

Report of a breach of the Code of Practice for Statistics

Core Information

Title and link to statistical output	National flu and COVID-19 surveillance report: 8 October 2020 (week 41) https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-flu-and-covid-19-surveillance-reports
Name of producer organisation	Public Health England
Name and contact details of person dealing with report	Jamie LopezBernal (Jamie.lopezbernal2@phe.gov.uk) Mary Ramsay (Mary.ramsay@phe.gov.uk)
Name and contact details of Head of Profession for Statistics or Lead Official	Clare Griffiths (clare.griffiths@phe.gov.uk)
Link to published statement about the breach (if relevant)	
Date of breach report	09 October 2020

Circumstances of breach

Relevant principle(s) and practice(s)	Trustworthiness: Principle T3, Practice T3.2
Date of occurrence of breach	08 October 2020
<p>Ed Humpherson (Director General for Regulation at the Office for Statistics Regulation) has written to Michael Brodie (Chief Executive of Public Health England) concerning the delay to the National flu and COVID-19 surveillance report which occurred on 8 October 2020. The letter highlights that while there are times when a publication may need to be delayed, for example, to address quality concerns with the data being published, it is important that these delays are clearly communicated and decisions are informed by the Head of Profession for Statistics. The Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) expect the Head of Profession for Statistics to engage experts in PHE (and more widely), and if necessary, consult the National Statistician.</p> <p>The national flu and covid-19 surveillance report, which is a new publication from 8 October 2020 (week 41), has been scheduled to be published at 2pm every Thursday. This report replaces the previously published weekly national flu reports (official statistics) and the weekly COVID-19 surveillance report (published since March 2020 and not an official statistic). A breach occurred on 8 October 2020 when the National flu and COVID-19 surveillance report due to be published at 2PM was delayed until 5PM, this delay was not announced.</p> <p>The method for calculating positivity changed for this report and it was identified on the evening of Wednesday 7 October 2020 that the method differed to that included in a separate situational awareness report presented to senior officials and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. A decision was taken on Thursday morning to delay the publication so that the Chief Medical Officer and Secretary of State could be updated on the change.</p> <p>The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is updated on the situational awareness report on a weekly basis on a Wednesday. This situational report informs the decision on watchlist areas, so if the method had impacted on the watchlist decision there could have been misalignment between the report data and the watchlist.</p>	

Updating the situational awareness report and briefing the minister on the change in method and revised figures was only possible at 4pm on 8 October 2020, and publication was delayed until this occurred. The report was therefore published at 5pm after the sign off, instead of the scheduled 2pm release.

Impact of the breach

The published version of the national flu and COVID-19 report was not available for the PHE, Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and NHS England influenza activity coordination meeting. A verbal update was provided at the influenza activity coordination meeting based on the pre-release version. A statement was not put up on the website alerting users of the delayed publication. There was no external impact nor an impact on decision making as this was the first report combining both influenza and COVID-19 surveillance. Had the reports been published separately (as in previous weeks) these reports would have been published later than this combined report.

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

Relevant colleagues within PHE and DHSC were informed of the delay. The report was published three hours after the official statistic announcement time and therefore did not have a large impact on its audience. The new approach to positivity calculation is being incorporated into other internal and external situational awareness reports. In future, we will aim to, where possible, plan methodological changes in advance with all relevant parties briefed ahead of publication. A weekly meeting has been established to review definitions and approaches to analyses to reduce the risk of late changes to methodology.

The [letter](#) from the Office for Statistics Regulation sets out expectations from the Code of Practice for Statistics around decision making and the role of the Head of Profession. These expectations should be considered to help prevent re-occurrence.