
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE

Rt Hon Frank Field MP DL
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

21 October 2015

Dear Frank,

MORTALITY STATISTICS IN RESPECT OF OUT-OF-WORK BENEFIT CLAIMANTS

Thank you for your letter dated 19 August regarding the Department for Work and Pension's (DWP) publication of mortality statistics in respect of out-of-work benefit claimants.

On 27 August, DWP published two statistical releases about mortality statistics, in particular, *Mortality statistics: out-of-work benefit claimants March 2003 to February 2014* and *Mortality Statistics: ESA, IB and SDA claimants*. DWP have advised us that *Mortality Statistics: ESA, IB and SDA claimants* is an ad-hoc release in response to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests that DWP received on mortality statistics and out-of-work benefit claimants. *Mortality statistics: out-of-work benefit claimants March 2003 to February 2014* is an experimental statistical release, produced alongside the FOI response.

In your letter you ask whether the Authority was consulted on the quality and robustness of these statistics. I can confirm that the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the executive branch of the Authority responsible for producing Official Statistics, was asked by DWP to check:

- (1) That ONS data used in the releases was correctly sourced and presented
- (2) The methodology used for calculating mortality rates and accompanying confidence intervals

Both deaths and population data were confirmed as correctly sourced and presented. The mortality rate formulae were also confirmed as correct.

In response to your letter, I have also considered the *Mortality statistics: out-of-work benefit claimants March 2003 to February 2014* release in the context of the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*.

I welcome DWP publishing statistics that are seeking to add value by providing context and analysis around mortality statistics for out-of-work benefit claimants. I also welcome their consideration of other explanatory factors, such as age, when calculating mortality rates. However, there are improvements that could be made to *Mortality statistics: out-of-work benefit claimants March 2003 to February 2014* to make it more useful and consistent with the *Code*.

I note that these mortality statistics have been produced by DWP as experimental statistics. Experimental statistics are new official statistics undergoing evaluation. They are published

in order to involve users and stakeholders in their development and as a means to build in quality at an early stage. I would encourage DWP statisticians to consider the following suggestions in the spirit of continuous improvement:

- Clear explanation of the purpose of the release
- Improved contextualisation of these statistics (for example, as far as possible, providing statistics on the different outcomes for individuals. These could include going into work, flowing onto other benefits, deaths or unknown outcomes)
- Explanation of the rationale for the use of age-standardised mortality rates (for example, clarifying whether other explanatory factors were considered and why, including the strengths and limitations of this approach)
- Clear statements on the quality assurance of the administrative data used in the calculation of these statistics (for example, the administrative data that feed into DWP's Work and Pensions Longitudinal Study)

I will ask DWP to publish more detail about their evaluation and development plans for these experimental statistics, including how users will be involved in this process and the timescales for this work, in line with the *Code*. To improve the quality and value of these statistics, I will also ask DWP to consider publishing, alongside its official statistics, more detailed research into the full range of outcomes for individuals who have undergone a Work Capability Assessment. Publishing such research would be a helpful next step in the development of these statistics.

I am copying this letter to Robert Devereux, DWP's Permanent Secretary, to Neil McIvor, DWP's Deputy Head of Profession for statistics, to John Pullinger, National Statistician, and to Ed Humpherson, the Authority's Director General for Regulation.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Dilnot". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'A'.

Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE