

## 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')

News Release Headline – Migration Statistics Quarterly Report, November 2012

Name of Producer Organisation

Office for National Statistics (ONS)

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

Glen Watson, Director General (DG), ONS  
[dg@ons.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:dg@ons.gsi.gov.uk)  
01633 655252

29 November 2012

### 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

28 November 2012

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

Pre-release breach on the ONS website and also the Publication Hub. The headline of the net migration News Release was displayed on the release calendar prior to the actual publication time of 09:30 on 29 November. No figures were published, but the headline 'net migration falls significantly' was displayed on the release calendar, and gave the gist of the story. This was due to human error by the 'release coordinator'.

Reasons for breach

What happened?

The breach occurred due to human error. In error, the media relations officer responsible for publishing the News Release selected the option on the publishing template for the headline of the News Release to appear on the ONS website and Publication Hub.

As a result, the News Release entry appeared on the release calendar. This meant the headline was visible on the release calendar of both websites between 11:00 and 18:00 on 28 November 2012.

Why did it happen?

The member of the Media Relations Office (MRO) team responsible for the breach was on secondment to the MRO from a statistical output area. A different process is used in output areas relating to the publishing of statistical bulletins which meant they were used to selecting the boxes on the publishing template that would cause the headline link to appear on both the ONS website release calendar and the Publication Hub release calendar. This is entirely appropriate and necessary for statistical bulletins where the titles of the bulletins are never disclosive (and only go live at the time of publication) but not for News Releases, where titles (which mimic headlines) are often disclosive (to attract media attention).

A recent review of desk instructions meant that these issues were not explicitly stated. This meant that, despite sign off by a senior media relations officer, the risk was not realised and the news release was signed off without a specific check on the tick box.

The current News Release procedures rely on the staff of the MRO (i) writing News Releases descriptions that are non-disclosive, and/or (ii) never clicking the 'publish' button. If the publish button were removed, then the need to never write disclosive News Release descriptors would be redundant.

The MRO had (until this error) managed this workaround successfully without a breach since the new website went live in August 2011.

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

At 16:00 on 28 November, the Guardian home affairs editor tweeted that a disclosive News Release headline on net migration, which was due to publish at 09:30 on 29 November was on the Publication Hub website. Subsequently five tweets were made, including 'what does this mean?' and 'ONS website jumping the gun?!'

ONS was notified by Head of Profession for Statistics at the Home Office at 17:25. The headline of the News Release was 'net migration falls significantly'. There was NO online or print media coverage of the pre-release breach.

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

##### First (immediate) response

Upon identification at 17:25 the headline of the News Release was changed to 'News release – Net migration' and this was amended on the website and publication hub at 18:00.

##### Second response

Since the breach was caused by human error, retraining was undertaken immediately and new desk instructions for publishing headline News Releases have been created. The MRO will also ensure that appropriate training is provided to new and existing staff, highlighting this issue to prevent future reoccurrence.

The following process changes were implemented:

1. The News Release calendar entry used to be created by the release coordinator and approved by the release approver. A check has now been put in place so that if a release approver in the media team receives a calendar entry for approval, they reject the entry rather than approve it to prevent it from appearing on the website and to prevent this issue from reoccurring. Retraining has been undertaken and desktop instructions have been updated.
2. Changes to MRO guidance have been made, which state that when a News Release calendar entry is created, a non-disclosive subtitle is always written for the calendar entry, which is different from the News Release.

##### **Technical solution**

In addition to the above changes to guidance and training, a significantly increased level of assurance and double-checking will now be provided.

The proposal is:

- to ensure that all MRO New Releases are held separately from any business area statistical releases; and
- then for that folder, if the publishing options are selected incorrectly (which will mean the title is published) then the system will automatically reject it and it will be sent for manual intervention.

A number of further possible options and developments have been investigated and considered but the above solutions have been deemed as the preferred measures to significantly minimise the possibility of reoccurrence of this type of breach.

#### **5. Links to published statements about this breach**

Statement displayed on ONS Website:

“There was a pre release breach of the Code of Practice relating to the headline News Release - Net Migration. The headline of the News Release appeared 'net migration falls

significantly' on the Publication Hub before the official release. This was a result of human error. This was removed upon discovery and corrective actions taken to prevent reoccurrence. We are very sorry for the breach."