

Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation

Baroness Grender
House of Lords
London
SW1A 0PW

20 February 2017

Dear Baroness Grender

USE OF HOMELESSNESS STATISTICS PRODUCED BY THE DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN PRESS NOTICES AND PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

Thank you for your correspondence of 9 January regarding the use of homelessness statistics produced by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) in December last year. Your concerns relate to the use of the DCLG's statutory homelessness statistics in a DCLG press briefing issued on 13 December; in the subsequent House of Commons and House of Lords debates on 14 and 21 December; and in regard to the comparability of DCLG's statutory homelessness series over time.

Firstly, we would have expected the DCLG press briefing issued on 13 December, which stated 'homelessness is less than half the 2003 peak', to have explicitly included the statutory homelessness definition. This exclusion implies that homelessness has more than halved since 2003 on a much broader basis than is shown by the statutory series. It is now apparent that DCLG omitted the statutory definition from other statements made towards the end of last year, including from background information published alongside the Government's announcement¹ that it was supporting the Homelessness Reduction Bill on 24 October, and from a DCLG press statement in response to a publication by Shelter on 1 December. This is disappointing, given the emphasis the UK Statistics Authority has placed on DCLG providing a comprehensive picture of homelessness.

Before these instances, DCLG press notices have included the statutory definition, and DCLG statisticians have informed my regulatory team that it is standard practice for the lead statistician to clear any press office announcements, lines and background notes that use the DCLG homelessness statistics in advance. However, it appears that DCLG press officials did not seek clearance from the lead statistician for the press briefing issued on 13 December or the background information published on 24 October, and that the lead statistician failed to ensure that the statutory definition was included in the press line issued on 1 December. The Head of Profession for Statistics at DCLG told me that the lead statistician has now reiterated the importance of the correct drafting of lines about homelessness to all DCLG policy and press officials and has received their assurances that they will be vigilant to this. I have asked my regulatory team to monitor this.

In relation to the subsequent use of these statistics in parliamentary debate, you refer to a statement made by the Minister for Housing and Planning on 14 December who said 'homelessness is lower now than its peak in 2003-04.' Ideally, such statements should include the statutory definition, but the Minister did not go as far as to say that homelessness was 'less than half the 2003 peak', only that it was lower than this level.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-to-support-new-legislation-to-reduce-homelessness>

To me, the Minister's moderated presentation of the statistics in this way seems reasonably clear.

In your correspondence you also identify the potential comparability issues in using the statutory homelessness series. You may be aware that our assessment of DCLG's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Statistics in December 2015² highlighted concerns that the statutory homelessness statistics presented as they were, without the broader context of increasing local authority prevention and relief activity, were potentially misleading, but noted DCLG's commitment to publish a better integrated set of statistics to increase their public value. However, DCLG clearly has more work to do to effectively communicate the limitations of the current and widely used statutory series, and to ensure that an understanding of these complexities is reflected in broader public debates. While it is working on longer-term developments, in the short term, DCLG has combined the previously separate statutory homelessness and prevention and relief statistics into one quarterly bulletin to present a more integrated and less misleading picture. This has been welcomed by users of the statistics in the charitable sector who are also contributing to the development work.

Beyond this, I will also be seeking a commitment from DCLG's Head of Profession for Statistics that future press notices referring to the declining statutory trend will also refer to the growth in prevention and relief activity presented in the same statistical bulletin. I hope that these actions taken together will provide greater clarity ahead of DCLG's longer-term statistical developments coming to fruition.

I am copying this letter to Sandra Tudor, Head of Profession for Statistics at DCLG.

Yours sincerely



Ed Humpherson

² <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/statistics-on-homelessness-and-rough-sleeping-in-england-department-for-communities-and-local-government/>