
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

John Swinney MSP
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Dear Mr Swinney

STATISTICAL EXPENDITURE REPORT: SCOTTISH SCHOOLS STATISTICS

Please find enclosed a report by the UK Statistics Authority reviewing the Scottish Government's recent decision to make a number of changes to statistical publications relating to schools. I am sending this to you as I understand that your Scottish ministerial portfolio now includes statistics produced by the Scottish Government.

We hope that you find our report useful, and we would welcome your thoughts on our conclusions.

I am copying this to your colleague Michael Russell MSP as Cabinet Secretary for Education.

Yours sincerely



Sir Michael Scholar KCB

UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY

Statistical Expenditure Report 3: Scottish Schools Statistics

*Statistical Expenditure Reports review significant changes to UK official statistics.
This report has been prepared and issued independently by the UK Statistics Authority.*

In October 2010 the Scottish Government announced that it would proceed with a number of changes to statistical publications relating to schools. Five sets of statistics will be discontinued: information on pre-appeal examination results, placing requests, children educated outwith school, independent schools and teacher vacancies. The remaining statistics, including statistics on pupils, teachers, pre-school and childcare, and school leavers, will be combined into three compendia publications. In the light of responses to consultation¹, the Scottish Government will maintain the collection of data on school meals. It will also maintain the collection and publication of statistics on pupil exclusions, attendance and absence, but on a less frequent basis.

The statistics covered

The statistics affected are those presented in some 17 different statistical publications. These include a wide range of statistics about schools in Scotland, including attainment levels, the characteristics of pupils and teachers, and the resources available to the school system in Scotland. Many of the sets of statistics provide time series dating back more than ten years.

The statistics are produced by the Scottish Government, although most of the data used to produce these statistics are collected by schools, local authorities, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and Skills Development Scotland for their own operational purposes. The statistics were the subject of an assessment² by the UK Statistics Authority, which resulted in their designation as National Statistics, subject to the Scottish Government implementing a number of enhancements and reporting them to the Authority by January 2011.

During our assessment of these statistics, the Scottish Government informed us that the analytical staff costs that it incurred in producing these statistical products was approximately £300,000 each year. However, the Scottish Government has not provided an estimate of the costs incurred by the organisations that collect the data, nor has it disclosed the estimated savings that the reductions will yield.

Uses of the statistics include the following:

- i. by the Scottish Government to develop and evaluate school policy;
- ii. by head teachers and local authorities to support the management of schools;
- iii. by parents, parent councils, school management bodies and HM Inspectorate of Education as benchmarks against which to consider the quality of individual schools, and to monitor trends in the resources made available to schools and in educational outcomes;

¹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/School-Education/scotstat/PastCons>

² <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/assessment-reports>

- iv. to inform the public and the Scottish Parliament about progress against the Scottish National Indicator for school leavers entering further or higher education, training or employment;
- v. as part of Single Outcome Agreements between local authorities and the Scottish Government; and
- vi. by the Accounts Commission in monitoring statutory performance indicators for local authorities.

Government proposals

In September 2010 the Scottish Government consulted users about plans to discontinue the collection of various sets of data used to produce some of these statistics, and to combine the remaining statistical releases into compendia publications³. In its consultation, the Scottish Government identified the following main reasons for these proposals:

- i. to remove some of the central burden placed by the Scottish Government on schools and local authorities when responding to the data collection;
- ii. to remove those products which result in a duplication of outputs; and
- iii. to remove those products where the variation of policy and collection at school and local authority level undermines the relevance of a national set of statistics.

Statistics Authority view

The Statistics Authority concludes that the Scottish Government was responsive to the views expressed in the course of the consultation exercise, resulting in the retention of the collection of statistics on school meals and, on a less frequent basis, the collection of data on pupil exclusions, attendance and absence. However, it would have been possible and helpful to have supplemented the information gathered through the online questionnaire with other forms of dialogue with user interests before making such extensive changes.

We recognise that it is possible that users of the statistics will find the new compendia more useful than the previous releases, but this is not yet clear. We note that the new compendia will provide a more limited set of statistics than had been provided in the statistical bulletins that they replace. In many cases, the statistics that had previously been published in separate statistical bulletins will continue to be available in supplementary tables, but without any accompanying explanation or advice. The Code of Practice for Official Statistics, which has statutory standing, requires statistics to be accompanied by information on the 'quality and reliability of statistics in relation to the range of potential uses, and on methods, procedures and classifications'. And also 'commentary and analysis that aid interpretation' and 'factual information about the policy or operational context'. Whilst the Code is not prescriptive about the form in which such material should be published it will be important that it is easily accessed from the published statistics.

The Scottish Government has not provided us with information on the impact that discontinuing the five sets of statistics will have on users, or the expected savings to the Scottish Government or data suppliers.

³ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/School-Education/scotstat/NatStatsCollection>

We suggest that for those statistics that are being discontinued, or produced less frequently, the Scottish Government should publish an assessment of the impact on users, and the estimated savings.

With regard to those statistics that are being discontinued partly because of poor quality, we have seen little evidence that consideration was given to the option of improving the quality rather than discontinuing collection. This should be seen as a necessary step in future.

It would be helpful if the Scottish Government were to consult users about their views of the first compendium publication issued in December 2010 and publish the findings. If there is now a greater unmet need than previously then that should be taken into account in forward planning.

We note that, in relation to the reduced sets of statistics that are retained, the requirements of the Code of Practice, in relation to commentary and advice, need to be met and we expect that this may require more than their presentation in supplementary tables without accompanying text.

ANNEX 1 FURTHER DETAILS

Details of the changes being made

Plans to stop producing statistical outputs

Five data collection exercises are being discontinued. This will mean that official statistics previously published in the following statistical bulletins will no longer be available:

- i. Children Educated Outwith School
The Assessment Report noted that these statistics undercount the actual number of children educated outwith school. The Scottish Government said that it could not amend the statistics to provide a comprehensive count.
- ii. Placing Requests in Scottish Schools
These statistics had been subject to evolving administrative practice and actual behaviour, which meant that they may not have supported like-for-like comparisons across local authorities and over time.
- iii. SQA examination results in Scottish schools
This bulletin presented statistics on pre-appeal SQA examination results. The Scottish Government also collects and publishes the final post-appeal statistics and considers these to be more important than the pre-appeal results. The SQA may still itself publish headline figures in late summer on pre-appeal examination results.
- iv. Independent School Census
The Scottish Government will continue to collect some information from the independent schools sector to fulfil legal requirements, but not as a formal statistical collection. The reason the Scottish Government provided for discontinuing the collection and publication of these statistics is that it is not responsible for detailed management of the independent schools sector, and that the data have a limited impact on the delivery of Scottish Government policies.
- v. Teacher vacancies and probationer allocations
The Scottish Government said that the statistics showed limited change from year to year and only played a minor role in teacher workforce planning. It decided that the limited use made of these statistics did not justify the cost of collecting and producing them.

The Scottish Government will also discontinue the publication of the statistical bulletin *Expenditure in Schools*. These statistics were derived from data that will continue to be collected from local government finance returns. The Scottish Government said that it is discontinuing this publication because it overlapped with statistics on local authority expenditure that will continue to be published in *Scottish Local Government Financial Statistics*.

Most of the tables and charts that were published in *Expenditure in Schools* presented the statistics as time series over a period of years. The statistics presented in *Scottish Local Government Financial Statistics*, and the accompanying datasets that are published on the Scottish Government's website only present statistics for the latest year. The Scottish

Government has not published any supplementary datasets that replicate the tables and charts that were previously published in *Expenditure in Schools*.

The Scottish Government had also initially proposed to discontinue the annual survey of school meals, because the administrative criteria for free school meals had become inconsistent across local authorities and over time. This meant that the data conflated reasons for eligibility. In response to expressions of strong user need, the Scottish Government decided to continue to collect and publish a reduced set of information on school meals.

Plans to produce certain statistical outputs less frequently

Statistics on pupil exclusions, attendance and absence will be collected biennially, rather than annually. The Scottish Government decided to collect and publish statistics on attendance and absence less frequently because the data do not change rapidly. Similar reasons may also apply to statistics on pupil exclusions, although in the September consultation the Scottish Government identified some possible problems with the quality of these statistics, which meant that year on year change may reflect a combination of evolving administrative practice, actual pupil behaviour and recording practice. The Scottish Government decided to retain the collection and publication of these statistics, on a less frequent basis, in response to expressions of strong user need.

Plans to change the format and timing of statistical reports for Scottish schools

In December 2010 the Scottish Government published a new compendium statistical bulletin, *Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland*. This replaced the following five statistical releases:

- i. Pupils in Scotland
- ii. Teachers in Scotland
- iii. Exclusions from Schools
- iv. Attendance and Absence in Scottish Schools
- v. Pre-School and Childcare Statistics

In 2011, this compendium bulletin will also include statistics on school estate statistics, replacing the current statistical bulletin on *School Estate Statistics*.

The 2010 compendium statistical bulletin provides a much more limited set of statistics than had previously been provided in the five separate releases identified above. However, the Scottish Government also publishes supplementary tables in spreadsheet format which include all the tables and charts that had previously been provided in the releases. The compendium bulletin provides a link to where these tables and charts can be found. The datasets for the pupil census, exclusions and attendance statistics are accompanied by the same commentary and background notes that were previously published in the separate publications.

The Scottish Government plans to produce two further compendia bulletins each year. The compendium on assessment will be published in February 2012 as official statistics (not National Statistics), replacing the official statistics publication *Scottish Survey of Achievement*. In June 2011 the Scottish Government plans to publish a new compendium of statistics on school outcomes, replacing the following three statistical bulletins.

- i. SQA Attainment and School Leaver Qualifications in Scotland
- ii. Destinations of Leavers from Scottish Schools
- iii. Follow Up Survey of Leavers from Scottish Schools

The school outcomes compendium will also include some statistics on school meals, replacing the previous statistical bulletin *School Meals in Scotland*.

The table at **Annex 2** summarises the main changes that the Scottish Government plans to make to school statistics for Scotland, having taken account of the findings from the consultation exercise.

User consultation and the decision making process

Between May and June 2010 the Scottish Government carried out a survey of users to collect information about user satisfaction with school statistics for Scotland. This was, at least in part, in anticipation of the findings in the Assessment Report. The Scottish Government published an analysis of its findings from this consultation in August 2010. The Scottish Government carried out a further consultation with users about the proposed changes to these statistics between August and September 2010.

The Scottish Government received 156 individual responses from Local Government, Central Government, Government Agencies, parent councils, teacher associations, research organisations and the voluntary sector. Some users said that they would experience significant problems if each of the 10 sets of data being consulted upon were dropped. The highest proportion of users identifying significant problems were for pupil exclusions (44 per cent of users responding to the consultation) and school meals (35 per cent of users responding to the consultation). The Scottish Government received few responses for or against the proposals to repack the publications.

The online consultations in June and September provided users with an opportunity to provide information about their experiences of using these statistics and to comment on the proposed changes, before the Scottish Government took its decisions. The main forum that the Scottish Government uses to engage directly with users of these statistics is ScotXed. The Scottish Government informed ScotXed of the consultation exercise but did not use it, or any other fora in which users are represented, to discuss its proposals for changes to these statistics. While the consultation was a valuable exercise, we think there would have been scope for the Scottish Government to have undertaken additional activities with users, as part of the development of these proposals, to supplement the information gathered through the online questionnaires.

The Statistics Authority has not itself received any representations from users about the Scottish Government's proposed changes to school statistics for Scotland. The National Statistician was invited to comment on the proposals through the September consultation exercise. In November 2010, the Scottish Government advised the National Statistician about its proposed changes to school statistics for Scotland. In response, the National Statistician's Office noted that users had been consulted.

Final decisions about the proposed changes to statistics were taken by Scottish Ministers, based on advice from officials. In response to findings from the consultation exercise, the Scottish Government decided to maintain the collection of data on school meals. It also

decided to maintain the collection and publication of statistics on pupil exclusions, but on a less frequent basis. Final decisions to cease the collection of data on pre-appeal SQA examination results and budgeted school running costs, and to move to the biennial collection of data on attendance and absence and exclusions will be taken in the light of the Scottish Government's current consultation on the School Handbook. This consultation ended on 14 March 2011 and the Scottish Government aims to report on the outcome by summer 2011.

The impact of the changes

The changes mean that the sets of statistics previously published in the following five statistical bulletins will no longer be available:

- i. Children Educated Outwith School
- ii. Placing Requests in Scottish Schools
- iii. SQA examination results in Scottish schools
- iv. Independent School Census
- v. Teacher vacancies and probationer allocations

The statistics published in *Expenditure in Schools* will continue to be available, but in a less accessible form. Statistics on pupil exclusions, attendance and absence will continue to be available, but on a less frequent basis.

In September 2010, the Herald newspaper reported views that had been expressed by various commentators, including academics and groups that have campaigned on education issues. Some had expressed concern about the loss of statistics that are needed to monitor Scotland's education system; others had expressed the view that that the proposed reductions would have little impact on the administrative burden on schools.

The Assessment Report for school statistics identified a need for the Scottish Government to develop a more complete understanding of the use made of these statistics and the needs of current and potential users. The absence of a clear set of statements about the uses and potential uses of particular sets of statistics makes it difficult to assess the impact of discontinuing the production of these statistics.

The changes to school statistics are intended, in part, to remove some of the central burden placed by the Scottish Government on schools and local authorities when responding to the data collection. For those statistics that are being discontinued, or produced less frequently, we suggest that the Scottish Government produce a statement that assesses the impact on users of these statistics, and reports the estimated savings to the Scottish Government and to data suppliers. For those statistics that are being discontinued because of their poor quality, the statement might also present information about the expected costs that would be incurred if, instead, the quality of the statistics were to be improved.

The rationalisation of publications for school statistics has the potential to generate efficiency savings and to provide users with a better service. The publication of additional datasets has the potential to improve the accessibility of these statistics. In many cases, the datasets replicate tables and charts that were previously published in statistical releases. These datasets are not accompanied by any commentary and analysis that aid interpretation, nor by any factual information about the context of these statistics. We suggest that the Scottish Government consult users about their experiences of the first compendium publication published in December 2010 and of the supplementary data tables.

ANNEX 2 Summary of Changes to Schools Statistics in Scotland

Table 1: Summary of changes to school statistics for Scotland

Data collection	How data collection will change	Title of previous statistical bulletin	New plans for dissemination
Annual survey of children educated outwith school Annual survey of placing requests Annual collection of pre-appeal SQA examination results Annual independent school census Annual teacher and educational psychologists vacancy survey Annual budgeted running costs survey Local government finance returns	Discontinued Discontinued Discontinued Discontinued Discontinued Discontinued Continue	<i>Children Educated Outwith School</i> <i>Placing Requests in Scottish Schools</i> <i>SQA examination results in Scottish schools</i> <i>Independent School Census</i> <i>Teacher vacancies and probationer allocations</i> Not previously published <i>Expenditure in schools</i>	Discontinued
Annual school pupil census Annual staff census Annual collection of data on exclusions Annual collection of data on attendance and absences Annual collection of core facts about school estates Annual collection of data from all pre-school and daycare providers	Continue Continue Biennial rather than annual Biennial rather than annual Continue Continue	<i>Pupils in Scotland</i> <i>Teachers in Scotland</i> <i>Exclusions from schools</i> <i>Attendance and absence in Scottish Schools</i> <i>School Estate Statistics</i> <i>Pre-School and Childcare Statistics</i>	New annual compendium of summary statistics for schools (from December 2010)
Sample survey of pupil's attainment in Scottish primary and secondary schools carried out annually from 2005 until 2009	To be replaced by a new survey, the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy, starting in 2011	<i>Scottish Survey of Achievement</i>	New annual compendium on assessment (from February 2012)
Annual collection of post appeals SQA examination results Destination of school leavers data collected twice a year Annual survey of school meals and healthy eating initiatives	Continue Continue Continue, but less data will be collected	<i>SQA Attainment and School Leaver Qualifications in Scotland</i> <i>Destinations of Leavers from Scottish Schools</i> <i>Follow Up Survey of Leavers from Scottish Schools</i> <i>School Meals in Scotland</i>	New annual compendium of statistics on school outcomes (from June 2011)