

HM Treasury  
1 Horse Guards Road  
London  
SW1A 2HQ

29 February 2008

Dear Sir,

This letter is a response to the consultation document on limiting pre-release access to Government statistics. I am a Principal Methodologist at the Office for National Statistics (ONS) but the views expressed here are my own, personal opinions and do not necessarily reflect the official views of ONS. These views are based on publicly available information and general reasoning and do not rely on any insider knowledge or confidential information available to me in my capacity as an ONS employee.

Although I, personally, would prefer no pre-release access except for legal and operational reasons, I welcome the proposal to limit pre-release access to a maximum of 24 hours. I also welcome, to some extent, the delegation of responsibility for granting pre-release access to the "person responsible" for producing the statistics. For ONS, this is the National Statistician, and the power to grant or not to grant pre-release access is a welcome addition to the National Statistician's authority. For other government departments, however, you must be aware that giving this power to the departmental Minister will not encourage trust in the independence of these departments' statistics.

At the end of this letter, I present arguments that pre-release access is neither necessary nor desirable but my main concerns about the current Draft Order are that there is no provision for sanctions against persons who breach the conditions of pre-release access and there is only a limited role for the Statistics Board, which purportedly has overall responsibility for the integrity of all official statistics.

Paragraph 3.22 of the consultation document merely requires that accidental and wrongful release are notified to the Board with a written explanation. The Board is given no authority to monitor or impose any action to prevent recurrence. The only sanction provided for is in paragraph 3.28, that 'The Board will be able to remove National Statistics status from any official statistics that it considers are ... not compliant with the principles and rules for pre-release.' This is a very draconian measure, wholly inappropriate to most cases of wrongful release and is therefore unlikely to be used. If, in some rare case, this measure were ever applied, it would be unfair and demoralising to the producers of these statistics, to see their hard work in meeting the assessment criteria for National Statistics status being overturned by the irresponsible behaviour of a privileged user of these statistics. This sanction is too blunt and unwieldy to be of any use.

I suggest that the Statistics Board be given the authority to withdraw pre-release access from any Government Department which, deliberately or accidentally,

breaches pre-release conditions until such time as the Board is satisfied that the Department has amended its security procedures to minimise the risk of the breach recurring. This allows the Board to react to any breach with commensurate, disciplinary action, providing a strong incentive for the Department to abide by pre-release conditions. It is important that the sanction is applied to the Department as a whole, not only to the individual(s) responsible for the breach. Knowledge that breaching pre-release conditions would affect pre-release access for colleagues, superiors and the Departmental Minister provides a strong incentive for individuals with pre-release access to abide by pre-release conditions. It also ensures that each Department will grant pre-release access only to those individuals who, in the Department's view, really need it.

However, I question whether any individual really needs pre-release access. Statistics that are so sensitive that pre-release access is demanded are usually analysed continually in the press and in research publications. Very often, commentators publish, prior to release, forecasts of what they expect the statistics to show. Departments also have their own data to inform their expectations of what the statistics will be. It is therefore a relatively simple matter to produce contingent responses according to likely out-turns for the published statistics and then to use the response most appropriate to the actual statistics as the immediate response that is apparently deemed necessary by Ministers.

Again, I question whether an immediate response to published statistics is necessary or even desirable. Published statistics are not definitive because they are subject to several sources of error: sampling error, measurement error, errors in the population being measured, errors arising from non-response to survey questions. Instant responses to such statistics are not sensible because their correct interpretation is masked by the inherent errors. They need to be analysed and considered carefully in the light of other, related statistics (which are also subject to the same types of error).

Unfortunately, politicians and media commentators do not heed these inherent errors, if they are aware of them, and treat published statistics as facts. The granting of pre-release access exacerbates this mistaken view by supporting the myth that early access to statistics provides magic entry into the world of truth. If pre-release access were withdrawn altogether, politicians, and hence commentators, might more readily take cognisance of the errors in statistics. The motivation for this, to disparage statistics that do not support the commentator's policy position, would be less than an objective search for the true statistics but the result would be a more mature and sensible debate about the correct interpretation of our inherently uncertain, published statistics.

Yours faithfully,



John Wood