

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')

Military Search and Rescue (SAR) Annual Statistics

This is a National Statistic.

Link to publication:

<http://dasa.mod.uk/index.php/publications/activities/search-and-rescue-annual>

Name of Producer Organisation

Ministry of Defence

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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Breach report completed on 21 January 2014.

2. Circumstances of breach

Relevant Principle/Protocol and Practice

Protocol 2: Release Practices; Practice 8 (Public Disclosure):

"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 9 January 2014.

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

On 9 January 2014 the RAF Search and Rescue Media Comms office published a press notice containing the following figures for 2013:

- Total number of callouts and persons assisted by RAF Valley during 2013
- Total number of callouts and persons assisted by the six RAF SAR Helicopter units during 2013

There was some commentary provided alongside the figures, including the fact that RAF Valley was 'the busiest Search and Rescue unit in the UK for the second year running'.

The press notice was produced in response to an initial request for information from BBC Wales. A number of newspapers published the figures on 10 January 2014.

The breach was discovered on 9 January 2014 in a meeting between the statistical team and the SAR Media Comms office.

The SAR Media Comms office had not been given access to the final statistics, but was using a provisional version of the data that is used internally as management information. A data cleansing and validation process is carried out on the dataset before the final statistics are derived. This means there are likely to be discrepancies between the figures that were released and the final published figures, and the commentary provided may not be accurate. There is currently no pre-release access to the SAR statistics in their final form.

The official 2013 Search and Rescue statistics will be published in a National Statistic on 5 February 2014.

There are similarities to a previous breach in April 2013, when provisional SAR statistics were released by one of the Royal Navy SAR units.

Reasons for breach

Despite repeated verbal and written explanations of the Code of Practice and reminders not to release any unofficial statistics externally, the SAR Media Office did not fully appreciate the implications of releasing provisional figures before the National Statistics were published. They were aware of the Code, but had misunderstood how it applied to these figures.

The SAR Media Office believed they were releasing the correct figures (knowing that they are derived from the same source as the official statistics) and that the numbers were not contentious (being simply a statement of the number of rescues). They had not appreciated that the official totals for 2013 had not yet been released, or that there could be differences in the numbers obtained from the management information and the final statistics.

There is a Service Level Agreement between Defence Economics Price Indices branch (who produce the official SAR statistics) and the RAF Search and Rescue Force Commander, which makes explicit reference to the National Statistics Code of Practice and includes the following clause regarding release practices:

“AOC 2 Gp agrees not to publish statistics that would conflict with published National Statistics, without the agreement of DASA [now Defence Economics] ”

It is the responsibility of the RAF Search & Rescue Force Commander to ensure that this guidance is followed by RAF SAR units, including any SAR media offices.

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

The breach was discovered on the afternoon of 9 January 2014, in a meeting between the statistical team and the SAR Media Comms office. After further investigation of the circumstances, the Head of Profession was informed on the morning of 10 January 2014, and confirmed that this was a breach.

Contact was made with the National Statistician's Office on 10 January 2014 giving a broad outline of the breach. Given the serious nature of the breach, the MOD Permanent Secretary's office was also notified on 10 January 2014.

There was media coverage of the released figures on 10 January 2014.

Since being made aware of the breach the unit has responded promptly and has ensured that no further figures are released. There are a number of other SAR media units across the UK and these have also been contacted to ensure that further breaches do not occur.

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

The Head of Profession for Statistics takes responsibility for the following actions:

- The Code of Practice for Official Statistics will be re-emphasised to SAR-HQ and SAR Media offices. The Head of Profession will meet with the head of AOC 2 Gp to ensure the severity of the breach is understood and that appropriate action is taken to prevent a further breach of MOD Search & Rescue figures.
- The SAR Aeronautical Rescue Coordination Centre (ARCC) will be made aware that the Management Information figures they produce and share with other units fall under National Statistics protocols, and should only be used internally. We will work with the ARCC to ensure that all such reports or datasets are labelled with appropriate text making it clear that the figures are not for public release.
- [DRAFT: Guidance on the handling of statistics will be developed for officials working with the media and agreed with Defence Media and Communications.]

5. Links to published statements about this breach

When the breach report is published on the UK Statistics Authority website we will link to it from our website <http://www.dasa.mod.uk>.