
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Rt. Hon. Stephen Timms MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

7 December 2011

Dear Mr Timms

STATISTICS ON THE WORK PROGRAMME

Thank you for your letter of 10 November in which you ask how the current statistical legislation – the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 – affects the release of administrative data relating to the Work Programme.

Under the legislation there is a Code of Practice for Official Statistics. The most relevant requirements of the Code are these:

Principle 1 – The production, management and dissemination of official statistics should meet the requirements of informed decision-making by government, public services, business, researchers and the public.

Principle 2.3 – Make official statistics equally available to all...

Principle 3.1 – Issue statistical reports separately from any other statement or comment about the figures and ensure that no statement or comment – based on prior knowledge – is issued to the press or published ahead of the publication of the statistics.

Principle 3.3 – Ensure that the relevant statistical Head of Profession has the sole responsibility for deciding on statistical methods, standards and procedures, and on the content and timing of statistical releases.

Protocol 2.1 – Release statistical reports as soon as they are judged ready, so that there is no opportunity or perception of opportunity, for the release to be withheld or delayed.

Thus, since the decision that there should be official statistics on the Work Programme has in effect already been taken, the content and timing of those statistics is a matter for the relevant statistical Head of Profession, not Ministers. In the light of your letter we asked the statisticians in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) about the considerations behind their plans for the release of the statistics and related management information. I am content that they are approaching this in line with the Code of Practice. They told us that the first statistics, on 'referrals and attachments', are now expected to be ready in February 2012. They noted that "Some early management information is already in circulation within the Department..., and we did consider whether a limited set of information could be released earlier than February. We considered whether we should release it and whether we could produce any equivalent early estimates from our statistical sources. ... However, our experience suggests that early information from schemes of this sort tends to be considerably affected by 'bedding down' administrative issues."

In relation to the statistics on outcomes, the current date is November 2012 and the statisticians told us that this would "depend on the ability of our IT systems (and thus the IT contractor) to deliver the appropriate information. If all goes well we may be able to advance

the release of official statistics to earlier in 2012, but we are not yet in a position to make a commitment to this.”

Whilst the expectation of the Code is that the official statistics will be released before or at the same time as any more detailed data, we recognise that it is sometimes appropriate and desirable to release administrative data ahead of the official statistics. I enclose a copy of a letter I recently sent to the Minister for the Cabinet Office which touches on this. It says that under some circumstances ‘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’. The official statistics are required to be published in a professional and impartial way with all necessary guidance to the user of the statistics. We would regard it as unacceptable if attention were distracted from the official statistics release by proximate release of more detailed data or of selective early disclosure of data designed to deliver a political message.

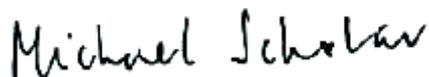
In relation to the Written Answer to which you refer, the Statistics Authority has not been consulted on whether it would be appropriate for Work Programme providers to publish their own performance data ahead of the publication of the relevant official statistics. However, without having all the details available, our current view is that the statisticians at DWP are doing their best to get the information into the public domain in as quick and orderly a way as they can.

In practice, if individual providers were releasing their own data, questions of accuracy and equal availability – the considerations mentioned in the Written Answer – would need to be carefully managed from the centre. On balance we share the view of the DWP statisticians that the uncontrolled release of data by the providers might not prove helpful, at least in the early stages of the scheme.

The net effect of these points is that there are not absolute constraints created by the Code of Practice, or by the Statistics Authority’s more detailed advice on good practice. However, any proposed arrangement to release detailed administrative data before release of the official statistics would benefit from discussion with the Authority to ensure that it did not compromise the release of the official statistics. In this particular case, we think the judgements made by DWP statisticians look about right.

I am copying this letter to Rt. Hon. Chris Grayling MP, Minister of State at the Department of Work and Pensions; to Jil Matheson, the National Statistician; and to David Frazer, statistical Head of Profession at DWP.

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