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**Ed Humpherson | Director General for Regulation**

Julian Knight MP, Chair  
DCMS Committee (Online Harms and Disinformation)  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

24 April 2020

Dear Chair,

I write in response to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Sub-committee on Online Harms and Disinformation call for evidence.

The Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR)<sup>1</sup> provides independent regulation of all statistics produced by the UK Government, Devolved Nations and by all related public bodies<sup>2</sup>. The OSR is the independent regulatory arm of the UK Statistics Authority<sup>3</sup> (the Authority), which was established by the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 (the SRSA).

We set the standards producers of official statistics must meet through the statutory Code of Practice for Statistics<sup>4</sup>. We assess compliance with this Code, and designate statistics as National Statistics. There are three pillars of the Code:

- Trustworthiness: trusted people, systems and processes
- Quality: robust data, method and statistics
- Value: statistics that serve the public good

Our role is to ensure that statistics serve the public good. In a world in which data and information are abundant, people can feel bombarded by information. We focus on the government as a provider of information and statistics, disseminating a reliable, impartial evidence base.

While we also have an important role in challenging instances of statistical misuse (misinformation), most of our regulatory work focuses on what it means to *inform* society. We help the public to identify the statistics that meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and value and we challenge producers to fill data gaps to better inform society.

This is a very difficult time for everyone as the UK adjusts to rapid changes in society and the economy. Organisations that produce official statistics are showing flexibility and adapting what they collect and publish to respond to this new environment. The pace at which these organisations have set up new data collection and dissemination processes has been unprecedented and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/osr/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/about-the-authority/uk-statistical-system/producers-of-official-statistics/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/about-the-authority/what-we-do/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/code-of-practice/>

enables timely updates on the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths, as well as the economic and societal impacts of the pandemic.

In response to COVID-19 we have developed a package of measures<sup>5</sup> including guidance on factors that producers should consider when making changes to data collection and statistics. We have carried out short regulatory reviews of new COVID-19 questions added to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Opinions and Lifestyle survey<sup>6</sup>, and of new experimental faster indicators<sup>7</sup> constructed from rapid response surveys, novel data sources and experimental methods.

In accordance with our interventions policy<sup>8</sup> we have responded to concerns about the publication of data on COVID-19 cases and deaths, and have called on the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure management information on Universal Credit used in daily briefings is published and accessible to the public<sup>9</sup>. We have undertaken a review<sup>10</sup> of all the data releases on COVID-19 cases and deaths – at a UK level and for each country within the UK – to help understanding of the available sources and to highlight strengths and areas for improvement.

Following our interventions regarding data on COVID-19 cases and deaths, there have been improvements in the information provided by government. In particular, there is now much greater clarity that the daily deaths data is incomplete and does not include deaths in all settings. It is a leading indicator, however, with the weekly figures from the ONS (and National Records of Scotland and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency) providing a more complete picture of deaths associated with COVID-19.

However, in order to maintain public confidence in these crucial statistics, we are encouraging producers to continue to clarify the nature and extent of the uncertainty around the UK estimates of deaths associated with COVID-19, and what the figures do and not include. We also continue to state our expectation that any management information used as part of daily public briefings is published and accessible to the public.

In summary, while combatting misinformation is crucial, it is also essential that the public receives information from government that is trustworthy, high quality and valuable – and enabling that outcome is the heart of OSR's mission.

I hope the Committee finds this evidence to be helpful. Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of any further assistance.

Yours sincerely



**Ed Humpherson**

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/osr/what-we-do/assessment/covid-19-changes-to-statistics/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/rapid-review-of-ons-opinions-and-lifestyle-survey-covid-19-questions/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/rapid-review-of-coronavirus-the-uk-economy-and-society-faster-indicators/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/The-Authoritys-role-in-making-public-interventions.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/ed-humpherson-to-steve-ellord-elliott-universal-credit-management-information/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/covid-19-surveillance-and-registered-deaths-data-review/>