



**UK Statistics
Authority**

Policy on publishing official statistics on polling days

November 2017

Foreword

This document sets out the UK Statistics Authority policy regarding the publication of official statistics on national polling days, and seeks views on this.

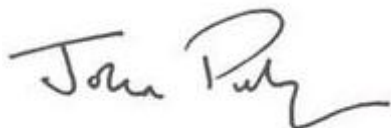
Publishing official statistics on polling days can present difficulties in communicating data clearly and fully, not least because of the restrictions in place around UK broadcast media reporting on the day of the ballot. Furthermore, if there is any misrepresentation of the figures then there are limited opportunities for redress due to these restrictions.

Current statistical policy is therefore to seek to avoid publishing statistical bulletins of significant public interest on national polling days. Once a date for polling day is known, statistics with a high level of public interest are brought forward to the day before polling day, or if that is unfeasible, then they are delayed until the next day.

This is not an easy situation, as judgements must be made about what constitutes 'significant public interest' and there is a risk that the impartiality of decisions may be questioned. But my current view is that this policy provides the necessary flexibility to balance timeliness against the risk of misrepresentation.

The other options available to us have their own downsides. For example, we could have a blanket delay on all statistics until after polling day, but that would mean lots of uncontroversial statistical releases would be needlessly delayed. And a blanket policy to bring all statistics forward to the previous day would cause unacceptable risks to statistical quality.

I feel that our policy reflects the best compromise. But I am seeking external views on this to ensure it remains the right policy. I would very grateful to hear your thoughts.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Pullinger". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

John Pullinger, National Statistician

November 2017

Publishing official statistics on polling days

Background

1. It is common for statistics to be scheduled for publication on polling days, often long before the date of a polling day is known. For instance, there were 26 sets of statistics due to be published on the day of the 2017 General Election.
2. During the period preceding an election or a referendum, the Cabinet Office issues rules on restrictions to government activity and communications. Known as ‘purdah’ rules, the period is typically between four and six weeks in duration, and restrictiveness varies depending on the nature of the election or referendum. There is always a clear exemption for official statistics, to the effect that all pre-announced official statistics should continue as normal.
3. The UK Statistics Authority’s current policy regarding the publication of official statistics on polling day is as follows.

Official statistics are published according to a pre-announced schedule published twelve months ahead, and continue during purdah periods. However, publishing on a polling day itself presents difficulties in communicating data clearly and fully, not least because of restrictions in place around reporting. Within this context, publication procedures should seek to ensure that bulletins of significant public interest are not published on national polling days.

Where there is sufficient notice of a national polling day, statistics of significant public interest can be scheduled to avoid this date.

If an election is called at short notice, statistical Heads of Profession should consider any statistical releases which had been pre-announced to be published on the polling day. Statistics with a high level of public interest should be brought forward to the day before polling day, or if that is unfeasible, then they can be delayed until the next day.

4. The Code of Practice¹ requires producers of official statistics to adhere to the following protocols.

Protocol 2 Practice 1	Release statistical reports as soon as they are judged ready, so that there is no opportunity, or perception of opportunity, for the release to be withheld or delayed.
Protocol 2 Practice 2	Publish a timetable of statistical releases for twelve months ahead.
Protocol 2 Practice 5	Draw public attention to any change to a pre-announced release date and explain fully the reasons for the change at the same time. The relevant statistical Head of Profession has the final decision and should not be influenced by non-statistical matters.

5. Published guidance² from the National Statistician further states the following.
 - i. “The timetable for regular statistical releases should, as a minimum, identify the planned month or two-month window for a release 12 months ahead in order to help users plan their own work drawing on the available statistics.”
 - ii. “The planned date of release [i.e. the specific day] must be added ... no later than four weeks in advance of the release date, or six months in advance in the case of market sensitive statistics.”

¹ A revised Code of Practice is currently under consultation but it is not proposed that these protocols change.

² https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/images-presentation-and-publication-of-official-statistics_tcm97-27562.pdf

2017 General Election

6. The 2017 General Election was called at short notice. It was therefore not possible for statisticians to take this into account when pre-announcing statistics.
7. When the election was called, the National Statistician advised statistical Heads of Profession to consider any statistical releases which had been pre-announced to be published on the polling day in light of the above policy. The advice issued was that statistics with a high level of public interest should be brought forward to the day before polling day, or if that was unfeasible, then they could be delayed until the next day.
8. To put this into context, of the 24 sets of statistics scheduled for polling day, 13 proceeded as usual:
 - i. Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy – Renewables obligation: certificates and generation, February 2017;
 - ii. Department for Education – Children accommodated in secure children’s homes, England and Wales: 31 March 2017;
 - iii. Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) – Usage of milk by dairies in England and Wales: April 2017;
 - iv. DEFRA – Animal feed production for Great Britain: April 2017;
 - v. Ministry of Justice (MoJ) – Tribunals and gender recognitions certificates statistics: January to March 2017; and
 - vi. MoJ – Knife possession sentencing quarterly;
 - vii. Office of Rail and Road – Freight rail usage, January to March 2017: freight moved, freight lifted, normalised freight delay;
 - viii. Public Health England (PHE) – Weekly national flu report: weeks ending 28 May 2017 and 4 June 2017;
 - ix. PHE – National norovirus and rotavirus report for May 2017;
 - x. PHE – Quarterly epidemiological commentary: mandatory MRSA, MSSA and E. coli bacteraemia and C. difficile infection, data up to January to March 2017;
 - xi. PHE – Weekly all-cause mortality surveillance: weeks ending 28 May 2017 and 4 June 2017;
 - xii. Scottish Government – weekly public health release; and
 - xiii. Department for Work and Pensions – Employment Support Allowance: outcomes of Work Capability Assessments.
9. Five were brought forward to the preceding day:
 - i. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) – Quarterly Carer Statistics for Northern Ireland (January – March 2017);
 - ii. NISRA – Anti-social behaviour incidents in Northern Ireland, period ending 30 April 2017;
 - iii. NISRA – Police recorded crime in Northern Ireland, period ending 30 April 2017;
 - iv. NISRA – Qualifications and destinations of Northern Ireland school leavers 2015 to 2016; and
 - v. Department for Education – Children accommodated in secure children’s homes.
10. In six cases it was deemed that bringing forward the statistics would be detrimental to their quality, and therefore these were delayed until after polling day:
 - i. ONS – non-financial business economy: 2015 revised results;
 - ii. HMRC – UK regional trade statistics: first quarter 2017;
 - iii. NHS England – a range of publications relating to NHS performance;
 - iv. PHE and ONS – Cancer survival in England;
 - v. Department for Transport – Vehicle licensing statistics: January to March 2017; and
 - vi. Welsh Government – New house building: January to March 2017.
11. Following advice from the National Statistician, the statistical Head of Profession for NHS England decided delay publication of some statistics originally scheduled for polling day until the next day. It was concluded that the statistics could not be brought forward to the

previous day, as they would not be ready. This delay was noted in media reporting, such as BBC News³.

12. In each case, all of the above decisions were made by the statistical Heads of Profession, who were able to seek advice from the National Statistician if in doubt.

Policy alternatives

13. Options and associated strengths and limitations are provided in the table below.

	Strengths	Limitations
<p>Current policy Statistics of <i>significant public interest</i> should be brought forward to the day before polling day, or if that is unfeasible, then they can be delayed until the next day.</p>	<p>Allows for flexibility to balance timeliness against the risk of misrepresentation.</p> <p>Considers the risks to statistical quality by allowing a delay where needed in order to minimise the risk of errors and the risk of misinforming voters.</p> <p>Uncontroversial releases can continue as normal.</p>	<p>For statistics brought forward, risk of criticism that the decision will add undue weight to the importance of the statistics in a way that is not impartial.</p> <p>For statistics delayed, risk of criticism from those wishing to see the figures before they vote.</p> <p>Relies on judgement to be made about what constitutes 'significant public interest'.</p>
<p>Alternative A All statistics of <i>significant public interest</i> should be brought forward to the day before polling day.</p>	<p>No delay to any statistics.</p>	<p>Risk to statistical quality by reducing planned quality assurance time at a late stage in production, leading to errors in the statistics and the risk of misinforming voters.</p> <p>Relies on judgement to be made about what constitutes 'significant public interest'.</p>
<p>Alternative B All <i>statistics of significant public interest</i> should be delayed until the next day.</p>	<p>No risk to statistical quality.</p>	<p>Statistics not available to inform voters.</p> <p>Relies on judgement to be made about what constitutes 'significant public interest'.</p>
<p>Alternative C A blanket approach, all statistics should be brought forward to the day before polling day.</p>	<p>No delay to any statistics.</p> <p>No reliance on judgement.</p>	<p>Risk to statistical quality by reducing planned quality assurance time at a late stage in production, leading to errors in the statistics and the risk of misinforming voters.</p> <p>Uncontroversial statistics would be needlessly put at risk of error.</p>
<p>Alternative D A blanket approach, all statistics should be delayed until the next day.</p>	<p>No risk to statistical quality.</p> <p>No reliance on judgement.</p>	<p>Statistics not available to inform voters.</p> <p>Uncontroversial releases would be needlessly delayed.</p>
<p>Alternative E Do not schedule any statistical releases on a Thursday.</p>	<p>Would avoid any conflict of timing as British convention is that polling occurs on Thursdays.</p> <p>No delay to any statistics.</p> <p>No risk to statistical quality.</p>	<p>Fewer feasible days would be available for the GSS to publish releases.</p> <p>Could be considered an extreme response to an infrequent event.</p>

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-39695598>