

POST-ELECTION BRIEFING: BETTER DATA FOR INFORMED, TRANSPARENT DECISION- MAKING

RSS manifesto ask

All ministers to undertake statistical training and party leaders to commit to updating the ministerial code to ensure that ministers abide by the Code of Practice for Statistics – including on pre-release access to statistics.

Summary

The RSS believes that a culture of statistical thinking within government is crucial to effective government – part of this means ministers need to be comfortable in understanding statistical concepts, to be able to interpret statistical evidence, to understand what questions to ask of analyses and to know how to handle and communicate data ethically. The RSS has offered to provide training to assist in this. Handling data ethically means understanding and adhering to the Code of Practice for Statistics – we urge ministers to treat adherence to the statistical code of practice as a key ministerial responsibility. This would involve ending the practice of pre-release access to statistics.

What's the problem?

Ministers and secretaries of state routinely receive advice based on statistics and data and it is important that they are well-positioned to interpret and use that evidence. This means both understanding how to interpret data-based evidence (and what questions to ask of it) as well as how to handle the data in an ethical manner – in line with the Code of Practice for Statistics.

Interpreting data-based evidence – and knowing what questions to ask of it – is a key skill for ministers. The pandemic showed how important it can be for ministers to be able to interpret evidence and make sound evidence-based decisions and communicate the data underlying decisions in an effective manner. This is important even outside a pandemic – as our series of [Statistics Under Pressure case studies](#) show, there are a wide range of scenarios in which ministers and their teams may be presented with data and they need to be comfortable with concepts such as uncertainty and know how to question data to ensure that it is used properly.



As well as understanding how to interpret and question statistical evidence, decision-makers should also know how to handle and communicate data ethically – by ensuring that they and their departments abide by the Code of Practice for Statistics.

One way in which government departments currently fail to act in line with the Code of Practice is through continuing the practice of pre-release access to statistics – allowing ministers and civil servants (other than those involved in their production) to access statistics before the wider public. We believe that this has a harmful impact on our political system for two reasons. First, it means that when the public see a department’s statistical release it comes with a pre-prepared press line. The public is sensitive to the potential spinning of information and that risks mistrust in the statistics themselves. Second, it perpetuates the impression that ministers control data and its release. The Office for National Statistics does not allow pre-release access to statistics, and it is noteworthy that there is a high level of public confidence in that organisation.

The Code of Practice for Statistics states that “Access to statistics before their public release should be limited to those involved in the production of the statistics and the preparation of the release, and for quality assurance and operational purposes”. The Ministerial Code currently states that Ministers should “be mindful” of the statistical Code of Practice – which, on our reading, would suggest that ministers should stop pre-release access in their departments.

This points to a wider problem, which is that the requirement in the Ministerial Code that ministers be mindful of the Code of Practice for Statistics has not been effective in preventing ministers acting in opposition to it. Examples of this include:

- Referencing statistics or data in Parliament that is not available in the public sphere and – in some cases – subsequently refusing to publish the information on which the claims were based.
- Repeating misleading statistical claims, even after being cautioned by the UK Statistics Authority that they risked undermining public trust.

It is important that ministers demonstrate stronger leadership on these matters to promote greater public confidence in official statistics.

How to fix it

The [RSS has offered to provide training to any secretaries of state or ministers that would like it](#). We have senior fellows prepared to deliver training to groups of politicians (and their political advisors). This might cover, eg, a brief introduction to the types of evidence ministers might receive as well as the types of questions that they should ask of this evidence, what types of analysis they might ask for and how to handle data in an ethical manner. This is intended to be supportive and delivered with interested ministers in private, solely with the aim of supporting them in making evidence-informed decisions.

In terms of the Ministerial Code, we urge the Prime Minister to update this to require ministers to treat statistics and data appropriately by adhering to the Code of Practice of Statistics – going beyond mere mindfulness of it. Regardless of whether the Prime Minister updates the Ministerial Code in this way, we urge all ministers to take mindfulness of the statistical code of practice seriously and to do their utmost to adhere to it. This would include ending the practice of pre-release statistics in their departments.