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**Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir David Norgrove**

Ms Lizzie Flew  
Child Poverty Action Group  
*By email only*

20 December 2017

Dear Ms Flew

Your former colleague Imran Hussain wrote to the UK Statistics Authority on 21 November to express concern about the way ministers and officials had used child poverty statistics.

He drew attention to two separate statements, which had used different child poverty indicators – one during Prime Minister Questions in 2014 which referred to *children in relative low income households*, and the other a statement by the Department for Work and Pensions referring to *children in absolute low income households*.<sup>1</sup>

These statements did not directly misuse statistics. The question for the Statistics Authority is whether we should intervene when statistics are used selectively.

The Authority's longstanding position is that it would be wrong for us to become a player or a referee in political debate.<sup>2</sup>

In this case, measuring child poverty is complex, and there is no single measure that captures all aspects of poverty. Where there are multiple measures, it would certainly help public understanding and debate if Government were more consistent in the choice of measures and in reporting progress against them.

I am copying this letter to Sir Robert Devereux, Permanent Secretary at the Department for Work and Pensions.

Yours sincerely



**Sir David Norgrove**

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<sup>1</sup> Prime Ministers Questions 19 November 2014 ([Hansard, Q4](#)); and, statements made in [the Guardian](#) on 6 November 2017.

<sup>2</sup> UK Statistics Authority (Jan 2011): [School sports statistics](#)

## ***Note by the Office for Statistics Regulation***

The 2010 Child Poverty Act included four statutory indicators for child poverty in the UK based on household income and a target to end child poverty (assessed against these indicators) by 2020/21;

- the proportion of children living in relatively low income households
- the proportion of children living in absolute low income households (measured against 2010/11 base year)
- the proportion of children living in relatively low income households and material deprivation
- the proportion of children living in persistent poverty

The Welfare Reform and Work Act replaced the Child Poverty Act in 2016, and this resulted in the removal of the child poverty targets, with no legislative duty on the Government to meet them. However, there remains a requirement for the Government to continue to publish annual figures based on these four income-related measures. The number and proportion of children living in relative and absolute low income household measures, the subject of this specific correspondence, are published by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)<sup>3</sup> in its annual Households Below Average Income (HBAI) statistical release.

Both the relative and absolute measures of child poverty are limited when viewed on their own as they measure different things. Latest figures for the 2015/16 financial year published by DWP show the percentage of children in relative low income households (before housing costs) has risen to a level last seen in 2009/10, while the percentage in absolute low income before housing costs remains at the historic low observed in 2014/15. This is clearly brought out in the latest HBAI release.

The press release that accompanied the latest statistical release for 2015/16 data, published in March 2017<sup>4</sup> referred only to the number of children moving out of absolute low income since 2009/10, stating clearly that it was the absolute low income figure being used. It included a link to the latest statistical release. The press release that accompanied the HBAI statistical release for the previous year (2014/15 data) published in June 2016<sup>5</sup> referred only to the fall in the number of children in relative low income households, while the press release for 2013/14 data

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/households-below-average-income-hbai--2>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/household-incomes-remain-highest-on-record>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/household-incomes-highest-on-record>

published in June 2015<sup>6</sup> included reference to both the relative and absolute measures of children in low income households.

Our view is that highlighting one measure of child poverty in ministerial or departmental statements where multiple measures exists is not an overt misuse of statistics and that it is in the nature of political discourse that this will happen. We do, however, feel that public debate would be enhanced if the Government indicated more clearly which measure or measures it places greatest weight on and that it was consistent in reporting progress against this measure. It is unhelpful if there is regular switching between what constitutes the key measure.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/low-income-statistics-lowest-levels-since-1980s>