

# Freedom of Information request 3338/2013

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## Information request

### **Concern about misuse of statistics by Department of Works and Pensions (DWP): freedom of information request**

The DWP yesterday released a much quoted poll, conducted by Ipsos Mori, of 500 people who had been informed they would be affected by the Benefit Cap but had since found work; the aim of the poll was to see if, having been informed that they would be affected by the cap, unemployed people on benefits had been motivated to find work because of a possible drop in their income. The main findings as quoted from the DWP website and Iain Duncan Smith, Work and Pensions Secretary<sup>1</sup>:

- 45% said they had sometimes, rarely or never been in paid employment since leaving school or further education
- around half of people who knew about the cap took action in response to it, with 62% of them looking for a job
- 61% of those currently in work found their current job after they were told about the cap
- this figure increases to 72% of those who report having been infrequently in the workplace during their working lives

Further details are available in the report '*Public perceptions of the benefit cap and pre-implementation impacts*', accessed via a link on the same page<sup>2</sup>. After reading the report and original data, I believe your department has misrepresented and selectively reported its findings to the public, to bias opinion in the government's favour. With further pressure to reduce the benefit cap, this is not acceptable practice in public office; clear, reliable information needs to be provided to the electorate to make informed decisions.

My first and main reservation with your figures is with regards to the second point above, or a statement to the effect that 'of those who knew about the cap and took action, 62% looked for a job in response to it'. Having looked at the data, this is extremely misleading. Though, indeed 99 out of the 160 people who knew about the cap (what they knew about it is another matter) and took action did look for a job after hearing about the cap, you have omitted to mention that 84 of these 99 individuals were already looking for work anyway, or 85% of them. So, it should have read 'of those that took action in response to the cap, a further 15 people/9% looked for work. I believe the Ipsos poll is being misrepresented to imply that the introduction of the Benefit Cap motivated the unemployed to find work, rather than those people already looking for work anyway, thus stigmatising the unemployed by depicting them as feckless and only able to seek jobs if forced to by the government.

To then state '61% of those currently in work found their current job after they were told about the cap' is meaningless. This result does not tell us any more information about whether they were motivated to find work more after hearing about the cap. Reading the results, many who took action were, in fact, motivated by concern about bedroom tax and changes to local housing allowances rather than the cap itself.

The other findings from the report, which are broadly against the DWP position that the cap will induce people to gain employment, are not quoted at all on the DWP website alongside the 4 main points above to provide context. For instance, 66% of people surveyed knew 'just a little' or 'very little/nothing' about the cap, hardly evidence that it has affected their decision making. Nor is the point made that 68% of respondents were routinely running out of money at the end of the month in the year prior to the survey.

The DWP are also reported to have stated '12,000 claimants had found jobs over the last year, after being contacted by job centres....the job centres warned them they might have their benefits capped if they did not find employment' as reported by the BBC<sup>3</sup>. Again, I believe the Ipsos poll is being misrepresented to imply that the introduction of the Benefit Cap motivated the unemployed to find work, rather than those people already looking for work anyway. Worse, no context is provided for the 12,000 figure, many of whom I suspect found jobs for reasons entirely unrelated to the Benefit Cap changes; once again the DWP is confusing correlation with causation.

Polls, especially of only 500 people, are very blunt instruments for gathering hard evidence about the effect of policy change; I am highly concerned that public policy appears to be being made on the back of them. I am also very concerned that these poll figures have then been misrepresented and selectively reported by your department for possible political ends. Please could you contact me to advise on the process by which results/statistics from the report were chosen to be placed on your website and others omitted, and what statistical advice/expertise was sought before publishing them. I have also written to the UK Statistics authority to voice my concerns with them, as well as my MP.

1. As accessed at [<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/national-introduction-of-benefit-cap-begins>] on 15<sup>th</sup> July 2013
2. As accessed at [[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/212132/dwp-benefit-cap-report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/212132/dwp-benefit-cap-report.pdf)] on 15<sup>th</sup> July 2013
3. As accessed at [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-23306092>] on 15<sup>th</sup> July 2013

## **DWP response**

You raise two points:

- the first relating to the publication of the polling report 12<sup>th</sup> July; and
- the second relating to the reporting of the potentially capped claimants moving into work and the context given to the figures reported..

Your specific request was in relation to the process by which these were placed on the website and what statistical advice was sought prior to publishing.

These results were based on independently commissioned research carried out in May and June this year. Headline results were published on 12<sup>th</sup> July, with supporting tables to allow examination of results. The Department is working towards the highest levels of transparency by making this level of detail available at this time, properly accompanied by information as to what the information does or does not show..

These headline results published 12<sup>th</sup> July were drafted by Ipsos Mori, an independent research organisation working under contract to DWP, in line with standard practice used in all externally commissioned DWP research.

The research was commissioned by the Department to look into the range of support taken up and the actions of those who were potentially capped, but had found work. The sample of 500 claimants was drawn from those who had found work and provides a reliable level of accuracy for this group, which at the time stood a little over 8,000.

The publications carry the appropriate caveats and the DWP press release issued to accompany the start of national roll out of the benefit cap reports accurately figures in the publications.

A link to the published information is provided below:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/212132/dwp-benefit-cap-report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/212132/dwp-benefit-cap-report.pdf)

Senior Departmental statisticians and social researchers were consulted early in the process and advised on procedures for release, and relevant protocols were followed. These included pre-release notification of the publication and release at 9.30am on the agreed date. Briefing was carried out by departmental analysts and all public domain documentation reviewed by the department's Chief Statistician.