



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Andrew Dilnot CBE
UK Statistics Authority
1 Drummond Gate
London
SW1V 2QQ

11th June 2012

Dear Mr Dilnot,

Congratulations on taking up office as Chair of the UK Statistics Authority.

The UK Statistics Authority has done a huge amount to ensure public debate is informed by accurate data. It is crucial that data is derived by rigorous analysis and is presented accurately and credibly.

That is why, with regret, I write to you in relation to the Housing Minister, Grant Shapps MP's, consistent misrepresentation and misuse of statistics in relation to a housing and homelessness crisis that all political parties agree requires urgent action.

I am deeply concerned that this casual attitude to accuracy is not only confusing to the public but is obstructing genuine public debate. Furthermore, it undermines legitimate calls for real action to deal with our nation's housing and homelessness crisis.

I outline below serious misrepresentations of facts by the Housing Minister. I request that you help to bring some clarity to the facts and for your recommendation on how we can best ensure that in future, the debate on housing can be open, honest, transparent and accurate.

1. Supply of homes between May 1997 and April 2010

27/01/2011: The Minister claims there was a net loss of 45,000 homes in 13 years of the previous Labour Government.¹

05/12/2011: The Minister claimed that we ended up with 200,000 fewer homes under the previous Government.²

Aside from the fact that we patently could not have ended up with both 45,000 and 200,000 fewer homes, Government statistics show that we had an additional 2 million homes in England by May 2010 compared with May 1997.³

¹ Westminster Hall Debate, 27 Jan 2011 : Hansard Column 194WH

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm110127/halltext/110127h0002.htm>

² Oral Answers to Questions, Communities and Local Government, 5 Dec 2011 : Hansard Column 3

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm111205/debtext/111205-0001.htm#1112057000445>

³ CLG Live Table 104 – Table 104 Dwelling stock: by tenure, England (historical series)

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/xls/table-104.xls>

2. Number of affordable homes built May 1997 – April 2010 and May 2010 – May 2015

12/03/2012: The Minister claims that this Government will build more affordable homes (270,000) than were built between May 1997 and April 2010.⁴ He comes to this figure by adding 170,000 through the affordable rent programme plus 100,000 he claims will be built as a result of right to buy by 2015.

Firstly, there is no way to verify that 100,000 homes will be built as a result of the right to buy scheme by 2015. Secondly, official Government statistics show that over 500,000 affordable homes were built between May 1997 and April 2010.⁵ This is clearly more than 270,000.

3. Rough Sleeping

Government statistics on rough sleeping in England show a rise of 23% between 2010 and 2011.⁶

On the day of the release of the official statistics, the Housing Minister confusingly press-released altogether different statistics relating to the total number of rough sleepers in London over a year, specifically highlighting the number of non-UK nationals that make up the number of rough sleepers in London, and warning foreign "Dick Whittingtons" to stay away from Britain.⁷

In doing so, the Housing Minister confused the two sets of statistics which clearly affected the public debate that followed. To deliberately confuse statistics in this way is completely inappropriate. They were heavily criticized for doing so by the homelessness sector who do so much in preventing and managing rough sleeping.⁸ They noted:

"It is... very disappointing to see the Minister challenging and questioning the statistics published by his own Department today and trying to draw comparisons between different sets of statistics."

4. House building

The Minister told the House that house building starts in England were going up in 2011, rising by 25% compared with 2009.⁹

In the context of the debate, this was deliberately and profoundly misleading. According to the Government's official statistics, annual housing starts reached 98,250 in the 12 months to December 2011, down by 4% compared with the 12 months to December 2010.¹⁰ Given that house building

⁴ Oral Answers to Questions, Communities and Local Government, 12 Mar 2012 : Hansard Column 14 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201212/cmhansrd/cm120312/debtext/120312-0001.htm#12031215000552>

⁵ CLG Table 1009: Additional new build and acquired affordable homes provided, England <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/xls/2001313.xls>

⁶ Rough Sleeping Statistics England - Autumn 2011 <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statistics/roughsleepingautumn2011>

⁷ DCLG Press Release: Grant Shapps: Over half of London's rough sleepers now non-UK nationals 23 February 2012 <http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/housing/2093811>

⁸ Crisis Press Release: <http://www.crisis.org.uk/news.php?id=404>

⁹ Oral Answers to Questions, Communities and Local Government, 12 Mar 2012 : Hansard Column 10 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201212/cmhansrd/cm120312/debtext/120312-0001.htm#12031215000520>

¹⁰ CLG Statistical Release: House Building: December Quarter 2011, England <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statistics/housebuildingq42011>

starts in reality fell in 2011 compared with 2010, it is disingenuous to suggest they “went up” even if they compare favorably with house building in a year where the world was in recession following the global economic crash.

5. Inappropriate use of timeframes for official statistics

The Minister has consistently used the period April – June 2010 in calculations for house building under the Coalition Government.

- 20/06/2011, House of Commons, (DCLG Orals), in answer to a question from Eric Ollerenshaw MP.¹¹
- 05/09/2011, House of Commons, (DCLG Orals), in answer to a question from Nick Raynsford MP.¹²
- 05/12/2011, House of Commons, (DCLG Orals) in answer to a question from Rushanara Ali MP.¹³
- 21/11/2011, House of Commons, (Debate on Housing Reform) in a debate on the Government’s Housing Strategy.¹⁴

This period incorporates a number of weeks from the last Labour Government and are clearly inappropriate to use to support the Government’s house building record.

6. Cost to build own home

14/05/2012: The Minister claimed in two articles on PoliticsHome¹⁵ and Conservative Home¹⁶ that a self-built home costs £150,000 on average, including the land.

Figures from The Self Build Portal website, created by the National Self Build Association, which the Minister helped launch, show that self-build costs tens of thousands more than he claims. Channel 4 FactCheck¹⁷ checked the figures and dubbed the Minister’s claims “fiction and patently untrue”.

Despite having this error pointed out to him via a letter from the Shadow Secretary of State, Hilary Benn, Grant Shapps repeated his claim in a Written Parliamentary Answer¹⁸, again omitting to say that the £150,000 average which he accords to the National Self Build Association, does not include

¹¹ Oral Answers to Questions, Communities and Local Government, 20 Jun 2011 : Hansard Column 6
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm110620/debtext/110620-0001.htm#1106204000577>

¹² Oral Answers to Questions, Communities and Local Government, 5 Sep 2011 : Hansard Column 15
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm110905/debtext/110905-0001.htm#1109054000489>

¹³ Oral Answers to Questions, Communities and Local Government, 5 Dec 2011 : Hansard Column 1
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm111205/debtext/111205-0001.htm#1112057000436>

¹⁴ Debate on Housing Reform, 21 Nov 2011 : Hansard Column 43
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm111121/debtext/111121-0002.htm#1111216000711>

¹⁵ http://www.politicshome.com/uk/article/53434/grant_shapps_on_self_builds.html

¹⁶ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/platform/2012/05/grant-shapps-mp-britain-is-at-the-bottom-of-the-league-for-self-built-homes-that-must-change-.html>

¹⁷ <http://blogs.channel4.com/factcheck/factcheck-the-shaky-foundations-of-the-governments-latest-grand-design/10583>

land. He then, curiously, claimed "It is not however possible to provide a breakdown of the average cost of a self-build home," despite having done so in articles, interviews and CLG departmental press releases. This is not a case of an incorrect fact inadvertently used and corrected. It is the repeated and deliberate use of misleading statistics, including in a written answer to Parliament.

In light of the above, I would welcome the UKSA's view on the following:

1. Whether the Housing Minister's representation of the net number of homes delivered in the period May 1997 – April 2010 is fair. Can you confirm, for the record, that there was a net gain of 2 million homes by May 2010 compared with May 1997 and not a net loss of 45,000 or 200,000 homes as the Housing Minister has suggested?
2. Whether the Housing Minister is correct in his view that by building 270,000 affordable homes, the Coalition Government will build more affordable homes than the last Labour Government despite the official figures showing that over 500,000 affordable homes were built between May 1997 and April 2010?
3. Whether it is appropriate to release separate statistics on homelessness and rough sleeping from the Department on the official release date of statistics on rough sleeping? Furthermore, can you confirm whether this release meets with Protocol 2: Release practices of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics (January 2009) and Protocol 3: The use of administrative sources for statistical purposes.
4. Is it a fair representation of statistics on house building starts to say they "went up" in 2011 when they fell compared with the previous year according to the Government's own statistics?
5. Can you confirm whether it is an appropriate use of statistics to use a period which covers both the last Labour Government and the current Government when referring to the Coalition Government's Housing record?
6. Can you confirm that representing an average cost for a self-build home as £100,000-£150,000 including the land, when the average is £100,000-£150,000 excluding land is completely inappropriate, particularly when one considers that land has the potential to add tens of thousands of pounds to the costs?

On a related note, in a letter to Rt Hon Nick Raynsford MP on 17th January 2012, your predecessor, Sir Michael Scholar, suggested in response to Mr Raynsford's complaint about the Housing Minister's use of statistics that because it is such a *"complex picture, the statistics are subject to selective use which has given rise to suggestions that they have been referred to in a misleading way."* While there are some cases where statistics are used selectively, I do not believe the listed examples fall into that category. In most if not all of the cases above the statistics used are factually incorrect or deliberately misleading.

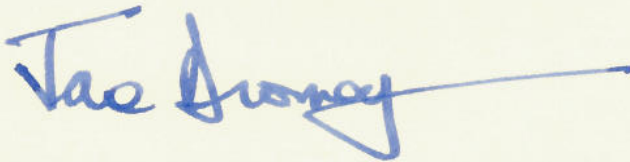
¹⁸ Written Answer to Hilary Benn MP, Questions, 17 May 2012 : Hansard Column 246W
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmhansrd/cm120517/text/120517w0001.htm#12051754000003>

I was therefore disappointed that in his letter to UKSA on the 27th March 2012, the Minister rejected the proposal from your predecessor, Sir Michael Scholar, that the Statistics Authority carry out a formal assessment of the statistics produced by the Homes and Communities Agency and the Tenant Services Authority. In doing so, the Minister has rejected the UKSA's proposal to bring about a clearer and more systematic public presentation of all the relevant statistical material.

The proper use of statistics is, as I am sure you would agree, vital to the integrity of public debate. I would therefore welcome your response to the questions and issues raised and I would ask you to give consideration to repeating Sir Michael Scholar's call that the Statistics Authority should be invited to carry out a formal assessment of the statistics produced by the Homes and Communities Agency and the Tenant Services Authority.

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

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jack Dromey', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jack Dromey MP
Shadow Housing Minister and MP for Birmingham Erdington

Cc: Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP – Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government
Sir Jeremy Heywood – Cabinet Secretary