

## NEWS FROM THE RSS

### Focus on Statistics Act and Public Trust

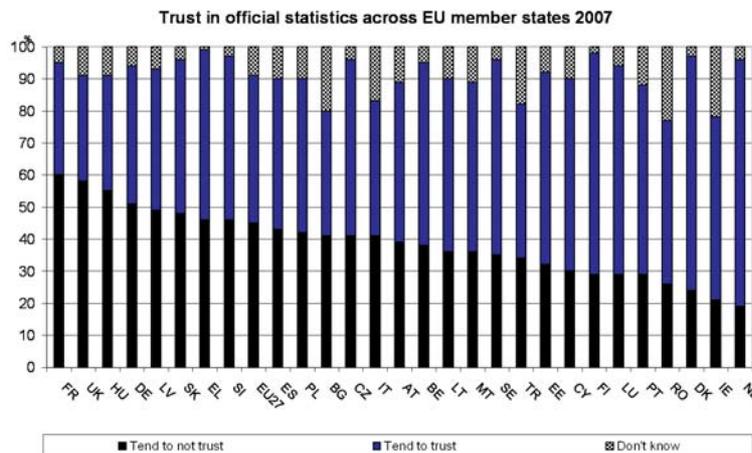
"Public confidence in official statistics (or lack of it) is NOT a desirable option to be offset against other desirable attributes such as influencing the use of statistics by government, or improving public policy. – it is an essential attribute without which the utility of even the highest quality statistics is undermined" emphasised **Tim Holt**, the outgoing President of the Royal Statistical Society in his farewell address on 12 December 2007. Trust in official statistics is of interest in all countries in the European Community and this is illustrated in the chart of responses across EU-member states in a Spring 2007 survey undertaken for the European Commission<sup>1</sup>

It is noteworthy that the UK nearly tops the list for being distrusting and shows how far it will be necessary to go to rebuild public confidence. The Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007 is unlikely of itself to have the desired impact. Much will depend on how it is implemented. What is at stake is confidence in the system as a whole, not just in a small Statistics Board. How the system needs to function depends on two key elements: an environment within government which creates space to demonstrate professional independence and statistical integrity; and statistics producers who are committed to the development and maintenance of the highest professional standards.

**Holt** went on to comment on a number of aspects of how the system might or ought to operate, including stressing the importance of building strong links to the user communities, as well as consulting on development plans and user needs. He also touched on the relationship of centralised, decentralised and devolved statistical systems and how they affected public confidence. He discussed the realities of how different parts of government practiced evidence-based public policy, particularly where statistics might have a role but sometimes was not even called upon to contribute. He ended with a rallying cry to the Society to exert greater efforts to extend its areas of influence beyond just traditional statistics to such communities as government scientists and professionals from other disciplines.

**Tim Holt's** considerable contribution to steering the Society's successful attempts to improve the Statistics Bill during its passage through both Houses was given due recognition in the course of the subsequent vote of thanks.

<sup>1</sup> *Special European Barometer: Europeans' Knowledge of Economic Indicators, European Commission, Luxembourg Spring 2007.*



## EDITORIAL

### ALL ABOARD FOR STATISTICS 2008 AND AFTER

The New Year heralds a new era. Welcome and Godspeed to the new Statistics Board and all who sail in her, whichever is her 'flag of convenience' and her registered home 'port'. The newly-installed Chair-Designate sets sail with a near-full crew, a number of new recruits on the bridge and below decks, and we wish them well, particularly in also adding the new board to the Cabinet Office's structural responsibilities.

The EU also has a New Year resolution in implementing a re-constitution of its CEIES, reducing

the total number of members to 25 and the number of representatives of member states to 10

And then there's the Statistics Commission's farewell report, which gives plenty of food for thought for those in the Board, the Office, Departments and the devolved administrations whom we will be watching closely for signs of recognition of the good advice it has offered. We want no more damned lies, more National Statistics, and better statistics and access, which 'the Hub' promises. And then perhaps there will be more trust.

# STATISTICS MOVE CENTRE STAGE

BY IAN MACLEAN

The linking of statistics with open government and a participating democracy has created an air of excitement and anticipation, elevating statistics to a position of prominence that they haven't enjoyed since the 19th century when Prince Albert created the Statistical Dining Club [which still exists], four members of Gladstone's cabinet were on the RSS Council and social reformers were basing their policies on statistics, provoking Disraeli into his infamous riposte "lies, damn lies and statistics." Fast forward to the 21st century and there is world-wide agreement on the importance of statistics. The UN has its Millennium Goals, the EU Commission an initiative on 'Democracy Dialogue and Debate' and the OECD their World Forum series of conferences on 'Statistics Knowledge and Policy'. The 2007 conference in Istanbul, subtitled 'Measuring and Fostering the Progress of Societies' raised the tempo of the debate by issuing a challenging 'Declaration'

"We the representatives of the OECD, the European Commission, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, the United Nations, the UN Development Programme and the World Bank affirm our commitment to measuring and fostering the progress of societies in all dimensions, with the ultimate goal of improving policy making, democracy and citizens' wellbeing. A culture of evidence-based decision making has to be promoted at all levels, to increase the welfare of societies. And in the 'information age', welfare depends in part on transparent and accountable public policy-making. The availability of statistical indicators of economic, social, and environmental outcomes and their dissemination to citizens can contribute to promoting good governance and the improvement of democratic processes. It can strengthen citizens' capacity to influence the goals of the societies they live in through debate and consensus building, and increase the accountability of public policies."

It's not just organisations, influential politicians and administrators are singing from the same hymn sheet:

- "statistics are the lifeblood of democratic debate", Jack Straw
- "new politics means engaging people and not excluding them, debating concerns and issues not just in the corridors of power, but throughout the land", Gordon Brown
- "progress indicators are a way for people to hold their governments accountable", Francois Bourguignon, World Bank Vice President
- "modern society is characterised by the growing involvement of civil society in public decision making. Innumerable NGOs as well as advocacy, lobby and stakeholder groups can now make their voices heard much more easily. Public and private decision makers are increasingly linked through vast participative networks. Statistics play a crucial role in understanding our society. They help us to capture the transformations taking place, to grasp their implications and develop an effective response. **"In modern society, politicians are probably more accountable than ever, and therefore statistics have acquired a critical role in our democracies"**. Joaquin Almunia, EU Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs

**Statistics Legislation.** The time lag between the good intentions and the legislation to put the principles into practice has been long drawn out in the UK. I wrote my first paper on the need for statistics legislation in 1978, the 1992 Labour Party manifesto promised legislation, repeated in 1997, but it was 2007 before the law was passed by Parliament. The EU is based on legislation so the statistics laws are long-standing, but they haven't stood still and there have been constant updates, including a major revision, now passed by the European Parliament and the Council, to significantly strengthen the European Statistical System. The stated objective is to revise the existing basic legal framework governing the production of statistics at European level so that they **respond more closely to changes in society** and the need to more clearly define the role of the European Statistical System, clarify the role of the NSIs and Eurostat, strengthen the existing European Code of Practice and formally recognize the European Approach to Statistics.

**What about the Users?** Since the formation of a European Statistics Advisory Committee [CEIES in French!!] in 1991, the requirement to consult with users has been enshrined in law, and

it's not just a vague pledge, there is a whole raft of procedures designed to ensure that the consultation is effective. This Directive has now been strengthened by bringing the European Parliament into the reporting structure, the membership criteria and name changed. The new CEIES will be called the 'European Advisory Committee on Community Statistical Information Policy', rather a mouthful. A bottle of whisky for the best acronym.

**The 'Tasks' for the Committee** as set out in the Directive are: The Committee shall be consulted by the Commission at an early stage in the preparation of the Community statistical program and shall deliver an opinion on

- its relevance to the requirements of European integration and development, relevance being defined as the degree to which statistics meet current and potential needs of the users for accuracy, timeliness and accessibility
- the level of resources required and determination of priorities.
- the costs incurred by providers.

## Relations with European institutions and other bodies

The terms open and transparent have a very real ring to them for European Community governance. The effectiveness of user consultation may be limited, but at least there are procedures in place that will expose shortcomings, foot dragging or however else one describes the procrastination that has characterized the UK experience in recent years. All the players are given interacting roles:

- At the request of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission, the Committee shall deliver an opinion on matters relating to user requirements in the development of the Community's statistical information policy, priorities of the Community statistical program, the evaluation of existing statistics, data quality and dissemination policy.
- The Committee shall deliver opinions and present reports on user requirements and the costs borne by data providers in the production and dissemination of Community statistics to the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission whenever it considers this necessary for the fulfillment of its task.
- The Commission shall report on a yearly basis on how it has taken account of the Committee's opinions:
- In order to accomplish its task, the Committee shall co-operate with the Statistical Program Committee and the Committee on Monetary, Financial and Balance of Payments Statistics. It shall send copies of its opinion expedient for the purpose of, or in connection with the exercise of its functions and reports to those two committees.
- The Committee shall establish relations with national statistical user councils. Interestingly the UK is the only EU country without an official 'suc'

## Membership

The enlargement of the EU to 25 states would have resulted in an unwieldy CEIES of over 100 members as each country could nominate 4 delegates, 2 from the NSI and 2 private experts. Membership has now been reduced to 25. The new committee will be composed of the Director-General of Eurostat, 10 members directly appointed by their organizations, including the European Parliament, Council, Central Bank, 'TUC', 'CBI' and 14 'private' members appointed by the Commission from nominations sent in by member countries.

## UK comparisons

The contrast with the 2007 UK Statistics Law could not be more pronounced, there is no reference to users let alone procedures to ensure effective user consultation. The Board fortunately, unlike the early Statistics Commission, have from the start, recognised the need to engage with users and the gap in the legislation should not be a problem as the Board is empowered to set up committees, in fact it seems to be a law unto itself. [The clause under ancillary powers states "The Board may do anything which it thinks necessary or expedient for the purpose of, or in connection with, the exercise of its functions"] so we wait with interest for the new user consultation mechanism to be put in place. The choice is wide and confusing, from a handful of individuals to large assemblies with representatives nominated by organisations. If the Statistics Users Forum is to be the chosen advisory vehicle it needs to be substantially strengthened,

Continued on page 4

## NEWS FROM STATISTICS COMMISSION

### FOREIGN/MIGRANT WORKERS Q & A

The Statistics Commission has performed a useful public service by publishing a paper which attempts to publicly clarify the reasons for varying answers given by the Department for Work & Pensions, the Office for National Statistics and the Department for Business, Enterprise & Regulatory Reform to a sequence of Parliamentary Questions concerning increases in the numbers of foreign/migrant workers in the UK in the last decade, which were widely discussed in the media. The common source for all of them is the Labour Force Survey; the differences derive from differing interpretations or practice which use either the country of birth (born abroad) and the nationality (foreign nationals) questions in conjunction with total adult (all over 16) or working age (15-59/64) population.

## Statistics Commission

The document **Foreign workers – briefing note**, available at [www.statscom.org.uk](http://www.statscom.org.uk), includes a number of tables setting out various figures; these are best summarised as:

Estimated numbers of foreign workers in employment							
		million			% of total employment		
		1997	2007	increase	1997	2007	% of net increase
Born abroad	Working age	1.9	3.3	1.4	7.5	12.0	81
	All over 16	2.0	3.4	1.4	7.4	11.9	68
Foreign nationals	Working age	0.9	2.0	1.1	3.5	7.4	65
	All over 16	1.0	2.1	1.1	3.6	7.3	53

## NEWS FROM THE STATISTICS BOARD

### NON-EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS AND DIRECTORS GENERAL APPOINTED

On 8 January 2008, the Cabinet Office Minister, Ed Miliband announced the appointment of seven non-executive directors to the Statistics Board, which will formally assume its statutory role on 1 April and will be known as the **UK Statistics Authority**. They are:

**Partha Dasgupta**, currently Chief Executive of the Pension Protection Fund and a former Managing Director at Barclays Global Investors.

**Moira Gibb CBE**, Chief Executive Officer of Camden Borough Council with a distinguished career in local government.

**Sir Alan Langlands FRSE**, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Dundee. He was Chief Executive of the National Health Service in England 1994-2000.

Professor **Stephen Nickell CBE FBA**, Warden of Nuffield College, Oxford. He was a member of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee from June 2000 to May 2006.

Professor **David Rhind CBE FRS FBA**, Chairman of the Statistics Commission. He was Vice-Chancellor and Principal of City University until July 2007, is a non-executive director of the Bank of England's Court of Directors, and until 1998 was Director-General of the Ordnance Survey.

**Lord Rowe-Beddoe**, Chairman of the Wales Millennium Centre and a former Chairman of the Welsh Development Agency, with a distinguished international business career.

Professor **Adrian Smith FRS**, Principal of Queen Mary, London, and a former President of the Royal Statistical Society.

**Sir Michael Scholar** will shortly announce arrangements for the Board and the appointment of two Deputy Chairs.

In addition, the ONS has appointed two Directors General, who are likely to be executive members of the Board: **Jil Matheson** (currently Executive Director for Census, Demographic and Regional Statistics, ONS) as DG for Statistics, with the role of Deputy Statistician, and **Rolande Anderson**, who will be responsible for delivery, is currently Regional Director, Government Office for the South East; previously Deputy Director General of the Innovation Group in the Department of Trade and Industry and Chief Executive of the Radiocommunications Agency. The Head of Assessment Post was advertised in mid-February.

Continued from page 2

the relationship formalised and mechanisms devised to identify issues that need supporting statistics, but the formation of a Users Council is only one small step on the way to ensuring that official statistics fulfill their destiny as one of foundations of the new participating, evidence-

based democracy that we are all extolling. Implementing statistics in the service of society, rather than just 'kitemarking' certain official statistics as 'national' is the real inspirational challenge that can set the pulse running and command our undivided attention and commitment.

## NEWS FROM H.M. TREASURY

### PANGLOSSIAN RESPONSE TO TREASURY COMMITTEE ON ONS EFFICIENCY

The Treasury Select Committee's inquiry into the efficiency programme of the Chancellor's departments (one of which is the ONS) initiated in Spring 2007 (see **BSUG News 36**) duly reported in the Autumn and a government response to it has been published. Having taken evidence from a number of the 'players', the Committee was quite critical about the handling of the ONS relocation and its possible effects. However, the Government's response can be described as 'Panglossian'. Apart from describing the situation at Newport as well-staffed with the Office functioning efficiently, and all's well, one new piece of information which emerged was that two new 'Directors-General' were being recruited to help the National Statistician



## NEWS FROM THE STATISTICS COMMISSION

### TAX RECORDS AS A STATISTICAL RESOURCE

The Statistics Commission has published the result of a nine-month investigation into the potential value for statistical purposes of tax records and data. Clearly, much of the information is confidential and the various tax authorities go to considerable lengths to protect it. This is reinforced by tight legal restriction on the transfer of potentially-disclosive data even between one government department and another undertaking related analytical work. Records can only be made readily available when anonymised. Currently the only such dataset available is the Survey of Personal Incomes, using a 10 per cent sample of income tax returns.

The review is based on the findings from circulating questionnaires to a number of academic and other researchers, and several government departments that were known users of tax data, as well as interviews with users in ONS.

The report has compiled an inventory of currently-published tax statistics and data. The taxes identified include those collected by HMRC: income, national insurance, capital gains, value added, corporation, petroleum revenue, fuel, tobacco, spirits, beer, wine, cider and perry, stamp, betting and gaming, customs, air passenger, insurance premium, landfill, climate change, aggregates, inheritance; and by other collectors: vehicle excise, business rates, council tax. There is a statement of the legal position on the dissemination of tax records and reference is also made to the situation in the US and Denmark.

The report makes seven recommendations. The first suggests that HMRC should find out more about users and their needs, and should consider setting up a taxation statistics user group. Secondly, HMRC should ensure availability of a comprehensive statistical dataset on UK tax revenues and the tax base, as well as acting to fill gaps identified by the review, and taking account of users' needs. Thirdly, improve accessibility, including difficulties experienced in website navigation and visiting multiple websites. The next three recommendations concern better support of researchers, and the last one draws the attention of HMRC and ONS to using the provisions of the Statistics and Registration Services Act as a legal gateway for the release of tax data to ONS for new statistical purposes.

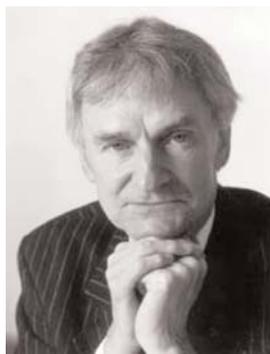
The report, No.37, November 2007 is available at [www.statscom.org.uk](http://www.statscom.org.uk).



### WATCHDOG'S FIRST SOUNDBITE ON PRE-RELEASE ACCESS

HM Treasury has published a consultation document: **Limiting pre-release access to statistics** (available at [hm-treasury.gov.uk](http://hm-treasury.gov.uk)) implementing the Statistics Bill's intended change from the existing pre-release access rule allowing ministers and their advisers five days, or for market sensitive statistics 40.5 hours, to only 24 hours for about-to-be-published statistics (as reported in **BSUG News 37**).

Sir Michael Scholar, Chair Designate of the new Statistics Board, reacted adversely, saying that this timing was still too long, should be brought into line with best international practice, and did not go far enough to restore public trust in official statistics, and that the Board should decide the rules for privileged access.



Sir Michael Scholar

The regulations would also give the Board power to remove 'national statistics' status from figures it feels are being shared outside the rules for pre-release, and allow exceptional access to certain statistics for the Bank of England and the Treasury relating to inflation, data affecting interest rate decisions, or those that could spark financial market disruption. The text of the

draft Order is included in the consultation document, which invites submissions to HM Treasury by 3 March 2008

## NEWS FROM STATISTICS USER FORUM

### SPOTLIGHT ON INCOME, EARNINGS AND WEALTH

The theme of the SUF annual conference, held on 15 November 2007, was **Statistics on income, earnings and wealth**. The opening speaker, **Sir Michael Scholar**, (Chair-Designate, Statistics Board) was taking an early opportunity of appearing before a body of users to provide them with an introduction to his attitudes and approach. He recognised the large, challenging task the Board will face, needing to be active and pro-active; it would only be effective if its operation was transparent, like the Statistics Commission. Unlike the FSA, its powers will not be draconian but will rest on influence and arrangements to be made by Parliament, for example, if it is in conflict with other parts of the official scene. A shadow Board will be in place early in 2008, with its first task: to consult on the new Code of Practice, starting with the existing Code and the Statistics Commission's proposals. He underlined the view that government is not the only user and the need to engage with all the communities involved in its work.

**Peter Elias**, (University of Warwick) set the scene by indicating why we need statistics on income, earnings and wealth – for GNP measurement, economic growth and planning wage-setting, measuring and understanding better the causes of disparities; how we collect them, what problems arise in doing so, and what improvements are necessary. He contrasted the reluctance to disclose personal information on this topic in the UK with free internet access in Sweden.

**Derek Bird**, (ONS) provided a detailed account of recent developments in two very different but intrinsically-related measures of earnings, the annual survey of hours and earnings (ASHE) which replaced the New Earnings Survey (NES) in 2004, and Average Weekly Earnings (AWE) which measures their level and dates from mid-2005, supplementing the long-running Average Earnings Index (AEI), which measures changes. There is continuing work on reconciling the AEI and the AWE results, progressing the latter's progress to becoming a 'National Statistic' and addressing the Monetary Policy Committee's concern on difficulty in knowing "which earnings measure to put most weight on".

**Maxine Willitts**, (DWP) described the use made of the ONS Family Resources Survey such as monitoring households below average income (HBAI), child poverty, material deprivation and debt. **Joanna Littlechild**, (DWP) detailed the development of the new cross-departmental (DWP/ONS/BERR/HMRC) Wealth and Assets Survey, to obtain more complete information on savings behaviour over time and individual needs by different age groups, and to obtain a better understanding of lifetime earnings and savings decisions. These were required to inform policy development and to monitor the impact of planned reform. The first results were published in December 2007.

**Bill Elmore** and **Mike Hawkins** (HMRC) undertook a tour of administrative sources of information on personal income and wealth, including the Survey of Personal Incomes and its sources, methodology, make-up and availability

**John Rae** (CACI) expounded the added value of commercial data. **Jo Blanden** (University of Surrey and LSE) reviewed the results of research into changes in the relationship of family income and educational attainment and its links with 'social mobility'. **Danny Dorling** (University of Sheffield), aided by a series of coloured UK maps of local authority areas, talked about the geography of disadvantage – does it matter where we live?

**Steve Tatton** (IDS Executive Compensation Review) provided some telling data on directors' remuneration derived from annual reports and informant surveys, seeking to ask whether they are 'fat cats or hungry tigers'

The final presentations by **Peter Scrimgeour** (GRO, Scotland) and **Elisabeth McLaren** (ONS) reported the results in Scotland, and England and Wales respectively of pilot tests conducted to reflect responses to the possible inclusion of a question on income in the next Census of Population.

## NEWS FROM THE STATICS COMMISSION VALUER AND TRUSTEE

The Statistics Commission's has published **Value and Trust**, its valedictory Report No. 38, to summarise its findings and experience over the seven years of its existence and draws important conclusions: the need for an effective planning system ie what big issues need to be addressed and how to timetable them; better-written commentary on the published statistics in the context of their likely use; better communication on statistics; effective assessment of the Code of Practice; and how trust can be built via opinion formers.

It usefully reminds readers of a number of its findings and achievements. For example, its seminal May 2004 Report No.18, which recommended legislation, demonstrates both the length of time its has taken to get an Act onto the Statute Book, and the way in which the Government ignored its actual recommended options in favour of creating the Board as a single organisation with its widely-criticised combination of being both producer and assessor of statistics. There are several types of message throughout the fourteen sections which discuss the wide-ranging topics which have constituted the Commission's work; there is praise

for the many good things in official statistics, and of a number of improvements, - indeed it can take credit for its consistent advocacy of the importance of all the varied uses and users of statistics, whilst wryly referring to obstacles and difficulties, which remain to be addressed, some of which relate to recommendations the Commission has made and which have been studiously ignored. It includes: a list of most of its thirty-seven previous reports with short descriptions thereof; the proposed draft Code of Practice from its October 2007 Report No.35 for the new Statistics Board to consider; some reflections on the arrangements for statistics in the US, Canada and the Nordic countries; and an illustrated Who's Who of the past and current commissioners. It should remain a vital reference document as a check to future performance of the UK's official statisticians. As usual, this report is available on the Commission's website, [www.statscomm.org.uk](http://www.statscomm.org.uk).

On January 31, the Commission moved to HM Treasury, Room G/07, 1 Horse Guards Road, London SW1A 2HQ. Its telephone remains unchanged - 0207 273 8008. The commission will close on March 31 2008. The contents of its website will be available until early 2010.

## NEWS FROM EUROSTAT

### ONS AND THE EUROPEAN STATISTICS CODE OF PRACTICE

A report by a three-man team organised by Eurostat to peer review the UK's implementation of the European Statistics Code of Practice, which visited the UK from 24 to 26 September 2007, was published at the end of January 2008. In view of the passage of the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007, the team decided to perform its review on the basis of the future situation, despite some aspects not yet having been spelled out, rather than harking back to the past.

The review discusses a selection of 38 indicators under seven of the 15 'Principles' of the Code: Professional independence (1); Mandate for data collection (2); Adequacy of resources (3); Quality commitment (4); Statistical confidentiality (5); Impartiality and objectivity (6); and Accessibility and clarity (15). It shows that 25 of these are 'fully met' with 10 'largely met' ie there were criticisms and matters needing attention, which were then addressed by a list of recommendations such as greater use of electronic data collection, which could lead to reduction of the response 'burden' on enterprises. Not surprisingly, given that the review sessions included participation by a number of users external to ONS (inter alia, RSS/SUF members Keith Dugmore and Jill Leyland), a number of their critical comments were reflected. They related to such aspects as descriptions of methodology and metadata, pre-release practices and the ONS website. The report sets out a timetable of improvements provided by ONS due for completion between December 2008 and 2012.

The full 28 Eurostat page report is available from its website  
[www.epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu](http://www.epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu)

## NEWS FROM ONS

### PRE-RELEASE# BROADENED: THE DEVIL'S IN THE DETAIL

Once the media have scented a vulnerable quarry, there's no let-up, no small detail too trivial to let pass without publicising it. Last December the ONS were reported (if not to the headmaster) to the public as having broken one of its own rules. It was 'embarrassingly forced' to publish quarterly business investment statistics one day earlier than their scheduled release date, the result of an overnight computer error. LBW? Was this 'market sensitive'? And what is the statistical test for market sensitivity anyway? The Statistics Commission's Report No.38 lists the data series which may be regarded as such; they include: Indices of production and of services, producer and consumer price indices, labour market statistics, retail sales, public sector finances, UK trade, national accounts and balance of payments.

# See report on 'Limiting pre-release access' on page 5.

## FUTURE SBE MEETINGS

**Tuesday 4 March 2008**

**CIPFA, 3 Robert Street, London WC2 (6.0pm)**

**Richard Fisher, President & CEO, Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas**

**Tuesday 22 April 2008**

**NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN ECONOMETRICS –  
APPLICATIONS TO BUSINESS**

**Prof. David Hendry**

**Wednesday 14 May 2008**

**SHOULD MONEY FORM THE CORNERSTONE OF  
CENTRAL BANK POLICY?**

**Ben Broadbent, Goldman Sachs & Prof. Tim Congdon**

**Tuesday 10 June 2008**

**1 Great George Street, London SW1 (9.00am – 1.00pm)  
ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

**All enquiries about attendance or membership:  
Society of Business Economists 01264 737552 or [admin@sbe.co.uk](mailto:admin@sbe.co.uk)**

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