
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Jenny Church
Royal Statistical Society
12 Errol Street
LONDON
EC1Y 8LX

13 July 2011

Dear Jenny

CONSULTATION ON CHANGES TO DEPARTMENTAL STATISTICAL PLANS

Thank you for your letter of 24 May. I apologise for the delay in replying to you, but I wanted to check the position carefully with the National Statistician's Office before responding.

Your letter raises concerns about the length of time that some departments allow for public consultation on their plans for statistical activity, and the practical means of communication being employed. I share your concerns. The Statistics Authority's view is that effective consultation on changes to departmental statistical plans is vital. The central importance of consultation is reflected in the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, and we agree with you that user engagement activities should be continuing rather than occasional. We also agree that the user community is diverse and not confined to a tight group of statistical specialists, and we encourage departments actively to employ different types of engagement events as a means of identifying the priorities of users of official statistics.

The Government's Code of Practice on Consultation provides for discretion on whether or not to undertake formal consultation exercises; and the Authority recognises that consultations on the future of statistical activities must be proportionate to what is being proposed, and should take account of the extent of latitude in terms of the final decision – consultations should make clear which options remain open. So, we would expect consultations on wide-ranging or extensive proposals to be given longer than consultations on plans which are likely to have minimal user impact or where the consultation will not be able to influence the decision much.

The National Statistician's Office has undertaken an analysis of recent consultations about reductions in official statistics. While I am told that approximately one-third of the consultations reviewed ran for 12 weeks or more, almost one-half ran for 8 weeks or less, including five consultations which ran for just 6 weeks and one consultation which ran for only 4 weeks. This is not an encouraging position. The National Statistician has asked Heads of Profession for Statistics and Statistical Theme Leaders in departments to take account of these concerns to ensure that appropriate timescales and methods of consultation are being deployed in all consultations about changes to statistical activity.

If we find that departments are ignoring this advice we will inform Parliament of this, and remind the departments concerned of their statutory duties in relation to the Code of Practice's provisions on consultation.

The Statistics Authority welcomes the development by the Royal Statistical Society of the *StatsUserNet* user engagement platform alongside the best practice guidelines being developed by the Statistics User Forum. The National Statistician's Office is keen to work with the Forum to consider the different principles and approaches needed for different user communities, to ensure that user engagement reaches the widest group possible and to improve the sharing of good practice. We will remind departments, and other producer bodies, of the importance of initiatives such as StatsUserNet, and of ensuring that departmental consultations on statistical plans are effective.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Scholar". The script is cursive and fluid.

Sir Michael Scholar KCB