

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')

Electoral Statistics for UK, 2015

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

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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

Friday 26 February 2016

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

ONS shared data in advance with the Boundary Commission for England (BCE) to assist with the ONS publication and BCE forwarded the data to other organisations not approved by ONS to have access.

ONS and the BCE have a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) in place for Electoral Statistics. Ahead of publication, ONS seeks advice from BCE to assist with quality assuring the data. The data is sent securely following the Cabinet Office guidance on the storing and sending of official sensitive statistics. On 16 February, ONS sent the data to BCE to quality assure. The MoA states the data will only be accessible by BCE staff. However BCE forwarded the data onto the Scottish and Northern Ireland Boundary Commissions.

ONS were notified of the breach when the Deputy Director responsible for Electoral Statistics was copied into an email which showed the data had been shared.

As soon as the breach was identified, it was reported to the ONS Statistical Head of Profession and GSS Professional Support Team. After seeking advice from the ONS Information Assurance team, the ONS output team responsible for Electoral Statistics contacted all individuals who received the data (including BCE) and requested the data was destroyed immediately as a result of this breach. All individuals agreed to destroy the data and sent confirmation that all information received had been destroyed.

Reasons for breach

This breach was the consequence of human error. The person who sent the email was not aware of the rules regarding Pre-Release Access.

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

ONS is not aware of any reaction or impact to this breach.

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

Jay Lindop, Deputy Director responsible for the Electoral Statistics release, wrote to BCE to explain the rules around quality assurance and PRA and seek assurance this breach would not happen again.

BCE stated that although they do receive the data directly themselves from local authorities, they accepted they inadvertently shared the electorate data with other commissions without strict authority to do so. BCE agree that in preparation for the next review in 2021, all four commissions will work together to identify sources of information and have clear definitions of authority (where applicable) under which it is shared.

Although the MoA states the data cannot be shared with anyone outside of BCE, ONS will

be updating the MoA. The MoA will state clearly that the data cannot be forwarded to any other organisation without authority from ONS and if sent, this would be considered a breach of the Code of Practice to Official Statistics and PRA Order 2008.