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Gordon Lindhurst
Convener
Scottish Parliament
Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee
Scottish Parliament Building
Edinburgh
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19 October 2018

Dear Gordon,

INQUIRY INTO SCOTTISH ECONOMIC STATISTICS

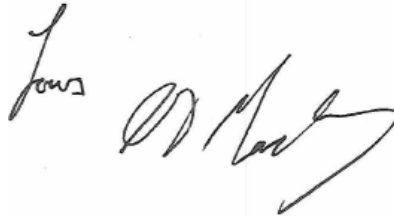
Thank you for your letter of 18 September and the opportunity to have further discussion of the issues at the Committee meeting on 2 October. At that meeting I offered to set out my own thoughts on why we should retain Pre-Release Access (PRA) to statistics:-

- Fundamentally this is an issue for the Chief Statistician and it is important that we respect the independence of his role. Mr Halliday has made his view on the retention of PRA clear. I am aware that his view reflects the fact that successive governments have respected the Code of Practice and not abused the privileged access they are afforded – as evidenced by the low number of breaches reported.
- When the Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007 was going through Parliament it was the view of the previous Chief Statistician that an organisation with the functions of Scottish Government should operate with PRA. 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.
- In these fast moving times one could argue that 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 at the point of the data being published.
- A key part of producing official statistics is ensuring they are properly understood by stakeholders and the public. PRA best supports this aim. For example, when PRA was removed for labour market statistics there was misreporting in the mainstream media of the key headlines and comparator period, as the data was availability digitally at 9.30 am without an accompanying official publication setting out the official figures and respective comparator periods for Scotland.
- It is not the case that we have “first mover” advantage. It is not just Scottish Ministers who receive PRA to GDP and GERS - there has been longstanding PRA to GDP statistics for the Scotland Office, and GERS to the Scotland Office and HM Treasury.

- Only ONS outputs have had PRA removed and this was in the context of concerns over leaks in genuinely market sensitive outputs. Whitehall Departments still operate with 24 hours as per the English PRA Order.

In relation to your question about the needs of the Scottish Fiscal Commission we welcome the annual Statement of Data Needs and can reassure you that all those that fall to Scottish Government are being prioritised. Our economic statisticians plan to publish a note of what can be achieved and when shortly.

I hope you find this helpful.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Derek Mackay', written over a light blue grid background.

DEREK MACKAY