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**Mark Pont, Assessment Programme Lead**

Siobhan Carey, CBE  
Chief Executive and Registrar General  
Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency  
(by email)

18 November 2020

Dear Siobhan

**Department for Communities' Benefits Statistics Summary for Northern Ireland**

I am writing to you following our review of the Department for Communities' (DfC) [Benefits Statistics Summary](#) for Northern Ireland against the Code of Practice for Statistics. The statistics have been considered as part of a wider review of benefit statistics, along with our assessment of benefit statistics covering Great Britain, produced by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

Benefit statistics play an important role in understanding the most vulnerable groups in society. As Universal Credit continues to roll out, the statistics on other available benefits are vital in providing insight into how the roll out affects the provision of these other benefits and how governments are financially supporting those who are eligible. The COVID-19 pandemic has created significant uncertainty and challenges for the labour market, which has led to heightened interest in benefit statistics.

I am pleased to confirm that these statistics should continue to be designated as National Statistics. During our review, we found several positives in the way that DfC produces and presents these statistics:

- The [Benefits Summary bulletin](#) is presented in a clear and consistent manner that ensures the publication is accessible for a broad range of users. The statistics are presented impartially, and the publication has been streamlined to bring out the key messages from the data.
- DfC has published new [management information](#) in response to increased demand for up-to-date information on the impact of COVID-19 on the take up of benefits. This demonstrates the team's ability to be proactive and agile in responding to the user need and adds value for users who rely on the data for service provision.
- We are pleased to see that DfC has implemented the Quality Assurance of Administrative Data (QAAD) [framework](#). Using the QAAD framework demonstrates the team's understanding of administrative data, including its strengths and limitations, and gives users the confidence to use the data appropriately. We welcome DfC's plans to publish its QAAD report as part of a department-wide initiative.
- The team told us that it is exploring the use of Reproducible Analytical Pipelines (RAP) in the production of its statistics. Adopting RAP principles could improve the

quality of the statistics by reducing the risk of human errors associated with current software packages. It could also enhance accessibility of the statistics and data, by introducing the capability for filtering and drop-down options in the charts within the bulletin. RAP also frees up resource which can be reallocated to addressing developments requested by users. We welcome these developments and encourage DfC to publicly release its development plans in this area.

We also identified some areas where DfC could improve the public value of its statistics, in order to continue to meet the high standards required of National Statistics:

- DfC conducted a user consultation in 2018 and published the [outcome](#), explaining the reasons why certain developments can or cannot be taken forward. Since then, DfC's user engagement has relied on users contacting the team. To ensure the statistics continue to add value to users, particularly in the light of changing user needs due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we suggest the team seeks to engage more proactively with users.
- The methodology information included in the bulletin is written in lay terms and is accessible to a broad range of potential users. However, there are some users who would benefit from more technical information, to understand how the data can be used for their own analyses. For example, the differences between extract date and reporting date are only briefly mentioned, and a lack of understanding of these nuances could risk misinterpretation of the statistics. We recommend that DfC expand the methodology information to cover key aspects of the suitability of data sources and methods.
- The statistics for the different benefits are presented very much in isolation of one another in the bulletin. The value of these statistics could be improved by telling a coherent story of how individuals move through the system, how the benefits interact, and where they fit within the bigger picture of the benefits system. We would encourage producers to look for ways to bring out more insight from the statistics, beyond simply reporting caseload numbers. We understand that the Client Group Analysis (currently suspended due to COVID-19) goes some way towards addressing this gap, and we look forward to seeing these improvements when resource availability allows it to be reinstated.

We would like to thank the team for its cooperation throughout the review process. We are pleased to hear already of the team's plans to engage with our recommendations – including by expanding the methodology information in the bulletin, looking to bring out greater insight from the statistics and increasing active user engagement. Our Labour Market and Welfare team will continue to engage with the team in the coming months to follow up on areas that have been highlighted for improvement.

I am copying this letter to Beverley Wall (Deputy Secretary Strategic Policy and Professional Services), Paul McKillen (Director Central Policy) and Ben Simpson (Professional Service Unit) at DfC.

Yours sincerely



Mark Pont  
Assessment Programme Lead