

Pre-Release Access to Official Statistics

Introduction

This statement sets out the Forestry Commission's operational arrangements under which Ministers, the Director General, country Directors, agency Chief Executives and their briefing officials may be given pre-release access to Official Statistics once they are in their final form prior to publication. These arrangements are designed to ensure that such access is justified, limited, controlled and publicised and complies with statutory requirements. Their purpose is to maintain public confidence in the integrity of Official Statistics while allowing Ministers, the Director General, country Directors and agency Chief Executives to comment immediately on the implications of statistics covering areas for which they are responsible.

Exclusion

Different arrangements apply to Ministers' and officials' access to the organisation's own administrative or management data where those data subsequently form the basis for published Official Statistics. These arrangements are set out separately, in the National Statistician's Guidance on the use of Administrative or Management Information¹ and in the Forestry Commission's Statement of Administrative Sources².

Authority

These arrangements have been drawn up by the Forestry Commission's Head of Profession for Statistics in consultation with the Forestry Commission's Director General, country Directors and agency Chief Executives. The Head of Profession for Statistics is also responsible for ensuring the day-to-day implementation of these arrangements.

Specific arrangements

The Forestry Commission is a non-ministerial department of the UK government, headed by a Board of Commissioners and a Director General. It is also a cross-border public authority for forestry as a devolved matter; the Forestry Commission's National Offices act as the forestry departments of Devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales, and in England the National Office undertakes a similar role in conjunction with Defra. Forestry Commission has agencies Forest Research, Forest Enterprise England and Forest Enterprise Scotland, which are also covered by these arrangements.

Because of this status, Ministers or senior officials would not normally be expected to comment immediately on the implications of forestry statistics, so pre-release access will not be routinely provided to all statistics. For each set of statistics, the data owner will agree in advance whether pre-release access for certain officials or Ministers would be appropriate, and if so follow the procedures in this compliance statement.

¹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/national-statistician/guidance/index.html>

² <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-832ey5>

General Principle

The Forestry Commission operates under the general principle that pre-release access to Official Statistics must be:

- limited to the minimum number of persons deemed necessary to allow the Ministers, the Director General, country Directors and agency Chief Executives to:
 - provide responses to questions, or make statements about those statistics at, or shortly after, their time of publication; or
 - take action just before, at, or shortly after the time of publication.
- allowed in those circumstances where the public benefit likely to result from such access outweighs the detriment to public trust in official statistics likely to result from so doing.

Grant of advance access

The arrangements set out in this statement are confined to those persons who meet the eligibility criteria set out in Annex A(i). Recipients can, in addition, share their access with their immediate administrative support staff even though those staff may not directly engage with the statistics in question. Their advance access is limited to statistics that meet the eligibility criteria set out in Annex A(ii), and that are in their final form prior to being published for the first time.

Documentation and Publication

In the interests of openness and transparency, the Forestry Commission maintains a public record³ on its website listing the titles of all the statistical releases to which these arrangements apply; and for any release with pre-release access, the job titles of all those persons to whom pre-release access has been granted, and the organisations to which they belong. The justification for giving advance access to each listed recipient is available on request.

Period of access

In line with the legislation, pre-release access to the organisation's Official Statistics is normally restricted to a maximum of 24 hours before their public release on the following day – usually at 09.30. In cases where the release relates to a single Devolved Administration, access for a longer period may be given, in line with that Administration's arrangements for pre-release access.

In exceptional circumstances only, and in accordance with Principle 5 of the Pre-release Access to Official Statistics Order 2008, the Head of Profession for Statistics may grant pre-release access for a longer period. They will only do this if, in their opinion, the public benefit outweighs the detriment to public trust which is likely to result from such extended access. When this happens, the Head of Profession will publish on the Forestry

³ <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-83mfrz>

Commission website their reasons for granting extended access, and will also inform the UK Statistics Authority's Chief Executive – the National Statistician.

Conditions of access

Those persons who are given access to the Forestry Commission's Official Statistics ahead of their release must keep the statistics secure and under embargo, and they must abide by the following conditions of access. They must avoid:

- disclosing the statistics or any part of a publication containing those statistics to any person not listed as a pre-release recipient;
- providing any indication of the size or direction of any trend revealed by the statistics;
- using such access for personal gain, or taking any action for political advantage;
- exploiting such access to change or compromise the content, presentation, or timing of publication of official statistics.

Where the statistics in question are market-sensitive, each recipient must sign a declaration to the above effect.

Special circumstances

Aside from the circumstances described above, the Head of Profession may also allow access to statistics ahead of their release to a limited number of persons in a limited number of special circumstances, sometimes for more than 24 hours. In each case, such access will be documented in the relevant release. For example:

- access may be given to the compilers of complementary reports due to be published at the same time as, or shortly after the statistics so that they can incorporate the latest available figures. Such access may also be longer than 24 hours;
- international organisations may gain access in order to compile supra-national statistics;
- journalists may be given access to complex or compendia releases in order to give them time to absorb and understand the significance of a given release. Such access, however, will never exceed 24 hours;
- in exceptional circumstances, pre-release access may be extended to someone who is not an 'eligible person' as defined in the Order. In which case the UK Statistics Authority will be informed and the reason for such exceptional access published.

Breach of conditions of release

In the event where an organisation becomes aware that a lapse in release practices for any of their designated 'National Statistics' has led to a substantive breach of the principles and rules set out in the legislation and described in this Statement, the Head of Profession for Statistics will notify the UK Statistics Authority's Chief Executive (the National Statistician); take action to prevent a recurrence; and provide the Authority with a written explanation using the Authority's standard reporting form. The National Statistician may decide to conduct an inquiry on behalf of the Authority, the results of which will be posted on the

Authority's website. In the case of minor breaches, or genuinely accidental breaches which have no major repercussions, the Head of Profession may deal with the matter informally.

Sanctions against non-compliance

The Forestry Commission's Head of Profession for Statistics may, for a period, withdraw pre-release access from any person judged to have breached the conditions of their access.

In addition, a heavier sanction can be imposed by the UK Statistics Authority which has a statutory duty to assess the extent to which any organisation's 'National Statistics' comply with the Pre-release Access to Official Statistics Order 2008 and with the associated obligations set out in this Statement. The Authority can, for instance, challenge an organisation where it considers that pre-release access to a National Statistic is not justified or where an organisation is failing to conform to these arrangements. It can also withdraw, or consider withdrawing, National Statistics designation from the statistics in question.

In the event of any such challenge or withdrawal the Head of Profession will publish the Forestry Commission's response or reaction on its website along with its plans for achieving conformance.

Simon Gillam
Head of Profession for Statistics
Forestry Commission
March 2010

ANNEX A: Criteria for granting pre-release access

- (i) Categories of persons within government to whom the Forestry Commission may grant pre-release access to its statistical releases:
- Those Ministers who have policy or operational responsibility for a particular subject-matter covered by a statistical release; who are accountable to Parliament and the electorate for their stewardship of that policy; and who may need to respond to questions about the statistics, or take appropriate action, at the time of release of those statistics;
 - The Director General, country Directors and agency Chief Executives who have operational responsibility for a particular activity covered by a release, and who are accountable for their stewardship of that activity to Ministers, and through them to Parliament; and who are in a similar position to those Ministers described above;
 - The Departmental or Agency officials with ultimate responsibility for formulating, developing, maintaining, monitoring or implementing that policy;
 - Other Departmental or Agency officials who have been assigned the specific responsibility to brief Ministers or Directors about the statistics in question (e.g. Special Advisers, Policy Advisers, Analysts) ;
 - Departmental Press Officers responsible for managing Ministers' interface with the media with respect to the policy or statistics in question.
- (plus any immediate ancillary staff who support the above).
- (ii) Categories of statistical release to which the Forestry Commission may grant pre-release access:
- Releases categorised as 'market-sensitive' (i.e. releases which embody statistics which, when disclosed, would be reasonably likely to have a significant effect on the value or traded volume of any investment). [At present no Forestry Commission statistics are categorised as 'market-sensitive'.]
 - Releases which incorporate statistics which are used to monitor or measure the government's performance (either generally, or against formal targets);
 - Releases which have the potential to impinge substantially on the formulation, implementation, or monitoring of government policy;
 - Releases which have the potential to inform, or impact on, decisions about the allocation of public funds;
 - Releases which have, demonstrably and historically, had a high public profile (i.e. regularly generate column inches in the print media or regularly attract the attention of the broadcast media) and on which Ministers or Directors with responsibility for the subject-matter might reasonably be expected to comment at the time of release;
 - Releases which incorporate statistics derived from other departments' or agencies' administrative or management systems, and for which Ministers or Chief Executives in those other departments have ownership and operational responsibility.
 - Compendia publications (e.g. Forestry Statistics) which often include data which has already been released, or complex publications which have been made available to the media in advance of their public release, and under embargo, in order to give journalists time to absorb and understand their contents.
 - Releases which cover matters of wide public interest.

ANNEX B: Definitional notes

(a) Pre-release access

In the context described above, the phrase 'pre-release access' covers privileged access to statistical releases in their final form prior to being placed in the public domain. It does not cover pre-release access available to:

- those staff intimately engaged in the process of producing and disseminating the statistics in question (including those responsible for overseeing this process);
- those persons requested by producers of statistics to quality assure their statistics before their public release.

However the restrictions listed under 'Conditions of access' above do apply to the above.

(b) Heads of Profession for Statistics

Organisations which employ a large number of official statisticians, or produce a large number of Official Statistics will normally appoint a Head of Profession for Statistics in consultation with the National Statistician. As well as being accountable to their own Ministers and departmental officials, Heads of Profession are responsible to the National Statistician for the professional integrity of the statisticians whom they manage, and for the quality of the statistics which those statisticians produce. In particular they are responsible for observing the UK Statistics Authority's Code of Practice for Official Statistics as well as any professional standards set by the National Statistician.