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Request for exceptional pre-release access to the ONS statistics ‘Winter Coronavirus (COVID-19) Infection Study, England and Scotland’

Scottish Government are requesting up to 24-hour pre-release access, on the grounds of exceptional circumstances, to the upcoming ONS statistical releases: ‘Winter Coronavirus (COVID-19) Infection Study, England and Scotland’.

Rationale for this request:

The impacts of a pandemic remain one of the highest risks on the national risk register, and actions to address Coronavirus (COVID-19) and other respiratory illnesses during the Winter season are a high priority for the Scottish Government.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) and UKHSA have jointly launched the [Winter Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Infection Study](#) (Winter CIS) for England and Scotland. This study, funded by the UKHSA and via foregone consequential for the Scottish component, started on 14 November 2023 and will run until March 2024. UKHSA and ONS, supported by Public Health Scotland (PHS), are using the same underlying study data to develop different metrics, to be published simultaneously throughout the study period. Along with ONS and UKHSA, PHS will use WCIS data to support timely preparation of Scotland’s weekly [Viral respiratory diseases \(including influenza and COVID-19\) in Scotland surveillance report](#) released at the same time as the ONS and UKHSA releases.

The Scottish Government understands through our regular engagement that Cabinet Office, UKHSA and DHSC have submitted their rationale for pre-release access and we would be keen to ensure a coherent and joined up approach across all parties. Recognising that health is a devolved responsibility, the Scottish Government is therefore requesting 24-hour pre-release access, on the grounds of exceptional circumstances, to the upcoming ONS and UKHSA statistical releases throughout the duration of this study: ‘Winter Coronavirus (COVID-19) Infection Study, England and Scotland’.

Statistics from ONS will provide information on COVID-19 positivity rates, and symptoms and health outcomes associated with COVID-19 and other respiratory infections. We do, of course, wholly support the principles of equitable access for official statistics and we will review our requirement for pre-release access over this period.

If study findings indicate material changes in COVID-19 positivity and prevalence rates, it is of vital public interest for decision makers, including ministers, to determine appropriate public health advice and interventions at the earliest possible opportunity during the pre-release access window, and be able to publicly announce this advice or action at the same time as the statistics are released. As public health is a devolved responsibility, any decisions and updated public health advice for Scotland need to be taken involving Scottish ministers. Therefore, early access to the ONS statistics up to 24 hours ahead of their scheduled release at 9.30am on Thursdays will enable these data to be fed directly and simultaneously into Scottish Government briefings and advice that are prepared, enabling timely ministerial decisions in the 24 hours before the statistics are published. This will help protect members of all communities from the impact of COVID-19 and reduce winter pressures on our health services in Scotland.

Yours sincerely



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Chief Statistician, Scottish Government