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**Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE**

Bernard Jenkin MP  
Chair, Public Administration Select Committee  
House of Commons  
LONDON  
SW1A 0AA

6 September 2013

Dear Bernard

**UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY RESPONSE TO *COMMUNICATING STATISTICS: NOT JUST TRUE BUT ALSO FAIR***

I am writing to respond formally on behalf of the UK Statistics Authority to the Committee's First Report of Session 2013-14, *Communicating Statistics: Not just true but also fair* (HC 190), published on 29 May 2013. The Authority's response to each of the Committee's recommendations and conclusions is set out below.

**A. *Finding official statistics***

*Although the issue of effective dissemination of statistics has been thoroughly explored, including six years ago by the Statistics Commission, progress has been slow. The ONS website and its re-launch in 2011 is a disappointment but we welcome the acknowledgment by the ONS of the problem. We note that they have undertaken to make substantial improvements to the website. Further improvements should be made as soon as possible to make the website accessible to ordinary users. We recommend that the ONS report progress to us and publish the report on the ONS website. We recommend the ONS also publish its plans for future improvements on its website. We recommend the ONS systematically seek and publish the views of users in order to inform further improvements to the functionality and presentation of official statistics on the ONS website. (Paragraph 10)*

**UK Statistics Authority response:** We agree with the Committee's recommendations. ONS has established a programme of improvements to the ONS website, is bringing new digital capability into the organisation to improve the ongoing quality of the site, and is systematically gathering user feedback and insight to feed into website development work. Recent improvements have included a series of new theme landing pages which pull together complementary information using interactive content to make data accessible to a wider audience; improvements to the search function; email alerting functionality; and a new 'key figures' page directly accessible from the ONS website homepage. ONS has recently established a blog (<http://digitalpublishing.ons.gov.uk/>) and a Twitter channel to share more regularly its plans for developing the site, and progress with stakeholders and the wider public, as well as to receive input and feedback. A broad range of users of the site will be involved in all significant planned website developments. ONS will publish a report

summarising progress in improving the ONS website at the end of each financial year, and my office will send a copy of the first report to the Committee.

Much work has been done within ONS, and there is much more to do. Improving the ONS website remains a key strategic priority of the Statistics Authority, and the Authority Board will continue to monitor progress in this area very closely.

*There are many places in which official statistics are published; this is confusing to both the regular and the occasional user. The relationship between data.gov.uk, departmental websites and the ONS website is not clear. We recommend that the National Statistician review, update and adopt the principles set out by the Statistics Commission in 2007 and urgently take a greater role in sign-posting users to different groups of statistics. The Statistics Authority should publish information on how data.gov.uk relates to other websites showing government statistics. (Paragraph 11)*

**UK Statistics Authority response:** We are aware that some users find the current range of different statistical websites to be confusing and welcome the Committee's recommendations. The Government Statistical Service (GSS) is currently developing a strategy to ensure that statistics can be easily located and used across the various websites. As part of this strategy a review of the National Statistics Publication Hub will be undertaken to identify how it can be improved. The Authority will consider the costs and benefits of retaining the existing Publication Hub, whether to develop it further, or to transfer it to another domain, for example to [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) while maintaining sufficient separation and independence from ministerial and policy content. We expect to take a decision by the end of this year.

The launch of a single government domain [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) has seen many departmental websites recently move. ONS is examining how best to provide reciprocal links between the ONS website and the single domain, and to ensure consistency for the user.

#### ***B. Presenting and explaining statistics***

*We welcome the Statistics Authority's programme of work to improve the communication of statistics across government. In particular, we welcome the creation of a public policy division in ONS. We recommend that the Statistics Authority publish information on the work of this team. (Paragraph 16)*

**UK Statistics Authority response:** We welcome the Committee's support of work underway to improve the communication of official statistics. A short report by on the work of ONS's public policy analysis division will be published by the end of September 2013. My office will send to the Committee a copy of the report when it is published.

*We are pleased to note that the Statistics Users Forum has been working with the National Statistician's Office to develop best practice guidelines for user engagement, although these guidelines are not yet published and so we cannot comment on their content. We recommend that ONS disseminate and promote the best practice guidelines, as soon as possible, throughout Government. We recommend that the Statistics Authority and ONS, together with government departments, work much more closely with different kinds of users of statistics in order to present statistics in ways which meet their different needs. (Paragraph 17)*

**UK Statistics Authority response:** We agree with the Committee's recommendations and the best practice guidelines for user engagement have now been published on StatsUserNet, the Royal Statistical Society's interactive website for users of official statistics, and on the Government Statistical Service intranet site. These guidelines were developed by the National Statistician's Office and representatives from the Statistics User Forum. Recommendations in the guidance include:

- using a range of approaches to reach a wide range of users, including non-experts;
- improving the presentation and dissemination of statistical outputs;
- communicating with colleagues from other disciplines;
- using online platforms such as StatsUserNet to enable a more continuous user/user and user/producer communication;
- collaborating with other user groups and business areas on issues of common concern, ensuring that user engagement continues to focus on subjects that are intuitive and relevant to users; and,
- compiling and prioritising user requirements, implementing changes, and communicating the results to users.

Representatives from across the Authority are also continuing to work closely with users to ensure that statistics are presented in ways which meet users' needs. As we have set out in earlier evidence to the Committee, the National Statistician and the Head of Assessment have set up a Good Practice team to lead on promoting and embedding good practice across the GSS. The team has initiated new user groups, facilitated wider use of StatsUserNet, established links between the GSS and existing user communities, and initiated a new forum for discussing and promoting the voluntary sector's needs as users of official statistics.

ONS has established a working group to engage with users to identify particular ONS statistical releases for improvement, as well as running a series of seminars for external users of official statistics to talk about their experiences. ONS is involving users of ONS statistics in priority-setting and, in light of reducing budgets, will undertake a public consultation exercise this Autumn to help inform how ONS might best meet user needs within its budget allocation for the next three years. ONS will also run a customer satisfaction survey later in the year, together with a tracking element over time, to measure improvement in performance in understanding users' views and meeting their statistical needs.

*The ways in which statistics are presented sometimes present a challenge even for expert users. The lay user is left confused and disengaged. We recommend that the Statistics Authority work proactively to bring together and clearly present key statistics, from various sources, with associated commentary and in printable format, around common themes or events, such as elections and referendums, as well as broader topics such as the labour market, economic trends and so on. This is especially important given the ending of hard copy compendia on such topics. (Paragraph 20)*

*We recommend that the Statistics Authority continue to explore more creative ways of communicating statistics, for example, through interactive guides. This should be in addition to the publication of more raw data in machine-readable format for experts who want the full results, not just the edited highlights presented in releases for the mass audience. (Paragraph 21)*

**UK Statistics Authority response:** We are aware that there are further improvements to be made with regard to the presentation of statistics and agree with the Committee's recommendations. The GSS is increasing its focus on improving the presentation and dissemination of statistics to all users, and the Statistics Authority will look to see further progress made in this area. A symposium of best practice was held in March 2013. This event, which will be repeated annually, focused on providing constructive challenge from statistical and media experts to producers of official statistics to go further in improving and developing the presentation and dissemination of statistical products, and promoting innovation and interactive engagement with users.

ONS has moved away from the production of printed statistical compendia in favour of publication online, but is continuing to produce cross-cutting publications in important statistical topic areas. For example, ONS is working with departments and the devolved administrations to prepare a compendium of statistics about the four nations of the UK to inform users of statistics ahead of the planned referendum on Scottish independence.

Likewise, the Authority is continuing to encourage producers of official statistics to explore and implement more innovative ways of communicating official statistics. In further developing and improving its website, ONS is engaging experts in interactive multimedia content design and expanding data visualisations.

ONS is making more of its datasets open to users, subject to the preservation of respondent and individual confidentiality, including in an open format using an enhanced Data Explorer and Application Programming Interface (API) service. ONS plans to publish detailed open format datasets from the 2011 Census during the Autumn, followed by a range of other datasets before the end of next year, including datasets on retail sales, population projections, and data from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings.

*Producers of government statistics do not always present their figures in the clearest way, sometimes going too far to create a newsworthy headline, when the true story is more nuanced. Government statistics press releases do not always give a true and fair picture of the story behind the statistics. We recommend that press officers and statistics producers work together much more closely to ensure that press releases give an accurate and meaningful picture. (Paragraph 27)*

**UK Statistics Authority response:** We agree with the Committee's recommendation. The National Statistician expects statisticians to work closely with departmental press officers to improve the content and narrative of statistical releases and related briefings so that they are informative for journalists and other users alike. We want to see many more departments following ONS's example by running independent press briefings, led by statistical professionals, to provide the media with opportunities to engage directly with expert statisticians, particularly to accompany the publication of high-profile statistical releases.

*The improvements to be made to the presentation and explanation of statistics reach beyond the written document. A "public face" to statistics would help enhance trust in the figures and encourage their use. A fear of appearing politically biased sometimes means producers of statistics are reluctant to explain them properly. We welcome the fact that more staff in ONS were presenting their figures to the media, and by extension, the world beyond. Producers of statistics – in both the ONS and across government departments – should be bolder in*

*ensuring that statistics are presented with a factually-accurate, but helpful explanation. (Paragraph 30)*

**UK Statistics Authority response:** We support the Committee's conclusion and the GSS recognises the need for more statisticians to engage with the media to help better explain statistics. The newly revised GSS Statistician Competency Framework indicates that, as part of the dissemination process, more senior statisticians need to be able to communicate effectively with the media. As we have advised the Committee in earlier supplementary written evidence, there are some good examples, from ONS in particular, of statisticians undertaking both radio and television interviews on a regular basis. Approximately 40 statistical experts from ONS are trained to brief journalists and to appear on broadcast media, and ONS provides live interviews and occasional press conferences to accompany the publication of major ONS statistical releases.

*We recommend that the Statistics Authority take the lead across Government in coordinating the effective presentation of regularly- and occasionally-produced and key statistics in relation to high profile topics or events. The National Statistician should raise her public profile to promote statistics and their value without fear of appearing politically compromised, and go further to encourage other government statisticians to do the same. (Paragraph 31)*

**UK Statistics Authority response:** The National Statistician will discuss with her Head of Profession colleagues in departments to identify those areas where users may benefit from the publication of additional statistical analyses in relation to high profile topics or events. The National Statistician further recognises that engaging with the media to help promulgate and explain statistics is essential and she does exactly that when she is the individual best placed to do so. Statisticians who are directly involved and responsible for the production and analysis of official statistics are themselves engaging with the media to explain the important messages from the statistics, and to give a human face in areas relevant to public debate.

*We recommend that all GSS press releases and statistical statements have named contact points of people with an in-depth understanding of the statistics in that release. (Paragraph 32)*

**UK Statistics Authority response:** We agree with the Committee's recommendation. The Code of Practice for Official Statistics requires statistical reports to provide the name and contact details of the responsible statistician. ONS ensures that a named statistical contact is provided on all its statistical releases and the National Statistician will remind departments of this obligation.

### **C. Statistics on demand**

*The fact that so much unpublished data sits in Government naturally leads to a steady flow of requests for information which in turn puts the statisticians under avoidable resource pressure. Government statisticians should aim for the best practice that has been adopted in other parts of the public sector, namely to publish anything that can be put in the public domain. It would be expected that requests for additional data would fall sharply as, over time, less and less would rest hidden waiting to be requested. (Paragraph 38)*

**UK Statistics Authority response:** We support the Committee's conclusion and the GSS has committed to making more data available in open formats so that users can better find,

understand and re-use data for themselves, while providing reassurance about confidentiality and statistical disclosure

In doing so, we remain mindful of the importance of statistical disclosure control. New guidelines for the GSS will emphasise the need for data suppliers to balance risk and utility, and to operate within the law while recognising the significant user value from the publication of datasets.

It is too early to say definitively what impact the publication of more data in open formats may have on the number of ad hoc requests for supplementary data and analysis that ONS and other departments may receive. While it is possible that the number of such requests may fall over time, there is a potential that the number may increase as the datasets published raise user awareness and interest in the range of other data that are available. The National Statistician and Heads of Profession will keep this closely under review.

*We welcome the efforts made by the Statistics Authority to be transparent with ad hoc requests for data. However, the ways in which such requests are processed and presented are still a cause for concern by users. We recommend that the Statistics Authority review the ways in which statistics and underlying data are drawn up and communicated, and that it draw up expected standards for ad hoc data which government departments should be expected to comply with when publishing statistical information, which should be in formats which meet users' needs. (Paragraph 39)*

**UK Statistics Authority response:** We welcome the Committee's support of work undertaken to date within ONS with regard to publishing ad-hoc requests for data and agree with the Committee's recommendation. Revised guidance on identifying official statistics was published by the National Statistician's Office in December 2012, spelling out that any departure from a department's compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics for an ad hoc release of statistics or statistical analysis must be considered by the relevant Head of Profession for Statistics. It is good practice that a specific departmental webpage should be provided for the purposes of disseminating ad hoc statistics and related analyses alongside suitably worded explanation, commentary and advice to provide the necessary context for users. The National Statistician's Office will continue to monitor departmental compliance in this area.

#### **D. Misuse of official statistics**

*Where the Chair of the Statistics Authority has judged that there has been misuse of official statistics, we support his independence and his right to intervene. We are grateful to both the current and former Chairs for their role in upholding the integrity of government statistics and in therefore striving towards achieving higher levels of public trust in government statistics. It would be prudent, given the controversy of the areas in which the Authority intervenes, to reduce the scope for future misunderstandings, if the Authority set out why it chooses to intervene publicly on some issues and not on many others that are raised. (Paragraph 44)*

**UK Statistics Authority response:** The Authority welcomes the Committee's support of our role in upholding the integrity of official statistics and in our public interventions where we have found those to be necessary.

The Authority takes seriously all concerns about the misuse or misrepresentation of official statistics. Where official statistics have been leaked before publication, where statistics have

been used in such a way as to mislead public debate, or where the advice of a government statistician has been ignored, the Authority investigates and publishes its findings. The Authority also investigates any suggestion that Parliament might have been misled on a statistical matter.

Where it is my view as Chair of the Authority, and drawing on the advice of the Head of Assessment, National Statistician, and others, that an intervention is required and it is in our statutory remit to do so, an intervention is made. In cases where we do not intervene, we either refer the matter to the relevant producer body to provide a response in the first instance which we review closely to determine what, if any, further action is required, or advise the complainant that the matter is not being pursued, setting out the reason.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Dilnot". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'A' and a distinct 'D'.

**Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE**