

## 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')

Non-domestic rating: High-level estimates of change in rateable value of ratings lists, England and Wales, 2017 revaluation:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/non-domestic-rating-change-in-rateable-value-of-rating-lists-england-and-wales-2017-revaluation>

There is no standard release that this is connected to, since this is in practice a "one-off" publication in support of the VOA's statutory function to periodically revalue non-domestic rates – usually every 5 years but in this instance 7 years.)

Name of Producer Organisation

Valuation Office Agency (an executive agency of HMRC)

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

Statistical report not released in orderly manner, contrary to Protocol 2 of the Code

Statistics are not made equally available to all (principle 2, practice 3)

Date of occurrence

13 September 2016

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

The scheduled publication was stopped within 12 hours of its timed release of 9.30am on 13 September, contrary to the release of statistical reports in an orderly manner that promotes public confidence.

Prior to this, 24 hour pre-release access to the final release had been provided, as usual, to appropriate ministers and officials (press offices etc). The report was subsequently published on 6 October.

#### Reasons for breach

The context and purpose of this statistical release was to support DCLG public consultation on transitional relief arrangements following revaluation (RV). The consultation document includes the single table on RV change from the VOA statistics publication and as such the importance of VOA information being made accessible to public as well is recognised by both parties.

The VOA statistical publication was halted at the point at which it became clear that DCLG's consultation document was not going to be published by 13 September. Critically, reassessment of rateable value of properties (revaluation) is one integral component of the wider system which determines the effects on business rates bills, which also includes policy decisions on the various reliefs (including transitional relief) and the tax rates (known as the multiplier). So the actual impact of revaluation on the rates bill for any given property can be seen only with this other information.

It was judged by VOA that release of the statistical information in isolation from the surrounding contextual information of those policy announcements would give rise to undue risk of that statistical information being misinterpreted (deliberately or inadvertently) and hence potentially even bringing VOA official statistics more generally into disrepute. Consequently, it was judged by VOA that, on balance, it was less damaging for the release to be withdrawn until such point as the information could be presented in a coherent way alongside that wider associated information from DCLG and HMT.

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

With respect to ministers and officials in DCLG, WG and HMT having pre-release access to the statistical report, it is important to note that in the course of the revaluation process DCLG and WG have prescribed access to record-level information on business rates as part of their statutory functions within the non-domestic rates system. Consequently the informational content of the statistical release was very marginal.

Outside of government, there was significant interest in all releases of statistical information connected to business rates and the impact following revaluation in advance of 30 September when VOA published the rating lists in the View My Valuation application on gov.uk, as well as making available as bulk data sets the rating lists to enable anyone to exercise their right to view rating assessments in the compiled 2010 and 2017 rating lists. This is done as part of the VOA's statutory function to compile an accurate rating list.

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

The exceptional circumstances of this release (i.e. coordination with another department) make it hard to conceive of either what further action could have been taken beyond those which were done and which would be repeated in future (i.e. at next revaluation in 5 years). However the outcome here may be instructive to others releasing statistics with a policy interest in another department and will feed into VOA plans for future release of official and other supporting statistics.

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

None made at this point. VOA's intent is to publish this breach report as part of the agency's commitment to transparency.

### **6. Any other relevant supporting material**

The statistical release halted on 13 September would have presented information at a high level of geography (regional) and property type (by 4 types, what is commonly referred to as 'bulk class'). A more detailed release – essentially the same statistics as the 13 September release on change in rateable value statistics, but published at the geographic level of local administrations – was still published on 6 October to support VOA's statutory function and following the release of the draft compiled non-domestic rating lists for each billing authority.