks
- b. operational plans to coordinate analytical response
- c. capability building and engagement across the organisation
- d. strengthening relationships with key stakeholders in other government departments, including provisions for a 'crisis surge team' of ONS analysts available to SitCen at short notice

200. The ONS has been working to improve resilience across government primarily through supporting the Resilience Framework's goal of 'using data to better embed risk in decision making'. There is now a dedicated central team within the ONS Analytical Hub with responsibility for crisis and resilience. Internally, a dedicated central team within the ONS Analytical Hub have worked on identifying ONS data sources that would provide insights relating to risks listed on the NSRA, and prepared analytical plans for where emergent risks might require rapid response from the ONS and the government analytical community. These plans have been used to support crisis response and preparation in recent years, with the ONS and its data regularly being called upon in ways which would have been rare prior to the pandemic. The ONS works closely with SitCen in supporting their broader data strategy work, helping to coordinate workshops and map cross-government data holdings, for example on population densities of vulnerable groups.

201. Externally, the ONS works to build capability through relationships with SitCen, the Analysis Function, GO Science, and other networks such as the Social and Behavioural Science for Emergencies group (SBS-E). Analysts and policy officials within the Analytical Hub provide flexible resource to resilience-related work in other departments. The SBS-E is supported by a working group, where the ONS provides technical advice and regularly leads workstreams, for example on recommendations for government communications about panic buying of consumer goods during emergencies.

202. The ONS and SitCen lead a cross-govt network of 'Data Liaison Officers', designated analytical contacts in government departments who can help feed data from their department into SitCen to support joined up responses in crisis situations, which may

depend on a wide range of sources to gain a full picture of the impacts and operational awareness. Working with them, in August 2023 we published guidance covering principles and best practice for sharing data, analysis, and statistics between government organisations in times of national crisis and to meet urgent operational need

(ID11/90)[INQ000590553]

This brings together in one place various pieces of existing best practice guidance, including the Code of Practice for Statistics, interpreted in the context of national emergencies. This guide helps analysts prepare for crises, assess what and when to share, how to quality assure data, and how to comply with handling restrictions and legislation. The principles highlighted in the guidance and the broader importance of data in emergencies have been disseminated in several forums, including through the COBR Unit's Crisis Management Excellence Programme.

203. The ONS has established a 'Crisis Surge Team' of analysts who can be moved to work in SitCen at short notice during a crisis response, expanding the capacity of central government crisis response. Members of the Team receive regular training and mentoring from SitCen counterparts, and are set up in advance with the IT equipment and analytical tools necessary to support the creation of briefing material. Following a successful pilot, the second cohort of analysts has been recruited for training in Spring 2025. The programme has resulted in greater resourcing resilience for SitCen as well as ensuring that the ONS has a pool of experienced analysts with the skills and training to support the organisation in a future crisis.
204. As part of work with the cross-government Pandemic Disease Capabilities Board, the ONS has reviewed its capability during a pandemic scenario to analyse the impacts of behaviour changes in various populations. The future analytical response would look to replicate and improve on the experiences from the Covid-19 pandemic including standing up new bespoke surveys (subject to resource and funding), acquiring new data feeds for timely data, and expanding and adapting existing surveys to meet data gaps.
205. In terms of providing international leadership on pandemic surveillance, the ONS has a five-year project to produce a Pandemic Preparedness Toolkit, a resource working with other NSIs, particularly in low and middle-income countries to effectively monitor their health data. Once live, the Toolkit will be a collection of resources to provide practical guidance, statistical methods, knowledge products, case studies, and training materials. All these aspects will help NSIs conducting infectious disease surveillance or enable them to provide strong support to the public health institutions who undertake surveillance. Our main aim with the Toolkit is to collaborate with lower and middle-income countries to build capability in tracking endemic conditions, novel emerging pathogens and escalating infectious diseases. In supporting international management of infectious

diseases, we contribute to the protection of our own citizens. The final Toolkit will be freely accessible, usable and sustainable, meaning all interested parties will be able to benefit from its resources. Sharing combined expertise in health statistics, survey design, data governance, and statistical leadership, this Toolkit will strengthen NSI capacities to support and link to their national health surveillance efforts, making an important contribution to the pandemic preparedness in each country and collectively.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed:

Personal Data

Dated: 24/04/2025