

Ed Humpherson
Director General for Regulation
Office for Statistics Regulation
(by email)

Date: 2 October 2019

Dear Ed,

I am writing in response to concerns that have been raised about our recent publication “Baby Names in England and Wales: 2018” on 29 August 2019. The concerns were centred around a claim that “Various spellings of the name Muhammad combined rank number one for most popular boys name in England and Wales in 2018”¹. This claim originated on Facebook and was subsequently investigated by Full Fact who concluded that this “depends on how you count the various spellings of Muhammad and other boys’ names and abbreviations of names.”²

Full Fact also commented “We think the ONS does not make this sufficiently clear in the release, meaning that readers are not given the information to fully judge the issue for themselves.”

We do not aggregate different spellings or abbreviations of baby names as part of our release, they are based on the exact name given on the birth certificate. Users can then aggregate if they wish. This is made clear in the statistical release.

This year we chose to publish a blog³ in advance of the baby names release addressing the complexity of aggregating similar or abbreviated baby names and the risk of not comparing like with like. This included discussion of the general diversification of baby names, while the proportion of Muhammads in the Muslim community remained constant. Including this within the statistical release would have enabled users to find all the relevant information in one place and would have added clarity to the debate. We will consider this approach for the next release.

We were broadly happy with the impact of publishing a blog post in advance of the baby names release, however we will consider publishing simultaneously in future and cross referencing the releases. Promoting the publication and setting the release in context improved the public engagement and media coverage, putting the statistics in the right social context. The blog gave us an accessible format within which to explore baby names in more detail, however we will consider how much of this information could have been included in the statistical bulletin and what the impact of this would have been. Baby names are a helpful insight into social change, and we will continue to examine ways to use this release to shine a light on broader changes in society.

We will continue working with your teams to ensure that we produce the best possible statistical and analytical insight into social change.

Yours sincerely



Ben Humberstone

¹<https://www.facebook.com/TheStrangeDeathOfEurope/photos/a.127443764476848/473738703180684/?type=3&theater>

² <https://fullfact.org/online/boys-baby-names-2018/>

³ <https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2019/08/28/whats-in-a-name-theres-more-than-you-might-think-to-the-ons-baby-names-list/>