

BREACH OF THE CODE OF PRACTICE FOR OFFICIAL STATISTICS

This document reports a breach of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, or the relevant Pre-release Access to Official Statistics Orders, to which the Code applies as if it included these orders.

1. Background information

Name of Statistical Output (including weblink to the relevant output or 'landing page')

DOE Driver, Vehicle, Operator and Enforcement Statistics Annual Report for 2014/15

http://www.doeni.gov.uk/index/information/asb/statistics/dva_statistics.htm

This is a National Statistics publication, due for release on 4 June 2015

Name of Producer Organisation

The Department of the Environment (DOE) for Northern Ireland

Name and contact details of the statistical Head of Profession (Lead Official in an Arm's Length Body) submitting this report, and date of report

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8 May 2015

2. Circumstances of breach

Relevant Principle/Protocol and Practice

Protocol 2, Practice 8: Release Practices:

Ensure that no indication of the substance of a statistical report is made public, or given to the media or any other party not recorded as eligible for access before publication, report to the National statistician immediately any accidental or wrongful release, and investigate the circumstances.

Date of occurrence

8 May 2015

Nature of breach (including links with previous breaches, if any)

An official from the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA), an executive agency of DOE, in reply to a Northern Ireland Assembly Question (AQ) provided a set of figures related to vehicle theory test failure rates that could be easily used to derive the exact pass rate figures due to be published as part of National Statistics reporting on 4 June 2015. The reply to the AQ was circulated internally within the DOE, at 08:01 and the figures were accessible in advance of publication to those named on the internal circulation list for this AQ.

Reasons for breach

The official preparing the AQ was under the mistaken perception that because the figures being quoted in the AQ reply were not the same as the still to be published figures this would not be considered a breach (even though one set of figures could be directly calculated from the other).

3. Reactions and impact (both within the producer body and outside)

It is estimated that the data was accessible internally to those on the AQ circulation list (13 individuals) for a period of 2-3 hours before the breach was discovered at which point the AQ was immediately withdrawn from circulation. There is no evidence that the draft AQ was circulated to anyone outside of the initial list nor that anyone on the list particularly took cognisance of the specific pre-release data (failure rate figures were supplied for a 5 year period and it was only the latest year which had yet to be published). The draft AQ was withdrawn and amended before it reached the Minister and Special Advisor for their approval.

This information would not be considered to have a high public profile and there were no public leaks or comments internally during this period.

The official has apologised for the accidental breach and has provided an assurance that it will not happen again.

4. Corrective actions taken to prevent reoccurrence of such a breach (include short-term actions, and long-term changes made to procedures)

Short-term actions:

- A DOE experienced Statistician contacted the official to discuss the circumstances surrounding the breach, to check whether any other persons not on pre-release access list had been given access and remind them of their responsibilities under the Pre-release legislation.
- The DOE Statistician immediately informed the Head of Profession at the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and sought further advice.

- A published statement was added to the DOE website at the point of access to the statistics.

Longer-term actions:

- A summary guidance document highlighting the “dos and don’ts” with respect to pre-release access, specifically aimed at DVA staff, will be reviewed and circulated in advance of our next annual publication shortly due for release on 4 June 2015.
- This will be particularly useful for reminding those working with DVA in-house administrative systems of the requirements of the Pre-Release Access Legislation and the stringent controls that this necessitates when handling potential National Statistics material.
- The DVA Chief Executive will issue a memo to all Agency staff highlighting that a breach has taken place, reminding them of their responsibilities under the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, and of the importance of checking all statistical data being considered for release with Agency statisticians prior to wider circulation.