

From: Iain Bell
To: Ed Humpherson
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Subject: Department for Education processes

Ed

I am grateful UKSA made time to discuss the Department's use of Staying Put figures in this embargoed press notice; I wanted to take the time to set out some of our standard assurance processes and corrective action in writing given this unfortunate incident.

The embargoed press notice - which was subsequently withdrawn - contained references to data which were not signed off by my analytical team at the time. Although the specific data included in the press notice were all correct, the comparison in the embargoed headline was invalid. This was because the statement compared different populations in coverage and definitional terms: comparing figures for Staying Put in 2010/11 based on 19 year old care leavers with figures in 2013/14 based on 18, 19, 20 and 21 year-old care leavers. As soon as the lead analyst became aware, she and our communications team worked quickly to ensure all proactive communication was dropped and this was removed from all departmental briefing lines. A reminder of our agreed quality assurance processes were sent out across the department.

We discussed the processes that already existed within the Department for quality assuring the use of numbers in press notices, speeches and other key departmental documents. These have been thoroughly reviewed following this event. Our key processes, which we have re-enforced, are:

(a) Assuring quality data in press notices:

When Press Office send drafts for clearance, they should specifically highlight any areas where they want to change/insert numbers and flag this clearly to the lead analyst and copy to the policy team. If for any reason press office need to amend a number, they should flag this change and not use it until they have sign off from the senior analyst and policy lead.

Policy leads should ensure a lead analyst/number checker is nominated for every press notice and be copied into each draft and all policy comments to quality assure the numbers. This analyst should be named at the start of the day and be available through to final sign-off, using remote working where necessary. The analyst will work with policy leads to ensure all numbers used are checked and correct within the press notice timescales.

(b) Statistics in media briefings, policy documents statements and interviews:

Published government statistics should be used for this wherever possible.

When providing statistics, analysts should be clear about the basis of the statistic and policy leads should check with the lead analyst whether the statistic means what they think it means and ensure any statistics used publicly reflect the evidence base sufficiently. They should also check with the lead analyst whether data from non-government sources is robust before using it – and, if using such sources, be clear about the source, for example, “According to the OECD/University of Bristol...”

Importantly, where no relevant published statistics are available, it may be necessary to use unpublished statistics to support a statement. *However*, if a plan is made to do so, the lead analyst must be involved. They will need to arrange for an ad-hoc Statistical Notice to be published alongside the first use of the numbers. If in doubt, you can also talk to the Head or Deputy Head of Profession for Statistics (Iain Bell, Tanya McCormack).

(c) Operation of the fact-checking service:

For all SoS/ Ministerial public statements that have a greater than 24-hour turnaround, statistics can be checked through the fact-checking service. Under this service, our Ministerial offices can send the speech/ public statement to MAILBOX, statisticsFactChecking. The core statistics team will then ensure this is disseminated to the right contact(s) and they will receive a fact-checked version in return. This version will include (a) a comment/ tracked change for any fact that requires amendment and (b) a footnote where facts have been checked and are correct.

In addition to the above, we are now rolling out sessions for staff across the Department on these processes. They are designed to minimise the risk of events such as this happening. I was also grateful for your reflections on the quality of the processes we have in place in the Department for Education and would welcome any additional reflections you have on the general approach I have set out above.

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