

## **Written evidence submitted by the Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP**

I welcome the Committee's important inquiry into Correcting the record. My evidence to the inquiry arises from unsuccessful efforts to persuade the former Prime Minister to correct his repeated, incorrect claims in Parliament about the overall level of employment.

Boris Johnson claimed twelve times in the House of Commons between November 2021 and July this year, incorrectly, that total employment was higher than before the pandemic. I attach a dossier setting out the details. The Chair of the UK Statistics Authority wrote to the Prime Minister in February and explained that, while the number of people in payrolled employment was greater than before the pandemic, there had been a large fall in self-employment. Overall, some 600,000 fewer people were in employment than pre-pandemic.

At the March Liaison Committee, Boris Johnson told me he accepted this correction, and indicated he was correcting the record. But the record has not been corrected. After that, he made the false claim three more times before stepping down as Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister did provide in June a written parliamentary answer which stated the employment position correctly. He appears to have regarded this as sufficient. However, anyone reading the Hansard record of the incorrect statements has no way of knowing that the Prime Minister subsequently gave different information in a written answer. I hope that the inquiry will agree that he should, instead, have issued ministerial corrections in Hansard. Anyone reading the Hansard record of his incorrect statements would then see that they had been corrected.

The former Prime Minister repeatedly gave answers in Parliament which – as our discussion at the Liaison Committee confirmed – he knew to be untrue. The record has not been corrected in any clear way. I do hope the inquiry will conclude that ministers should correct the record of an incorrect statement through a ministerial correction in Hansard rather than randomly answering an unconnected parliamentary written question. I also think, even though the former Prime Minister has left office, there should be a way to flag the factual inaccuracies in the Hansard record of his twelve incorrect statements.

19 September 2022

SIR STEPHEN TIMMS MP

**Boris Johnson's statements in Parliament on employment, November 2021-Sept 2022**

*Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP – 19 September 2022*

- **16 November 2021 to 18 January 2022: Office for National Statistics reports each month total employment around half a million lower than before the pandemic**

**24 November 2021 to 19 January 2022: Statements by the then Prime Minister**

- 24 November 2021 – PMQs – “...now, almost a month after furlough ended, there are more people in work than there were before the pandemic began.” (Hansard c.344)
- 24 November 2021 – PMQs – “...there are now more people in work in this country – jobs up, with their wages going up – than there were before the pandemic began.” (Hansard c.344)
- 15 December 2021 – PMQs – “we have the fastest growing economy in the G7 and 500,000 more jobs today than there were when the pandemic began” (Hansard c.1050)
- 5 January 2022 – PMQs – “It is quite an extraordinary thing that there are now record numbers of people in work – 420,000 more than there were before the pandemic began.” (Hansard c.11)
- 5 January 2022 – PMQs – “We have 420,000 more people in jobs now than there were before the pandemic began...” (Hansard c.14)
- 5 January 2022 – PMQs – “We now have more people in work than there were before the pandemic began.” (Hansard c. 15)
- 12 January 2022 – PMQs – “...it is an astonishing fact that we have 420,000 more people in work now than before the pandemic began...” (Hansard c.567-8)
- 19 January – PMQs – “...we have more people in employment and more employees on the payroll now than there were before the pandemic began.” (Hansard, c.323)

**1 February: Letter to Director of Data Science at 10 Downing Street from Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation, Office for Statistic Regulation**

Statements on the number of people in work

I know you and your colleagues responsible for briefing the Prime Minister take the accuracy of those briefings very seriously. I want to raise an issue with you related to employment. We have received correspondence from Full Fact about statements on the number of people in work now compared with before the pandemic. This includes Prime Minister’s Questions on 24 November 2021, 15 December 2021, 5 January 2022, 12 January 2022 and 19 January 2022.

Your colleagues told us that the Prime Minister was referring to the number of UK workers on employer payrolls. In response to a parliamentary question, the Prime Minister confirmed his statement of 5 January was referring to payroll employment from ‘Pay As You Earn Real Time Information’ published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

The number of people on employer payrolls does not include everyone in work. Specifically, most of the self-employed and those whose jobs are not part of company payroll are excluded.

ONS publishes data on the number of people in employment. The data for January – March 2020 estimate that 33.0 m people were in employment compared with 32.5 m people in

employment for September – November 2021. It is therefore incorrect to state that there were more people in work at the end of this period than the start.

The most recent references have been clearer that they refer only to payroll employment. In this case, it was disappointing that some earlier statements continued to refer to payroll employment as if describing total employment, despite contact from our office and from others. When we spoke, you emphasised the efforts that your colleagues take to ensure that briefings are accurate. I would like to thank you and colleagues for these efforts, which recognise that it is important that statements made to inform public debate are unambiguous.

Yours sincerely

Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation

- **15 February: Office for National Statistics reports total employment 505,653 lower than before the pandemic**

### **2-23 February: Statements by the then Prime Minister**

- 2 February 2022 – PMQs – *“There are more people in work now than before the pandemic began.”* (Hansard c.268-9)
- 23 February – PMQs – *“There are 430,000 more in employment now than there were before the pandemic began.”* (Hansard c.314)

### **24 February: Letter from Sir David Norgrove, Chair of the UK Statistics Authority**

Dear Prime Minister,

You said at Prime Minister’s Questions yesterday that there are now more people in employment than before the pandemic began.

According to the latest ONS figures, it is wrong to claim that there are now more people in work than before the pandemic began: the increase in the number of people who are on payrolls is more than offset by the reduction in the number of people who are self-employed. The number of people in work is estimated to be around 600,000 fewer than at the start of the pandemic (comparing December 2019 – February 2020 with October – December 2021).

If, as seems to be the case, your statement referred only to the increase in the number of people on payrolls, it would be a selective use of data that is likely to give a misleading impression of trends in the labour market unless that distinction is carefully explained.

The distinction has been highlighted by the ONS when they published the most recent labour market figures, as well as in the media, in Parliament, and in a [letter of 1 February from the Authority’s Director General for Regulation to 10 Downing Street’s Chief Analyst](#).

I hope you will agree that public trust requires a complete statement of this important measure of the economy.

Yours sincerely,  
Sir David Norgrove

### **30 March: Discussion with the then Prime Minister at the Liaison Committee**

*Q74 Stephen Timms:* ... I want to ask you about a letter that was sent to you by the chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir David Norgrove, on 24 February. You mentioned earlier that we don't have enough people in jobs at the moment—there are lots of vacancies. His letter to you says: “*You said at Prime Minister’s Questions yesterday that there are now more people in employment than before the pandemic began. According to the latest ONS figures, it is wrong to claim that there are now more people in work than before the pandemic began: the increase in the number of people who are on payrolls is more than offset by the reduction in the number of people who are self-employed.*” Do you accept that correction?

*The Prime Minister:* Yes, I do. That is why I took particular care today, mindful as I am of Sir David’s chastisement, and on all occasions I stressed that it was payroll employment that I was talking about. There were 400,000 more, and there are now 600,000 more people on the payroll than there were before the pandemic began, and that is not half bad when you consider what we were predicting. Everybody was talking about 12% unemployment, I seem to recall.

*Q75 Stephen Timms:* His point in the letter is that the increase in the number of people on payrolls is “*more than offset by the reduction in the number of people who are self-employed.*” Do you accept that that’s correct?

*The Prime Minister:* My overall picture, I think, is right. The employment record of the Government has been absolutely outstanding when you consider that people were seriously predicting that after covid we were going to have not only huge backlogs in healthcare but also unemployment running at 12%. That has been very far from the case.

*Q76 Stephen Timms:* I completely agree—it is understandable—why it is that employment now is lower than it was before the pandemic. I just wanted to confirm that you recognise that total employment is now less than it was before the pandemic began.

*The Prime Minister:* Well, unemployment is actually—

*Stephen Timms:* No, employment is what I am asking about. The figures from the latest statistics are that the number of people in employment more recently is 32.493 million. In the quarter immediately before the pandemic, it was 33.073 million. Employment now is less than it was before the pandemic began.

*The Prime Minister:* You are making a very important point. It depends how you look at this. Unemployment is the thing that we were worried about when we were growing up. That was the terrifying thing that happened to people—they were slung out of their jobs and it was awful, in the ’80s and the ’90s. We remember that. That is low. That is back down now to pre-pandemic levels. That is 3.9%. What we have got at the moment—

*Stephen Timms:* But employment is still less than it was before the pandemic.

*The Prime Minister:* Although payroll employment is higher, what you are pointing to is a very interesting thing, which is the self-employed. For reasons that everybody is trying to get a handle on, it looks as though large numbers of people, possibly in their 50s, are deciding that, what with one thing or another, they want to do something else.

*Stephen Timms:* And some of them have gone on to the payrolls, which is why the payrolls are higher.

*The Prime Minister:* Some of them, perhaps, have gone on to the payrolls. Some of them are doing other things. What we want to do is to find ways of helping those people back into work, because they have fantastic skills to contribute.

*Q77 Stephen Timms:* On the employment point, you have said in the Commons nine times, I think, that the number of people in work is higher now than it was before the start of the pandemic. I think you have recognised this afternoon that those statements were incorrect.

*The Prime Minister:* I think I have repeatedly—and I think I took steps to correct the record earlier.

*Stephen Timms:* Have you? Ah, I hadn't seen that.

*The Prime Minister:* I think I did, yes. I think I did. I certainly have been very punctilious to talk about payroll employment, Mr Timms. But there is a very interesting thing. Something has happened, which is that people at a certain stage of their life are not deciding to go back into the labour force. We have vacancies now at 1.25 million—record jobs vacancies. Frankly, those people have some of the skills we need. We are probably short in this economy. One of the pressures that we have on supply chains and inflation is we are probably short about 500,000 pairs of hands to do crucial things. Many of those pairs of hands belong to those people in their 50s who have decided to do something else. One of our challenges is to get those people back into work.

- **12 April: Office for National Statistics reports total employment 506,550 lower than before the pandemic**

#### **20 April: Statement by the then Prime Minister**

- PMQs: “... *with more people in work than there were before the pandemic...*” (Hansard c.155)

#### **26 April: Extract from the then Prime Minister's letter to Chair of the Liaison Committee**

I agree with the points that Stephen Timms made about the overall employment figures.

The latest statistics show the continued strength of our jobs market. As I said, and I have previously explained in a written PQ to him when he has asked me about the definition I was using, payroll employment, as a measure of people in work, is now at a record high. It is now

around half a million higher than before the pandemic. At the same time unemployment, at 3.8 per cent, is below pre-pandemic levels.

### **27 April: Statement by the then Prime Minister**

- PMQs: “...*employment is going up by record amounts...500,000 more people in paid employment now than there were before the pandemic began...*” (Hansard c.754)

### **23 June: Extract from the then Prime Minister’s written answer to parliamentary question 18053 from Stuart Anderson MP**

I trust that the following provides a comprehensive assessment and clarifies my previous answers about employment levels in the UK.

Further to my letter of 26 April 2022 to the Liaison Committee (a copy of which was placed in the Libraries of the House) and the Committee’s letter of 20 May 2022 (a copy of which is available on its website) concerning my previous answers to the House on this issue (*Official Report contributions referenced in the letter of 20 May 2022; and also Official Report 1 December, column 911; 15 December, column 1052; and, 20 April, column 155*).

The latest labour market statistics show that the total UK employment level is currently at 32.7 million, compared to 32.9 million in October-December 2019.

They also show that payroll employment, as a measure of people in work, is again at a record high. It is now around 627,000 higher than before the pandemic. At the same time we have seen significant improvements in national unemployment rates, which are currently at 3.8% and lower than pre-pandemic levels. It is important that everyone has the opportunity and support to find a good job to help them get on in life. That is why we are delivering on our Plan for Jobs – increasing the number of work coaches, seeing over 162,600 Kickstart jobs started by young people, and offering free skills bootcamps. And we have launched Way to Work - a campaign that will focus on getting job-ready claimants into work and support employers to fill vacancies. Together we will boost this country’s jobs-led recovery.

### **14 July: The then Prime Minister’s answer to parliamentary written question 33662**

To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to the Answer of 23 June 2022 to Question 18053 on total UK employment levels, what plans he has to correct the record, with a Ministerial Correction in the Official Report, in respect of oral contributions of (a) 24 November 2021, Official Report, column 344, (b) 5 January 2022, Official Report, column 11, (c) 5 January 2022, Official Report, column 14, (d) 5 January 2022, Official Report, column 15, (e) 12 January 2022, Official Report, columns 567-8, (f) 19 January 2022, Official Report, column 323, (g) 2 February 2022, Official Report, columns 268-9, (h) 23 February 2022, Official Report, column 314 and (i) 20 April 2022, Official Report, column 155.

### **Answer: Boris Johnson:**

My answer of 23 June 2022 to PQ 18053, and my letter of 26 April 2022 to the Liaison Committee (a copy of which was placed in the Library of the House), clarified my previous answers about employment levels in the UK.

## **20 July: The then Prime Minister's answer to parliamentary written questions 37423-5**

- To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his Answer of 14 July 2022 to Question 33662 on Employment, for what reason he has not corrected the record with a Ministerial Correction in the Official Report in respect of oral contributions on the level of employment in the UK.
- To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his Answer of 14 July 2022 to Question 33662 on Employment, what assessment he has made of the likelihood that people reading the record of his statements on the level of UK employment will become aware of his Answer of 23 June 2022 to Question 18053 or his letter of 26 April 2022 to the Liaison Committee; and if he will make a statement.
- To ask the Prime Minister, what assessment he has made of the circumstances in which making a Ministerial Correction in Hansard is appropriate.

### **Answer: Boris Johnson:**

As I have previously noted, my answer of 23 June 2022 to PQ 18053, and my letter of 26 April 2022 to the Liaison Committee (a copy of which was placed in the Library of the House), clarified my previous answers. Corrections and clarifications can be made in a number of ways.

I note the Procedure Committee is looking into these processes in more depth, and the Government looks forward to engaging with its inquiry.

- **19 July: Office for National Statistics reports total employment 210,431 lower than before the pandemic**

## **20 July: Statement by the then Prime Minister**

- 20 July – PMQs – “*We have more people in paid employment than at any time in the history of this country.*” (Hansard c.951)

## **6 September: The then Prime Minister's answer to parliamentary written question 41922**

- To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to the Answer of 20 July 2022 to Question 37423 on Employment and with reference to the Answer to the Question from the Rt hon. Member for Holborn and St Pancras at Prime Minister's Questions on 20 July 2022, Official Report, column 951, whether he plans to correct the record in respect of his statement that there are more people in paid employment than at any time in the history of this country; and if he will make a statement.

### **Answer: Boris Johnson:**

I am proud of this Government's record in protecting jobs and supporting employment across the country. As I leave Office, latest labour market statistics speak to the resilience of the UK economy: I am happy to clarify that we have a record number of employees on payrolls, unemployment close to its lowest point since 1974, and youth unemployment at a record low.

This resilience is, in no small part, thanks to the extraordinary interventions we made during the pandemic to protect over 14.6 million jobs through furlough and our self-employment income support scheme. It is because of these interventions, and the delivery of the fastest vaccine rollout in Europe, that we oversaw the fastest economic growth in the G7 last year.