

Press Release

18 March 2010

Statistics Authority calls time on Ministers' 24-hour early access to official statistics

The UK Statistics Authority has today published its independent review of the statutory arrangements governing access to official statistics before they are published.¹ The report is its first formal advice on this subject.

'Pre-release access' is the practice of making official statistics, and the written commentary accompanying them, available in advance of publication to Ministers, their advisers and others not involved in statistical production. Under the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*, the UK Statistics Authority is precluded from determining the rules on pre-release access.

The report calls for a reduction in the time limit for pre-release access to a maximum of three hours; and proposes that there should normally be an interval of one hour, observed voluntarily, between the release of statistics and any associated comment from Ministers, so as to allow the independent statistical report to receive public attention without competition from any political commentary, and also to reduce the need for pre-release access. The report further proposes that, in future, the Statistics Authority should have the lead role in determining the arrangements for pre-release access to all UK official statistics.

Speaking today, the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar said:

"Equality of access is a very important principle of statistical good practice. All the parties to public debate should, as far as possible, have the same information available at the same time, and only the minimum number of people should see statistical results before they are published.

"The current 24-hours advance access by Ministers and their advisers contains too many dark hours during which no-one can see what is happening. In Scotland and Wales, the current arrangements allow five days advance access for devolved statistics, which is inconsistent with international best practice. The Statistics Authority would like to see a maximum period of three hours, consistently applied across the UK. This was also the view of the House of Commons Treasury Committee when it reviewed the issue in 2006. We believe that the recommendations in our report will minimise the opportunities for political influence or exploitation, and will help to build public confidence in the independence of the statistical system.

"The Statistics Authority also proposes that, despite the statutory provisions which prevent it from determining the rules on pre-release access, Ministers in all four UK administrations should look to the Authority to guide future practice. Equality of access levels the political playing field, demonstrates statistical independence, and is a reasonable arrangement which respects the interests of Parliament, the press and the public."

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¹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/reports---correspondence/reports/pre--release-access-to-official-statistics--a-review-of-the-statutory-arrangements.pdf>