

REPORTING A BREACH OF THE CODE OF PRACTICE FOR OFFICIAL STATISTICS

1. Core Information

Title of statistical output and link	UK Labour Market: March 2019 https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/uklabourmarketstatistiscsmarch2019
Name of producer organisation	Office for National Statistics
Division and Branch	Labour Market and Households
Responsible Divisional Director (DD)	David Freeman
Name and contact details of person reporting the breach	Name: David Freeman Email: david.freeman@ons.gov.uk Telephone: 07917 108623
Departmental Statistics Head of Profession	Debra Prestwood
Link to published statement about the breach (if relevant)	https://twitter.com/ONS/status/1107938690456793088
Date of breach report	19 March 2019

2. Circumstances of breach

Relevant principle(s) and practice(s)	T3 – Orderly release
Date of occurrence of breach	19 March 2019
<p>On Tuesday 19 March ONS held its regular monthly Labour Market ‘lock in’ briefing for certified news wire journalists.</p> <p>Under the established procedure, once the agencies have had a chance to test their connections, the press officer in charge of the briefing presses the switch disabling the journalists’ phones and internet connections and isolating the briefing room from electronic contact with the outside world. This must take place before any data are presented to the briefing, as required by the Media Relations Office Security Protocol.</p> <p>On this occasion, the Senior Press Officer in charge failed to press the switch before presenting the bulletin at around 8:50am. The problem did not become apparent until</p>	

some way through the briefing (around 09:10am), when one agency journalist pointed out that their computer seemed to be online and may have posted data. The Senior Press Officer chairing checked the switch and realising the error immediately switched it to red.

However, upon checking the agency's website, it became clear they had already published headline statistics. This happened because the agency systems are set up so journalists in Drummond Gate can queue up their reports for instant publication when the lines are made live again at 9:30am. Thus, if the lines are inadvertently not disconnected at the start of the briefing, their material will publish automatically.

At this point the Senior Press Officer chairing the briefing immediately contacted the Head of Media who assessed the situation. He ascertained from the agency that it would not be possible to withdraw the data as it had already been posted to a number of news websites. The Senior Press Officer then asked whether the other agencies were ready to publish their reports. On the assurance that they were all ready to publish he authorised all of the agencies to release their material.

This took place at approximately 09:15.

The Head of Media then contacted the Digital Publishing Team, informed of the accidental release and recommended the early publication of the full bulletin on the ONS website. He then alerted the National Statistician, Director General for Economic Statistics and the Director of Policy and Communications to the error.

The bulletin was published on the ONS website at 9:30am.

A statement to the media was signed off by the Director General for Economic Statistics which was tweeted from the main ONS account as well as being emailed to media subscribers to the Labour Market release alerts. This took place at 09.43am.

3. Impact of the breach

The breach meant that the agency's subscribers could see the latest figures c. 20 minutes early and could then pass onto their contacts. The corrective action taken meant that a wider range of users who subscribe to other agencies in the lock-in could access the data. However, due to the safeguards in place on the ONS website to prevent early release, it would have introduced a risk of late publication to push the release through in the short time available.

4. Corrective actions (taken or planned) to prevent re-occurrence

The practices governing the running of a lock-in briefing were last reviewed in February 2018. They are well understood by press officers conducting the briefings and have been followed for more than ten years without any incidents of this nature. There were two very experienced and senior members of the media team in attendance who have successfully conducted hundreds of similar briefings.

To ensure that this simple case of human error is not repeated in future we will have a physical check list in the room for each lock in to be ticked off before any data are revealed. This will include:

1. Secure the exit
2. Press the switch to disable telephones and internet connections
3. Test an agency phone to ensure no dialling tone
4. Reveal slide headlines
5. Hand out data

ONS will amend the standard operating procedure to include this practice.

5. Comment from the Office for Statistics Regulation

Orderly release arrangements are an important part of establishing and maintaining the trustworthiness of statistics and organisations that produce them. We welcome that in response to the rare failing of its normal processes for providing briefing to carefully selected journalists, ONS took immediate action to consider how best to remedy the situation on 19 March, and to consider what steps it might take to enhance the robustness of its processes.

We consider that ONS should reflect on two further points. First, any access to data outside of those responsible for statistical production and publication carries with it a risk of a breach. Conversely, briefing journalists before the standard release time is beneficial to enable insights from the statistics to be drawn more quickly and more widely. We consider that ONS should formally weigh up the relative risks and merits of continuing its practice of providing press lock-ins and review whether any changes are needed to these arrangements. Second, more-equal access would have been provided had ONS brought forward the publication of the Labour Market statistics bulletin. We understand that the ONS website was not able to do this. We consider that ONS should review its publication arrangements to ensure that in exceptional situations like this, its statistics can be published more quickly, or for it to provide key statistics through other media platforms such as Twitter.

Regarding the process of reporting the breach, there were significant failings in the ONS system of informing the Office for Statistics Regulation. We are grateful that ONS has implemented new breach reporting procedures to ensure swifter engagement with us.