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for Business
Innovation & Skills

The Rt Hon Vince Cable MP
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Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority
UK Statistics Authority
1 Drummond Gate
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21 January 2015

Dear Sir Andrew,

You will be aware of recent correspondence between myself and Mr Glen Watson at the Office for National Statistics (ONS) regarding the inclusion of the following sentence in the Migration Statistics Quarterly Release (MSQR) published in August and November 2014:

'Additionally, migration statistics are used to monitor the impact of immigration policy, and performance against a stated target to reduce annual net migration to the UK to the tens of thousands by 2015.'

Between August 2013 and May 2014 inclusive, the MSQR referred explicitly to a “government” target to reduce “annual net migration to the tens of thousands by 2015”. My Department fed back to ONS officials that the net migration target was not government policy, and the wording was subsequently changed to that used in August and November. However, this revised wording retains mention of the net migration target being in the tens of thousands but fails to identify who it is that has stated the target. This ambiguity means that some readers may infer that it is a government target.

I wrote to Mr Watson to ask that this wording was removed, however, his reply to my letter contends that the “net migration target” has become part of the public discourse, and it is therefore legitimate to reference it. I must disagree strongly on this point. Whether or not it has become part of the public debate is irrelevant and to continue to state it as a government target does not in any way reflect the coalition agreement.

The public rightly expects all ONS releases to reflect the facts accurately, given its role as a trusted and respected institution. It is not for the ONS to comment on public discourse or political targets set by political parties, and continuing to use this incorrect wording will no doubt compromise its political neutrality and independence thus misleading the public.

I am therefore requesting that the ONS removes all references to this target from all of its future releases, to ensure that it conveys the correct and agreed government position.

I am copying this letter to John Pullinger, Glen Watson and Ian Cope.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Vince Cable', with a small mark above the 'e'.

VINCE CABLE

Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills