Using Administrative Payroll Data to Improve Official Labour Market Statistics in the UK

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Submission for the Innovations in Measuring Employment Conference
17-18 September, Washington, DC

Abstract:

In this paper we outline the features of a new and comprehensive linked employer-employee dataset (LEED) for the UK which links administrative payroll data from HM Revenue & Customs' (HMRC) Pay As You Earn (PAYE) system with information from the UK's business register, the Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR). This dataset enables the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to track all payrolled employees in the UK across the organisational units in which they are employed, on a monthly basis, from 2014 to 2025. We develop a methodology to align payroll reporting schemes with the statistical reporting structures used in official business surveys and use this approach to assess the coherence between administrative data and survey-based measures of the ONS's headline estimates of employment and earnings. We additionally set out an evidence-based framework for progressively integrating administrative data into the production of labour market statistics.

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Acknowledgements:

Any views expressed are solely those of the author(s) and cannot be taken to represent those of the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Bryson and Forth gratefully acknowledge funding from the Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence (ESCoE) Research Program.

Conflict of interest statement: The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

1 Introduction

The UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) is undertaking a major transformation program for its labour market statistics in response to the operational and methodological challenges that emerged during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (ONS, 2025a).

An important driver of this programme has been the downward pressure on response rates across household surveys. This challenge has been further exacerbated by a long period of disinvestment in core survey operations which has impacted the ONS' ability to maintain data collection teams, replace legacy systems and re-evaluate survey designs across both household and business surveys (ONS, 2025b). Together, these issues have placed increasing pressure on the robustness and representativeness of survey-based estimates. In the case of the Labour Force Survey (LFS), concerns about the quality of the underlying microdata resulted in the temporary suspension of the LFS estimates in October 2023. While dissemination of LFS estimates has since resumed, and there are signs of a gradual recovery in the quality of ONS' economic statistics across the board (Benford, 2026), the episode underscored the structural vulnerabilities associated with a continued reliance on traditional survey instruments.

In light of this situation, the ONS has identified the need to develop more resilient and sustainable approaches for assessing, assuring, and maintaining the quality of its labour market outputs. This imperative is articulated through strategic programmes, including the Economic Statistics Plan (ONS, 2025a), the Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan (ONS, 2025b), and the Labour Market Transformation Programme (ONS, 2025c), which collectively set out a framework for the modernisation of labour market statistics. These initiatives emphasise an increased reliance on administrative and alternative data sources, improved integration of administrative data with existing survey instruments, and strengthened quality-assurance and coherence-assessment processes.

A central component of this transformation is the strategic use of administrative payroll information collected by HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) through employers' real-time submissions (PAYE RTI). This data provides comprehensive coverage of UK employee jobs and is available at high frequency from 2014 onwards. It captures detailed information on employment spells, earnings, tax liabilities, and social contribution or pension deductions, providing a rich and timely source of insight into labour market activity. Crucially, it is not subject to the response-rate pressures or fieldwork constraints that affect survey data.

The integration of this administrative data into the labour market statistical systems will play a critical role in improving existing survey-based outputs. Particularly, it will enhance the capacity of the ONS to identify potential quality issues, support more informed sampling and weighting decisions, and provide a benchmark against which survey estimates can be validated. Beyond this, administrative payroll data will enable the development of novel labour market indicators that do not rely on survey data collection, thereby offering a potential route to more stable and cost-effective measurement.

Such administrative data, will also contribute to the production of the Labour Accounts under the updated System of National Accounts (SNA), strengthening the coherence between labour market statistics and the wider national accounts framework.

The creation of an initial UK LEED, linking the UK's tax payroll system to the UK's business register, marks an important first step in strengthening the national labour market data infrastructure. This dataset will both enhance existing labour market outputs through improved quality assurance and

coherence assessment and provide a valuable resource for new and innovative research across labour market and related domains.

In this paper, we discuss the role of LEED within the ONS' transformation program for labour market statistics. We outline the features of the LEED data and discuss the way in which LEED is currently feeding into two high-profile coherence workstreams within the ONS. Finally, we go on to outline a framework that is intended to inform wider discussions about the effective use of administrative data in the production of economic and social statistics.

Our paper contributes to debates about how administrative data can support improvements in official statistics. It does so by showing how payroll data can improve business survey-based measures of employment and earnings, and by exploring how these data can be integrated into the process of producing official employment statistics more generally.

1.1 Relevance to the US context

The situation in the UK shares a number of common points with the US experience. The PAYE RTI payroll data that form the basis of our LEED have many similarities with the administrative data collated by the US Census Bureau and used by the Bureau of Labour Statistics to generate the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW). The dataset we have compiled also has much in common with the Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) dataset which provides the basis for the Census Bureau's Quarterly Workforce Indicators and Job-to-Job Flows estimates.

However, the recent UK experience also offers some specific insights. Principally, the value of harmonised data collection in contrast to the fragmented landscape in the US, where administrative employment and earnings records are collated via the state-level Unemployment Insurance (UI) wage reporting system. In the US context, coverage of UI can vary by state due to differences in state-level legislation (US Department of Labor, 2023), leading to inconsistencies in the types of employment activity that are measured across areas. States' filings also vary in their completeness - which we understand to be partly due to state-level variation in the cadence of data collection – leading to a need for short-term imputation and subsequent benchmark revisions. Finally, the processing time required to collate and harmonise data from across the 50 states delays the speed with which insights can be obtained. QCEW estimates are usually published with a lag of 6-7 months. In the UK, the ONS (working with HMRC) is able to acquire and process harmonised data from across the UK in relatively short order, publishing employment and earnings estimates within 1-2 months of the reference period (see ONS, 2026c). This also enables the administrative data to contribute promptly to the calibration of other measurement activities, such as the Short-Term Employment Survey.

The use of a single, country-wide data collection approach has some limitations. In particular, it is likely more difficult to innovate the approach to data collection in a nationwide system, when compared with a decentralised system in which individual states have scope to experiment with incremental enhancements (see Evermore and Raderman, 2026). Enhancements such as the collection of occupation data or more detailed hours information have been discussed in the UK but innovation has been very limited thus far.

As a result of these commonalities and differences, the UK experience add an alternative perspective to current US debates about how payroll data may be effectively leveraged for statistical purposes (Groeshen et al, 2022; Yeyati et al, 2025).

2 The motivation for developing LEED

At present, labour market statistics draw on a combination of household surveys, such as the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and its transformed successor (TLFS), business surveys such as the Short Term Employment Survey (STES) and Monthly Wages and Salaries Survey (MWSS), and some administrative sources. While each source provides valuable insights, differences in concepts, coverage, timing, and measurement can give rise to inconsistencies both within and across published outputs. Reconciling these sources, validating changes over time, and maintaining coherence across the labour market system has therefore become increasingly complex, underscoring the need for a more integrated and resilient data infrastructure.

Against this backdrop, the development of a LEED is a critical strategic response to these challenges. By linking administrative payroll data at the individual level to firm-level information from the UK's business register, LEED provides a consistent, longitudinal framework that jointly captures workers, jobs, and employers. This integrated perspective enables forms of validation, coherence checking, and analysis that are difficult or impossible when worker-based and firm-based sources are considered in isolation.

LEED has the potential to address several well-known measurement challenges associated with the LFS and business surveys capturing information on employment and earnings. Administrative payroll data provide high-frequency information on employment spells, allowing more precise measurement of short-duration jobs, overlapping employments, and job-to-job movements. These aspects of labour market dynamics are often difficult to capture accurately in surveys due to recall error, limited sample sizes for specific transitions, and variation in how respondents interpret and report employment activity. By providing an administrative benchmark, LEED can therefore help strengthen the measurement of labour market dynamics and the ONS's ability to communicate labour market conditions.

Beyond improving measurement, LEED also offers a robust longitudinal benchmark for validating survey-based estimates. By comparing employment counts or earnings distributions calculated using surveys with those derived from administrative records, LEED can help identify potential misreporting, misclassification, or timing issues. For example, discrepancies between changes in employment reported in business surveys and those observed in administrative payroll data may point to reporting errors or structural business changes, while unusual wage movements identified in survey data can be assessed against administrative payroll dynamics. Together, these validation and coherence-checking exercises demonstrate how LEED can strengthen the reliability of survey outputs and improve the overall quality and coherence of labour market statistics.

The coherence work underway at ONS is instrumental in determining how LEED can most effectively support this endeavour. It will inform the appropriate positioning of LEED across a spectrum of complementary roles, including use in tandem with existing approaches to enhance validation and calibration, as well as targeted supplementary applications such as selective variable replacement where this adds robustness or efficiency.

Despite these advantages, the UK's LEED data infrastructure has historically been more limited than that of several comparator countries, where linked employer–employee datasets have been embedded within both statistical production and research for many years (Forth et al, 2025).

Recognising this gap, the ONS has collaborated closely with academic partners through the Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence (ESCoE), to develop and evaluate a UK LEED prototype.

The development of LEED is also clearly aligned with the ONS's current Plan for Economic Statistics (ONS, 2025a), which emphasises the integration of administrative and survey data to improve labour market reporting. LEED supports this objective by enabling more systematic integration of data sources and providing an empirical basis for assessing where administrative data can enhance or partially replace survey-based estimates. In doing so, LEED contributes to the longer-term ambition of developing labour market accounts that provide a comprehensive and coherent picture of the UK labour market, using an optimal balance of survey and administrative data.

3 LEED at the ONS

The protype Linked Employer–Employee Dataset (LEED) we present in this paper is created by linking information on workers paid via Pay as You Earn (PAYE) schemes with information on the organisations paying these employees from the UK's Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR).

Pay as You Earn (PAYE) represents the system through which the UK's tax authority (HMRC) collects information about earnings, tax, National Insurance contributions (NICs) and occupational pensions from employers. In the 2013/14 tax year, HMRC introduced the Real Time Information (RTI) system which ensures any information about tax and other deductions is transmitted to HMRC every time an employee is paid. This gives near real-time insight into the employment and earnings of all payrolled employees in the UK.

For businesses, the Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR) represents a comprehensive list of UK businesses and is used as a sampling frame for business surveys across the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and government. It covers all businesses which are VAT and/or PAYE registered and is therefore said to only cover the registered business economy.

To inform the link between IDBR enterprises and PAYE schemes, we use the Longitudinal Business Database (LBD) (Lemma et al, 2023). The LBD is a set of longitudinal data spines built using consecutive snapshots of the IDBR, which contains information on the longitudinal link between enterprises and their associated PAYE schemes. When linked, these two components give us the ability to track all payrolled employees in the UK across the enterprise units paying them, on a monthly basis, between 2014 and 2025.

At this stage, LEED does not yet include information on self-employment due to the lag associated with individual filings under the UK's Self-Assessment (SA) system for reporting self-employed income. Future versions of LEED will operate on an annual basis with more comprehensive coverage of income sources beyond employee earnings. This will support the production of the UK's Labour Account, extending the use of LEED beyond operational purposes which are better suited to the high-frequency RTI payroll data.

4 Improving existing labour market statistics

At the ONS, LEED is currently feeding into two high-profile coherence workstreams. The first looks at the UK's Short Term Employment Surveys (STES) which underpin the employee jobs private sector component of the ONS's quarterly workforce jobs estimates (ONS, 2026b). The second covers the Monthly Wages and Salaries Survey (MWSS) which is used to derive the UK's headline Average Weekly Earnings estimates (ONS, 2026c). Generally, these coherence workstreams can be viewed as attempts to assess the extent to which administrative data can be used to replicate and quality assure data collected by business surveys.

The Short-Term Employment Surveys (STES) are three statutory, quarterly surveys of private sector businesses: the Monthly Business Survey (MBS), Quarterly Business Survey (QBS), and Construction Survey (CON). The surveys ask businesses for their number of employees (male/female/full-time/part-time) on a specified date (the first Friday after the second Thursday of March, June, September or December). Online questionnaires are sent to a sample of approximately 37,000 businesses each quarter. The combined surveys cover all sectors of the private sector economy and all industries in England, Scotland and Wales (Great Britain) with the exception of 'agriculture, forestry and fishing' and 'private households'. Data for Northern Ireland businesses are collected independently by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) via the Quarterly Employment Survey and are not available for use in this project.

The Monthly Wages and Salaries Survey (MWSS) is the main source of information for two key indicators of Short-Term Earnings generated by the ONS: the Average Earnings Index and Average Weekly Earnings. The MWSS is distributed monthly to approximately 9000 businesses and covers around 12.8 million employees. Companies are required to respond under the Statistics of Trade Act 1947 although, inevitably, some do not. Businesses are selected from the Inter-Departmental Business Register. Every company with more than 1,000 employees is surveyed. Sampling is random for businesses with fewer than 1,000 employees. The MWSS does not sample businesses with fewer than 20 employees, instead an adjustment factor is applied, at the industry level, to account for small firms in the final AWE estimates. The self-employed and government-supported trainees are also not surveyed.

STES and MWSS are employer surveys, so LEED enables a coherence analysis to be undertaken by linking businesses to employee-level payroll data. For STES, LEED can help identify cases where employment changes reported in the STES differ from administrative PAYE returns, pointing to potential misreporting or misclassification in the STES. For MWSS, linking to PAYE earnings data helps flag unusual wage movements in the MWSS and confirm whether they reflect actual payroll dynamics. Together, these exercises provide an evidence base from which the ONS will choose how LEED will be used to improve the coherence and reliability of survey outputs and to strengthen the overall quality of labour market statistics.

5 Aligning administrative and survey data

Within the UK's business register, an enterprise is described as the smallest combination of legal units which has a degree of autonomy within a wider enterprise group. These legal units are informed by administrative records from Companies House (CH), Value Added Tax (VAT) and PAYE.

For the purpose of statistical reporting, enterprises will be made up of one or more reporting units. These reporting units represent the observation unit of the firm and are used for the purpose of sampling in the majority of business surveys, including STES and MWSS.

Within an enterprise, PAYE schemes should always be attached to a single enterprise (aside from a small number of pooled PAYE Schemes allowed by HMRC). For enterprises with only one reporting unit, their PAYE scheme(s) will align exactly with the coverage of the reporting unit, making the assessment of coherence between the survey and administrative data relatively simple. However, for more complex enterprises with multiple reporting units, we must apportion individuals within PAYE schemes to specific reporting units so that administrative payroll data can be aligned with information reported in business surveys. An example of a simple and complex business structure is given in figure 1 and 2 respectively.

Figure 1: Simple business structure

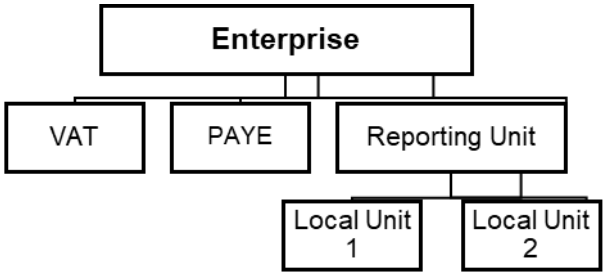
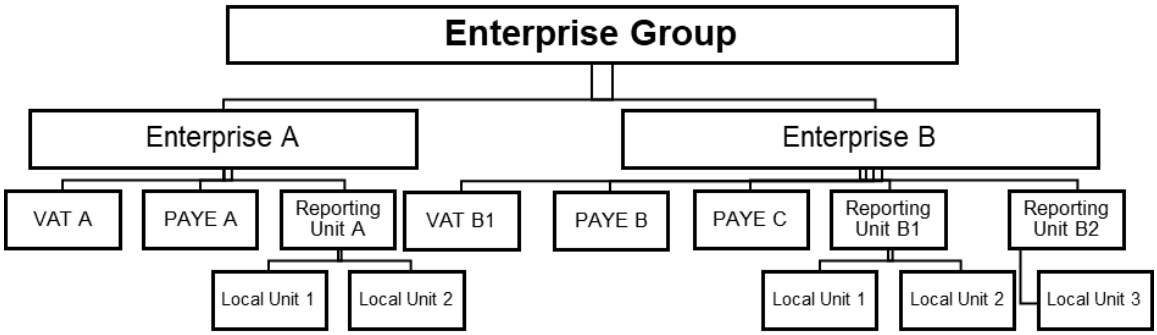


Figure 2: Complex business structure



To align administrative data on workers received at the PAYE scheme level, with the reporting unit structure used in survey reporting, we implement two apportioning methods. The first represents our baseline approach in which we aggregate all information on employment and earnings in LEED to the enterprise level and then apply an assumed reporting unit employment share which is derived from the Business Register Employment Survey (BRES). Initial coherence work, outlined below in more detail, shows that for business surveys, this baseline method works well and closely mirrors what specific reporting units report on surveys, albeit with less accuracy than in the case of simple business structures.

Our more involved apportionment method looks to apportion individuals to employment sites based on the employee's residential location. This approach is necessary because, in enterprises with multiple local units (employment sites), the PAYE data do not identify the local unit at which the employee is based. To achieve the apportionment, we implement a Minimum Cost Flow Assignment which assigns individuals to local units based on the Euclidean (straight line) distance between prospective sites and the employees home address. When assigning individuals, we constrain so that the number of employees we expect to be assigned to each site and we additionally optimise so that, at the enterprise level, the total distance travelled is minimised across all workers. We then use the local unit to reporting unit structure contained in the IDBR to assign workers to their corresponding reporting unit. This approach builds on a similar apportioning methodology developed for the construction of the US Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) dataset (see Abowd et al, 2005: 174-179). This second, more involved approach to apportionment is particularly important for future work in which we need to assign individual workers to the activities of reporting units.

6 Coherence Results

Due to ONS publication rules, we are unable to share pre-publication outputs until they are also available to the wider public. However, the underlying outputs and methodologies are set to be published within the coming months and will therefore be available to present in September 2026. Below, we provide a high-level descriptive summary of our coherence results to indicate what we will be able to present at the conference:

6.1 Short Term Employment Surveys

- Employee Jobs (EJ) estimates derived from LEED closely track those produced from STES in terms of overall trends. There is, however, a small and consistent level difference, with LEED producing marginally higher aggregate estimates of the number of employee jobs.

- Initial analysis shows that adjusting LEED job estimates using worker start and end dates improves alignment with the "point-in-time" reporting period used in STES.

- This high level of coherence is observed for both simple enterprises and multi-reporting unit enterprises, where a basic apportionment method is applied.

- At the firm level, differences between LEED-based EJ estimates and those reported in STES are approximately normally distributed around zero, with a slight bias towards higher administrative (LEED-based) estimates.

- Derived estimates of male and female employee jobs follow a pattern similar to total job estimates, with LEED accurately replicating the male/female splits reported in the STES survey.

- LEED is less able to replicate the part-time/full-time breakdown from STES due to the absence of hours information in PAYE RTI data. Further work is planned to incorporate data from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) to calibrate adjustments based on observable characteristics and pay information.

- Overall, early coherence analysis indicates that LEED is well suited for operational use in the quality assurance, validation, and non-response evaluation of STES responses and the derived EJ estimates.

6.2 Monthly Wages and Salaries Survey

- Average Weekly Earnings (AWE), on a total pay basis, can be broadly replicated using LEED. However, limited information within PAYE RTI relating to bonuses and arrears means that replicating all AWE components under identical definitions is less feasible.

- The high level of coherence observed between MWSS and LEED holds for both simple enterprises and multi-reporting unit enterprises, where a basic apportionment approach is applied.

- At the firm level, differences between LEED-based AWE estimates and AWE reported in MWSS are approximately normally distributed around zero, with no clear bias towards either data source. At the aggregate level, these differences largely cancel out.

- Overall, early coherence analysis indicates that LEED is well suited for operational use in the quality assurance, validation, and non-response evaluation of MWSS responses and the derived AWE estimates.

7 Implementing administrative data in the production of statistics

The increasing availability, coverage, and quality of administrative data present national statistical institutes with significant opportunities to enhance the production of labour market statistics. Realising these benefits, however, requires careful integration of administrative sources into established survey-based systems, with close attention to conceptual coherence, data quality, and overall fitness for statistical purpose.

Building on the successful coherence exercise described above, this section sets out a spectrum of options for the practical use of the Longitudinal Employer–Employee Data (LEED) in the production of employee jobs (EJ) and Average Weekly Earnings (AWE) statistics (see Figure 3). These options range from maintaining the current survey only approach, through incremental and low-risk operational uses of administrative data, to more substantive integration. At each stage, coherence research provides the empirical evidence required to support operational decision-making, ensuring that increasing reliance on administrative data strengthens rather than undermines statistical quality. We expand on each of the options below.

Figure 3: A framework of options for implementing administrative data in statistics production



7.1 Do nothing

At one end of the spectrum is the option of "doing nothing", whereby both the Short-Term Employment Survey (STES) and the Monthly Wages and Salaries Survey (MWSS) continue to operate as standalone business surveys, with no operational use of administrative data in the production process. While this option carries no implementation risk, it forgoes the efficiency, resilience, and analytical gains demonstrated by the coherence analysis.

7.2 Production of New Statistics

An early and low-risk application of LEED is the production of new, complementary statistics that sit alongside existing survey outputs, rather than directly intervening in their production.

For STES, LEED offers the potential to publish ad-hoc EJ estimates at finer industry or firm-size breakdowns where survey coverage is limited. In addition, LEED enables the production of new flow-based measures, such as hires, separations, and worker mobility between firms, which would enhance interpretation of changes in EJ.

For MWSS, worker-level administrative data allow more granular analysis of AWE, including decompositions of earnings growth into the contributions of job stayers, job movers, and individuals entering or exiting payrolled employment. These insights are not achievable using firm-level survey data alone and would improve the communication of changes to AWE to key stakeholders, including those involved in macroeconomic policy.

7.3 Parallel production for internal quality assurance and benchmarking

A further step along the integration spectrum involves producing LEED-based EJ and AWE estimates in parallel with STES and MWSS, for internal quality assurance and benchmarking purposes. At this stage, administrative data remain non-authoritative, but coherence findings are explicitly reviewed by each production team.

Parallel production enables systematic comparisons between survey and administrative aggregates to identify unexpected divergences, emerging structural changes, or potential collection issues. This approach strengthens confidence in survey outputs while preserving STES and MWSS as the primary sources used for publication.

7.4 Operational quality assurance in near real time

As LEED has been developed into a near-real-time data asset, a more operational use is to embed it within the survey collection process itself. Within ONS, LEED is now produced through a primary production pipeline shortly after receipt of underlying tax data, making it available internally within approximately one month of the reference period.

This allows LEED outputs to be compared with incoming STES and MWSS responses during data collection, supporting targeted response chasing and identification of potential reporting errors, improving the outlier detection currently in place.

7.5 Administrative Data for Imputation and Resilience

Building on operational quality assurance, administrative data can also support imputation in cases of survey non-response. This capability is particularly important for strengthening resilience during periods of economic shock, such as those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic where response rates to business surveys dropped.

The use of administrative data for imputation relies on strong assumptions about the transportability of administrative measures into the survey framework. Coherence analysis helps to identifies the variables and business types for which these assumptions are most defensible.

7.6 Improving Survey Weighting Using Population-Level Administrative Data

Beyond item-level imputation, LEED can enhance both STES and MWSS through improved weighting and calibration. Administrative data provide comprehensive population-level information, particularly valuable in survey cells with high grossing factors and sparse coverage.

Coherence research ensures that administrative population counts align with survey target populations and highlights discrepancies arising from firms within the wider sampling cell performing differently to those sampled. Embedding these findings into the weighting strategy has the potential to reduce sampling variance while maintaining conceptual integrity.

7.7 Targeted replacement of unsampled populations

A more substantive operational use of LEED is targeted replacement for groups of firms that are currently excluded from survey samples to reduce respondent burden. A clear case is MWSS coverage of firms with fewer than 20 employees, which are typically not sampled.

LEED provides a natural administrative source for extending coverage to these firms, improving the coverage and representativeness of AWE estimates without increasing burden on small businesses or costs to the ONS.

7.8 Sample Reduction and Full Replacement

At the far end of the spectrum are options to reduce the size of MWSS and STES samples, or ultimately to fully replace them with administrative data. While these approaches offer potential efficiency gains, they also carry the greatest statistical risk.

Administrative–survey coherence research is indispensable in evaluating these options, as replacement requires administrative data to replicate not only levels and growth rates, but also the stability, revision behaviour, and interpretability of survey-based outputs. While full replacement is unlikely, the coherence work undertaken as part of the LEED project provides valuable assurance on the continued role of business surveys and a robust evidence base for any future decisions.

While the immediate operational focus within ONS is on embedding LEED within the production of EJ and AWE, the framework developed through this project is intended to inform wider discussions on the effective use of administrative data in the production economic and social statistics more generally. A key component of this framework is an explicit assessment of the practical and financial implications of changes to survey collection, and how these can be balanced against improvements in quality, timeliness, and resilience. In parallel, this workstream is helping to clarify and strengthen internal governance arrangements within ONS to support future administrative data adoption.

Across this process we have engaged with a number of other national statistical institutes to learn from their experiences and approaches. Our aim is to develop a shared, evidence-based framework from which the ONS can benefit and which may also provide value to other statistical institutes undertaking similar transformation programmes.

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