
Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation

[By email]

24 March 2017

Dear Mr Manners

Many thanks for your email to us about the comments made on social media critical of the Scottish Government's Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland (GERS) statistics. The Statistics and Registration Act 2007 established the Authority is an independent statutory body. We operate at arm's length from government as a non-ministerial department. I am the Director General for Regulation and head of the Office for Statistics Regulation within the Authority. I am the Authority's principal adviser on the compliance of government statistics with the Code of Practice.¹

In 2014, my team assessed the compliance of the GERS statistics with the Code of Practice. We wanted to be reassured that the very high standards denoted by their National Statistics designation remained merited. We always consider three aspects of official statistics – their trustworthiness, their quality, and their value.

The Code of Practice for Official Statistics and the assessment by us, an independent regulator, are an assurance of the impartiality and objectivity of such statistics – which we summarise as their trustworthiness. In our 2014 assessment, we concluded that appropriate standards of trustworthiness had indeed been maintained. You indicated in your email that comments you had seen denigrated the statisticians. The UK Statistics Authority has never had any reason to question the integrity of their work and our view is that the statisticians producing these statistics work to high standards of professionalism and ethics.

In terms of quality, the Code of Practice for Official Statistics sets out the expectation that users are informed by statistics producers about the quality of statistical outputs and that choices about methodology and sources of information are clearly explained. As with any other economic statistic, there are limitations to the GERS statistics. The key test is whether users are reasonably informed of these limitations and the choices made by producers. We concluded in our 2014 assessment that "*In general the Scottish Government provides detailed information about the methods, procedures and classifications used in the production of GERS and clear explanations of why particular choices have been made*".²

In terms of value, we always assess whether the statistics meet the needs of users. In 2014, users told us that GERS has benefited from a programme of continued improvement in recent years, and met their principal needs. The inclusion of a range of results for Scotland using different estimates of shares of North Sea oil revenue, for example, was particularly welcomed by users.

¹ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/code-of-practice/>

² https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/images-assessmentreport274statisticsongovernmentexpenditureandrevenuescotlan_tcm97-43613.pdf, paragraph 1.3.1

I agree with you that the finances of the Scottish Government may well continue to be the subject of lively political discussion. As a result, the GERS statistics may come under further scrutiny. We would not wish to enter into this debate every time it arises, and I note that in the case you highlighted, there is evidence that other social media commentators have expressed more supportive views of GERS. However, we do think it is appropriate for us to emphasise the importance of official statistics being trustworthy, of good quality and of high public value.

I am grateful to you for raising the issue with us.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Humpherson', written in a cursive style.

Ed Humpherson