

## Royal Statistical Society response to the House of Commons' Public Administration Select Committee fourth study: Communicating and Publishing Statistics

### A. Introduction

- i. This submission by the Royal Statistical Society (RSS) focuses on questions 1 to 3 of the Study. The Statistics User Forum is providing a more extensive submission, which the RSS endorses and supports.
- ii. Communication has always been a weak area of UK official statistics. Since the introduction of the Code of Practice following the 2007 Act, and the first Assessment round of the UK Statistics Authority, more attention has been paid to it. Improvements have resulted but much more effort is needed. We are aware that the UKSA is undertaking some new initiatives in this area; the success of these and other measures need to be monitored carefully and further measures undertaken if required.
- iii. In this submission we focus on communications and presentations around statistical releases and other statistics outputs that already exist. A deeper communications challenge for the official statistics service is to present a coherent statistical picture of what is going on in areas where debate needs to concentrate on the issues rather than on explaining particular statistics. The debate on Scottish independence is an example where statistics needs to be brought together and well communicated in order to foster good debate. The old style Social Trends was a good example of when this was done.
- iv. The RSS is the UK's only professional and learned society devoted to the interests of statistics and statisticians. Founded in 1834, it is one of the world's most influential and prestigious statistical societies. It aims to promote public understanding of statistics and provide professional support to users of statistics and to statisticians.

### B. Specific questions

1. *How well are the practices for the release of official statistics, and pre-publication access to those statistics ("pre-release access") working?*

1.1 As far as we are aware the actual mechanics for the release of official statistics are working well, bar some technical problems in ensuring that Office for National Statistics' (ONS) statistics are released and available on the website at 9.30 am prompt. The issues around statistical releases concern essentially content and presentation.

1.2 As indicated in our response to Study 1, the RSS believes there is no justification for pre-release access other than in exceptional circumstances; at most this should be just 2-3 hours.

1.3 The arguments for pre-release access (as a reading of the Cabinet Office review of the arrangements makes clear) rest on the alleged necessity for ministerial comment or a departmental press release being issued at or around the same time as the statistics. In our view the practice of issuing such 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 strong evidence from surveys of public confidence in official statistics to suggest that lack of confidence in statistics is in large part due to perceptions of political control or misrepresentation. This practice perpetuates that perception so is a major obstacle to improving confidence, in our view.

1.4 We accept that straightforward abuse of the system is rare but even 24 hours allows a degree of media management. The situation in Scotland and Wales is worse in that up to five days pre-release access is allowed.

2. *Is the right balance struck between the resources devoted to producing statistics and those devoted to communicating them? What should be the future of the National Statistics Publication Hub, particularly in the context of the proposed single Government domain for communicating data?*

2.1 Statistics are of value only if they are used; it is a waste of money to collect data and compile figures if they do not reach potential audiences. More resources need to be devoted to communicating statistics, including appropriate training sessions, even if this has to come at the expense of reducing expenditure on statistical collection. The Assessment process carried out by the UK Statistics Authority has confirmed the need to improve communication which regular users have long known.

2.2 Improving communication will not be cost free but need not always be very expensive. In some cases simple improvements such as improving the writing and presentation in statistical releases is all that is required. The ONS communications unit does some good work in finding innovative ways to present statistics; there may be a case for strengthening it and for increasing efforts to disseminate its expertise across the rest of the Government Statistical Service. However, in many cases what is essentially required is an improved ability of statisticians to put themselves in the shoes of potential users, especially the non-expert user, and to tailor communication appropriately, including, importantly, communication via websites.

2.3 Good communication of statistics includes the provision of appropriate information on the forms, notes, definitions, and classifications used. The ONS website and the statistical sections of Departmental websites should include these as standard practice.

2.4 Good communication of any technical subject also educates the recipient. Government statisticians must keep the “education” element in mind when preparing web pages, statistical releases and other outputs. More generally, however, government statisticians in general and the ONS in particular should be conscious of their broader responsibility to help develop a more statistically literate society. Websites could, for example, explain in plain language issues such as the sampling and survey design, seasonal adjustment and, importantly, the limitations of and margins of error, which lie behind particular statistics. Educating journalists, reporters and others in the media is of particular importance.

2.5 The National Statistics Publication Hub clearly needs to be integrated appropriately with other government communication initiatives but we do not see that a single government domain for communication data would necessarily mean that the Hub has no purpose. There can be more than one route to finding data. Improvements in the Hub are, however, needed. Many of its aims – for example giving an overview of particular statistics with links to more detailed explanations are good. But the quality of execution is patchy and it is not as easy to use or as user friendly as it could be. For example, while clicking on a “theme” or broad subject group brings up a fairly short list of more detailed subjects, clicking subsequently on one of the detailed subjects often brings up a very long list of publications in alphabetical order which take a long time to scroll down and where it is not always easy to guess which items are relevant to what the user is searching for. Another example is that the section on National Accounts lacks consistency in nomenclature making it confusing to a non-expert.

3. *In what circumstances should the UK Statistics Authority comment on the use or misuse of statistics?*

3.1 It is clearly impossible for the UK Statistics Authority to comment on every instance of statistical misuse by any person or organisation in the public domain. Further, instances of misuse are not equally serious. In practice the Authority has concentrated on misuse by politicians and has selected instances where it feels that its intervention is appropriate and will be effective. We feel that the Authority under Sir Michael Scholar judged this well; Sir Michael's interventions were generally effective, established the Authority as a force to be reckoned with and were clearly uncomfortable at times for those concerned. Further, the Authority appeared even handed between government, opposition and other politicians.

3.2 It is perhaps more difficult to assess whether and when the Authority should intervene in other cases, notably misuse in the media. In practice the Authority has only done this on one or two occasions. We agree that the Authority should keep its powder dry and intervene only occasionally, when there has been significant misinterpretation rather than a simple mistake and where the misinterpretation is serious and clearly the fault of the journalist (rather than, for example, arising from a poorly written release). Having established its credibility and effectiveness under Sir Michael Scholar, the Authority is now well positioned to consider some extension to its interventions on these occasions issuing forceful reminders to editors and writers that they bear a heavy responsibility.

3.3 Similarly, it should be prepared to reprimand advertisers and businesses that badly and deliberately misuse statistics. It should liaise closely with regulatory bodies in marketing and advertising and with whatever structure emerges from Lord Leveson's inquiry. It might also consider 'strategic' and programmatic reports on how statistics are being used by business and the media.