Letter from the Royal Statistical Society Covid-19 Task Force to the Guardian regarding data transparency

7 August 2020

The Covid-19 public health crisis has placed a sharp emphasis on the role of data in government decision-making. During the current phase – where the emphasis is on Test and Trace and local lockdowns – data is playing an increasingly central role in informing policy.

We recognise that the stakes are high and that decisions need to be made quickly. However, this makes it even more important that data is used in a responsible and effective manner. Transparency around the data that are being used to inform decisions is central to this.

Over the past week, there have been two major data-led government announcements where the supporting data were not made available at the time.

First, the announcement that home and garden visits would be made illegal in parts of northern England. The Prime Minister cited unpublished data which suggested that these visits were the main setting for transmission. Second, the purchase of two new tests for the virus that claim to deliver results within 90 minutes, without data regarding the tests' effectiveness being published.

We are concerned about the lack of transparency in these two cases – these are important decisions and the data upon which they are based should be publicly available for scrutiny, as Paul Nurse pointed out in this paper at the weekend.

Government rhetoric often treats data as a managerial tool for informing decisions. But beyond this, transparency and well sign-posted data builds public trust and encourages compliance: the daily provision of statistical information was an integral part of full lockdown and was both expected and valued by the public.

As champions for the use of data in policy making, set out in RSS's data manifesto, we ask the government to recognise the importance of transparency and to promptly and prominently publish all data that underpin its decisions.

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