

By email

11 July 2024

Dear Secretary of State,

Congratulations on your appointment.

We are writing to introduce you to the Royal Statistical Society, set out some of our priorities for how data is used in government and to offer our support to you and your department.

The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) is a membership society and charity that brings together all who have an interest in, and appreciate the value of, data and statistics. We are a professional body and learned society that advocates for the importance of data and statistics. The vision of the RSS is to have a world where data is at the heart of understanding and decision-making.

One of the key roles of the RSS, established in our Royal Charter, is to advocate for the role of statistics and data in decision-making. We believe that there is a crucial role for statistics and data both to improve decisions and inform the public – the importance of this was highlighted during the pandemic. A well-functioning statistical system means investment in infrastructure, transparency around the data used to inform decisions and decision-makers who are well-equipped to interpret statistical evidence.

As you may be aware, Professor Denise Lievesley has recently conducted a review of the UK Statistics Authority. The [RSS has welcomed the findings](#) of her review. The challenges highlighted by the review around data sharing between government departments and pre-release access to statistics are especially important for the next government to address. There are several systemic and cultural barriers to data sharing between government departments that hamper the government's ability to develop a full picture of the state of the nation. Removing these barriers will increase the productivity of public service delivery. If the potential for data to help improve services is to be fulfilled, government must ensure that the UK's data infrastructure is fit for purpose.

We have long campaigned for an end to the practice of pre-release access to statistics. We believe that this practice – by which ministers and civil servants can access statistics before the wider public – has a harmful impact on our political system and that abandoning the practice could improve public confidence in official statistics. The previous government did not support ending this practice. We believe this is harmful 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 we note 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 to ministers should stop pre-release access in their departments. The Labour Party has been vocal during the election campaign on the need to rebuild trust in government: ending the practice of pre-release access to statistics in your department would, we believe, be a good way to demonstrate trustworthiness and we would warmly welcome this move.

In summary there are three things that can be done, early in your tenure, to improve the way data is used and build trust with the public:

1. Aim to instill a culture that encourages the sharing of data with other government departments.
2. End the practice of pre-release access to statistics within your department – increasing trust and public confidence in how data informs decisions.
3. Pledge to abide by the Code of Practice of Statistics – rather than merely being mindful of it as the current Ministerial Code requires.

The RSS is keen to support the public's access to data and the government's use of data. We are working closely with the UK Statistics Authority to help implement some of the recommendations of the Lievesley Review – especially around the proposal for a new Triennial Statistical Assembly to identify users' needs. We have also been working with government statisticians to draw up proposals to produce statistics in pressurized scenarios and we will be releasing guidelines in September. We welcome the reference in the Labour Party's manifesto to a National Data Library – this could be an important addition to the UK's data infrastructure and the RSS would be pleased to support the government in developing this work.

We would also like to offer to support you and your ministerial colleagues by developing training to support you in the receipt and interpretation of statistical advice. This might cover, eg, a brief introduction to the types of evidence you might receive as well as the types of questions that you should ask of this evidence, what types of analysis you might ask for and how to handle data in an ethical manner. We would arrange for a senior member of the RSS to speak to you and any interested colleagues in private and with the aim to support you in making evidence-informed decisions. Please let us know if you would be interested in this and we will discuss how best to deliver this.

Please let us know if it would be helpful to have any more information on any of these points and if you would like to take part in the proposed training.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Sarah Cumbers
Chief Executive Officer



Dr. Andrew Garrett
President

