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OFFICIAL STATISTICS – ROLE OF THE UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY AND THE CENSUS

Thank you for coming to see me on 7 July, where we discussed the issues raised in your letter of 12 May to the Prime Minister and your letter to me of 20 May on the 2011 Census. I am writing to you to set out the Government's position on the 2011 Census and the future of the Census and to reply on the other issues raised in your letter.

2011 Census

Despite my initial concerns about cost and scope, I am now convinced that the 2011 Census must go ahead. It will provide unique information necessary to meet essential UK and EU requirements and the sunk costs mean that any other option would be more costly. Going forward, my colleagues and I will continue to promote the importance of the public engaging with the 2011 Census.

Users must have confidence in the resulting data, so ONS must ensure that the problems encountered in 2001 are avoided and that every area achieves a high level of response, although this must be balanced by cost considerations. I am pleased that ONS has confirmed that they will be speeding up publication of the initial Census results from September 2012 to July 2012. This will be welcomed by Census users.

The future of the Census

Your letter recognises the increasing costs and difficulties of carrying out a Census. I therefore welcome the urgent work on considering alternatives that the Board has instructed ONS to carry out with the intention that the 2011 Census will be the last of its kind. I ask you to consult widely across Government on this work.



Issue – Independence and consulting the Authority on statistical outputs and resources

The current framework for official statistics in the UK was laid down in the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007, which had multi-party support, and promotes the independence of official statistics within departments. The National Statistician, as head of the Government Statistical Service and Permanent Secretary of the ONS, meets with other Permanent Secretaries, which provides an ideal opportunity to promote statistical independence. The Heads of Profession (HoP) for Statistics are well placed to promote statistical integrity within their department and have the support of The National Statistician on professional statistical matters. The Authority has its Code of Practice, which is statutory and places a considerable responsibility on all producers of official statistics to follow the principles and protocols it contains. This will help ensure independence.

You suggest that Ministers should consult the National Statistician on decisions on statistical staff within their departments and that Ministers should consult the Statistics Authority on changes they wish to make to statistical expenditure or statistical outputs. It is for each department to decide on how they manage their budgets, in accordance with departmental priorities, and identify the staff required to meet those priorities. The Accounting Officers and Secretaries of State are responsible and accountable to Parliament for their departments spending. It would not be appropriate to effectively ring fence statistical expenditure, as this reduces the flexibility that departments have to manage their budgets and prioritise accordingly. HoPs play an important role in advising on the statistical priorities within departments as part of the business planning process.

Pre-release access to official statistics

The Government has reviewed the current arrangements on pre-release access to official statistics, alongside the recommendations made by the Authority. Having considered the issues carefully, Government has decided to continue with the existing arrangements.

Statistical propriety

Finally, reflecting Government's priority for accountability, guidance on statistical propriety has been included for the first time in the Ministerial Code, which was published on 21 May. The Code can be found at: <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/409215/ministerialcodemay2010.pdf>. The guidance makes clear the responsibilities placed on Ministers in relation to official statistics, particularly on adherence with the Code of Practice and the Pre-Release Access Order.

I am copying this letter to the Prime Minister, the Cabinet Secretary and the National Statistician, Jil Matheson.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of two lines of cursive script. The first line starts with a large 'F' and ends with a horizontal stroke. The second line starts with a vertical stroke and ends with a horizontal stroke.

FRANCIS MAUDE