

From: Siobhan Carey

Date: 13th May 2020

To: Robin Swann, MLA

cc. Sue Gray, DoF
Richard Pengelly, DoH
Dr. Eugene Mooney, DoH

Covid-19 Statistics

1. You wrote to me on 11th May setting out some issues with regards to publicly available official statistics on the impact of Covid-19 in Northern Ireland. You asked:
 - I. Is it possible for NISRA to move beyond its current weekly bulletin on deaths, with publication twice a week or more?
 - II. Can the dashboard be extended to include a breakdown of the daily fatalities by setting?
 - III. Can you provide clarity to NISRA's intentions regarding the detailed information being supplied by RQIA regarding care home infection and outbreak levels?
 - IV. Can the dashboard be archived through the publication of .csv files to facilitate research?
 - V. Can NISRA advise on the mechanisms it is putting in place to record and report on the impact of Covid-19 on BAME communities?
2. I am not responsible for the production of all official statistics in Northern Ireland, but I do have oversight. Your department, as an official statistics producer, has the responsibility under the Code of Practice for Statistics to abide by the pillars of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value (TQV) in its policy and practices. To that end, three of your questions relate to data held by your own department or an ALB and would have been better directed to Dr. Eugene Mooney, Head of the Information & Analysis Directorate or the Chief Executives of the relevant ALBs. In the interests of efficiency and expediency, however, I have liaised with Eugene in drafting this reply.
3. In terms of the queries relating to NISRA weekly statistics based on the death registration process, you have asked that we (I) publish more often, and (V) consider how to analyse the impact on BAME communities. I considered the first question a few weeks ago when the media reported that you intended to make this request. I looked at various issues with a 'TQV' lens and decided that the public interest was best served by maintaining the current weekly release schedule - so NISRA will not be publishing more frequently. Some of the considerations that informed this decision were:
 - Both ONS (England & Wales) and NRS (Scotland) publish only once a week and having discussed with them, neither intends to change this approach. Their reasons resonate with my own.
 - Under the Quality pillar, we looked at the times taken to register deaths and the median is around 3 days. On the current production timescale (working on a 5 day registration period

from the last Friday to the next Wednesday) it takes us 2 days from the final count of occurrences to produce the statistics on the next Friday. If we were to take an earlier cut-off point (say the median) then the earliest we could produce another output with any meaningful reliability would be the next Wednesday. These figures would of course be highly provisional and liable to change only 2 days later with the Friday release. This would add further confusion and would not add value to the series.

- The alternative would be in addition to the current schedule of reporting deaths in the 7 days ending each Friday to release death counts for periods such as the 7 days ending, say Tuesday, and I considered this option under the Value pillar. You will be aware that the general public and the media have exhibited confusion over the differences between the daily surveillance death figures from PHA published on the DOH dashboard and the NISRA weekly statistics. It is my assessment that another mid-week interjection would confuse the position even more and undermine public confidence and trust. My team has worked hard to brief the media and others on the differences between the two sources. I do not think that an additional release would contribute to increasing understanding, rather the opposite, so we will continue with once per week reporting. The user community now largely understands that death registration figures are produced by all UK countries on a weekly basis.
 - Also, part of my consideration under the Quality pillar was the availability of resources. The small team is already working around the clock to produce the weekly output and if asked to do more, the risk of errors being made, or people becoming ill increases substantially. Having the time to quality assure the release is essential and I am not prepared to burden my people in that way for no additional benefit to users. For such a high profile release and under extremely short production times I must ensure that the team has sufficient time to assure the outputs adequately. Any reporting error would substantially undermine public trust.
3. In terms of BAME analysis (V), ONS has published differential death numbers based on linking Census and death registration information. Given that migration to Northern Ireland peaked more recently than 2011 when the last Census was taken, we are instead looking at country of birth information recorded on death certificates. We think this approach will be more meaningful in the Northern Ireland context. This is work in progress and I will keep you informed as to when this new breakdown and any others might be published.
 4. In that vein, we plan to publish a geographical breakdown of deaths by local government district this Friday 15th May for deaths up to and including 8th May. You, the Permanent Secretary and Press Officer will receive pre-release access to the publication on Friday morning at 8.30am for the purposes as set out in the legislation.
 5. In terms of your queries relating to colleagues' work in IAD:
 - (II) IAD will consider how this may be provided but data quality is an issue in that the information from PHA by setting is not always complete.
 - (III) These data are provided by RQIA which has its own analyst function to assure the quality and reliability of the data being collected from the app. Once the figures are of sufficient quality they could be made available publicly on the DoH dashboard.
 - (IV) IAD understands that external users would like open data for further analyses, but ever changing data due to lagged reporting times needs overwritten constantly. IAD does not have the resources to manage that process right now but will release a .csv dataset in the future once the situation with both people and data stabilizes.
 6. In conclusion, in the current circumstances, having good data to inform decisions and public debate is critical. The data landscape has changed and each department needs to consider how it collects and uses information to support service delivery, making sure it is of high quality, fit for purpose and designed to integrate across agencies where necessary to support collaborative working and decision making. The Code of Practice for Statistics provides a framework for good hygiene around the release of data in an orderly way.
 7. I note your appreciation of IAD colleagues which is very welcome. Both they and my own people in NISRA are committed to providing a quality service to departments, government and

the public in these exceptional times to meet our own and shared objectives. Various parts of the wider analytical community are working collaboratively to design and develop new data sources and new analyses to support not just the current crisis but also the recovery phase. We are happy to assist where we can.

Yours sincerely,

Personal Data

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Chief Statistician for Northern Ireland, Registrar General & Chief Executive NISRA