



Department for  
Digital, Culture  
Media & Sport



Scottish  
Government  
gov.scot



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

Sir David Norgrove  
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority  
1 Drummond Gate  
London  
SW1V 2QQ

TO2019/08508/DC  
13 August 2019

Dear Sir David,

We are writing to you collectively as the Tourism Ministers for the UK, Welsh and Scottish Governments to express our concern at the current quality of the International Passenger Survey (IPS) data for inbound visitors produced by the Office for National Statistics, and to request an urgent investigation into its reliability and robustness as a data source.

We discussed this issue at our recent Tourism Ministers meeting and it was clear that for each of us, the IPS is the primary way by which we evaluate the success of our tourism policy in attracting inbound visitors. This is especially important at the current time; we need to be able to closely monitor the impact of the EU referendum and related political developments on our tourism industry so we can respond efficiently and effectively. Furthermore, the UK Government has just published a Tourism Sector Deal in conjunction with the tourism industry, and both the Scottish and Welsh Governments are about to update their Tourism Strategies for 2020. It is vital that we have the best possible statistics available to make forecasts and evaluate these interventions and that, as financial contributors to the IPS, we get value for money.

We are not the only customers of the IPS. We know that the wider tourism industry - including airlines, hoteliers, attraction providers, outbound tour operators and travel insurers - also rely heavily on the statistics for business and investment decisions. We also know that these businesses are interested in the data at a regional and/or market level basis.

Our main cause for concern is the recent fall in sample size (in terms of interview numbers) for 2018 and Q1 2019. For the first 3 quarters of 2018, the overall sample size was down around 20% on the same quarter in 2017. For Quarter 4, the sample size was down 10%. This is on top of a 5% reduction in 2017 when compared with 2016. The fall in sample size makes it harder to have confidence in the accuracy of estimates produced by the IPS, be that for specific inbound markets such as China,

or for Scotland, Wales and English regions as specific destinations. For example, the confidence interval for expenditure by inbound visitors to Wales in Q3 of 2018 (the peak summer months) was +/- 31.3%, around a central estimate of £153m, meaning that the true value of the expenditure is between £105m and £201m - a very large range. This compares with +/- 15.3% in Q3 of 2017, where the central estimate was £178m and the range between £150m and £205m.

The fall in sample size has come despite us collectively contributing financially to a sample 'boost' for 2017, 2018 and 2019. We had been anticipating that the boost would maintain a similar sample size to previous years. Without our funding the decline would have been even greater. As the sample boost funding runs out in 2019 we will need to decide whether or not to provide a similar level of funding, provide additional funding, or withdraw funding.

Our policy officials and those working for our National Tourist Boards have already raised concerns with the Office for National Statistics but we feel that insufficient priority has been given to finding a solution and that we are yet to be given a sufficient explanation for the fall in sample size.

We are therefore requesting that the UK Statistics Authority, in your position as the regulator, conduct an urgent investigation so that this issue is treated with the priority it deserves.



**Rebecca Pow MP**  
Minister for Arts, Heritage and Tourism - UK Government



**Fiona Hyslop MSP**  
Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs - Scottish Government



**Lord Elis-Thomas AM**  
Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism - Welsh Government