
Director General for Regulation

Roger Halliday
Chief Statistician and Data Officer
Scottish Government
(by email)

7 March 2019

Dear Roger,

THE USE OF UNPUBLISHED STATISTICS IN PUBLIC DEBATE

At First Minister's Questions on 28 February 2019 the First Minister quoted figures about long-term trends in NHS waiting times since 2006/7, in response to a question about the latest official statistics on waiting times published by ISD. The figures the First Minister used for long-term trends were based on unpublished analysis of management information provided by Scottish Government officials, rather than ISD's official waiting time statistics. This is the second time these unpublished figures have been cited in Parliament.

After we raised our concerns about this case, ISD have today published an ad-hoc statistical release containing the figures quoted at FMQs. ISD recognise there is public interest in long-term trends, and a need to ensure their quality and limitations are understood. They had already [announced](#) their intention to publish these statistics from May 2019, in response to our intervention when the figures were previously used in parliament. We welcome their publication of this information.

There is an important general principle here. Information that supports public debate should be available to everyone, and should be open to public scrutiny. Where, as in this case, the information is not equally available to all, there is a risk to public confidence in statistics. We recently met with you to raise concerns about these and other unpublished statistics being used in debate. We outlined our expectation that such analyses should be published to support the principles of equal access and transparency contained in the Code of Practice for Statistics.

Waiting times are a major concern to patients and their families. The statistics informing debates about them must therefore be trustworthy, of suitable quality, and useful. We are therefore extremely disappointed that it has been necessary for us to intervene in this way.

I am copying this letter to Scott Heald, Head of Profession for Statistics, ISD Scotland, Leslie Evans, Scottish Government Permanent Secretary, and Lewis Macdonald MSP, Convenor, Scottish Parliament Health and Sport Committee.

Your sincerely,



Ed Humpherson

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