Mark Pont, Assessment Programme Lead

Hugh Stickland,
Head of Strategy and Engagement Division
Office for National Statistics
(by email)

21 January 2020

Dear Hugh

PUBLIC SERVICE PRODUCTIVITY: ADULT SOCIAL CARE STATISTICS

Thank you for inviting us to carry out a check of compliance of ONS's statistics on public service productivity for adult social care in England with the Code of Practice for Statistics. This compliance check complements our wider review of adult social care statistics in the UK, with our report for England published last week. We welcome your developing these statistics, as first published as experimental statistics in June 2018 in the article Measuring adult social care productivity in the UK and England: 2016, to better inform policy-making in the Department of Health and Social Care. We note the latest release of official statistics was published in February 2019 Public service productivity: adult social care, England, 2017/18 and welcome the ambition of your team to achieve National Statistics status for these statistics. This letter highlights our main findings and recommendations from our check.

Measuring productivity of publicly funded adult social care services is difficult and complex. We share your ambition for stronger outcome measures, and to improve the public value of these statistics. Our check, and our discussions with the statistical team, identified that there are quality issues with these statistics and our overall conclusion is that our concerns around the data sources need to be addressed before these statistics can be considered for National Statistics status. We have included more detail within the Annex to this letter. In view of our findings, we encourage you to continue with the publication of these statistics as official statistics and:

- investigate the issues identified in this letter further, working collaboratively with others to do so
- engage with users to ensure the development of the statistics meet their needs

We are planning to meet with ONS to discuss our regulatory work on productivity statistics for 2020/21, and will consider further the outcomes of this review as we consider our future work. We look forward to engaging with ONS over the coming months to discuss this further.

I am copying this letter to Richard Heys, Head of Productivity Statistics at ONS and Ben Humberstone, Head of Health Analysis and Life Event Statistics at ONS.

Yours sincerely

Mark Pont
Assessment Programme Lead

Annex

This annex lists our main findings of our compliance check, based around the three pillars of the Code.

Trustworthiness

- The statistics are presented impartially and objectively, with the purpose of the new statistics clearly stated in the release. They are produced within the Efficiency Measurement Unit at ONS and contact details for the lead statistician are included. Relevant data and security policies are linked and available to users within the quality and methods information.

Quality

Quality Assurance of Administrative Data

- The expenditure data for the Adult Social Care, England release are derived data published within the Adult Social Care Activity and Finance Report produced by NHS Digital. Use of these data enables analysis of productivity at sub-sector levels and this is all well-documented within the comprehensive quality and methods information. We have concerns around your own quality assurance of the use of these data. The Adult Social Care Finance Returns (ASC-FR) used for the expenditure data in the Adult Social Care Activity and Finance Report are submitted by local authorities to NHS Digital. As highlighted in the data quality statement for the Adult Social Care Activity and Finance report, part of the ASC-FR includes a comparison to the RO3[1] to help local authorities to be consistent in their data submissions. NHS Digital does not have access to the individual records and is reliant on local authorities to assess their own data quality, with ownership of the accuracy of the data collection lying with each of the 152 local authorities in England. NHS Digital completes validation checks and details of any issues are available in a Data Quality Summary. The team has only a basic level of quality assurance of this data source and it needs to fully understand and consider any risks in using these data and appropriately mitigate any impact these may have on the statistics. Data quality issues must be clearly documented and accessible to users so that they understand the strengths and limitations of using these statistics. An enhanced level of assurance would lead to better development of these statistics. We recommend using the Authority's Quality Assurance of Administrative Data (QAAD) toolkit as ONS seeks to enhance its quality assurance arrangements.

Coherence with other expenditure data sources

- Other statistics on expenditure of publicly funded adult social care are available and published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in the Local Authority Revenue Expenditure and Financing outturns. Through our wider review of adult social care statistics across the UK, we heard from users that the lack of coherence between expenditure figures in the two data collections was confusing and often misunderstood. To investigate this issue, a cross-government working group was formed to align national and local reporting of adult social care expenditure, including representatives from NHS Digital, the Department of Health and Social Care and MHCLG. We would encourage your team to engage with this group, to offer its own insights and to gain a better understanding, including the strengths and weaknesses of the different sources of expenditure data. We would also recommend that users be informed of this underlying issue through the quality and methods information.

Concerns around the quality adjustment data source

- The quality adjustment data are sourced from the Personal Social Services Adult Social Care Survey (ASCS) produced by NHS Digital. This survey is subject to areas of bias (for example, a small sample size and the fact that respondents who are unable to complete the survey independently may receive assistance from others in completing it) limiting the quality of the estimates and stakeholders are concerned about the consistently high levels

---

[1] Local Authorities in England are required to complete the Revenue Outturn (RO) suite of forms to show all financial transactions. This includes the RO3 return for 'Social Care and Public Health' submitted to MHCLG

of satisfaction reported by the survey, that do not accord with those shown by other sources. ONS needs to fully understand these biases, the impact that they might have on the productivity statistics, and document any implications for use of the productivity statistics.

Value

- The user community for these statistics is niche and the statistics are directed towards an expert economic user. The statistics were introduced to better inform policy makers within the Department of Health and Social Care. The team has identified other users of the statistics such as HM Treasury, think tanks and academics and researchers working on adult social care. This is documented in the quality and methods information and highlighted through our own discussions with the team. Despite this consideration, we do consider that an ongoing and open dialogue with users is missing. There is a lack of publicly available user feedback including any improvements made because of any user commentary. To maximise the public value of these statistics, we would encourage the team to engage more proactively with users.

- Navigation between the main statistical bulletin and relevant supplementary information can be confusing. A number of articles detailing methodology changes and subsequent updates are linked within the bulletin and similar wording of titles makes it difficult to follow which is which. We are encouraged to hear that the team plans to improve the accessibility and referencing between the supplementary information for the next release in February 2020.