
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Jim Mather MSP
Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism
Scottish Government
Meridian Court
5 Cadogan Street
GLASGOW
G2 6AT

23 September 2010

Dear Jim

UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY: SCOTLAND

I am writing to bring to your attention our Annual Report for 2009-10, which has now been laid before the Scottish Parliament, and to offer some observations on how the Authority sees its role in relation to Scotland and to seek your support in certain respects. I am also writing in similar terms to your ministerial counterparts in Wales and Northern Ireland.

As you know, the legislation that established the Authority contains provisions that make specific reference to the Scottish Government and Parliament. For example, the non-executive members of the Authority must include at least one person appointed after consulting Scottish Ministers; in preparing or revising the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, the Authority must consult Scottish Ministers; and there are a number of other matters in relation to which Scottish Ministers have specific powers or must be consulted including, under certain circumstances, the power to direct the Board of the Authority. Thus, there is a formal statutory framework which defines the relationship in a number of respects.

However, in practice, most of our dealings with the Scottish Government are not of a kind that will require the exercise of Ministerial powers. We maintain a small office in Edinburgh that leads on the assessment of Scottish official statistics against the Code of Practice. Communication between the statisticians in the Scottish Government and our own staff is, we believe, effective and constructive. There are aspects of the professional statistical agenda arising from assessment in which statisticians in Scotland are leading the way at the UK level.

From time to time more intractable or high profile issues arise and, where that happens, we will write to you as appropriate. One case in point has been the topic of pre-release access to official statistics on which our respective positions are well documented and different. I hope that will not interfere with making progress in other areas. You expressed a similar sentiment in a recent letter to me.

Another, sometimes difficult, area is ensuring that where it would be of value at a UK national level, the four administrations work together to produce comparable sets of statistics. In practice, this should not, and will not, restrict the freedom of the Scottish Government to commission official statistics specifically tailored to the Scottish legal, administrative or policy

environment. But it may involve contributing to some additional work across the administrations to examine definitional differences and put together estimates on a common basis. I would ask for your support in general terms for government statisticians giving constructive attention to such matters when they arise. As part of this, the National Statistician has some UK-wide responsibilities and I hope that all the devolved administrations will recognise that at times this involves her advising the chief statisticians on the priority to be given to the UK dimension.

At a time when all administrations are looking to contain expenditure where possible, I would assure you that the Statistics Authority does not see its role as the unquestioning defence of statistical activities. A sharper focus on meeting clear needs, which in turn deliver demonstrable value to the citizen, is central to much of our work. We would ask however that all the benefits of evidence-based decision-making in government, business, and the voluntary and personal sectors, be fully weighed in the balance. Reducing expenditure on statistical work may be straightforward; determining the consequences is much harder. Such matters must be approached with an eye to the longer term public interest. The Authority will offer impartial advice where it can.

One special case, relating both to resources and the need for co-operation, is the conduct of the 2011 Census and, more specifically, consideration of the longer term options to replace the traditional Census. Whilst we are aware of the close working arrangements that already exist among government statisticians on Census issues, these are not purely professional matters and have a substantial political and policy dimension. The Statistics Authority will be happy to engage with all the administrations, and other political interests, with a view to discussing where the best interests of the UK and its constituent countries lie.

These are, I submit, substantive agenda items with both shorter and longer term implications. I hope that the approach above will commend itself to you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Scholar". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Andrew Welsh MSP
Convenor, Finance Committee
Scottish Parliament
EDINBURGH
EH99 1SP

23 September 2010

Dear Mr Welsh

UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY: SCOTLAND

I am writing to bring to your attention our Annual Report for 2009-10, which has now been laid before the Scottish Parliament, and to offer some observations on how the Authority sees its role in relation to Scotland and to seek your support in certain respects. I am writing in similar terms to Jim Mather MSP, as the responsible Minister in the Scottish Government.

The legislation that established the Authority contains provisions that make specific reference to the Scottish Government and Parliament. For example, the non-executive members of the Authority must include at least one person appointed after consulting Scottish Ministers; in preparing or revising the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, the Authority must consult Scottish Ministers; and there are a number of other matters in relation to which Scottish Ministers have specific powers or must be consulted including, under certain circumstances, the power to direct the Board of the Authority. Thus, there is a formal statutory framework which defines the relationship in a number of respects.

However, in practice, most of our dealings with the Scottish Government are not of a kind that will require the direct involvement of Ministers or committees of the Scottish Parliament. We maintain a small office in Edinburgh that leads on the assessment of Scottish official statistics against the Code of Practice. Communication between the statisticians in the Scottish Government and our own staff is, we believe, effective and constructive.

From time to time more intractable or high profile issues arise and, where that happens, we will write to Ministers and your committee as appropriate. One case in point has been the topic of pre-release access to official statistics in relation to which the Scottish and Westminster Parliamentary Orders are substantially different; and about which the Statistics Authority and Scottish Government do not agree. We have expressed concern about this but hope that it will not impede the constructive dialogue in other areas.

Another, sometimes difficult, area is ensuring that where it would be of value at a UK national level, the four administrations work together to produce comparable sets of statistics. In practice, this should not, and will not, restrict the freedom of the Scottish Government to commission official statistics specifically tailored to the Scottish legal, administrative or policy environment. But it may involve statisticians in Scotland contributing to some additional work across the administrations to examine definitional differences and put together estimates on a common basis. I would ask for your committee's support in general terms on this point.

At a time when all administrations are looking to contain expenditure where possible, I would assure you that the Statistics Authority does not see its role as the unquestioning defence of statistical activities. A sharper focus on meeting clear needs, which in turn deliver demonstrable value to the citizen, is central to much of our work. We do ask however that all the benefits of evidence-based decision-making in government, business, and the voluntary and personal sectors, be fully weighed in the balance. Reducing expenditure on statistical work may be straightforward; determining the consequences is much harder. Such matters must be approached with an eye to the longer term public interest. The Authority will offer impartial advice where it can.

One special case, relating both to resources and the need for co-operation, is the conduct of the 2011 Census and, more specifically, consideration of the longer term options to replace the traditional Census. Whilst we are aware of the close working arrangements that already exist among government statisticians on Census issues, these are not purely professional matters and have a substantial political and policy dimension as I am sure you will appreciate. The Statistics Authority will be happy to engage with all the political and other interests with a view to discussing where the best interests of the UK and its constituent countries lie.

These are, I submit, substantive agenda items with both shorter and longer term implications. I hope that the approach above will commend itself to you.

Yours sincerely

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Sir Michael Scholar KCB