

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')

UK Overseas Trade Statistics – Non-EU release for April 2013.
<https://www.uktradeinfo.com/Statistics/NonEUOverseasTrade/Pages/NonEuOTS.aspx>

Name of Producer Organisation

HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC)

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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2. Circumstances of breach

Relevant Principle/Protocol and Practice

Protocol 2, Practice 8: "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

Thursday 6 June 2013

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

The Non-EU release of the UK Overseas Trade Statistics for April 2013 was due to be published at 09:30 on Friday 7 June 2013. Due to the reasons described below, the underlying detailed data related to the release was published to HMRC's trade statistics website on 09:30 on Thursday 6 June 2013. The statistical release itself (including commentary and aggregated data tables) was not published.

The erroneous publication was identified and withdrawn by HMRC's Trade Statistics web service provider at 14:35 on Thursday 6 June 2013.

Reasons for breach

On Thursday 6 June 2013 at 09:30, HMRC published the UK Regional Trade Statistics (RTS) for the First Quarter of 2013 available here:

<https://www.uktradeinfo.com/Statistics/RTS/Pages/default.aspx>

Publication of the underlying detailed RTS dataset in our interactive trade database occurred simultaneously. Publication of this dataset was problematic for our contracted Trade Statistics external web service providers due to a large volume of revisions. This required a manual intervention to the normal publishing process. During this manual intervention, the wrong publishing code was copied and run resulting in the erroneous publication of the Overseas Trade Statistics (OTS) Non-EU detailed data for April 2013, which was in the (non-live) staging environment ready for publication the following day.

Early afternoon, a member of our Customer Service support team was dealing with a query from a data user searching for UK to China/Hong Kong data for a specific commodity. The support team member identified the availability of April data and reported it to senior management. The Trade Statistics external web service providers were contacted and the data was removed from the website at 14:35 on Thursday 6 June 2013.

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

Available web metrics detail that 20 users accessed the interactive data tables between 09:30 and 14:35 on Thursday 6 June 2013.

Location specific metrics and other information allow us to be confident that 5 of the users were part of our Trade Statistics external web service provider team, 5 were HMRC staff and 9 were viewing the (legitimately published) Regional Trade Statistics data. We can deduce that the 1 other user was the enquirer using UK to China/Hong Kong data.

We have had no other enquiries or complaints to either our trade data helpdesk, or the HMRC Press Office.

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

Our Trade Statistics external web service providers are investigating the technical problems that caused the failure of the automated publishing of the Regional Trade Statistics. They have already audited the manual publishing code and have removed it from the system, updating their internal guidance to ensure new code is written for each manual intervention, specifically highlighting the product differences. They have re-iterated the importance of the Code of Practice and its requirements to their Data Centre staff. This is supported by their contractual obligations to ensure appropriate data confidentiality.

HMRC have introduced a new Standard Working Instruction to check the integrity of all these publications when a new release occurs, meaning that any issues can be identified and addressed immediately.