

REPORTING A BREACH OF THE CODE OF PRACTICE FOR STATISTICS

1. Core Information

Title and link to statistical output	Unit Labour Costs https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/ukproductivityapri1tojune2019
Name of producer organisation	Office for National Statistics (ONS) Division: Productivity, Innovation, Engagement and Research Branch: Labour productivity
Responsible Divisional Director	Richard Heys
Name and contact details of person dealing with report	Name: Katherine Kent Email: katherine.kent@ons.gov.uk Telephone: 01633 455829
Departmental Statistics Head of Profession	Debra Prestwood
Link to published statement about the breach (if relevant)	N/A
Date of breach report	11/10/2019

2. Circumstances of breach

Relevant principle(s) and practice(s)	Trustworthiness: T3.3 Orderly release of statistics
Date of occurrence of breach	08/10/2019
<p>Draft unpublished estimates of unit labour costs sent to Bank of England at 9:30 on 8 October 2019. This breach happened under an unusual set of circumstances as ONS regularly publishes the whole suite of productivity estimates quarterly. However, this quarter, following extensive improvements introduced into the national accounts as part of Blue Book 2019, further time was needed to quality assure some of the draft outputs. ONS took the decision to defer publication of Unit Labour Costs, from 8 October to 20 November 2019. This decision was pre-announced on the website on 7 October 2019.</p> <p>After deferring publication, not all the required actions were taken to prevent some draft data being sent to the Bank of England. On 8 October, some draft estimates of unit labour costs were automatically uploaded to a central shared database, from a designated status, where only the Bank of England can retrieve data uploaded by ONS. All the data had been uploaded into the publication system as part of the normal dissemination process – the decision to defer the publication came after this had been completed. These data were draft because they were not published on 8 October and the values could potentially change with the extra quality assurance put in place before they are published.</p> <p>On discovery of the upload, ONS immediately contacted the Bank of England to ask them to delete the series. By the end of the day (8th October), the draft data had been removed from the central shared database and replaced by ONS previously published series from the previous quarter.</p> <p>Order of events:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The ONS labour productivity team loaded data to ONS’s central sharing database in a ‘holding status’. An automatic overnight task prepared the unit labour cost time series (known as UCST), to be published on the website at 9:30. 2. Because unit labour costs were not being published, the UCST data series were correctly not picked up and therefore, correctly, not published to the ONS website. 	

3. In parallel the team successfully cancelled the manual task which copies the latest unit labour cost series into the public status of the central shared database.

However, ONS productivity team were unaware that ONS also send an automatic feed to the Bank of England in a separate status saved in this central shared database.

4. The draft estimates were loaded into the central shared database in a status where only the Bank of England can download the data.
5. At 9.30am the ONS discovered this had been done in error and investigated which data series and time periods were affected. ONS contacted the Bank of England at 11:44 to explain what datasets were affected.
6. ONS liaised with the Bank of England to identify the best way to rectify the mistake. The Bank and ONS agreed the best solution was for ONS to resend a complete copy of last quarter's dataset and for the Bank of England to load these values. This corrective action would over-write the draft values in the database.
7. At 16:52 ONS notified the Bank of England that a new dataset had been delivered.
8. The Bank of England confirmed they received and uploaded the old values (which then replaced the draft values sent in error).
9. The Bank of England confirmed it was unlikely that the data was used internally as this was not a particularly busy time for downloading data. The data was not shared externally.

3. Impact of the breach

We conclude that the impact of the breach was minor. The data were working level draft estimates and the limited set of individuals who saw these were contacted to explain not to use them.

In addition, unit labour costs are not market sensitive and users had already been made aware these data were not going to be available and so would not have expected data to be available.

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

The ONS labour productivity team have had training on how to amend and stop automatic data flows (if this is needed in the future). The desk notes in the branch have been updated accordingly for all staff, including new starters.

The ONS labour productivity team now know the correct processes and practice to follow (including which colleagues in ONS and the Bank of England to inform) if any statistics are being postponed.

Awareness of this issue, together with the new guidance, has been shared with all managers in the Division. This means that branch heads across ONS's Productivity, Innovation, Engagement and Research division are aware of how to amend and stop tasks if necessary in the future.

The labour productivity team are also discussing this with data suppliers within ONS and exploring the possibility of reviewing the delivery process (so that they are less likely to postpone data in the future).