
Professor Sir Ian Diamond | National Statistician

Rt Hon Greg Clark MP
Chair, Science and Technology Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

18 May 2020

Dear Mr Clark,

While providing evidence to the Committee on 7 May, for the inquiry '*UK Science, Research and Technology Capability and Influence in Global Disease Outbreaks*', I promised to provide further information to the Committee on excess deaths, and to clarify the release schedule of the results of the COVID-19 Infection Survey. I have also been informed the Committee would be keen for more detail on the potential of timely electronic recording of deaths, and whether we have responsibility for publishing a value of 'R'.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) publish provisional weekly deaths registrations, which are currently published for deaths registered up to 1 May 2020¹. National Records Scotland (NRS) and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) are responsible for publishing the number of deaths registered in Scotland and Northern Ireland respectively.

Figures from the weekly ONS deaths bulletin show that the recent overall increase in deaths compared to the five-year average is not solely due to deaths involving COVID-19, known as excess deaths.

The ONS is publishing a report on the increase of non-COVID-19 deaths observed in weekly deaths statistics later this month, which I will send to the Committee when released. The report will analyse how the number of non-COVID-19 deaths occurring in different places of death, for different age groups and for different causes of death differ from previous years' data and will suggest how these findings correspond with possible reasons for the increase.

I stated that electronic recording of deaths would be useful to increase the timeliness comprehensiveness of our mortality statistics, which while among some of the most timely recorded, have an 11 day lag. The timing of those registrations would still have to be balanced with the need to provide cause of death, and ensure our death registration remains informative and valuable, as opposed to a simple count. However, electronic registration would be a vast improvement, particularly when noting the ONS still receives some paper registrations, and the average registration takes between 4-5 days.

On the COVID-19 Infection Survey, we have now produced and published the first estimates². We will produce estimates on a weekly basis to begin with and publish these each Thursday. Over time, as the Infection Survey develops, we aim to produce and publish estimates twice a week. We will do

¹<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsregisteredweeklyinenglandandwalesprovisional/weekending10april2020>

²<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19infectionsurveyspilot/england14may2020>

this once we are sure that publishing twice weekly maintains quality, relevance and coherence of the data to users.

Moreover, the Infection Survey is vital for the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) to calculate estimates of R . The ONS will assist SAGE, but will not provide, produce or publish any alternative estimates of R .

I hope this is helpful, and please do not hesitate to contact me further with any additional questions.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Ian Diamond', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Professor Sir Ian Diamond