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Statistics Authority publishes *Migration Statistics: the Way Ahead*

The UK Statistics Authority today publishes its review of progress to improve official migration statistics, *Migration Statistics: the Way Ahead*. The review concludes that whilst useful work is being done across government to deliver some improvements in the short to medium term, the longer term goal of high quality migration estimates derived primarily from administrative sources will take some considerable time to realise, perhaps decades. The Authority recognises that there are no short-cuts, but it believes that all the steps to support progress should be taken as soon as they can be.

International migration is currently the largest component of population change. However, the statistical concept of migration also includes movement of people within the UK. Such internal movements have a substantial influence on the level and composition of the population in local areas. The accurate measurement of the movement of people, both into and around the country, is essential to reliable population estimates and therefore to policy development, resource allocation and service delivery.

Improvements to migration statistics are being pursued by government departments, partly in response to two National Statistics reviews¹ and the House of Commons Treasury Committee report on *Counting the population*². The purpose of the Authority's monitoring review was to report on the progress being made, the adequacy of the plans, and the extent and effectiveness of co-operation across government to deliver the improvements.

Speaking today, the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar said:

"Improving UK migration statistics is a high priority for the Statistics Authority. More reliable migration statistics are needed by the many different users who depend on them to inform their work and their decisions.

In the absence of a population register, and while the Government has, as yet, no plans to create a continuously updated Address Register, the Migration Statistics Improvement Programme charts the best way forward, and is of great importance. The report we are publishing today makes a number of recommendations which I hope will make a useful contribution to this Improvement Programme"

The Authority makes a number of recommendations to this Improvement Programme, which is being led by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). In particular, it identifies a number of ways in

¹ National Statistics Quality Review Report no 23: *International Migration Statistics* (2003) and *Report on the Inter-Departmental Task Force on Migration Statistics* (December 2006)

² House of Commons Treasury Committee, *Counting the Population*, Eleventh Report of Session 2007-08, 23 May 2008, HC 183

which the Improvement Programme can be made more transparent to users and increase engagement:

- for ONS to make its quality assurance methodology clear to users and for a phase of quality assurance involving local government experts to occur before the final version of the estimates is released;
- for ONS to flag those local authority population estimates where there are relatively high levels of uncertainty, indicating the reason for the uncertainty;
- to publish information to clarify how e-Borders³ data might be used in the estimation of migration statistics;
- to publish the project papers which together with details of investigations currently underway and their progress would give users a better understanding of progress;
- for each department involved in the Programme to provide the programme board with details of the work being undertaken, together with the associated expenditure, and update this every six months;
- for ONS, Home Office and the Department for Work and Pensions to adopt a 'conceptual framework' in their releases of migration statistics, to enable users to understand how the different sets of figures relate to each other and to the process of migration more generally.

The review examines developments within the cross-government migration statistics improvement programme and draws on interviews with users of the statistics. Most of the users supported the direction of travel of the improvement programme. In particular, they supported the emphasis on drawing on administrative sources but they also pointed to the need for more information to be made available publicly on what was currently being done, and remained to be done. Included in the report is a review of relevant academic literature prepared for us by the School of Geography, University of Leeds. This authoritative paper provides a number of helpful insights into ways of further improving the official migration figures.

Successive UK governments have historically been opposed to maintaining a comprehensive register of everyone in, and entering and leaving, the country – on the lines of some Scandinavian countries. From studies of those systems, it is clear that they do not prevent all problems, but they can give better and more up to date information on migration. Whatever the statistical merits of such a system, there is no practical prospect of the UK Government introducing a comprehensive system on these lines in the foreseeable future. That being the case, it is inevitable that current, substantial efforts to improve statistics on migration into and around the UK will take a long time to reach their maximum potential, and will meanwhile produce only modest short-term improvements in what we know.

The report is available on the Authority's website at: <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/reports---correspondence/reports/index.html>.

Earlier this week, the Authority wrote to the Minister of State at the Department for Communities and Local Government, John Healey MP, regarding the establishment of a National Address Register. The letter is published on the Authority's website at: <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/reports---correspondence/correspondence/index.html>

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³ The e-Borders system is currently under development with the primary aim of securing the UK borders. It will eventually record all people travelling in and out of the UK (except across the Irish land border). This provides the statistical benefit of being able to count people into and out of the country.