
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Rt. Hon. Francis Maude MP
Minister for the Cabinet Office
Cabinet Office
70 Whitehall
LONDON
SW1A 2AS

11 October 2011

Dear Francis

MAKING OPEN DATA REAL: GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION

I am responding to the current Cabinet Office consultation on this topic.

As you know, the UK Statistics Authority is very supportive of the Government's Open Data policy. We fully support your commitment to open government through greater transparency.

The Authority undertakes to investigate and to report publicly upon cases where data held for statistical purposes should be, and is not, as the Code of Practice for Official Statistics requires them to be, placed in the public domain for analysis and re-use. The Code requires that statistics be made available 'in as much detail as is reliable and practicable, subject to legal and confidentiality constraints', constraints which protect inter alia against the disclosure of personal information as proscribed by legislation. Normally we expect all data underlying official statistics to be published where this is practicable and does not put confidentiality at risk. Judgements about utility and reliability are, in our view, best largely left to users, as long as they are fully informed of the strengths and weaknesses of the data, which is another requirement of the Code of Practice.

We are at the same time fully supportive of the view expressed by the Public Administration Select Committee, that transparency is not always or necessarily achieved merely by the publication of data. 'Data dumping' can be inimical to transparency and good government. It is the task of government statisticians, and a requirement of the Code of Practice, to produce official statistics which are intelligible, readily accessible, with objective and impartial commentary. The Statistics Authority will do all it can to ensure that official statistics meet the highest standards in these and other dimensions.

There is also an important question about the relationship between the timing of the publication of official statistics and that of the data on which they are based. Ideally both should be published at the same time, and that may in some cases mean the bringing forward of publication dates of official statistics, where possible without unacceptable detriment to the quality of the statistics. However, where the statistics are drawn from administrative sources it may well be appropriate to release the administrative records and some related summary material earlier where this does not compromise the release of the official statistics. This will be a matter for the judgement of those responsible for the statistics concerned. If early release were to lead to a situation in which selective and misleading statistical summaries were being created by, for example, Ministers, their advisers, or third parties, ahead of the official statistics, we (and no doubt the issuing Department) would be

concerned, and we would investigate and report according to the circumstances.

Paragraph 8.11 of the consultation document commits the Cabinet Office to explore with the National Statistician how to ensure coherence in implementation between the Government's agenda and the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. We welcome this, and look forward to a discussion of the issues I have raised above, and of any other relevant questions, with your officials.

I am copying this letter to Bernard Jenkin, Chair of the Public Administration Select Committee, Sir Gus O'Donnell, the Cabinet Secretary, and to Jil Matheson, the National Statistician.

With best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Scholar". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Sir Michael Scholar KCB