
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir David Norgrove

Lyn Brown MP
(via email)

9 April 2019

Dear Ms Brown,

Thank you for your letter of 25 February in which you expressed concern about the use of statistics in comments on child poverty made by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Liz Truss. You question the statement that there are ‘1 million fewer people...now in absolute poverty than were in 2010, including 300,000 fewer children’ and query the use of the year 2010. I apologise for the delay in replying.

The Chief Secretary clarified the reference period as 2009/10 to 2016/17 in a written response to a Parliamentary Question. We have checked both the accuracy of the figures and the reference period quoted and can confirm the figure taken from the Department for Work and Pensions statistics, Households Below Average Income (HBAI)¹, is correct.

Sir Andrew Dilnot set out the Authority’s position regarding comparisons around a change in government and attribution of changes to particular governments in his letter to George Eaton, editor of the *New Statesman*². The choice of reference period will depend on the issue, the context and the nature of the discussion. In this case, the Minister compared the latest available statistics with the last full year before the change in government, which seems a reasonable basis for this kind of comparison. I should note that the Government Statistical Service’s guidance on presenting statistics advises users not to focus solely on the latest numbers, or on point-to-point comparisons in isolation.³

I also note that other measures of poverty may show different results. But as Sir Michael Scholar argued in an earlier letter, “political debate frequently involves the selection and interpretation of the available statistics. [...] Our role is to make sure that public debate is well informed by accurate, impartial and objective statistics, and not ourselves to become a player or a referee.”⁴

In sum we do not regard the Chief Secretary’s statement as misleading.

I am copying this letter to the Chief Secretary.

Yours sincerely,



Sir David Norgrove

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-199495-to-201617>

² <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/statistics-on-private-sector-employment/>

³ <https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Writing-about-statistics-Edition-2.0-October-2018-1.pdf#page=10>

⁴ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/school-sports-statistics-3/>