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Dear John

Autumn Budget 2017 and the ONS 2016-based population projections

The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) has never sought regular pre-release access to statistics. We support your decision to end this practice to ensure the integrity of official economic statistics. We also support the maintenance of the 'exceptional' pre-release access regime and the decision to make it as transparent as possible. We have periodically sought and received exceptional pre-release access to specific releases to facilitate production of our twice-yearly forecasts ahead of Budgets and other fiscal statements. By the time those forecasts are published, the data in question have themselves been published.

When the OBR was created, I exchanged letters with the then National Statistician that codified this approach. In practice, the need to request exceptional pre-release access has been limited to second estimates of GDP, which have often coincided with later rounds of our economy forecasts, and the biennial population projections, which affect our economy and spending forecasts and take some time to process.


This year's population projections, published in 26 October, will play a key role in our economy and fiscal forecasts that we are producing to underpin the 2017 Autumn Budget on 22 November. The OBR is requesting 48 hours exceptional pre-release access to specific data from the population projections. This would mean relevant analysts and decision-makers receiving the data on 24 October. We are doing so for operational purposes, in order to ensure that the latest available population projections are reflected in the penultimate round of the pre-measures fiscal forecast.

We provide the Chancellor with successive draft forecasts (termed 'rounds') ahead of each Budget or other fiscal statement. The Autumn Budget forecast timetable requires us to deliver the second round of the fiscal forecast soon after the population projections are released. The available window would be insufficient for the new projections to be processed through our welfare spending forecasts in time for delivery to the Chancellor. It would also give insufficient time to produce the devolved taxes forecast by then, which affects the Treasury's block grant calculations. As the third round of the fiscal forecast is the final pre-measures fiscal forecast, waiting until publication to process such a key input to the welfare spending and devolved taxes forecasts would create risks since there would be no scope to deal with any issues that arose.

Receiving the population projections 48 hours early will give us time to process their welfare spending and devolved tax implications in the second round of the fiscal forecast and provide the opportunity to scrutinise the outputs fully and if necessary revise the forecast in the third round. This will ensure that this important input to the forecast has been reflected correctly.

Specific parts of the projections affect elements of our welfare spending forecast that are produced on our behalf by HMRC and DWP; in particular child benefit, tax credits and state pensions. Pre-release access would therefore be necessary for a small number of named HMRC and DWP analysts who run the relevant forecast models. This would only be used to enable them to revise their second round forecasts and return them to the OBR. A small number of analysts and decision-makers at the OBR would also need pre-release access to make judgements about forecast implications; to liaise with HMRC and DWP analysts on any issues that arise in the forecast production process; and to produce the devolved tax forecasts.

We would limit the number of named officials and decision-makers who would need this exceptional pre-release access to the minimum necessary to make forecast judgements and complete the quality assurance process that would be necessary ahead of the projections being published on 26 October. This list consists of the three members of the Budget Responsibility Committee, the OBR's Chief of Staff and three OBR officials spread across the welfare spending, devolved and fiscal sustainability teams; and six officials from DWP's and HMRC's analytical divisions responsible for processing the welfare spending forecasts that are affected.

Many thanks and best regards,


Robert Chote
Chairman