
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE

Bernard Jenkin MP
Chair, Public Administration Select Committee
House of Commons
LONDON
SW1A 0AA

10 March 2014

Dear Bernard

PRE-RELEASE ACCESS

Thank you for your letter of 31 January regarding pre-release access to official statistics, following media reporting in advance of the release of estimates of Gross Domestic Product for the fourth quarter of 2013, published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) on 28 January.

I have made enquiries with colleagues in ONS and they have told me that, as far as it is possible to ascertain, they are satisfied that there is no current evidence that there was an unauthorised breach of the pre-release arrangements among those who were granted privileged access to this statistical output before it was published.

However, you will not be surprised to learn that it remains the clear view of the Board of the Statistics Authority that the current arrangements for pre-release access are deeply unsatisfactory. This has been a long-held view which both I and my predecessor, Sir Michael Scholar, have set out in our respective pre-appointment hearings before the Committee – in 2007 and 2012 – as well as in other oral and written evidence, in correspondence, and in our published reports.

As the Authority's statement of strategic priorities sets out, we will continue to argue against Government ministers and officials having privileged access to statistics before Parliament or the public. For as long as pre-release access persists, the Authority will publicise its extent and seek to reduce it. The Authority will oversee and support the National Statistician's drive to reduce the degree and incidence of pre-release access to the fullest extent possible under the law. The National Statistician will shortly be finalising the necessary arrangements to reduce further pre-release access to ONS statistics following an exercise to minimise the extent of such access.¹

As our 2010 review of the pre-release arrangements concluded, the mere existence of pre-release access can feed public uncertainty about what happens behind the doors of government departments, undermining public confidence both in the statistical evidence and in the policies to which official statistics relate.² Equality of access is a fundamental principle of statistical good practice, both in the UK and internationally. All the parties to public debate should, as far as possible, have the same information at the same time, and only the absolute minimum number of people should see official statistics in their final form before they are published.

¹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/statistics-authority-statement-of-strategy.pdf>

² <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/statistics-authority-review-of-pre-release-access-arrangements.pdf>, section 1.2, in particular pp. 12-13

I and my colleagues remain very grateful for the support from both your Committee and its predecessor in wanting to see changes to the current statutory arrangements for pre-release access, and for the Statistics Authority to be given responsibility for determining the arrangements in future.

I am copying this letter as yours.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Dilnot". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'A' and a distinct 'D'.

Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE