
Mark Pont, Assessment Programme Lead

Steve Ellerd-Elliott
Chief Statistician and Head of Profession for Statistics
Department for Work and Pensions
(by email)

23 June 2023

Dear Steve

Benefit Sanctions statistics

We recently completed our compliance check of your [Benefit Sanctions statistics](#) against the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#). Even though these statistics are still in development, they are important official statistics valued by users across government and those with an interest in the Benefits system. We have made several recommendations to support the continued development of these statistics.

We considered the Trustworthiness, Quality and Value of these statistics in relation to the Code and have appreciated the positive and constructive way that the team has engaged with us during our review.

Our review found many examples of good practice. We would particularly like to recognise the complexities around the development of these statistics and the re-instating of the currently suspended measures of legacy benefits sanctions, and the need to balance the pace of progress with making sure that the statistics are suitably robust.

The [background information and guidance](#) for the statistics is comprehensive and provides transparency around the issues with the data and methods and that those issues are being addressed. There are appropriate health warnings throughout the bulletin about making comparisons across benefits due to the different data sources used and methodological approaches. Making the data available for wider re-use through [Stat-Xplore](#) enables users to carry out their own further analysis and enhances the usefulness of the data.

From our conversations with your team, it is clear that a great deal of work is going on to re-instate the currently suspended measures and develop the published series further to add more value and meet user needs. This is while dealing with the limitations associated with the data being collected for operational reasons and not specifically for statistical production – for example, the data being held across several different systems and difficulties with accessing the data in a useable format. It was good to hear that regular conversations are happening between the statistics team and policy colleagues within DWP in particular to understand the context behind the year-on-year increases in reasons for sanctions decisions – an area flagged by users who would like to understand more around these reasons. The statistics team also told us that there has been a positive

change in the way ethnicity data are collected during benefit applications which should enable ethnicity breakdowns to be published in future – which would address a data gap we have also seen identified by users.

However, it is difficult for users to see and appreciate this work happening as this has not been communicated to them. Sharing details of both activity to date and planned work with users would help them to understand the amount of effort that is going into making the Benefit Sanctions statistics as useful and useable as possible. When sharing your plans, you should also provide details of how you plan to prioritise work going forward so it is clear to users when developments may occur, which will also help manage their expectations.

As the plans to reinstate the suspended measures progress and with other valuable developments in the pipeline, we fully support the team's plans to engage more widely with users beyond the regular user forums and stakeholder engagement that are already in place, and which are providing helpful channels for known users to provide feedback. Our [user engagement guidance](#) provides a useful framework to help plan these activities and this wider engagement can help inform any future decisions regarding these statistics that will help to ensure that they remain useful, relevant and continue to support understanding of this important area. The Government Analysis Function is also developing a [User Support and Engagement Resource \(USER\) hub](#) which contains helpful guidance on engaging with users.

In our review we identified a gap in the available quality assurance information, and we are pleased to hear from the team that it is following our [Quality Assurance of Administrative Data \(QAAD\) guidance](#) in order to provide both the team and users the necessary assurance about quality and to help users understand how the Benefit Sanctions data are collected and processed. The team has told us that it will publish this as soon as it is ready.

Our Labour Market and Welfare domain lead will continue to engage with you and your team on progress in the coming months. Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you would like to discuss any aspects of this letter further.

Yours sincerely



Mark Pont
Assessment Programme Lead