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I am writing in response to your letter of 13 September following my appearance in front of the Education and Skills Committee on 5 September 2018. I will set out the current position regarding the availability of information on school support staff collected as part of the school staff census. in this letter, but I would like to begin by being clear that there has been no reduction in the data collected on either school support staff or teachers.

An extensive suite of statistics on school education are published throughout the year. This includes supplementary data sets derived from the school staff census on teachers and school support staff. These statistics provide a further breakdown of the headline statistics published annually in December in each edition of the statistics bulletin Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland and they have previously been published at varying intervals in the months following the headline statistics.

Initial quality assurance of the data submitted by local authorities in 2017 led to Scottish Government statisticians requiring more time to quality assure the data and some changes in the approach to publication.

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Supplementary statistics on teachers based on the 2017 edition of Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland were published on 6 March 2018. This was a little later than in recent years as more time was required to verify data given errors that came to light in the initial quality assurance work.

It has been practice since 2012 that statistics on school support staff are not necessarily published at the same time as teacher census supplementary data.

Initial quality assurance of the data on school support staff revealed some issues that required more extensive quality assurance to be carried out in conjunction with local authorities. This work yielded two significant improvements to these statistics. Firstly, it became apparent that in many local authorities there are no roles termed ASN support staff or classroom assistant, instead the term pupil support assistant is used to describe a role covering this type of work. Following consultation with local authority education representatives and Scottish Government officials with responsibility for support and wellbeing in schools, Scottish Government statisticians took the decision to present the data using a new category labelled pupil support staff. This new category is simply a combination of the previously reported - and still collected - Additional support needs auxiliary or care assistant and Classroom assistant categories but better represents the terminology and practice of support provision in schools.

The second improvement to the statistics was the result of changes to bring the processing and quality assurance for six categories of school support staff (Pupil support assistant (the combined Additional support needs auxiliary or care assistant and Classroom assistant category), School nurses, Home-school link workers, Behaviour Support staff, Educational Psychologists and Library staff) into line with procedures for National Statistics on pupils and teachers.

The improved quality statistics on school support staff were published on the Scottish Government website alongside the other school education supplementary statistics on 31 July 2018. The website clearly advertises that the remaining data collected from local authorities on school support staff, including that relating to technicians, is available on request. This data has been published on the Scottish Government website as part of the response to a Freedom of Information request and officials are considering the appropriate method for publication of this data. Therefore all the data that has been previously published by the Scottish Government on school support staff continues to be available for the 2017 edition of the data.

I can also confirm that I have no role in influencing the decisions I outlined in Committee as being the responsibility of statisticians. This is in accordance with the Code of Practice for Statistics which states "The collection, access, use and sharing of statistics and data should be ethical and for the public good. Those producing and releasing statistics should be free from conflicts of interest, including political and commercial pressures, that may influence the production, release and sharing of the statistics and data."

Yours Sincerely

JOHN SWINNEY

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