
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Rt. Hon. Andy Burnham MP
House of Commons
LONDON
SW1A 0AA

19 January 2011

Dear Mr Burnham

SCHOOL SPORTS STATISTICS

Thank you for your letter of 13 December in which you set out various statements made by Ministers about trends in school sports activities and your own interpretation of the relevant statistics. At the same time, I received a letter from Mr Andrew Bridgen MP with his own interpretation of the statistics. I apologise for the delay in replying, but, given the political controversy embodied in the two letters, I have needed to check the statistics carefully.

The Statistics Authority recognises that political debate frequently involves the selection and interpretation of the available statistics. The Authority cannot – indeed it believes that it would be neither appropriate nor practical for it to do so – intervene whenever statistical or quasi-statistical comments are made in interviews or in exchanges in Parliament to which informed participants or commentators take exception. Our expectation is that statements which are not firmly based are likely to be challenged by other parties to the debate, and also by journalists and commentators. Our role is to make sure that public debate is well informed by accurate, impartial and objective statistics, and not ourselves to become a player or a referee. We also have to ensure that the integrity of the statistics themselves is not impugned or damaged by the political debate.

After careful consideration of the exchanges to which you and Mr Bridgen have drawn my attention, I do not believe that this is an occasion on which the Authority ought to intervene.

I am copying this letter to the National Statistician, Jil Matheson, and to the Permanent Secretary at the Department for Education, David Bell.

Yours sincerely



Sir Michael Scholar KCB