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Dear Sir Michael,

I am writing in response to your letter of 29 January concerning the policy priorities of the UK Statistics Authority. Your letter was addressed to Mr Salmond as leader of the SNP, however as you raise issues for the Scottish Government, I am responding as the Cabinet Secretary with responsibility for statistics.

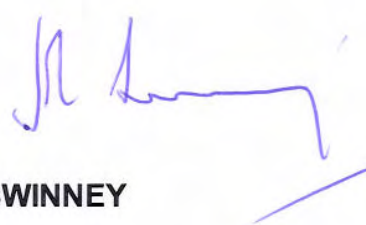
On your first point on strengthening the impartiality of statisticians within Government Departments, within Scottish Government we find that current arrangements generally work well. Our procedures, which follow the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, ensure that there is not ministerial involvement in the production and publication of statistics whilst enabling statisticians to work along side policy officials. This serves to ensure that statistics are used to properly inform the development and evaluation of policy whilst strong user engagement ensures that external needs are met.

With regard to making more use of the Authority in government decisions, we welcomed the creation of your Edinburgh office and have found the close working that this has facilitated to be very useful. We have also had a substantial programme of Authority assessments of our products and welcome the constructive way these have been carried out. On the specific issue of allocation of statistical resources the Authority's views are always welcome though it would be important that they are based on a full understanding of the needs and opportunities in Scotland.

On pre-release access, we generally find that our current procedures work well and I am concerned about the Authority's wish to abolish such access. As many Scottish Government official statistics relate closely to management information and policy delivery, it is important for Ministers and other delivery partners to be able to comment in an informed way when the figures are released. The media expect a Ministerial response and this is often reflected in media coverage. Abolishing pre-release access could, in my view, result in damaging public trust if Ministers are put in the position of having to comment without being properly briefed.

As you will be aware, we are currently exploring these issues in our review of the Pre-Release Access to Official Statistics (Scotland) Order 2008. We also aim to establish international practice for the publication of official statistics by Government Departments as opposed to the largely economic data and further analysis of already published administrative data generally published by National Statistics Institutes. For such data there is a stronger argument for tighter arrangements to be applied. Indeed in Scotland we already have tighter arrangements in place for market sensitive statistics. I hope that the Authority's review of the arrangements for pre-release access across the UK will also properly consider these issues.

You and other Authority members have been welcome visitors to Scotland in the past and will be in the future. In the first instance it would perhaps be best to liaise with Jim Mather, Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism, who has specific responsibility for statistics.

Yr sincerely


JOHN SWINNEY