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Withdrawal of funding for health statistics

Thank you for your letter of 7 July which gives your position with respect to the funding of the Office for National Statistics's General Lifestyle Survey (GLF)

Following discussions with the Health and Social Care Information Centre (IC), I can confirm that it will cease its contribution towards the GLF, which includes health-related questions. This decision has been taken following careful consideration of a number of key factors, including:

- Following consultation, ONS are planning to stop the GLF after 2011 and replace it with a new vehicle in 2012 based on the Opinions survey. This will generate a discontinuity in the time series and necessitate a substantial increase in the IC's funding contribution. Given this, it was felt that the majority of the information could be obtained through alternative means in a more cost-effective way.
- Most of the questions on general health, smoking and drinking have been included in the Health Survey for England for a number of years (for example, the smoking questions since 1993), albeit for a smaller sample and not for Great Britain.

- The Health Survey for England offers a richer set of health data and it makes sense to focus our resources on that.
- We are continuing to fund questions on smoking prevalence in the Integrated Household Survey, which can be used as a proxy for the GLF.
- Data on most aspects of the questions on the utilisation of health services is collected through the annual British Household Panel Survey. This allows us to link up health utilisation with other health and socio-demographic factors. In addition, the panel design of the survey allows much better analysis of change over time.

I agree about the value of many parts of the GLF and we are keen to ensure that the information collected from the health-related parts of the survey continues to be collected in the best way possible.

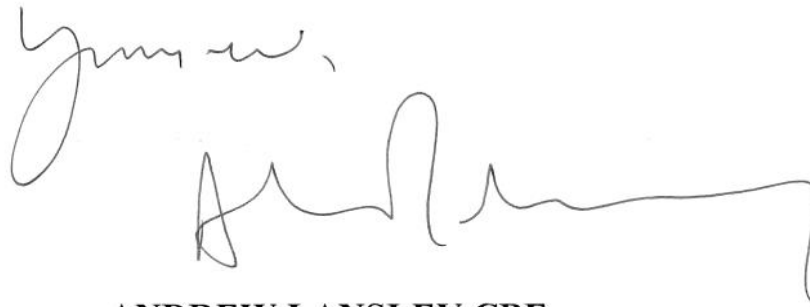
To this end, I can confirm that the Department is working to identify the most cost-effective and appropriate way of collecting this information in the future. For example, I have sought to find budget to continue the questions on weekly alcohol consumption, which were the key questions that would be lost. These discussions have not yet concluded and the arrangements have not yet been finalised. I have asked officials to keep the National Statistician's Office up-to-date on progress.

I turn now to your concern about consultation. Given the limited life of the GLF and tight financial environment in which we all have to work, I do not think it would be sensible to ask the IC to undertake more consultation at this stage - though I understand ONS as the producers of GLF formally consulted on its future earlier this year, and one of the IC's senior staff participated in a user consultation meeting organised by ONS. However, I do recognise that it is important to ensure that the hard decisions about priorities for National Statistics that will be needed going forward are properly informed by an understanding of user needs.

My officials will be working with the IC to ensure a more strategic and transparent approach to priority setting for future years. This will include appropriate user engagement. My Statistics Head of Profession will also consult the National Statistician's Office to ensure that the Department

and all its arm's length bodies understand the Authority's expectations in relation to consultation about changes to National Statistics, when organisations other than the main producer have contributed to funding.

I am copying this response to the Minister for the Cabinet Office, the National Statistician and the Chief Executive of the IC.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to be 'Andrew Lansley', is written over a faint, larger version of the same signature. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

ANDREW LANSLEY CBE