
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE

Hugh Bayley MP
House of Commons
LONDON
SW1A 0AA

14 April 2014

Dear Mr Bayley

GOVERNMENT SPENDING ON FLOOD DEFENCES AND THE SCOPE OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS

Thank you for your letter dated 28 February, further to my reply to you dated 19 February, regarding Government spending on flood defences in England.

You asked me about the outcome of the Authority's discussions with the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in respect of the publication of official statistics on Government spending on flood defences in England. I can confirm that the Statistics Authority's Head of Assessment has been actively discussing this matter with the Head of Profession for Statistics and others at Defra, and I expect this to continue at pace until we have achieved an outcome which is satisfactory to us.

You have also raised two related questions in correspondence with Bernard Jenkin MP, Chair of the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, to which the Authority most routinely reports in Parliament:

- whether there should be a Code of Practice for numerical information that is not presently designated as 'official statistics'?
- whether the UK Statistics Authority should have the statutory responsibility to designate numerical information produced by departments as 'official statistics'?

To take the second question first – Section 6 of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007* does not give the Authority the statutory responsibility for defining whether numerical information produced by such bodies is an 'official statistic' or not. The Authority is therefore able to advocate that statistics should be recognised as official statistics, and has been active in doing so, but we do not have statutory power to require this of Departments.

Reflecting this situation, the Authority has published guidance¹ on the circumstances under which we will regard numerical information and research data as official statistics, and therefore where we expect these to be produced in accordance with the Code of Practice. The Authority has, on a number of occasions, advised publicly when, in our view, numerical information should in future be treated as official statistics, and where the treatment of numerical information appears to conflict with the standards expressed in the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

¹<http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/statement---management-information-and-research-data-as-official-statistics---21032011.pdf>

But we do not think that this position is ideal. Instead, we consider that there are strong arguments for the Authority to be given responsibility for determining the scope of the definition of 'official statistics'. We would welcome all opportunities to engage with Government and Parliament in this regard.

Returning to your first question, we are presently not attracted to a separate Code of Practice for non-official statistics. We consider that whenever a Department issues numerical information, it should have regard to the principles of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics - quality, transparency, accessibility, impartiality, and objectivity – whether or not the information is formally recognised as official statistics. I would also expect that where information is not official statistics, departments can also explain the standards that have applied to the data, for example, financial reporting standards or research ethics. But we would be concerned that creating a separate Code of Practice for non-official statistics would, in effect, create a two-speed system, with all the attendant risks of arbitrage as some departments sought to escape the main Code and to comply with what they would no doubt see as the less onerous requirements of a non-official statistics code. For this reason, our clear preference is to extend the principles of the current statutory Code of Practice for Official Statistics to cover a very wide range of numerical releases.

I am copying this to the Minister for the Cabinet Office, Rt. Hon. Francis Maude MP, to the Chair of the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, Bernard Jenkin MP, to the Permanent Secretary to Defra, Bronwyn Hill, to the National Statistician, Jil Matheson, and to the Authority's Head of Assessment, Ed Humpherson.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Dilnot". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE