



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Sir Andrew Dilnot
UK Statistics Authority
1 Drummond Gate
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Tuesday 6 May 2014

Dear Sir Andrew

As you'll no doubt be aware, there was significant media attention and public debate this week around the new Office for National Statistics figures around contracts that do not guarantee minimum hours.

I'm acutely aware of the importance you place on accurate use of statistics to ensure there is an informed public debate. And I'm sure you share my belief that debate around policy should be based on fact, not misrepresentation. In light of this, I would appreciate your advice on the accuracy of claims made by the Labour party and by several media outlets.

From my reading of the statistics, it seems to be that any assessment of a 'surge' in these type of contracts, or of 'contracts tripling', are wrong given yesterday's publication is a new estimate at one point in time that does not provide any evidence on whether this type of contract is increasing or decreasing.

Indeed, the Office for National Statistics itself said in its release: "In comparing both figures, it must be noted that they are both 'point-in-time' estimates, and that whilst the LFS data exists for several years back, the business survey data is the first estimate of its type. It is not, therefore, possible to say from the business survey whether the number of employee contracts without a guaranteed minimum number of hours of work is increasing or decreasing."

Member of Parliament for Dover & Deal



It also appears equally wrong to suggest that the figures relate to the number of workers - as the reference is to the number of contracts that employers estimate they are using, not the number of individuals employed on these contracts.

In light of this I was surprised to see that the Shadow Business Secretary Chuka Umunna and the Labour Press team were repeating both of these assertions across Twitter yesterday:

(Retweeted by Labour Press Team and Chuka Umunna): These shocking ONS figures show that since David Cameron took office there has been a huge increase in workers on zero hours contracts.

The Mirror reported that: "Union bosses have demanded a crackdown on zero-hours contracts after it emerged the number of workers on them rose by 800,000 in five months. There are now an estimated 1.4 million people on the deals – where they can be called in at short notice and only get paid for the hours worked with no guaranteed minimum. Yet only last December the Office for National Statistics estimated 583,000 were on zero-hours contracts."

Similarly the Guardian headline reported: "Huge surge in workers tied to zero-hour deals". Its introduction read: "The number of workers on zero-hours contracts has almost tripled to 1.4million since last year's estimate, according to official data."

And the Independent reported: "Nearly half of Britain's biggest businesses are using zero-hours contracts to employ 1.4million workers across the country, figures show. "The figure is a large increase on the previous ONS estimate of 580,000 - or 2 per cent of the workforce - from October to December last year."

Given the importance to the public of accurate reporting of official statistics, and the emotive debate which has arisen around these types of contracts, I would welcome your advice on the above examples and whether you are satisfied that they are an accurate interpretation of the official statistics.

I would be grateful if you could look into this and I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Charlie Flintoff".