
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Dominic Grieve QC MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

23 July 2009

Dear Mr Grieve

**MINISTRY OF JUSTICE NEWS RELEASE: HOUSING ARREARS PRE-ACTION SCHEME
IN NORWICH**

Thank you for your letter dated 2 July regarding a Ministry of Justice (MoJ) news release containing statistics for Norwich in respect of the Housing Arrears Pre-Action Scheme (HAPAS). In particular, I note the points you make about the forthcoming by-election in the parliamentary constituency of Norwich North, and that you have also written to the Cabinet Secretary about this matter.

I have sought the advice of the National Statistician who has also spoken to the Head of Profession for Statistics at the MoJ. The HAPAS is a pilot programme – funded by the MoJ – developed at Norwich County Court in conjunction with the City Council, Shelter and Norfolk Community Law Service. I am told that the press release was published to coincide with a visit from the Minister of State for Justice, Bridget Prentice MP, to Norwich County Court. I am also told that the visit was originally planned for March 2009, but was rescheduled to early July due to reasons beyond their control.

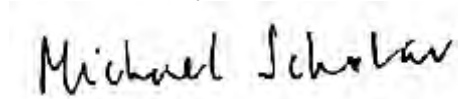
The Head of Profession for Statistics at the MoJ has reviewed the departmental news release. His conclusion is that the figures quoted are local information collected by Norwich County Court to assist in the monitoring of the HAPAS scheme and in future evaluation. The data concerned are not part of, nor feed in to, any of the MoJ's official statistics or National Statistics publications. The data are collected locally for the purposes of monitoring and evaluation of the pilot programme. I am also advised that the intention is to collect these data only for the lifetime of the pilot programme. The Statistics Authority therefore takes the view that these data should be regarded as research findings rather than as official statistics and that they are therefore outside the scope of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. I understand that when the evaluation has been carried out, the MoJ will undertake a quality assurance review. If this review finds that the research meets the required standards then, I am told, the underlying results will be published.

I am, however, of the view that a clearer statement of the nature of the figures quoted, in particular that they were not National Statistics but the results of a local research project that had not been formally evaluated, would have helped readers of the news release. As a matter of principle, the Statistics Authority would also recommend that the supporting statistical evidence for the statements of the kind made in the news release should be made public.

Recent guidance published by the National Statistician and the Government's Chief Social Researcher regarding the distinction between statistical and research outputs says that it is important to set out from the outset whether an output is classified as statistics or research, and thereby in the view of the department concerned the most appropriate Code of Practice (for Official Statistics or the Government Social Research Code) against which the systems of planning, collection, management and release of numerical information should be judged.

I am copying our correspondence to Sir Gus O'Donnell, Cabinet Secretary, Sir Suma Chakrabarti, Permanent Secretary at the MoJ, and to the National Statistician, Karen Dunnell.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Scholar". The signature is written in a cursive style with a clear, legible font.

Sir Michael Scholar KCB