19 July 2019

Rt Hon Nicky Morgan MP
Chair
Treasury Committee
House of Commons SW1A 2HQ

Dear Nicky,

Thank you for your letter on 20 May regarding the government’s approach to publishing performance data.

The government supports the desire to further increase transparency, and to provide Parliament and the public with the information they need to hold departments to account. Since 2010 we have taken a number of substantive steps to publish more of the underlying performance data that is used by the government to support policy development and scrutinise the effectiveness of existing policies. Through Find Open Data (data.gov.uk) the government has released over 40,000 datasets to the public, this includes some of the underlying performance data for key areas of public policy such as crime and education. The government has also made improvements to the quality and accessibility of the data we publish through the commitments we have taken forward under the Open Government Partnership National Action Plans.

There are, however, certain types of underlying performance data which cannot be released by the government since they contain the personal information of citizens who use public services. For example, a number of DWP’s underlying performance datasets, such as the Adviser Discretionary Fund dataset, cannot be released by the government since they contain personal information and disclosure would breach data protection principles under the Data Protection Act 2018.

The World Wide Web Foundation ranked the UK joint first in their Open Data Barometer for 2017, which measures the extent to which different governments around the world publish and use open data (including performance data) for accountability, innovation and social impact. This shows that the UK is recognised internationally as being a world leader in making public sector data, including performance data, available to the public.

Going forward, and outlined in the April 2019 Government Financial Reporting Review, the Treasury recognises the importance of improving performance reporting across government so that it is easier for users, including third parties, to access the information they need to assess departments’ performance. The review sets out how the government is committed to improving the quality of departmental reporting through single
departmental plans and other publications which report on government performance, such as departments’ annual reports and accounts.

On 27 June the government published an updated set of single departmental plans for 2019/20, which include improvements which will make it easier for both Parliament and UK citizens to use them to scrutinise departmental performance. Following recommendations from the National Audit Office, Public Accounts Committee, and the Institute for Government, we have improved single departmental plans in three key areas: (i) they are now more specific; (ii) more focussed on departmental priorities; and crucially, (iii) include improved performance indicators that allow the public to assess whether the government is achieving its objectives.

The ONS also produce public service productivity statistics, drawing on detailed administrative data and providing input and output indices for a range of public services, including health and education. The ONS are also introducing quality adjustment metrics for an expanding number of services.

In addition to this, as I set out in the Spring Statement the upcoming spending review aims to have a renewed focus on outcomes and performance. This is intended to maximise the value achieved for taxpayers’ money and to drive improvements in the delivery of public services. The government also published at Spring Statement a revised version of the Public Value Framework alongside guidance on how to use it most effectively which will support this focus.

PHILIP HAMMOND