

Strictly embargoed until 21 June 2024

The Royal Statistical Society calls for statistical training for ministers and an end to pre-release access to statistics in the run up to the general election

The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) has written to all leaders of the main UK political parties, calling for ministers to receive training in interpreting data, as well as an end to pre-release access, where the government see key statistical releases before the press and public do.

The UK Covid inquiry highlighted that during the pandemic, the prime minister and other ministers were unable to interpret key statistical evidence. To prevent this issue happening again, particularly during times of national emergency, the learned society urges all party leaders to ensure, if elected, any ministers they appoint receive basic statistical training.

The letters to Rishi Sunak, Sir Keir Starmer and the other main UK political parties, also call for ministers to abide by the Code of Practice for Statistics and for this to be incorporated into the Ministerial Code. The code's pillar of trustworthiness – with statistics being used with honesty and integrity by ministers – is essential, the RSS says, to ensure public trust.

Pre-release access was ended for ONS statistics in 2017 following a long campaign by the RSS, but it remains in place for official statistics produced by other government departments and the devolved administrations.

The learned society believes the practice threatens to undermine public confidence in the statistics themselves when ministers are potentially able to prepare their own spin on the numbers ready for when they are released to the press and public. It also, says the statistics society, creates the impression that the government is in control of the data and its release, threatening to erode trust in the independence of the UK's statistical system.

The recent review of the UK Statistics Authority highlighted the issue of pre-release as well as barriers around data sharing between government departments. The RSS believes these barriers to data sharing need to be urgently addressed to improve the UK's data infrastructure, and in turn, public services.

RSS president, Dr Andrew Garrett, said: "The pandemic showed the real-life consequences of decision-makers not having the right data skills. We urge whoever is elected in July to make our call for statistical training a priority, as well as end pre-release access to statistics."

Dr Sarah Cumbers, RSS CEO, added: "The UK is lucky to have one of the strongest statistical systems in the world, but a lack of data skills in our politicians can threaten to undermine this. Our next prime minister has a real opportunity to build public confidence in our data by ending any potential spin and ensuring their ministers use statistics responsibly."

Notes to editors:

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- Contact: Mags Wiley, RSS head of media & external relations, m.wiley@rss.org.uk, 020 7614 3937
- The letters from Dr Sarah Cumbers and Dr Andrew Garrett, can be viewed here: <https://rss.org.uk/policy-campaigns/search-policy-documents/government-statistics/>
- The asks in the letters form part of the Royal Statistical Society's election manifesto, "Statistics.in.Action;A.manifesto.for.empowering.society.through.data" which can be viewed here: https://rss.org.uk/RSS/media/File-library/Policy/2024/RSS_Statistics_in_Action_May_2024-1.pdf
- The [Royal Statistical Society \(RSS\)](#), founded in 1834 is a charity which promotes statistics, data and evidence for the public good. We are one of the world's leading learned societies and the only UK professional body for all statisticians and other data professionals.