

Rt Hon David Cameron MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
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Tuesday, 30 October 2012

Dear Prime Minister

The chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Andrew Dilnot, wrote to you last week (25 October 2012) on the arrangements for pre-release access to official statistics. I write in support; the Royal Statistical Society believes that it should be abolished with the possible exception of a very short access period for market-moving statistics.

The principle of equal access to statistical information for all users is found in both the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the European Statistics Code of Practice.

A fundamental goal of the 2007 Statistics and Registration Service Act, which had cross-party support, was to improve public confidence in official statistics. Surveys (such as the NatCen Survey of Public Confidence in Official Statistics published in 2010) have repeatedly indicated that the low levels of confidence present in the UK are linked to perceptions of political control or interference. Pre-release access, both in itself and through enabling the preparation of ministerial or policy statements which are released at the same time or shortly after statistics are published, perpetuates this view and thus undermines the purpose of the Act. In our view the practice of issuing ministerial or policy commentary to coincide with statistical releases is pernicious. It skews any debate over the figures and perpetuates the impression that ministers control the data.

There is always the risk of inadvertent disclosure of market sensitive data. A recent example of this was the inadvertent disclosure of consumer price data last December.

A further factor that compounds the lack of trust is that the power to set the arrangements for pre-release access rests essentially with ministers and not with the UK Statistics Authority.

We, therefore, support the call by Andrew Dilnot for you to review the arrangements for pre-release access with the clear aim of seeking its abolition.

Yours sincerely,



Valerie Isham
President of the Royal Statistical Society