
Professor Sir Ian Diamond | National StatisticianWilliam Wragg MP
Chair, Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee
House of Commons
London
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Dear Mr Wragg,

Thank you for your letter of 2 February requesting an update on COVID-19 data, following the evidence I gave to the Committee in May and September 2020 for the inquiry *data transparency and accountability: COVID-19*. I have addressed the specific questions from your letter below. I also wanted to use this opportunity to formally update the Committee on Census 2021 preparations and highlight the new Government Statistical Service (GSS) user engagement strategy, that had been part of a recommendation from this Committees' *governance of official statistics* report.

Data transparency and accountability: COVID-19*Key areas of progress since the start of the pandemic*

The pace of progress made with COVID-19 data and analysis is truly remarkable, and testament to the hard work of colleagues in the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and across the GSS. You ask what key data do we have now that we did not have in March/April 2020: the answer is really an extraordinary amount. I have focused on the new surveys we set up early on in the pandemic and looked specifically at their progress since I gave evidence in September.

COVID-19 Infection Survey (CIS)

When I gave evidence in September, we spoke about the continuing roll-out of the CIS to the devolved administrations. As of 23 October 2020, the CIS has been publishing as a UK wide survey. This enables the devolved administrations to make better informed decisions using data that are directly relevant to their populations and giving a much deeper picture of the UK as a whole. We can now provide critical evidence on community infections which is tailored to the specificities of each country and enables decision makers to respond with bespoke approaches where appropriate.

For England, in addition to the regional estimates, we are now also producing sub-regional estimates which gives us a much richer picture of infection rates in the community.

In response to the emergence of the new variant, we can estimate the proportion of cases which are compatible with this new variant across the UK and within the regions in England. This means that we have a better understanding of its impact on positivity rates in different regions and can more closely track and understand its spread across England.

Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN)

The OPN has increased sample size, which has allowed us to do granular breakdowns by different demographics such as sex, age, ethnicity, income and disability, and more regular breakdowns, such as impacts of tiers and lockdowns on behaviours. It covers key compliance measures to help

stop the spread of coronavirus such as washing hands, avoiding physical contact, wearing face coverings, social distancing and reasons for leaving home. The survey also captures personal wellbeing and perceptions of the future. Questions regarding attitudes to COVID-19 vaccination have recently been added, with data on the likelihood of having the vaccine and reasons for being unlikely to have it recently published, and there are plans to continue monitoring this as the vaccination rollout continues.

Business Impact of COVID-19 Survey (BICS)

BICs captures businesses' views on financial performance, workforce, prices, trade, and business resilience. It is well placed to quickly respond to changing events by rapidly introducing new questions to meet policy needs; such as the impact of the end of the transition period on businesses which was incorporated into the survey towards the end of 2020 and for early 2021.

Weekly mortality release

We continue to provide weekly and monthly COVID-19 analysis using our mortality data. This is supported by ad hoc analyses such as occupational risk and regional variation. However, the main way we have been able to develop our mortality analysis is through the acquisition and integration of other data sources, which I discuss in more depth when discussing mortality demographics.

Other areas of progress

Other relevant COVID-19 linked surveys are also ongoing. For example, the second wave of the shielding survey will be published mid-February, which looks at clinically extremely vulnerable people (the shielding population) in England during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, including their behaviours and mental and physical well-being.

We set up the COVID-19 Schools Infection Survey to assess the role of schools in coronavirus (COVID-19) transmission and how transmission within and from school settings can be minimised. Round one of this survey was published in December 2020¹, with round two due to be published in March.

And the Student COVID-19 Insights Survey includes information on the behaviours, plans, opinions and well-being of higher education students in the context of guidance on the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, with the second wave of this published in January².

Localised data

As mentioned previously, we are now producing, from the CIS, estimates at a sub-regional level in England. This enables us to identify areas in England where cases are increasing, or positivity is particularly high. Tracking these trends is useful to help understand how and where COVID is spreading in the community and where action should be taken. Such estimates allow us to capture where the virus may be spreading at a lower level which would not largely be captured in regional or national estimates. We are continuing to work on improvements around our methodology for this analysis.

¹<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/covid19schoolsinfectionsurveyround1england/november2020>

²<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandhighereducationstudents/8januaryto18january2021>

More broadly, a significant improvement since I gave evidence in May has been the setting up of the Joint Biosecurity Centre which provides localised data, and we work closely with them to collaborate on data and analytical needs.

Data to understand mortality demographics

Following my evidence in September, we have made progress in several areas to understand mortality demographics further, reacting to user needs, while continuing to publish our regular weekly and monthly publications using our mortality data.

In October we published an update to our ethnicity analysis and using linked Hospital Episodes data were also able to investigate the impact of pre-existing conditions on the risk of death from COVID-19 on ethnic groups³. A further follow-up piece will be published in March.

We have been working across government partners to provide better understanding on the impact of the pandemic on care homes, and to that effect we now provide in our weekly deaths publication deaths of care home residence alongside the existing series on deaths in care homes.

Using our mortality data, we have undertaken experimental cluster analysis of COVID-19, published in January⁴. The analysis determined geographic clusters of raised COVID-19 mortality, and suggested that the known risk factors of age, population density, ethnicity and socioeconomic deprivation only partly explain the distribution of deaths across England and Wales. We also published an update on deaths by occupation in January (including teaching professions)⁵.

On 11 February we will be publishing updated analysis on COVID-19 mortality for disabled people. This will be first time we are able to use additional health data from Hospital Episodes and GP data to investigate the impact of underlying health conditions on the risk of death from COVID-19 of disabled people. We will also be including analysis on learning disabilities for the first time.

Increased data access from across Government is a big factor in what analysis we can produce. For example, we are now receiving monthly hospital data for England from NHS Digital and have also received a 20-year extract of primary care data for England. We have combined these with our census 2011 and mortality data and used this new linked data to produce several outputs looking at inequalities in COVID-19 mortality.

Using newly available data from the CIS we have been able to produce new experimental estimates on the prevalence of long COVID symptom, published in January⁶. We are working to further refine the methods for producing the estimate and new questions will be asked on the CIS to provide a more direct measure.

Finally, the ONS has just started to receive vaccination data. We plan to combine this with our linked Public Health Data Asset and will then allow us to investigate areas such as risk of death from COVID following vaccination, the demographic breakdown or people who refuse the vaccine.

³<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/updatingethniccontrastsindeathsinvolvingthecoronaviruscovid19englandandwales/deathsoccurring2marchto28july2020>

⁴<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/analysisofgeographicconcentrationsofcovid19mortalityvertimeenglandandwales/deathsoccurringbetween22februaryand28august2020>

⁵<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/causesofdeath/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19relateddeathsbyoccupationenglandandwales/deathsregisteredbetween9marchand28december2020>

⁶<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandlifeexpectancies/datasets/prevalenceoflongcovidsymptomsandcovid19complications>

Lessons learnt for vaccine data

The ONS and the Government have been on the front foot when it comes to vaccination data collection. ONS surveys collect data that will provide wide-ranging information relating to vaccines. We have recently started asking questions around vaccinations in the CIS including the type of vaccine, the number of doses and when the latest dose was received. We are also taking monthly blood samples in 20% of the sample to monitor seroconversion. This will enable us to understand the impact vaccinations has on transmission within the population and antibody response.

The OPN has already started reporting on attitudes to vaccination, and in due course will report on vaccination uptake, refusal and compliance following vaccination. Other surveys are being scoped to further improve the evidence base on people's attitudes and behaviours relating to vaccination. The ONS is also conducting linkage of NHS vaccination data with survey data, as well as administrative data on mortality and hospitalisation.

We have developed a comprehensive question bank to standardise data collection and maximise comparability of data across government. The question bank includes the topic of vaccines, with questions on the likelihood of having a vaccine when offered and reasons for vaccine hesitancy. Other topics available include following government guidance, leaving home and satisfaction with the testing programme.

We have developed a vaccine plan on a page which crystallises the key vaccine research questions currently. These are focused on vaccine effectiveness, vaccine refusals, attitudes to vaccines, impact of vaccinations on behaviours and adverse effects. This has been circulated across government groups including the 4 Nations Vaccine Group and the SAGE Vaccine Subgroup. The plan captures ongoing work that can answer those questions and more importantly identify where new data collection and analysis needs to happen.

In terms of vaccination data presentation and analysis, the ONS have made themselves available to provide advice at the beginning of the process, as we did for testing data following correspondence from Sir David Norgrove to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.

Data gaps and next steps

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a catalyst for incredible improvements across the GSS. The ONS has been a major part of those improvements, working with Government on their analytical priorities, rapidly setting up surveys to meet user needs, and advising on presentation and communication of data and analysis: I mentioned in my previous evidence that we embedded statisticians within No10 and Cabinet Office to provide statistical expertise.

Some of that has been through the Analysis Function, which I head up. It has been agile in its support of professions and departments in developing new products and insights in this novel policy area. For example, the Function responded quickly to support DHSC through short-term redeployment of analytical staff from across government, to produce high-profile daily reporting of cases, deaths and testing, which met both Government and public need.

Throughout this letter I have also highlighted the importance of fast and secure data sharing and collaboration between departments to produce cross-cutting analysis. The ONS is leading on the Integrated Data Platform (IDP), which will be a key enabler for enhancing the capability of sharing data across Government, and ultimately allow faster evidence-based policy decisions to be made. Positive engagement and timely sharing of data will be critical to the success of the IDP.

Census 2021

As set out in our statement of 22 January⁷, Census 2021 is coming at a critical point. It will be fundamental to our understanding of the impact the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has had on different communities and how we all live. Information from the 2011 Census has been crucial in our understanding of mortality for different groups during the pandemic, as set out in this letter already, and is the only source of local-level information on occupation and household composition. With fresh data from 2021, we will be able to update this analysis and use it alongside new data sources to give us the richest data we have ever had.

This will be a digital-first census and we will be encouraging people to respond online if they can on their mobile phones, laptops, PCs or tablets. We have seen that through the pandemic many households and services have successfully switched to online only. We will also be providing a comprehensive range of support for those who are not able to complete the census online, including paper questionnaires for around 10% of households, where the take-up of the online option is likely to be relatively low. They can either fill it in or use the code it includes to complete online.

The main census field operation will begin only after Census Day (21 March). The primary role of our field officers is to give help and encouragement to those who have not yet filled in their census questionnaire online or on paper, and to direct them to the support services they need. Our field staff will never enter people's houses; they will be supplied with PPE, will always be socially distanced and will work in line with all government guidance. They will be operating in the same way as a postal or food delivery visit.

The quality of census outputs relies on optimising response rates, which is at the heart of the design and collection operation. We have designed Census 2021 to be simple, straightforward and safe to complete, and the Government is confident following our advice that Census 2021 will be a success⁸.

GSS User Engagement Strategy

The GSS user engagement strategy is a four-year strategy which has been developed in collaboration with a wide range of users and producers of statistics. It will be officially launched on 22 February 2021⁹. The strategy presents a plan of action for building a more meaningful and sustained dialogue between producers, users and potential users of statistics. It sets out a vision for user engagement to be: *"second nature for all producers of statistics, embedded into an organisation's wider engagement activities and actively implemented throughout the statistical development, production and review cycle."* This vision is supported by three ambitious goals which promote collaboration, build capability and strengthen our culture of engagement.

The strategy will be delivered in phases to ensure sustainable change can be achieved. Producers of statistics will be able to draw on the help and expertise of the User Support and Engagement Resource (USER) hub to support the delivery of the strategy.

Please do let me know if I can help the Committee further with this inquiry, or more broadly.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Sir Ian Diamond

⁷ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/news/statementsandletters/census2021andcoronavirus>

⁸ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2021-02-03/hcws755>

⁹ <https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/news/user-engagement-strategy-launch-book-your-place/>