
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Jennifer McCann MLA
Chair, Finance and Personnel Committee
Northern Ireland Assembly
Parliament Buildings
BELFAST
BT4 3XX

23 September 2010

Dear Ms McCann

UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY: NORTHERN IRELAND

I am writing to bring to your attention our Annual Report for 2009-10, which has now been laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly, and to offer some observations on how the Authority sees its role in relation to Northern Ireland and to seek your support in certain respects. I am also writing in similar terms to Sammy Wilson MP MLA, as the responsible Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive.

The legislation that established the Authority contains provisions that make specific reference to the Northern Ireland administration. For example, the non-executive members of the Authority must include at least one person appointed after consulting the Department for Finance and Personnel for Northern Ireland; in preparing or revising the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, the Authority must consult the Department; and there are a number of other matters in relation to which the Department has specific powers or must be consulted including, under certain circumstances, the power to direct the Board of the Authority. Thus, there is a formal statutory framework which defines the relationship in a number of respects.

However, in practice, most of our dealings with the Northern Ireland administration are not of a kind that will require the direct involvement of Ministers or committees of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Communication between the statisticians in the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and our own staff – in London, Edinburgh and Newport – is effective and constructive.

From time to time more intractable or high profile issues arise and, where that happens, we will write to you as appropriate. However, I am not currently aware of any specific matters in this category as far as Northern Ireland is concerned.

One more general, and sometimes difficult, area is ensuring that where it would be of value at a UK national level, the four administrations work together to produce comparable sets of statistics. In practice, this should not, and will not, restrict the freedom of the Northern Ireland Ministers to commission official statistics specifically tailored to your own legal, administrative or policy environment. But it may involve contributing to some additional work across the administrations to examine definitional differences and put together estimates on a common basis. I would ask for your committee's support in general terms on this point.

At a time when all administrations are looking to contain expenditure where possible, I would assure you that the Statistics Authority does not see its role as the unquestioning defence of statistical activities. A sharper focus on meeting clear needs, which in turn deliver demonstrable value to the citizen, is central to much of our work. We would ask however that all the benefits of evidenced based decision-making in government, business, and the voluntary and personal sectors, be fully weighed in the balance. Reducing expenditure on statistical work may be straightforward; determining the consequences is much harder. Such matters must be approached with an eye to the longer term public interest. The Authority will offer impartial advice on this where it can.

One special case, relating both to resources and the need for co-operation, is the conduct of the 2011 Census and, more specifically, consideration of the longer term options to replace the traditional Census. Whilst we are aware of the close working arrangements that already exist among government statisticians on Census issues, these are not purely professional matters and have a substantial political and policy dimension. The Statistics Authority will be happy to engage with all the administrations, and other political interests, with a view to discussing where the best interests of the UK and its constituent countries lie. The particular need for cross-border statistical co-operation in Ireland is clearly one aspect here.

These are, I submit, substantive agenda items with both shorter and longer term implications. I hope that the approach above will commend itself to you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Scholar". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Sammy Wilson MP MLA
Minister of Finance and Personnel
Department of Finance and Personnel
Rathgael House
Balloo Road
BANGOR
BT19 7NA

23 September 2010

Dear Mr Wilson

UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY: NORTHERN IRELAND

I am writing to bring to your attention our Annual Report for 2009-10, which has now been laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly, and to offer some observations on how the Authority sees its role in relation to Northern Ireland and to seek your support in certain respects. I am also writing in similar terms to your ministerial counterparts in Scotland and Wales.

As you may know, the legislation that established the Authority contains provisions that make specific reference to the Northern Ireland administration. For example, the non-executive members of the Authority must include at least one person appointed after consulting the Department for Finance and Personnel for Northern Ireland; in preparing or revising the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, the Authority must consult the Department; and there are a number of other matters in relation to which the Department has specific powers or must be consulted including, under certain circumstances, the power to direct the Board of the Authority. Thus, there is a formal statutory framework which defines the relationship in a number of respects.

However, in practice, most of our dealings with the Northern Ireland administration are not of a kind that will require the exercise of Ministerial powers. Communication between the statisticians in the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and our own staff – in London, Edinburgh and Newport - is effective and constructive.

From time to time more intractable or high profile issues arise and, where that happens, we will write to you as appropriate. However, I am not currently aware of any specific matters in this category as far as Northern Ireland is concerned.

One more general, and sometimes difficult, area is ensuring that where it would be of value at a UK national level, the four administrations work together to produce comparable sets of statistics. In practice, this should not, and will not, restrict the freedom of the Northern Ireland Ministers to commission official statistics specifically tailored to your own legal, administrative or policy environment. But it may involve contributing to some additional work across the administrations to examine definitional differences and put together estimates on a common basis. I would ask for your support in general terms for government statisticians giving constructive attention to such matters when they arise. As part of this, the National

Statistician has some UK-wide responsibilities and I hope that all the devolved administrations will recognise that at times this involves her advising the chief statisticians on the priority to be given to the UK dimension.

At a time when all administrations are looking to contain expenditure where possible, I would assure you that the Statistics Authority does not see its role as the unquestioning defence of statistical activities. A sharper focus on meeting clear needs, which in turn deliver demonstrable value to the citizen, is central to much of our work. We would ask however that all the benefits of evidence-based decision-making in government, business, and the voluntary and personal sectors, be fully weighed in the balance. Reducing expenditure on statistical work may be straightforward; determining the consequences is much harder. Such matters must be approached with an eye to the longer term public interest. The Authority will offer impartial advice on this where it can.

One special case, relating both to resources and the need for co-operation, is the conduct of the 2011 Census and, more specifically, consideration of the longer term options to replace the traditional Census. Whilst we are aware of the close working arrangements that already exist among government statisticians on Census issues, these are not purely professional matters and have a substantial political and policy dimension. The Statistics Authority will be happy to engage with all the administrations, and other political interests, with a view to discussing where the best interests of the UK and its constituent countries lie. The particular need for cross-border statistical co-operation in Ireland is clearly one aspect here.

These are, I submit, substantive agenda items with both shorter and longer term implications. I hope that the approach above will commend itself to you.

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