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Dr Tony Wright MP
House of Commons
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Dear Tony,

PUBLICATION OF STATISTICS RELATING TO KNIFE CRIME

I wrote to you in December following our conversation regarding the publication of statistics. I am now writing to let you know what progress we have made.

The background to these events is the importance the Government attaches to tackling knife crime. It launched an initiative in June 2008, the Tackling Knives Action Programme (TKAP), working with ten police force areas to reduce the number of teenagers killed or seriously wounded by knives. A monitoring programme was set up which gathered data from a number of sources to assess the progress of the initiative. Ministers and officials in the Home Office (the lead department for the TKAP) were keen to use this data to inform the public about the true prevalence of knife crime as soon as it was reasonable and appropriate to do so. The Government believes that the public perception of the prevalence of knife crime is self-reinforcing, especially among young people: in other words, if more young people think other young people are carrying knives, then more will carry knives (out of a misplaced belief that this will protect them). It was therefore decided in December to issue a fact sheet using that monitoring data. Most figures in the fact sheet were the output of administrative records held by police authorities and not under the control of government statisticians; a few came from the Ministry of Justice. One piece of information planned for the fact sheet, hospital admissions for assault by sharp object, came from NHS Information Centre.

Home Office officials identified the need to consult the Information Centre before publication. Although the head of statistics profession for the NHS Information Centre, supported by DH officials, refused to sanction the publication of hospital admissions figures, the Home Office used the figure in the fact sheet following consultation with a special advisor in No 10, in the belief that concerns of NHS statisticians had been addressed. One of the contributing factors to the decision was the fact that the HO numbers in the fact sheet appeared to be comparable to those being asked of DH and that the same objections were not being raised inside the HO. In fact the two departments had gathered their figures in different ways and took a different view on whether they



should be governed by the code for official statistics. By the time the National Statistician intervened the fact sheet had already been released. On 15 December the Home Secretary apologised to the House of Commons for the premature release of the figure.

There are three key lessons we will take from these events. First, the need to impress upon all officials and advisors the importance the Government and permanent secretaries attach to the observance of the Statistics Code that has now been published by the UK Statistics Authority. It is not only a Code for statisticians applying to designated National Statistics but covers all officials and advisors who use and quote official statistics.

The second lesson relates to the issue of numerical information derived from administrative sources. We know we will not succeed in improving trust in official statistics if we confine our attention to the outputs of statistical surveys and other data under the control of members of the Government Statistical Service. With information derived from management records liable to be made available in response to queries from policy advisors and officials, and to journalists and MPs on all sides of the House through PQs and Fol requests, there is potential for people to quote statistics in the absence of specific advice on professional principles. This is already an issue which is being looked at by a working party reporting to the National Statistician. I look forward to seeing the results of this work.

Third, it is essential that statisticians are involved at an early stage in the production of any publications that contain official statistics and that they are able to and do raise any concerns as rapidly as possible, if necessary with the National Statistician, so that urgent action can be taken to prevent any inappropriate use of statistics.

I shall be discussing the above at a meeting with my permanent secretary colleagues, to which I will invite Michael Scholar, to re-enforce these messages and ensure we promulgate them. I will be asking for examples of good practice that we can share across departments.

Finally, we welcome the helpful new Code of Practice for Official Statistics published last week by the UK Statistics Authority.

I hope this is useful. I would like to reassure you that we regard building trust in official statistics as a high priority and I will personally do whatever I can to help achieve that.

I am copying this letter to Sir Michael Scholar, Jeremy Heywood, Sir David Normington, Hugh Taylor and Keith Vaz MP.



Gus O'Donnell

