
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