
Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation

Michael Brodie
Chief Executive
Public Health England
(By email)

21 October 2020

Dear Mr Brodie

Official Statistics: National flu and COVID-19 surveillance reports

I am writing about delays to the release of statistics published by Public Health England (PHE). Most recently, on 8 October the National flu and COVID-19 surveillance reports, which are classified as official statistics, were delayed from 2pm until 5pm.

PHE make use of and publish a wealth of data supporting the core activities of government, informing decisions and tracking outcomes. Your coronavirus dashboard is a key source of information for many people, getting millions of hits each week, and the information you publish in your surveillance report supports the public in understanding decisions around local lockdowns. It is an impressive achievement for a small team to produce these figures in such a timely way and we appreciate the effort that has been put into making the data available so widely.

The importance of what you publish is unquestionable and it is essential that the public have confidence in it. The [Code of Practice for Statistics](#) supports public confidence in statistics by setting out clear commitments for official statistics producers.

Meeting the expectations of the Code helps you as an organisation demonstrate trustworthiness which in turns supports confidence in you and the data you publish. For example, it supports transparency and equality of access, and highlights the importance of independent decision making. To support this, we were pleased that you pre-announced the decision to combine the flu and COVID-19 surveillance reports.

However, some of your recent publications have been delayed, including the National flu and COVID-19 surveillance official statistics publication on 8 October. 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. We

would expect the Head of Profession for Statistics to engage experts in PHE (and more widely), and if necessary consult the National Statistician. The Code sets out expectations around decision making and the role of the Head of Profession:

- Changes to pre-announced release dates or times should be agreed by the Chief Statistician/Head of Profession for Statistics. Any changes should be announced promptly, explaining the reasons for the change. (T3.2).
- The Head of Profession for Statistics should have sole authority for deciding on methods, standards and procedures, and on the content and timing of the release of regular and ad hoc official statistics. (T2.1)
- The Head of Profession for Statistics should actively advocate the application of the Code pillars of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value to all those involved in producing, publishing and using statistics and data in the organisation. (T2.2)
- As the principal adviser and accountable officer on statistical matters within the organisation, the views of the Head of Profession for Statistics should be considered in all matters relating to statistics and data. (T2.3)
- The Head of Profession for Statistics should report immediately any concerns regarding professional independence and accidental or wrongful release of statistics to the National Statistician (T2.7) and should report any concerns about continuing to meet the principles of the Code to me as Director General for Regulation (T2.8).

I would be happy to meet to discuss the value of official statistics and the Code of Practice if you would find it helpful.

I am copying this letter to Sir Ian Diamond, the National Statistician and Clare Griffiths, PHE Head of Profession for Statistics.

Yours sincerely



Ed Humpherson
Director General for Regulation