

REPORT OF A BREACH OF THE CODE OF PRACTICE FOR STATISTICS



1. Core Information

Title of statistical output and link	Quarterly mortality report, England: October to December 2019 and year-end review
Name of producer organisation	Office for National Statistics (ONS)
Division and Branch	Health-adjusted life expectancy (HALE), Mortality Analysis
Responsible Divisional Director (DD)	Ben Humberstone
Name and contact details of person reporting the breach	Name: Sarah Caul Email: sarah.caul@ons.gov.uk Telephone: 01633 456490
Departmental Statistics Head of Profession	Debra Prestwood
Link to published statement about the breach (if relevant)	N/A
Date of breach report	04/03/2020

2. Circumstances of breach

Relevant principle(s) and practice(s)	Trustworthiness: Orderly release T3.4 - The circulation of statistics in their final form ahead of their publication should be restricted to eligible recipients. No indication of the statistics should be made public and the statistics should not be given to any other party without prior permission for access.
Date of occurrence of breach	02/03/2020
<p>The ONS quarterly mortality report, England was due to be published on Tuesday 3 March 2020. Analysts at Public Health England (PHE) have confidential access to this report, for quality assurance purposes. ONS sent PHE the report on Thursday 27 February.</p> <p>PHE analysts had prepared a ministerial briefing on the release of their Health Inequalities Dashboard; that dashboard was also due for publication on Tuesday 3 March. This briefing was due to be sent to Ministers at 9.30am on 3 March 2020.</p> <p>As the dashboard was reporting on inequality in life expectancy, and was being produced on the same day as the release of ONS's quarterly mortality report, PHE decided to add in the latest life expectancy figures from the ONS quarterly mortality report.</p> <p>There were two versions of the Ministerial briefing – one with and one without the unpublished life expectancy data. However, PHE had only been granted access to the data for quality assurance (QA) purposes only.</p> <p>PHE had been sharing the ministerial briefing (the version without unpublished life expectancy data) with a specified Communications lead with permission from the ONS Statistics Head of Profession. Late on the afternoon of 2 March 2020, the version with unpublished data was accidentally sent to the specified Communications lead. The file included the following points based on previously unpublished data:</p>	

- The provisional estimates of life expectancy in England in 2019 are 79.9 years for males and 83.6 years for females. These are the highest ever life expectancies in England.
- The provisional estimates for 2019 are higher than the 2018 estimates for life expectancy at birth by 0.3 years for males, and by 0.4 years for females. Life expectancy also increased at older ages, by 0.3 years for both sexes at age 65.
- Between 2018 and 2019 there were statistically significant decreases in the provisional annual age-standardised mortality rates of circulatory disease, influenza and pneumonia, and other respiratory diseases, for both sexes and all age groups over 75 years.

The version of the briefing including pre-publication figures was sent to one individual in the Communications team and not shared any further.

3. Impact of the breach

One individual in PHE's Communications team had sight of the data the evening before the release. It was not shared any further either within or outside of the organisation.

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

The ONS Head of Profession for Statistics has spoken to their counterpart at Public Health England and reiterated the controls which must be put in place when handling ONS data prior to publication.

Additionally, it has been reiterated to PHE that they are receiving the data for QA purposes only and must not use their privileged access to prepare briefings for Ministers or others.