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**Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB**

Nigel Dodds OBE MP MLA  
Minister for Finance and Personnel  
Northern Ireland Executive  
Craigantlet Buildings  
Stoney Road  
Belfast  
BT4 3SX

29 January 2009

Dear Minister

**CONSULTATION ON PRE-RELEASE ACCESS TO OFFICIAL STATISTICS ORDER  
(NORTHERN IRELAND) 2009**

Thank you for your letter dated 19 January, inviting the Statistics Authority to comment on the draft Order in advance of consideration by the Department of Finance and Personnel Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Authority recognises that the draft Northern Ireland Order mirrors that agreed by the Westminster Parliament. Consistency in the rules will be reassuring to those outside government who have concerns about the arrangements for releasing statistics.

However, I would like to repeat some of points that the Authority has made in relation to the Westminster Order. Underlying the debate about early access to official statistics are the principles of equality of access and earliest possible release – principles widely recognised internationally as being in the public interest. The Code of Practice for Official Statistics, published on 6 January this year, places emphasis on both principles.

Enabling the administration of the day to discuss, and prepare statements about, the statistics whilst not allowing the same access to Parliament or the public is not, in our view, either the best approach, in terms of principle or, at a practical level, likely to help build confidence in the independence and impartiality of the statistical service.

The Statistics Authority would like to see all four UK administrations using the new Orders not just to establish a new standard for pre-release access but to achieve progressive reduction both in the length of time for which privileged access is granted, and in the number of officials and Ministers seeing statistics prior to publication.

We will carry out an independent assessment of the impact of all the pre-release Orders after about a year of their operation. We will be concerned primarily to see whether a reduction in pre-release access has taken place, compared with the position prior to the Orders, and whether external commentators consider that the Orders have affected trust in official statistics produced by Northern Ireland public bodies.

I am copying this letter to Karen Dunnell as National Statistician, and to Norman Caven.

Yours sincerely

*Michael Scholar*

**Sir Michael Scholar KCB**