

GSS policy on publishing official statistics on polling days

Background

1. This policy has been developed following a consultation that took place during November 2017. The consultation document can be found on the [UK Statistics Authority website](#).
2. The revised policy, updated in light of the feedback, is shown below.

Policy statement

Official statistics are published according to a pre-announced schedule, and continue to be published during purdah periods. However, publishing on a national polling day itself presents difficulties in communicating data clearly and fully, not least because of restrictions in place around reporting. Within this context, publication procedures should ensure that statistical bulletins are not published on national polling days.

Where there is sufficient notice of a national polling day, statistics should be scheduled to avoid this date.

If an election or referendum is called at short notice, any statistical releases which had been pre-announced to be published on the polling day should be rescheduled to the next day.

Decisions on pre-release access remain with the relevant person responsible as defined by legislation. The advice of the National Statistician is that there should be no pre-release access to statistics published close to a polling day.

This policy covers UK general elections, UK referendums, devolved elections and devolved referendums. In the case of devolved elections and devolved referendums, the policy only applies to the relevant devolved statistics (as defined in Section 66 of the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007). This policy does not apply in the case of local polls.

Any exceptions to this policy must be agreed with the National Statistician.

3. This policy was approved by the National Statistician on 1 March 2018.
4. A summary of responses to the consultation is provided in the annex overleaf.

Central Policy Secretariat, 14 March 2018

Annex: Summary of consultation responses

1. The consultation received responses from six UK government bodies, two devolved administrations, a broadcast journalist, a national charity, a professional body and one privacy group.

Flexibility versus predictability

2. The principle of avoiding publishing politically sensitive statistics on polling days was generally accepted. There were mixed views on whether to allow flexibility to decide whether to reschedule statistics. Respondents fell into two broad camps.
 - i. About half suggested flexibility was the right compromise. However, these respondents suggested that clear criteria should be set out for decisions on what constitutes 'significant public interest'. One response suggested such decisions should be made solely by the National Statistician.
 - ii. The other half advised changing the policy to a blanket approach where the announcement of an election or referendum would affect statistics in a consistent and predictable way. These responses emphasised the need to protect statisticians from being perceived as taking selective decisions.
3. We do not think it would be possible to define 'significant public interest' in such a way that would sufficiently remove the risk of controversy. In light of the consultation responses we have revised the policy **to a blanket approach**.

Advance or delay

4. A few respondents supported bringing forward statistical releases to the previous day. While it would be possible to do this for some statistics, there are other statistics where it would not be possible to do this without causing unacceptable risks to quality. The only remaining blanket approach is therefore to delay all statistics.
5. We have therefore applied a **blanket delay**.

Length of delay

6. Among those who supported a delay, there was general support for this to be until the next day, though two responses favoured longer delays. Reasons for longer delays included:
 - i. statistics being overshadowed by media coverage of the election result; and
 - ii. avoiding pre-release access issues across an election.
7. We have considered the arguments for a delay of longer than one day. We considered that statistics are often published on days where the media is dominated by predictable high profile events. The concern about pre-release access would be mitigated by additional restrictions mentioned below. We have therefore applied **a delay of 24 hours**.

Devolved administrations

8. The devolved administrations requested the policy should also apply to devolved polls. There should be proportionality to ensure that UK statistics could still be published on a devolved polling day.
9. We have therefore decided that **this policy will apply to UK general elections, UK referendums, devolved elections and devolved referendums. In the case of devolved elections and devolved referendums, the policy should only apply to devolved statistics (as defined in Section 66 of the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007). This policy will not apply in the case of local polls.**

Pre-release access

10. By moving to a blanket delay there is a risk that departments might give pre-release access to individuals on polling day, and a public breach of such access could have an impact on the poll.
11. By law this is at the discretion of the 'person responsible'. **The new policy includes advice from the National Statistician that there should be no pre-release access to statistics published close to a polling day.**