

BREACH OF THE CODE OF PRACTICE FOR OFFICIAL STATISTICS

A breach of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics occurs where one or more provisions of the Code were not followed in situations where an exemption or exception had not been approved by the UK Statistics Authority's Head of Assessment, as required in paragraph (xii) of the Code's preamble. Rules on pre-release access to statistics are covered in the relevant Pre-Release Access to Official Statistics Orders; the Code applies as if it includes these orders.

1 Background Information

Name of Statistical Output (including web link if relevant)

Rough Sleeping England – Total Street Count and Estimates 2010 (published July 2010)
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statistics/roughsleepingcount2010>

Name of Producer Organisation

Communities and Local Government – Housing Analysis and Surveys Division

Name and contact details of person submitting this report, and date of report

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2 Circumstances of Breach

Relevant Principle/Protocol and Practice

Principle 3 – Practice 3 - Ensure that the relevant statistical Head of Profession has the sole responsibility for deciding on statistical methods, standards, and procedures, and on the content and timing of statistical releases

Principle 2 – Practice 1 - Publish statistical reports in an orderly manner, in accordance with Protocol 2

Date of occurrence

15 July 2010

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

CLG publishes annual official statistics on the number of rough sleepers, broken down by reporting Authority. This information has traditionally been based on specific counts carried out only by those Local Authorities where there was perceived to be a problem with rough sleepers. Typically, therefore, the published figures have related to less than 100 Local Authorities out of a grand total of more than 300 Local Authorities.

In the normal way, CLG Statisticians pre-announced on the CLG website and the Publication Hub that the next 'traditional' release on rough sleepers would be released at 9.30 on 15 July.

In parallel to preparing the usual release, and at the request of the Housing Minister, CLG policy officials and statisticians undertook to collect estimates from the 256 local authorities that had not undertaken street counts since January 2009 and initiated work on proposals for a new method for enumerating rough sleepers which would better reflect the situation for England as a whole. The 'total rough sleeping figure' would be based on figures provided by all Local Authorities in England, i.e. a local authority would either count or provide an estimate of the number of rough sleepers in their area.

Accordingly, and on 16 June, the Housing Minister made a public announcement (See link below) to the effect that he was asking his officials to review the way that rough sleepers are counted so that the findings better reflect the true scale of the problem. (This review is currently the subject of a public consultation). The Minister also said that any agreed methodological changes would come into effect from 2011 and that this year's rough sleeping figure would be published as soon as possible.

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/newsroom/1616414>

Thereafter, officials and statisticians worked on the assumption that the statistical release due for publication on July 15th would incorporate not only the traditional count but also these additional estimates from those Local Authorities which, hitherto, had not carried out a count and submitted a rough sleeping return. Statisticians' intention was that these additional figures would be published as 'experimental statistics' and, as such, forerunners of the new set of statistics, based on a new methodology, planned for publication in 2011

It became apparent immediately after the release was published on July 15th that, although the Minister and his briefing officials had been given the usual 24 hours pre-release access, the Minister himself was not aware of the plan to include the estimates in the July 15th statistical release. Under time pressure, and at the request of the Minister's private office, a rapid decision was taken that, given the nature of the Publication Hub pre-announcement, only the count figures should be released and not the more experimental estimates, until this misunderstanding had been resolved. Officials withdrew the experimental release at 9.35 and replaced it at 10.20 with the 'traditional' street count figures based upon less than 100 local authorities. The former was eventually restored to the CLG website on 23 July (See Para 4 below)

Reasons for breach

There was a misunderstanding between Private Office and officials about whether the new experimental estimate data would be included in the release planned for 15 July.

3 Reactions and Impact

As far as CLG is aware, the withdrawal of the original 'new' release after 5 minutes, and its replacement 45 minutes later by the 'traditional' rough sleeping count release appears to have gone largely unnoticed – except in the case of a News of the World journalist who had spoken to the Minister earlier in the week (before the pre-release access period) and been alerted to the publication of the figures at 09.30am on 15 July. The journalist in question published an article on rough sleeping which included mention of new estimates and suggested a figure for the full England rough sleeping total. This appeared in the News of the World (page 24) on Sunday 18 July.

To date, there have been no indications in the media and no direct approaches or enquiries to CLG which would suggest that anyone became aware of the post-publication substitution.

4 Corrective Actions Taken (include short-term actions, and long-term changes made to procedures)

One important handling lesson that CLG has drawn from this episode, is that a submission to Ministers designed to alert them to a substantial change in the content and coverage of an impending statistical release should be provided in advance of the pre-release period, and should incorporate a mock-up of that release (but without any accompanying statistics). Taking such a step should limit the possibility, in future, of any misunderstanding about statisticians' publication intentions. Furthermore, officials should check that Ministers have read and understood the contents of their submissions, especially for hybrid policy/analytical statistical releases where statisticians do not have sole responsibility for the production and publication of the figures.

CLG has drawn the attention of the breach to the Department's analytical champion at Board Level and recommended that further advice is issued to Private Office to reinforce the need to contact the Statistics Head of Profession if they wish to discuss the content or publication of a release during the 24-hour pre-release period.

The additional information on rough sleeper estimates, and the total figure for England was eventually published on July 23rd and can now be seen on the CLG website (see link in Para 1 above).

5 Any other relevant supporting material (including link to published statements about this breach)