

Limiting pre-release access to statistics: a consultation document

FDA response

1. The FDA is the union representing senior managers and professionals in the civil service and wider public sector. In particular, we represent statisticians and economists within the Government Statistical Service (GSS) and the Government Economic Service (GES).
2. The FDA supports the limiting of pre-release access to statistics for Ministers. We recognise that early access to statistics has given the impression that there is potential for political interference in statistical processes and that has reduced trust in official statistics.
3. We do, however, have a number of concerns about the efficient operation of government departments under the proposed arrangements. It is important that Civil Servants responsible for briefing Ministers are not put under undue pressure to produce briefings of the depth that can be produced under the current arrangements, where up to five days' access to both Ministers and officials advising Ministers is allowed. Such pressure will lead to officials working excessive hours, which would be unacceptable. Ministers must, therefore, accept that changes in pre-release access proposed may lead to a reduction in the amount of briefing material produced. This could be better managed through having different rules applying to officials compared to Ministers
4. We are also concerned that more limited arrangements may reduce the access to management information ahead of publication of statistical aggregates. It is clearly important for decision makers within departments to have access to the latest information, while at the same time safeguarding the integrity of National Statistics releases. This also suggests that it will be important for statistical releases to be published as early as possible to maximise their usefulness.
5. We also believe that it is important that the statistical quality assurance process makes appropriate use of non-statistical expertise. For quality assurance reasons, appropriate officials should have access to data outside of the proposed pre-release arrangements.
6. Finally, we welcome the Government's proposal to give a formal role in applying the principles of the new pre-release arrangements to statistical Heads of Profession, backed by Ministers and Permanent Secretaries, and that the decision making process regarding the pre-release arrangements will be led by the statistical professionals within Departments.