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')

National Travel Survey 2012 https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-transport/series/national-travel-survey-statistics

Name of Producer Organisation

Department for Transport (DfT)

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 (Release practices), 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

26 July to 29 July 2013

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

- The report of the National Travel Survey 2012 was due for publication at 09:30 on 30 July.
- This is one of our largest statistical releases, with more than 100 individual table files (in MS Excel format) accompanying it.
- These table files are spread across 10 "statistical data set" pages on the www.gov.uk website. These pages all already exist, holding table files for 2011 and earlier years.
- DfT staff created updated editions of each of these pages (with new 2012 table files added) during the week before publication (w/e 26 July). The drafts were all scheduled for publication to the live site at 09:30 on 30 July using the scheduling tool in the "Inside Government" publisher application used to manage statistical content on www.gov.uk.
- However, the 2012 table files were available to download from the live site on the day before their scheduled release date of 30 July. We do not know how this occurred but we were alerted to it by an e-mail from an external user at around 10:30 on 29 July.
- We also do not know how long the files were available on the live site before this, although it's possible that they were there from the point at which the draft pages were completed (i.e. late on 26 July).

Reasons for breach

- As far as we are able to tell, this breach resulted from a bug in the www.gov.uk Publisher application (managed by the Government Digital Service (GDS)) and not from any human or system error within DfT.
- Specifically, the tool to schedule page drafts for future publication did not work correctly. The tool has been in place for several months and we have used it on many previous occasions to publish statistical releases without any difficulty.
- GDS colleagues confirm that a bug was introduced following changes to the Publisher interface made on 23 July.

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

- The e-mail pointing out the breach is only external reaction that has come to our notice.
- Internal reaction has been confined to the statistics and web teams responsible for taking corrective action, although senior officials and Comms staff are being briefed

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

- DfT's HoP was alerted immediately once the breach was reported.
- Work began immediately to remove the prematurely published material from the web. Given the nature of the error (an unexpected bug in the web publishing application itself) the best short-term fix was not obvious. In the end, the 2012 table files were removed manually and replaced with their 2011 equivalents. This work was completed by just before 1pm on 29 July. The 2012 files were reinstated – again manually – on their intended release date of 30 July.
- DfT statisticians raised this bug as a high-priority technical fault with the GDS and have escalated the issue within GDS to the level of product manager for the government section of the site.

- GDS subsequently identified the bug (following a similar problem experienced in another department) and implemented a fix on Friday 2 August.
- DfT used the scheduling tool to prepare statistical releases during the week of 5 August (after the implementation of this fix). There was no repeat of the fault and the tools worked as intended.
- As this breach has been caused by a bug in the web publishing application managed by GDS, we do not believe any changes are need to DfT's internal working practice in this case.
- However, it underlines the need for open and active channels of communication between statisticians and digital staff (both within departments and at GDS), so that issues can be dealt with quickly if / when they arise.

5. Links to published statements about this breach

See NTS 2012 release page at:
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-travel-survey-2012
Statement is under 'detail' subheading

6. Any other relevant supporting material

Investigation into DfT scheduled statistics breach - GDS note of their investigation into this issue:

Summary
A change to the admin interface for managing attachments introduced a bug that meant replacement files uploaded to re-editioned documents were leaking into the most recent (published) edition. The direct impact was that a DfT statistical data was made public before it should have been.

Timeline of events
Tuesday July 23
Work to update the interface for managing attachments on editions is completed and deployed to production (this is where the bug will have been introduced).

Monday July 29
DfT reported that the files for a large statistical release were made publicly available ahead of the edition's official publication date. They took steps to remove the files in question by manually replacing them with the most recent publicly available set.

Tuesday July 30
A story is added to the Inside Government tracker to investigate the cause of the issue. This story is marked as requiring production access to investigate, meaning that the number of Inside Government developers that can look at it is limited.

Thursday August 1
A further report from Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC) is received that attachment files are being made publicly available before their editions have been published,

including steps to recreate the problem.
An urgent investigation is launched to identify and fix the issue. By 17:30, a fix has been produced, verified in preview, and scheduled for release the next morning.

Friday August 2
The fix is released to production.

Cause
The work carried out to update the admin interface for managing attachments included some major reworking of both the UI and the underlying code that manages attachments on editions. As part of these changes, the automated acceptance tests that were previously verifying the separation of attachments between published editions and newly-drafted ones were removed as it was felt that adequate coverage was provided by other automated tests (functional and unit). Unfortunately, there was a discrepancy between the way the functional tests were verifying the behaviour and the actual behaviour when directly driving the admin interface. This meant that although our automated tests suggested the behaviour for replaced attachments on new editions was maintained, it had in fact been lost.

Corrective action
Once the cause of the problem was identified, it was quickly fixed and an update to the admin interface was released. As part of this fix, the previously removed automated acceptance tests were put back in place to ensure we have full test coverage of this feature.

The Inside Government development team is to discuss how best to balance the speed of development and the size of the test suite whilst maintaining good acceptance test coverage for key features such as this.