

GUIDANCE NOTE J

Statistical Activities during a General Election

Introduction

1. This note gives guidance on the conduct of statistical activities in Government Departments and their Agencies during a General Election campaign. It is being circulated by the National Statistician - Head of the Government Statistical Service to Heads of Profession for Statistics and to Survey Control Liaison Officers in Departments and Agencies. It is in accordance with the general principles identified in the Election Guidance issued to Heads of Departments by the Cabinet Office, of which it forms Note J, and in keeping with the specific guidance issued to Departments on how to deal with enquiries and requests for information in the Election period. The National Statistician is responsible for promoting the integrity of official statistics and should be consulted in any cases of doubt about the application of this guidance.

Key Principles

2. During a General Election period (from the day on which the Election is called to the day after polling day) statistical activities should continue to be conducted in accordance with the Official Statistics/National Statistics Code of Practice, while taking great care to avoid competition with Parliamentary candidates for the attention of the public. Civil servants must take care to ensure that they do not engage in or appear to engage in Party politics or be used for Party political purposes. This leads to some key guidelines.

Guidelines

3. The greatest care must continue to be taken to ensure that information is presented impartially and objectively.

4. Regular statistical releases (e.g. press notices, bulletins, publications or electronic releases) will continue to be issued and published on dates which have been pre-announced. Ad hoc statistical releases should be released only where a release date has previously been published or release in the Election period has been clearly intended and publicly known when the election is called. Where the pre announcement specified that the information would be released during a specified period (eg a week, or longer time period), but did not specify a precise day, releases should be published within the specified period. Other ad hoc statistical releases which are not pre-announced and which may be regarded as politically sensitive should not go ahead. If unsure, the advice of the Head of Profession for Statistics and the National Statistician should be sought.

5. Any requests for unpublished statistics should be dealt with in accordance with the requirements of FOIA, and should be released unless an exemption applies. In such cases, advice should be sought from the Head of Profession for Statistics and the National Statistician.

6. Special care must be taken in producing commentary for inclusion in announcements of statistical publications issued during the Election period. Commentary which would be accepted as impartial and objective analysis or interpretation at ordinary times, may excite criticism during an Election. Briefings by civil servants should be restricted to the most basic factual clarification during this period. Ultimately each case must be considered on its own merits and the

content of the announcement left to the discretion of the departmental statistician, seeking advice from the Head of Profession for Statistics and National Statistician as appropriate.

7. During this period, civil servants involved in the production of official statistics will not generally provide face to face briefing to Ministers. Only if there is a vital operational need for information, e.g. an out of the ordinary occurrence of market sensitive results with significant implications for the economy, or some new management figures with major implications for the running of public services, should such briefing be provided. Any such briefing should be approved by the National Statistician.

8. Requests for advice on the interpretation or analysis of statistics should be handled with care, and the guidance in paragraphs 5 and 6 is appropriate.

9. Requests for guidance on methodology should continue to be met.

10. Requests for small numbers of copies of leaflets, background papers or free publications which were available before the Election period may continue to be met but no bulk issues to individuals or organisations should be made without appropriate approval. Regular mailings of statistical bulletins to customers on existing mailing lists may continue.

11. Regular, continuous and ongoing censuses and surveys to individuals, households, businesses or other organisations may continue. So may ad hoc surveys which are directly related to and in support of a continuing statistical series.

12. Ad hoc censuses or surveys to individuals, households, businesses or other organisations may give rise to controversy or be related to an Election issue. Where this is likely, departments may consider postponing or cancelling them. If this is inappropriate, guidance should be sought from the Departmental Head of Profession or if necessary the National Statistician. Each case will be judged on its merits including any costs which would be incurred through cancellation. Non-controversial censuses or surveys, not directly related to any Election issue, may proceed, subject to the usual survey control requirement to obtain Ministerial approval for surveys of businesses and local authorities.

13. If officials working on statistics in any area across government are unsure about any matters relating to statistics during the election period, the advice of their Head of Profession for statistics or of the National Statistician should be sought (ONS can be contacted on 020 7533 6210).