

**LIMITING PRE-RELEASE ACCESS TO STATISTICS:  
A consultation document,  
HM Treasury & Cabinet Office, December 2007**

Submission from Statistics Group of The Society of Business Economists

The Society, with some 600 members, is the leading organisation serving business economists in the UK. It represents a broad spectrum of business life, spanning financial services, commerce and industry, consultancies, the public sector, business schools and universities. It is a member of the Royal Statistical Society's Statistics Users Forum.

The Society welcomes the official recognition that pre-release access policy is due for reform and the proposed significant reduction in the time allowed for privileged access. Nonetheless, given that a number of other countries which are democracies appear to be able to manage without pre-access release, we feel that the present situation of major reform of the statistical regime presents a golden opportunity to take the 'radical' step of abolition of pre-release, or at the very most, reducing it to just a few hours for a very limited set of data. We support the view of Sir Michael Scholar, the Chair-designate of the new United Kingdom Statistics Authority (UKSA), who said in the course of his evidence to the 18 July 2007 Treasury Select Committee session on his appointment, that in his opinion the proposed timing was still too long, should be brought into line with best international practice, and did not go far enough to restore public trust in official statistics, and that the UKSA should decide the rules for privileged access. The Statistics Commission and the Royal Statistical Society have similar views but offer compromises in suggested amendments to the draft Order.

The Treasury consultation paper, in paras.1.18-1.25, sets out the current and proposed future position relating to pre-release.

Para.1.20 states that "[pre-release access] ...allows Ministers to account for the implications of policy areas for which they are democratically responsible at the time of release, **as the public and media have come to expect.**" (our emphasis). In para.3.3 this is slightly transformed to "The public and media **often** (our emphasis) expect..." It would seem that the justification for the elaborate superstructure of varying periods of pre-release timing are built on this flimsy presumption. Habitual attitudes are capable of being changed – government and media are attempting this continuously. It is as well to reiterate that one of the main objectives of the legislation and its resultant procedures is to improve public trust (this is recognised in para.1.22); the opportunity for 'spin' that any pre-release offers and the perception that it is used for 'spin', even when that is not the case, appears to be a significant factor behind the lack of trust in UK official statistics.

Paras.2.12-2.15 rehearse the comparable international practices, which are used to further support the UK's policies and practices citing Australia, France, Ireland, Germany and the USA. No mention is made of many other European countries whose policies are to release statistics to everyone at the

same time ie no one has early access – Austria, Denmark, Finland, Netherlands (with some exceptions limited to one hour), Norway, Poland, and Portugal (maximum of five hours). Even in the list of countries cited in the paper the times are shorter than the proposed 24 hours, eg: Australia (three hours); France (coverage is limited to a few series and then only to one hour); Ireland (one hour, except for National Accounts). (Information is taken from Statistics Commission Report No.18, *Legislation to build trust in statistics*, May 2004, Annex 4, para.4.3.3.4.)

In summary we believe that 24 hours is too long. We believe that the UK should aim to be among the countries with the highest level of statistical practice which in this case means no, or very limited, pre-release. We note that arrangements will be reviewed after 12 months and believe that there should be a presumption for further tightening at that point if not implemented earlier.

Finally, we welcome the indication in the consultation paper that arrangements for pre-release access will be led by the Head of Profession for Statistics in each department (para.3.17). However, there is no indication of this in the draft Order. While we accept that it is not possible to refer to Heads of Profession in the Order since they are not statutory posts, we feel this can be overcome by indicating that the 'person responsible' must consult with the National Statistician.

It is to be hoped that the ice on this issue will melt totally.