
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Chris Bryant MP
House of Commons
LONDON
SW1A 0AA

25 January 2012

Dear Mr Bryant

STATISTICS ON NATIONALITY OF BENEFIT CLAIMANTS

Thank you for your letter dated 20 January.

The Statistics Authority recognises that Ministers often want to present published statistical information in the way that best serves their political objectives, and that this is part of the cut and thrust of political debate. However, we expect the statistics themselves to be publicly available in a professional and impartial format, and produced and released in ways consistent with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. The DWP are claiming that these figures (which they describe as 'statistics' on their website) are not in fact statistics subject to the Code of Practice. We disagree. But whatever view is taken on this question, it is clearly contrary to good practice if, as in the present case, the political comment on the figures is in the news media before the public have access to the statistical report.

Please find attached a copy of my letter to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions regarding this matter. More generally, in cases where departments are unclear whether a new release of statistics and analysis should be released as official statistics, we encourage them to seek the early advice of the Authority, given our statutory responsibilities in respect of official statistics.

The statistical report published by DWP on this occasion was, as far as we can ascertain, professional and impartial. We would therefore suggest that all parties to the public debate should pay close attention to the findings, explanations and cautionary comments that the DWP report contains.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Minister of State for Employment, Minister of State for Immigration, Minister for the Cabinet Office, the Cabinet Secretary, Chair of the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, and Jil Matheson, the National Statistician.

Yours sincerely



Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Rt. Hon. Iain Duncan Smith MP
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions
Department for Work and Pensions
Caxton House
Tothill Street
LONDON
SW1H 9DA

25 January 2012

Dear Secretary of State

STATISTICS ON NATIONALITY OF BENEFIT CLAIMANTS

The statistics in the report 'Nationality at point of National Insurance number registration of DWP benefit claimants' published by your Department on Friday 20 January have attracted wide media coverage and comment. They were also the basis for the article in the Daily Telegraph, published online on 19 January, by the Minister of State for Employment and the Minister of State for Immigration.

The Statistics Authority has received representations about the interpretation and manner of release of these statistics. We note that DWP issued these as a research report, not as official statistics; and that, as such, they are not in your view covered by the rules in the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

The Statistics Authority has reviewed the report and has concluded that it would be preferable for statistics of this kind to be published as official statistics, and in accordance with the Code of Practice. In reaching this view we took account of these points in particular:

- The DWP website refers to the research as 'publication of ad-hoc statistics', which indicates that DWP itself considers them to be official statistics. Many users have treated them as official statistics, and have assumed that they should have been published in accordance with the Code of Practice, which would, amongst other things, have prevented Government Ministers from issuing a political commentary on the statistics ahead of their publication. The Statistics Authority shares that view.
- In view of the political and media interest in the results, we expect that there will be demand for these statistics to be published in future as a series.
- As is explained in the DWP report, the number of people claiming working age benefits is a regular National Statistics release; and so too are the numbers of National Insurance Numbers registered to non-UK nationals entering the UK. The cross-analysis of these sets of data, which gave rise to the statistics in the current report, is a new statistical

analysis, and should be seen as augmenting the existing statistical releases. We suspect that is how most commentators will see them.

- Again, as recognised in the DWP report, these statistics are both highly relevant to public policy and highly vulnerable to misinterpretation. There are some important caveats and weaknesses that need to be explained carefully and objectively to Parliament and the news media at the time of publication. This is, in our view, best done by official statisticians producing a statistical release in accordance with the Code of Practice. Statistics Authority officials responsible for the statutory assessment of official statistics stand ready to provide any necessary further advice in this respect to the DWP statisticians.

With these considerations in mind, I seek your agreement that any further publication of these, or of any such statistics, be handled as an official statistics release. If you agree to that, we will further propose, under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act*, that the Authority should be invited to assess these statistics, to ascertain whether they are worthy of designation as National Statistics.

In addition, we hope that the anonymised matched records from which the results have been drawn will be published in accordance with the Government's Open Data initiative to allow others to make their own analyses.

I am copying this letter to the Minister of State for Employment, the Minister of State for Immigration, the Minister for the Cabinet Office, the Cabinet Secretary, Chair of the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, and Jil Matheson, the National Statistician.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Scholar". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Sir Michael Scholar KCB