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Andrew Dilnot CBE
UK Statistics Authority
1 Drummond Gate
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3 April 2012

Dear Andrew

First of all let me wish you, both personally and on behalf of the RSS, every success in your term as Chair of the UK Statistics Authority. You and the RSS have an equally firm belief in the crucial importance of official statistics to all sectors of society and the economy and hence in the importance of the post you are taking up.

I think, too, we are fully agreed on some of the key aims for the Authority, aims that are driven by its statutory objective of "promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good". Substantial progress was made during Sir Michael Scholar's term of office and you will be conscious of the need to maximise the advantages that has given you in order to build further.

This will, clearly, include the goal of further strengthening user engagement. The RSS and the Authority have worked together on this in supporting the Statistics User Forum, User Groups and the recent development of StatsUserNet. We look forward to continuing this partnership.

Continuing the drive to improve communication and presentation will also, we assume, be one of your priorities. We hope that through listening to users, the UKSA will be active in ensuring that where the statistical message is unclear new analysis is done to fill gaps and reconcile inconsistency.

Sir Michael was steadfast in challenging any misuse of statistics by politicians (and at times by others) and argued repeatedly for the abolition of, or a substantial reduction in, pre-release access. You will have the full support of the RSS in carrying on these endeavours. Perceptions of political interference are, in our view, a major impediment to building much needed trust in official statistics. Pre-release access gives credence to such perceptions, which are, in general, unwarranted.

The National Statistician and the UKSA face considerable challenges in maintaining and developing both a coherent Government Statistical Service and a coherent programme of official statistics in the UK's decentralised and devolved system. Increased departmental control over budgets, outbedding of statisticians into policy sections and the reduced number of high-level statistical posts in government have weakened the overall ethos of the GSS and the ability of official statisticians to gain wide experience. Ensuring that official statistics meet both current and future needs and are

responsive to economic and social changes is far from simple in the UK's structure. We regret that ministers have not yet accepted the need for departments to consult and pay attention to the UKSA and the National Statistician when making statistical plans.

The potential for public services to become more fragmented, for example under localism agendas or changes to the NHS, will also present statistical challenges including quality assurance. Wellbeing, open data and "beyond 2011" will present tests as well as opportunities for official statistics.

The first round of assessment of national statistics will end shortly. This has formed a solid grounding bedrock for the assessment and monitoring process. I think we all agree though that once this first round has been finished, a more flexible and pro-active system should be introduced.

You have always been an effective and tireless advocate for statistics. There is a growing appreciation across society that accurate information about the state of our country and communities is needed to improve personal and business decision-making and public policy. You will, I am sure, wish to continue to be a champion of this movement. The RSS is, of course, committed to this, in particular through its "GetStats" campaign to increase statistical literacy. We would welcome a discussion with you on how we might coordinate our joint effort.

Turning to more specific issues, we welcome the current efforts to increase data availability for parliamentary constituencies. We have argued for some while that more statistics should be available to support the democratic process. On these lines, we hope you will consider soon the issue of the statistics needed to inform the debate around any referendum for Scottish independence or, indeed, data that throw light more generally on the relationships between the constituent parts of the United Kingdom. It is imperative that such crucial decisions are informed by comprehensive, accessible and impartial data.

Finally, as you are well aware, the RSS has been very concerned in the past with the discrepancy in the rates of inflation shown by the Retail and Consumer price indices. Much work is now being done on this. We are pleased in particular to note the substantial research being carried out by the ONS into the formula effect, work being assisted by three RSS members with specific expertise. We are also pleased to have been able to set up, together with the ONS, a vibrant user group. These and other initiatives will, we hope, eventually result in indices that are fitter for purpose than those currently produced. However it is not yet certain that the differences between the inflation rates shown by the two indices will be eliminated (or largely eliminated), in part due to governance constraints. Handling the public presentation of any remaining noticeable gap in such high-profile statistics will be an issue for the both the UKSA and the ONS.

I look forward to discussing these and other issues with you, as well as how the RSS and the UKSA can continue or extend working in partnership, at an early opportunity.

I am copying this letter to Jil Matheson, Richard Alldritt and to Bernard Jenkin, MP.

Best wishes,

Valerie Isham
President of the Royal Statistical Society