
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Andrew Davies AM
Minister for Finance and Public Service Delivery
Welsh Assembly Government
Cardiff Bay
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7 August 2009

Dear Mr Davies

DRAFT PRE-RELEASE ACCESS TO OFFICIAL STATISTICS (WALES) ORDER 2009

Thank you for your letter dated 3 July 2009 and for the opportunity to comment on the draft *Pre-Release Access to Official Statistics (Wales) Order 2009*.

We note that the Welsh Assembly Government has proposed that the arrangements for pre-release access to Welsh statistics should broadly mirror the arrangements in Scotland, providing up to five days' privileged access for Ministers and advisers. This puts the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales at odds with the UK and Northern Ireland administrations which limit pre-release access to 24 hours. We take the view that it would be in the interests of public confidence in the statistical systems if all four administrations restricted pre-release access as much as possible.

The Statistics Authority's perspective here is one both of principle and of practical management. We believe that pre-release access is inconsistent with the principles of equal access to, and earliest possible release of, official statistics. These principles are very much at the heart of the new Code of Practice for Official Statistics which came into force in January 2009, (and upon which the Statistics Authority consulted you and were grateful to you for your responses).

We are also concerned that pre-release access increases the risk of leaks and undue influence over the statistical product ahead of its publication. Enabling the administration of the day to discuss, and prepare statements about, the statistics whilst not allowing the same access to Parliament and the public is not, in our view, good statistical practice.

The draft Welsh Order also allows the maximum period for pre-release access to be varied to an unlimited extent. We would question the need for this provision. If the statistics are ready for publication it would be better if they were published at the earliest opportunity rather than held back.

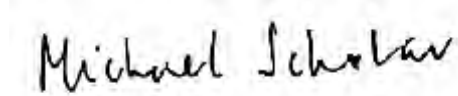
The Statistics Authority would wish to see a commitment from all administrations in the UK to a progressive reduction in the length of time for which privileged access is granted, as well as in the number of officials and Ministers seeing statistics prior to their publication. We would encourage the Welsh Assembly Government to adopt statistical policies that promote

equal access, the earliest possible publication, and remove the opportunity to make policy proposals or comments from advance sight of the unpublished statistics.

The Statistics Authority will be undertaking an independent review of the impact of the new arrangements for pre-release access later this year. We will be concerned primarily to see whether a reduction in pre-release access has taken place and whether the Orders have affected trust in official statistics. While it may be too soon to include a detailed assessment of the impact of the arrangements in Wales, it is likely that our assessment will make some observations that will be applicable across the UK.

I am copying this letter to the National Statistician, Dame Karen Dunnell and to the National Statistician-designate, Jil Matheson, and also to the Chief Statistician of the Welsh Assembly Government, Kate Chamberlain.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Scholar". The signature is written in a cursive style with a clear, legible font.

Sir Michael Scholar KCB