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Your Reference: Pre-release access to Official Statistics (Scotland) Bill

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Dear Professor Ashby,

Thank you for your letter to the First Minister on 15 September regarding the Pre-release Access to Official Statistics (Scotland) Bill. The Government will lay out its official position on this Bill to parliament in due course and I am replying as I have portfolio responsibility for Official Statistics.

While legislation has allowed for Scottish Ministers to decide on Pre-release Access (PRA) for Scotland, we have always been clear that arrangements should be a matter for the Chief Statistician, Roger Halliday. The independence of his role is crucial for maintaining the trust, quality and value of Scottish Government Official Statistics.

The Chief Statistician continues to support limited and tightly controlled PRA to Official Statistics and opposes the removal or further restriction to this practice for the following reasons;

- The approach to PRA in Scotland has been working well since the implementation of the 2008 Order. The Scottish Government Statisticians are managing access successfully, in line with the requirements set out in the Order and in full compliance with UK Statistics Authority's Code of Practice for Statistics.
- The aim of PRA is to allow informed comment to take place and sufficient time is required for PRA to work effectively. This applies for Scottish Ministers as well as others who receive early access, which in the case of GDP statistics includes the Scotland Office.



- Unlike ONS we are not a Non-Ministerial Department but one in which statisticians are embedded within policy Directorates and have a key role in the development and evaluation of policy. PRA helps ensure the policy response to the issues illuminated by the statistics is in hand at the point of publication.
- A key part of producing official statistics is ensuring they are properly understood by stakeholders and the public. PRA best supports this aim.
- These are fast moving and unpredictable times. This makes Ministers more accountable as there is an expectation that the Minister will be on top of the issues and able to provide informed comment and clear messaging at the point of the data being published. Indeed, evidence and statistics have been at the heart of the Scottish Government's response to Covid. The First Minister speaking about the numbers each day has built significant trust in the numbers and this has been possible due to pre-release access.

In your letter you mention the removal of PRA by ONS and how this was in the context of concerns over leaks in genuinely market sensitive outputs. The Chief Statistician has been clear that if there is evidence of Scottish economic statistics being market sensitive then PRA would be removed for those statistics. Whitehall Departments still operate with 24 hours as per the English PRA Order.

I hope this is helpful.

Yours sincerely,



**KATE FORBES**

