

Limiting pre-release access to statistics: a Local Government Association response to the government's consultation

Introduction

1. The Local Government Association (LGA) promotes better local government. It works with and for member authorities to realize a shared vision of local government that enables local people to shape a distinctive and better future for their locality and its communities. The LGA aims to put local councils at the heart of the drive to improve public services and to work with government to ensure that the policy, legislative and financial context in which they operate, supports that objective.

2. Arrangements for pre-release access for government ministers, senior civil servants and others to official statistics matter to local government for the following reasons:

- We are users of official statistics and support the principle of equality of access to statistics
- In some instances statistics relate to our business (for example, school examination results or local government finance statistics) and we are disadvantaged if others are able to prepare their interpretation of statistics ahead of us
- We are users of official statistics and so we need those statistics to be perceived as trustworthy
- We are part of government and a perception that central government manipulates statistics is damaging to all government institutions

Elements in the proposals which are welcome

3. We welcome the proposals that:

- The length of pre-release be reduced to a maximum of 24 hours
- The number of people with pre-release access be much reduced
- Heads of profession be responsible for monitoring the operation of the system
- Releases go out through a central publication hub managed in ONS
- The UK Statistics Authority should set out provisions governing the timing, means and responsibility for releases
- The operation of the system be reviewed after 12 months
- Decisions on the pre-distribution list are to be reviewed before access is granted

Elements in the proposals which are disappointing

4. We are disappointed that:

- The length of pre-release is longer than in many other countries, and longer than recommended by the Treasury Select Committee

- Ministers, who benefit from pre-release access, have determined pre-release rules rather than entrusting the task to the UK Statistics Authority. This is a missed opportunity to enhance public trust in the official statistics system
- There may still be scope for confusion between the statistical releases through the central publication hub and policy releases issued around the same time which contain interpretations of statistics. We look to the UK Statistics Authority to monitor such releases and comment if it believes that they act against the public interest.
- There is no questioning of the embargo system, whereby journalists effectively have pre-release access

Issues for consideration

5. We urge the following points on those responsible for operating, monitoring and evaluating the system:

- Heads of Profession are put in a position where they are asked to prescribe the behaviour of the political masters. This position is powerful but at the same time vulnerable.
- Para 3 (1) (a) (ii) allows the 'person responsible' to grant pre-release access where its denial would significantly impede the taking of action in relation to that statistic. One can imagine that, for certain series, the need for action would depend on the level of the statistic. This raises the possibility that pre-release access to a series might be granted at some times (where, in the view of the person responsible, action might be needed) but not others. This point needs clarification, and needs to be considered in the light of the judgement that it requires of the 'person responsible'.
- Pre-release access to special advisers may particularly undermine public trust. This should be a major consideration in reviewing existing distribution lists.
- The 24-hour pre-release access period might be justified for certain sets of statistics. It should not become the norm. The onus should rest on ministers to demonstrate that they require this period rather than something shorter.