

Prof Baroness Finlay of Llandaff  
House of Lords  
London SW1A 0PW  
(via email)

22 July 2022

Dear Baroness Finlay,

Thank you for your letter of 28 May to the Director General for Regulation about research by ONS on suicides among people diagnosed with severe health conditions. I apologise for the delay in replying.

You are quite right to highlight the importance of treating this issue with sensitivity. As ONS did in this bulletin and in all publications on suicide, I would encourage anyone making use of these findings to be mindful of the harm that can be caused by irresponsible reporting.

The ONS research provides a valuable source of data to support a high quality public debate. As you say, it does not itself make the case for or against assisted suicide, and indeed campaigners supporting and opposing the policy have made use of it.

You asked about the use of the word 'dying' to describe the people with severe health conditions identified in the study. It is not the role of the UK Statistics Authority to comment on the subjective interpretations by which campaign groups put forward their arguments, save to ensure that the official statistics in question are presented clearly and accessibly. In this case, ONS explained the health conditions chosen, which include progressive conditions that cannot be reversed by treatment and carry a reasonable risk of death. The cohort in the study has a very high mortality rate and includes many people who could be considered terminally ill.

I understand you have met with the National Statistician and ONS analysts to discuss the strengths and limitations of the research methods, including the point you raise about accounting for pre-existing mental health conditions, which was discussed in a later version of the analysis submitted to the Lancet journal<sup>1</sup>. Thank you for your continued engagement with ONS, which will inform the presentation of future work on this topic.

Yours sincerely,



**Sir Robert Chote**  
Chair

---

<sup>1</sup> Risk of Suicide After Diagnosis of Severe Physical Health Conditions: A Cohort Study. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4138283>