

Limiting pre-release access to statistics: a consultation document

Comments from the Health Statistics Users Group 3 March 2008

1. Background

The Health Statistics Users Group is a member of the Statistics Users Forum but on this occasion we are making our own submission separately from the Forum. We welcome the opportunity to comment on this important issue.

2. Relationship between access and quality of statistics

We would support any changes in the current arrangements that would maintain and, ideally, improve the overall quality of published national statistics. This includes ensuring that the data themselves are reliable and accurate, and that the publications are free from any attempts to manipulate the results to suit particular requirements. In discussing quality, three different but related aspects should be considered:

2.1 The actual quality and reliability of the data underlying the statistics.

2.2 The ways in which the statistics are presented. This can distort, either intentionally or unintentionally, the most reliable of statistical information.

2.3 The public perception of the quality and reliability of statistics. This can, in some cases, be affected more by their presentation and by the context and general discussion about the statistics, than by the actual quality of the underlying data.

3. Practical implications of reducing pre-release access time

The main focus of the proposals is on the third of these points. In addressing this, it is important not to jeopardise the other two aspects of quality listed above.

We accept the general view that allowing a longer time period for pre-release access, and increasing the number of people who are granted pre-release access, increases the danger that either the information is leaked or that attempts are made to "adjust" the results in some way. We therefore agree that it is sensible to reduce the current time period. On the other hand, we do not support the view, that the pre-release access time should be reduced to zero or to a very short time period. The reasons for our view relate to the first two quality issues set out above

4. Ensuring that statistics are well presented

Members of the public may feel distrustful if selected government officials, ministers, or other key individuals obtain access to statistics in advance of publication. At the same time, the public also expects these same officials or ministers to be able to talk intelligently about the figures, and their implications, as soon as the figures are published. In order to do this they need to be properly briefed, and the government staff who are responsible for preparing these technical briefings need to be given adequate time to prepare the briefings.

The preparation of these briefings can take some time, particularly where the statistics are complex and the technical team have not themselves been closely involved in their production. We note that this point is mentioned in the paper. We would expect that these technical staff would need to see the data at least a full working day, and ideally two days, in advance. If the time for preparing these briefings is to be reduced to one to two days, then it is also important that the technical staff in ONS or in the relevant ministries or other agencies have adequate warning of the actual dates. This should enable them to give this priority within their work programmes.

Government officials and ministers are usually called upon to make some statements as soon as the figures are available, and expected to respond. Our concern is that these immediate statements could be incorrect or misleading if insufficient time is allowed to prepare them and, as a consequence, the spokespeople are inadequately or improperly briefed. A need to correct statements at a later stage, once a full and more considered interpretation is available, will increase confusion. In turn this will fuel mistrust of the statistics and the statistical process, thus defeating the main purpose of these proposals

5. Ensuring the quality and reliability of the data

One good way of ensuring that the statistics are reliable is to share these with data producers, or some of the main data users, before they are finalised. Staff with a detailed knowledge of the subject area may be more able to pick up inconsistencies and possible errors, than statisticians working at the centre if the latter do not have the depth of understanding and experience of the subject area or local circumstances.

Where the statistics are not sensitive or potentially contentious, then there should be no problems in asking for comments in confidence from appropriately experienced professionals at a draft stage. Where the statistics are liable to be sensitive then this would have to be handled carefully, but we hope that the arrangements agreed for pre-release access will allow for this kind of consultation.

It should be noted that, in both cases, we are suggesting that pre-release access is allowed only for practical and technical reasons, to people who have a specific function in improving the quality or the presentation of the statistics. It would of course be important that anyone who has been given such access clearly understands that they cannot release the information, and signs a confidentiality agreement to that effect.