

DUG Conference 2010 – Panel session

Richard Alldritt closing summary comments:

The UK Statistics Authority strongly supports the thrust of the policies behind Data.gov and the Transparency agenda. We want to see statistics used to inform beneficial decisions and actions in all sectors of government and society and have no objection to a 'crowd source' approach to getting as much intelligent information out of the data as possible; or indeed letting individual experts compete to be seen as the best interpreters of official data.

However, many sets of official statistics are not quite what they might first seem. GDP per capita at local area level is misleading as an indicator of wealth; serious road accidents, or bicycle accidents, are often not reported to the police, so the statistics may mislead; crime statistics can be affected by changes in counting rules and are not, in any case, a count of crime per se. Even population statistics may not reflect either the local daytime or night-time population with much accuracy. The knowledge of government statisticians about what the statistics are, what they are likely to be used for, and their strengths and weaknesses in those contexts, is essential information. We mustn't let a situation arise in which the data themselves are widely distributed and widely interpreted, whilst crucial information about them is lost.

There needs to be a debate about the role of statisticians and other professionals in government in a world in which the release of raw statistical data is no longer packaged and controlled by professional gate-keepers. How do we ensure that the person whose decisions or actions may be influenced by the statistics has ready access to the right advice; and not just ready access to a load of misinformed comment from people who do not fully understand the statistics, or have their own agendas. This problem may be solvable but, as yet, we seem to be at an early stage.

15/10/10