
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Bernard Jenkin MP
Chair, Public Administration Select Committee
House of Commons
LONDON
SW1P 3JA

3 November 2011

Dear Bernard

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION SELECT COMMITTEE, THIRTEENTH REPORT OF SESSION 2010-12, *CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT: THE AGENDA FOR LEADERSHIP*

Thank you for your letter of 12 October in which you draw attention to Paragraph 97 of the report. In that paragraph the Committee looks to the Government to explain how the public in general, and the user community of statistics in particular, will be empowered to use newly published information. The Committee also recommends that the Statistics Authority should take a proactive role in ensuring that data released is intelligible, objectively interpreted and in a readily accessible format.

The Statistics Authority warmly welcomes both these points. To use statistics properly and effectively, people need clear guidance on the strengths and weaknesses of the statistics in relation to the uses to which they might be put. There is, for example, a real difference between using crime statistics to manage police resources and using those statistics to make judgements about the personal risk of victimisation. I have written to the Minister for the Cabinet Office, as enclosed, confirming the Statistics Authority's full support for the Government's Open Data policy but arguing that the publication of data is not on its own enough; the user needs sound professional advice on how to interpret the data as well.

There have been suggestions that such advice can be provided by third parties, much as applications for mobile phones are now provided by entrepreneurial individuals and companies. We would aim to support developments of that kind but are clear that those third parties will themselves first need to understand the strengths and weaknesses, and the relevance and reliability, of the statistical data. And it is not clear to us that such third parties will necessarily be motivated by the requirement for objective interpretation and advice. So we see no alternative to government statisticians both continuing, and enhancing, their role in providing objective and impartial comment and guidance. The Statistics Authority is currently conducting a review of all statistical publications produced in government to address how best this might be approached for the future. We hope that the Cabinet Office's report on the current consultation on Open Data will recognise the importance of the work of government statisticians in this regard.

In relation to the Committee's specific recommendation about the role of the Statistics Authority, we have always accepted that we must be proactive on this matter. Many of the 150 formal assessment reports we have so far published contain binding requirements to improve both the accessibility of the official statistics concerned and the quality of the written

text that accompanies their release. We have also published a number of statements about the standards we expect statistical releases to meet and the value of statistical commentary. This work is all under-pinned by the requirements of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics compliance with which – in respect of designated National Statistics – is a statutory requirement. The Code contains several requirements relating to the need to offer sound explanation alongside the figures themselves.

Whilst the Authority will do all it can in this regard, individual government departments and agencies have the final decision in terms of what they publish. We cannot oblige them to commit expert resources to the preparation of professionally sound advice and guidance, beyond the very specific requirements of the Code of Practice. Currently the picture is mixed. Some statistical releases contain clear and helpful text and, in these cases, our goal is to help the producer body to ensure this text is easy to find, both in standard statistical releases and on websites where data are released in more wholesale formats. In other cases, the written advice at present falls short of doing full justice to the information content of the statistics. Here our goal is to support the National Statistician in offering the producer organisation help and guidance.

As Chair of the Statistics Authority, I am also taking every opportunity, such as in the enclosed letter to the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, to stress the value of good statistical commentary in enabling people more easily to challenge inaccurate statistical stories in the news media. This can be difficult to do if there is no authoritative interpretation available. The Authority will report further on these matters, to the Committee and to other Parliamentary committees, as necessary.

I am copying this letter to the Minister for the Cabinet Office and to Jil Matheson, the National Statistician.

Yours sincerely

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

Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Rt. Hon. Francis Maude MP
Minister for the Cabinet Office
Cabinet Office
70 Whitehall
LONDON
SW1A 2AS

11 October 2011

Dear Francis

MAKING OPEN DATA REAL: GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION

I am responding to the current Cabinet Office consultation on this topic.

As you know, the UK Statistics Authority is very supportive of the Government's Open Data policy. We fully support your commitment to open government through greater transparency.

The Authority undertakes to investigate and to report publicly upon cases where data held for statistical purposes should be, and is not, as the Code of Practice for Official Statistics requires them to be, placed in the public domain for analysis and re-use. The Code requires that statistics be made available 'in as much detail as is reliable and practicable, subject to legal and confidentiality constraints', constraints which protect inter alia against the disclosure of personal information as proscribed by legislation. Normally we expect all data underlying official statistics to be published where this is practicable and does not put confidentiality at risk. Judgements about utility and reliability are, in our view, best largely left to users, as long as they are fully informed of the strengths and weaknesses of the data, which is another requirement of the Code of Practice.

We are at the same time fully supportive of the view expressed by the Public Administration Select Committee, that transparency is not always or necessarily achieved merely by the publication of data. 'Data dumping' can be inimical to transparency and good government. It is the task of government statisticians, and a requirement of the Code of Practice, to produce official statistics which are intelligible, readily accessible, with objective and impartial commentary. The Statistics Authority will do all it can to ensure that official statistics meet the highest standards in these and other dimensions.

There is also an important question about the relationship between the timing of the publication of official statistics and that of the data on which they are based. Ideally both should be published at the same time, and that may in some cases mean the bringing forward of publication dates of official statistics, where possible without unacceptable detriment to the quality of the statistics. However, where the statistics are drawn from administrative sources it may well be appropriate to release the administrative records and some related summary material earlier where this does not compromise the release of the official statistics. This will be a matter for the judgement of those responsible for the statistics concerned. If early release were to lead to a situation in which selective and misleading statistical summaries were being created by, for example, Ministers, their advisers, or third parties, ahead of the official statistics, we (and no doubt the issuing Department) would be

concerned, and we would investigate and report according to the circumstances.

Paragraph 8.11 of the consultation document commits the Cabinet Office to explore with the National Statistician how to ensure coherence in implementation between the Government's agenda and the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. We welcome this, and look forward to a discussion of the issues I have raised above, and of any other relevant questions, with your officials.

I am copying this letter to Bernard Jenkin, Chair of the Public Administration Select Committee, Sir Gus O'Donnell, the Cabinet Secretary, and to Jil Matheson, the National Statistician.

With best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

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

Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Dame Anne Begg DBE MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee
House of Commons
LONDON
SW1A 0AA

11 August 2011

Dear Dame Anne

STATISTICS ON EMPLOYMENT AND SUPPORT ALLOWANCE

I am writing to you in relation to the concerns expressed by the Work and Pensions Committee about the reporting of statistics on Employment and Support Allowance and the need for good statistical commentary to accompany such figures. The Statistics Authority strongly supports the need for clear advice to accompany official statistics, particularly where they are the focus of public debate.

In your report, *The role of incapacity benefit reassessment in helping claimants into work*, you express concern at the way in which releases of official statistics on the subject were covered in the news media. Your report says that ‘...more care is needed in the way...in which [Government] releases and provides its commentary on official statistics on the IB [Incapacity Benefit] reassessment.’ And ‘the Government should take ...all possible steps to ensure that context is provided when information about IB claimants found fit for work is released, so that unhelpful and inaccurate stories can be shown to have no basis’. You also stressed these points in your letter of 27 July to the Minister of State for Work and Pensions.

In the light of these concerns, the Statistics Authority has reviewed the statistical release in question, *Employment and Support Allowance: Work Capability Assessment by Health Condition and Functional Impairment* and concluded that it could be improved in a number of respects. We will be offering specific advice on this to the statisticians at the Department for Work and Pensions. The presentation of statistical releases is the responsibility of departmental statisticians, not their Ministers.

As it stands, the statistical release is not as clear as it could be. We note for example that it may not be obvious to the non-expert that figures for the category ‘Work Related Activity Group’ have to be added to those for ‘Support Group’ to get the proportion initially judged entitled to benefits; or that because the proportion initially judged ‘Fit to Work’ is reduced following appeals, the proportion eventually judged to be eligible for benefits is higher than it first appears. We would also like to see more distinction between the assessment of new claims and the re-assessment of existing claims; and some information on trends in the statistics over time. Some improvements on these lines would help all users of the statistical release, especially journalists, to better understand the figures.

We share the view expressed in your report that good statistical commentary not only helps people to understand and use the statistics, it allows inaccurate stories to be shown to have no basis. The Authority considers that this is a very important message for all government departments and agencies. The public can much more easily challenge inaccurate reporting,

and inaccurate statements made in the political fray, if the official statistics concerned are accompanied by objective and helpful commentary. It is, regrettably, sometimes argued that if the statistics are controversial, it is best for statisticians to avoid risk and to maintain a low profile, by offering minimal comment and commentary. We wholly disagree with this view and we are supporting the National Statistician's project to improve official statistical commentary across the board.

The Statistics Authority also warmly welcomed the guidance issued by the Cabinet Office to all Departments in 2009, and recently reiterated, that the presentation of official statistics in Ministerial and policy statements should always be informed by professional statistical advice. We also think it most important that there should be no confusion between the statistical messages in official statistics publications and the comments of Ministers on those statistics.

We note that the present statistical release is not currently designated as 'National Statistics', and there is therefore no statutory obligation to comply with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. The *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007* contains provisions that allow the Authority to propose to Ministers that statistics that are not currently designated as National Statistics should nonetheless be formally assessed against the Code. The Code contains a number of relevant requirements, including one to 'prepare...commentary and analysis that aid interpretation, and provide factual information about the policy or operational context of official statistics'; and also to 'provide information on the quality and reliability of statistics in relation to the range of potential uses'.

In view of the importance of these statistics to both government policy and public debate, I am writing to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, in accordance with section 16 of the Act to notify him of our view that these statistics should be assessed against the Code of Practice under the terms of the legislation.

The Statistics Authority reports to the Public Administration Select Committee. The Committee has made clear its support for independent scrutiny of official statistics wherever they are produced in government, and for high standards in the use of those statistics in political debate. I am copying this letter to Bernard Jenkin MP, Chair of the Public Administration Select Committee, and to Rt. Hon. Chris Grayling MP, Minister of State at the Department for Work and Pensions.

Yours sincerely

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

Sir Michael Scholar KCB