

Hugh Bayley MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority
1 Drummond Gate
London
SW1V 2QQ

28 February, 2014

Dear Andrew,

GOVERNMENT SPENDING ON FLOOD DEFENCES IN ENGLAND

Thank you for your reply dated 19 February, 2014 to my letter of 22 January, 2014. I am grateful for your clear advice.

You may have been told that I referred to your letter in a debate in the House of Commons on Wednesday, 26 February.

I am particularly interested in the question you raised in the penultimate paragraph of your letter – whether figures on flood defence spending should, in future, be published as official statistics. I believe they should. You will be aware that I received significantly different figures from DEFRA in answer to very similar Parliamentary Questions tabled in July 2013 and January 2014. During the debate I learned that Chris Ruane had also asked a similar PQ towards the end of last year and the figures he received were different again. It would be helpful to the public and MPs if we received consistent and quality assured figures in a matter of such great public interest. I should be grateful if you would let me know the outcome of the Authority's discussion with the Department on this matter.

You have, rightly raised an important policy issue, which I in turn have raised with the Chair of the Public Administration Select Committee. I enclose a copy of my letter to Bernard Jenkin MP.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Hugh Bayley'.

Hugh Bayley
MP for York Central

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Bernard Jenkin MP
Chair
Public Administration Select Committee
House of Commons
First Floor, Committee Office
7 Millbank
London
SW1P 3JA

28 February, 2014

Dear Bernard,

UK Statistics Authority

Thank you for talking with me on Thursday.

I wrote to the UK Statistics Authority in January to seek advice about the reliability of figures about spending on flood defence which have been given to me by DEFRA in answer to Parliamentary Questions. I enclose a copy of the reply which I received last week from Sir Andrew Dilnot, the Authority's Chair.

I do not expect your committee to look into the questions which I put to the UK Statistics Authority. The Authority itself has answered those queries.

I would, however, like your committee to consider the wider policy issue which Sir Andrew raises in the penultimate paragraph of his letter.

He makes two points: that DEFRA's figures on flood defence spending are not official statistics, prepared in compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics; and "given the salience of these figures and the public interest in them, it is my view that it would better serve the public good if DEFRA were to consider publishing official statistics on expenditure by the relevant organisation on aspects of flooding and coastal erosion management in future."

Of course all government departments publish data on many matters which are not covered by official statistics and will doubtless continue to do so. The policy issues, thrown up by this example, which your committee may wish to examine as part of some future enquiry, are:

- 1) Should there be a Code of Practice, similar to the Code of Practice for Official Statistics to set quality assurance standards for statistics published by government departments, which are not classified as official statistics and therefore overseen and quality – assured by the UK Statistics Authority.

- 2) Should the UK Statistics Authority have the power to designate departmental statistics as official statistics – and thereby take over the quality assurance and publication of those statistics – in cases like this one, where the Authority believe there is a “public interest” in the figures in question being prepared in accordance with the UK Statistics Authority’s more exacting standards.

I should be grateful if you would circulate this letter to the members of your committee and let me know the response.

I am copying this letter to Sir Andrew Dilnot and to the Clerk of the Committee.

Yours sincerely,

Hugh Bayley
MP for York Central