

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Annual Employment Statistics from the Business Register and Employment Survey

(produced by the Office for National Statistics)

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About the UK Statistics Authority

The UK Statistics Authority is an independent body operating at arm's length from government as a non-ministerial department, directly accountable to Parliament. It was established on 1 April 2008 by the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*.

The Authority's overall objective is to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. It is also required to promote and safeguard the quality and comprehensiveness of official statistics, and good practice in relation to official statistics.

The Statistics Authority has two main functions:

1. oversight of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) – the executive office of the Authority;
2. independent scrutiny (monitoring and assessment) of all official statistics produced in the UK.

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ASSESSMENT AND DESIGNATION

The *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007* gives the UK Statistics Authority a statutory power to assess sets of statistics against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*.

Assessment will determine whether it is appropriate for the statistics to be designated as National Statistics.

Designation as National Statistics means that the statistics comply with the *Code of Practice*. The *Code* is wide-ranging. Designation can be interpreted to mean that the statistics: meet identified user needs; are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and are explained well.

Designation as National Statistics should not be interpreted to mean that the statistics are always correct. For example, whilst the *Code* requires statistics to be produced to a level of accuracy that meets users' needs, it also recognises that errors can occur – in which case it requires them to be corrected and publicised.

Assessment Reports will not normally comment further on a set of statistics, for example on their validity as social or economic measures. However, Reports may point to such questions if the Authority believes that further research would be desirable.

Assessment Reports typically provide an overview of any noteworthy features of the methods used to produce the statistics, and will highlight substantial concerns about quality. Assessment Reports also describe aspects of the ways in which the producer addresses the 'sound methods and assured quality' principle of the *Code*, but do not themselves constitute a review of the methods used to produce the statistics. However the *Code* requires producers to "seek to achieve continuous improvement in statistical processes by, for example, undertaking regular reviews".

The Authority may grant designation on condition that the producer body takes steps, within a stated timeframe, to fully meet the *Code's* requirements. This is to avoid public confusion and does not reduce the obligation to comply with the *Code*.

The Authority grants designation on the basis of three main sources of information:

- i. factual evidence and assurances by senior statisticians in the producer body;
- ii. the views of users who we contact, or who contact us, and;
- iii. our own review activity.

Should further information come to light subsequently which changes the Authority's analysis, it may withdraw the Assessment Report and revise it as necessary.

It is a statutory requirement on the producer body to ensure that it continues to produce the set of statistics designated as National Statistics in compliance with the *Code of Practice*.

Contents

Section 1: Summary of findings

Section 2: Subject of the assessment

Section 3: Assessment findings

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

Annex 2: Summary of the assessment process and user views

1 Summary of findings

1.1 Introduction

- 1.1.1 This is one of a series of reports¹ prepared under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*². The report covers a forthcoming set of statistics produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), based on data from the Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES)³. These statistics will be reported in a statistical bulletin, *Annual Employment Figures: Business Register Employment Survey*, which is not currently designated as National Statistics.
- 1.1.2 This report was prepared by the Authority's Assessment team, and approved by the Board of the Statistics Authority on the advice of the Head of Assessment.
- 1.1.3 The Act requires all statistics currently designated as National Statistics to be assessed against the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. The Act also allows Ministers or the National Statistician to request an assessment of other official statistics in order for them to gain National Statistics status. This report is in response to such a request.
- 1.1.4 Some members of the Assessment team were granted access to *Annual Employment Figures* in draft format, for the purposes of assessing its content against the principles of the Code of Practice, and the conclusions in this report reflect the content of that draft. The Assessment team has judged the draft as meeting the requirements of the Code of Practice, subject to the caveats listed in section 1.5. Should there be significant changes to the final publication that would lead the Assessment team to different conclusions, the Assessment report may be withdrawn and revised as necessary.

1.2 Decision concerning designation as National Statistics

- 1.2.1 The Statistics Authority judges that the statistics covered by this report are readily accessible, produced according to sound methods and managed impartially and objectively in the public interest, subject to any points for action in this report. The Statistics Authority confirms that the statistics published in *Annual Employment Figures* can be designated as a new National Statistics product, subject to ONS implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5. *Annual Employment Figures* may carry the National Statistics logo when published, on condition that ONS agrees to implement the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and report them to the Authority by January 2011 for Requirement 6 and by April 2011 for Requirements 1 to 5.

¹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

² http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga_20070018_en.pdf

³ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about/surveys/a-z-of-surveys/business-register-and-employment-survey/index.html>

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

- 1.3.1 The introduction of the BRES as the data source for these statistics is likely to lead to improved regional estimates of employment, and reduce burdens on respondents. As BRES integrates two existing surveys, it decreases duplication of efforts. Through more efficient processes, the timeliness of these statistics will also be improved.
- 1.3.2 Awareness of the changes being made to the data source was low amongst the users we contacted, reflecting a lack of adequate user engagement. The introduction of using BRES for employment estimates means that there will be a discontinuity in the time series from the previous survey, the Annual Business Inquiry part 1 (ABI/1). Since BRES is a different measure, comparisons with previous ABI/1 data will have to be made with caution and an understanding of resulting limitations. ONS plans to publish a paper detailing the discontinuity, which should help users make comparisons with previous years.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

- 1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that ONS could strengthen its compliance with the Code. Those which the Assessment team considers essential to enable designation as National Statistics are listed in section 1.5. Other suggestions, which would improve the statistics and the service provided to users but which are not formally required for their designation, are listed at annex 1.

1.5 Requirements for designation as National Statistics

Requirement 1	Take steps to develop a greater understanding of the use made of the statistics; publish the relevant information and assumptions, and use them to better support the use of the statistics (para 3.4).
Requirement 2	Produce consistent historical data where possible and include information on quality (para 3.12).
Requirement 3	Include factual information about the policy or operational context of these statistics (para 3.22).
Requirement 4	Ensure that technical terms are explained in the release (para 3.23).
Requirement 5	Publish records of those who have pre-release access to the statistics prior to release (para 3.27).
Requirement 6	Ensure that all releases are issued at 9.30am on the day of release (para 3.28).

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 *Annual Employment Figures* is a new statistical release which will present statistics on the number of full-time and part-time employees in the United Kingdom. Analyses are provided by region, public/private sector, whether urban or rural, and industry. The release is accompanied by a set of tables which provides greater geographical and industrial detail. The first publication is scheduled for 8 December 2010.
- 2.2 *Annual Employment Figures* is based on data from the BRES. The BRES is a new survey that replaced two established ONS surveys: the Business Register Survey (BRS) and the Annual Business Inquiry part 1 (ABI/1). The main driver for combining the BRS and the ABI/1 was the Allsopp review⁴, which highlighted the need for better regional estimates of employment. In addition to providing data for *Annual Employment Figures*, the BRES is used to maintain the Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR). The IDBR is a list of UK businesses used as a sampling frame for surveys of businesses carried out by ONS and by other government departments. The IDBR is not covered by this assessment.
- 2.3 The BRES is a sample survey of about 80,000 businesses. Like the BRS, the BRES collects some information about whole business enterprises and some about each of the business's sites (that is, the local business units). The enterprise data collected include: business structure, total number of employees, and the total number of sites. At the site level, data collected include: address, business activity, full and part-time employees and turnover for one month. The BRES covers Great Britain only. Statistics for Northern Ireland are collected by the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), and are combined with BRES data to produce UK estimates for *Annual Employment Figures*. The BRES also currently excludes agricultural farm businesses, although there are arrangements in place to include this in the future with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), which currently provides aggregate estimates for this sector.
- 2.4 Users can apply for a licence to access employment statistics at a greater level of detail than that presented in *Annual Employment Figures*, through NOMIS⁵, a database funded by ONS and hosted by Durham University. There is a £125 charge for this service, which generates a gross income for ONS of about £90,000 per annum.
- 2.5 The estimated cost to ONS of running the BRES is £950,000 per annum. £170,000 of this figure is estimated to be costs incurred in the validation of the aggregated results and production of the final estimates for *Annual Employment Figures*. The BRES is partly funded by the Welsh Assembly Government and the Scottish Government which pay for a 'top-up' sample each year of around £40,000 each.
- 2.6 Alternative employment estimates are available from the Labour Force Survey⁶

⁴ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/development-programmes/allsopp-programme/index.html>

⁵ <http://www.nomisweb.co.uk>

⁶ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about/surveys/a-z-of-surveys/labour-force-survey/index.html>

and Work Force Jobs⁷. The Labour Force Survey is the preferred source for statistics on employment for the whole economy, while Work Force Jobs is the preferred source for statistics on changes in employment at the industry level. The employee estimates of Work Force Jobs are benchmarked to the BRES in the private sector to ensure consistency between estimates.

- 2.7 Annual employment estimates are required to be supplied to Eurostat under the Structural Business Statistics Regulation⁸. These are currently supplied by ABI/1 but will be replaced by BRES-based estimates from 2010. Employment estimates from the BRES are likely to be used widely by local authorities for use in planning and forecasting⁹. The statistics will be used widely as a denominator for other statistics, and for benchmarking. Other organisations will also use the statistics for planning, such as the Highways Agency for impact assessments of new roads. The statistics will also be valuable to academic researchers, who previously used ABI/1 statistics for a range of analytical work. For example, the Institute for Employment Research used ABI/1 data to develop the Working Futures Database¹⁰, which provides forecasts of employment for a ten-year period.

⁷ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/user-guidance/lm-guide/sources/compound/workforce-jobs/index.html>

⁸ http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/european_business/introduction

⁹ For example, Cardiff: http://www.cardiff.gov.uk/ObjView.asp?Object_ID=14076

¹⁰ <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/research/current/wf/wftechnicalreport2004-2014.pdf>

3 Assessment findings

Principle 1: Meeting user needs

The production, management and dissemination of official statistics should meet the requirements of informed decision-making by government, public services, business, researchers and the public.

- 3.1 ONS carried out a 'web consultation'¹¹ about the BRES in 2006. The main proposals were set out for users, along with reasons for the changes, proposed outputs, and details of data items which were available from BRS or ABI/1 but that the BRES would not collect. ONS used the responses to make decisions about the development of the BRES, and produced, but didn't publish, a summary report. For example, due to user concerns about the loss of information on gender splits in employment, ONS decided to derive these using ASHE data. The consultation ran for three months, publicised through a link on ONS's website and the NOMIS website, and received 30 responses. ONS has a list of over 600 users of ABI/1 statistics; to maximise response to any future consultation exercises we suggest it use this list to alert users. We also suggest that the internal summary report of this consultation be published and circulated to respondents.
- 3.2 Local authority users have been kept informed of developments through meetings of the Central and Local Information Partnership (CLIP), at which ONS has presented progress on the BRES. Minutes of these meetings can be found on the CLIP website¹².
- 3.3 As for ABI/1, users requesting access to detailed low-level statistics through NOMIS will have to apply for a licence. As part of their application, users must give details of what they intend to use the statistics for. This allows ONS to build up a valuable list of users, with details of their intended use.
- 3.4 As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should take steps to develop a greater understanding of the use made of the statistics. It should publish the relevant information and assumptions, and use them to better support the use of the statistics¹³ (Requirement 1). We suggest ONS use the NOMIS-application information to improve its understanding of the use made of these statistics, and to make improvements to *Annual Employment Figures*.
- 3.5 The draft statistical release seen by the Assessment team includes a statement on how the statistics could be used. We suggest this be revised in the light of the understanding gained from implementing Requirement 1.

¹¹ http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/consultations/downloads/BRES_users.pdf

¹² <http://www.clip.local.gov.uk>

¹³ In relation to Principle 1 Practice 2 of the Code of Practice.

Principle 2: Impartiality and objectivity

Official statistics, and information about statistical processes, should be managed impartially and objectively.

- 3.6 Based on the draft output seen by the Assessment team, the statistics in *Annual Employment Figures* will be presented impartially and objectively. The change from the ABI/1 and the BRS to the BRES has been announced through ONS's website, the NOMIS website, in the last ABI/1 release, and in an email to users of ABI/1 statistics.
- 3.7 Revisions to the statistics may be made at the time of the next publication, due to late returns or corrections to survey responses from businesses. A revisions policy has been drafted by ONS and will be published alongside the statistics.

Principle 3: Integrity

At all stages in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics, the public interest should prevail over organisational, political or personal interests.

- 3.8 No incidents of political pressure or abuses of trust were reported to or identified by the Assessment team in the course of this assessment.

Principle 4: Sound methods and assured quality

Statistical methods should be consistent with scientific principles and internationally recognised best practices, and be fully documented. Quality should be monitored and assured taking account of internationally agreed practices.

- 3.9 *Annual Employment Figures* is based on data from the BRES. Technical information on the methods used for the BRES is contained in internal ONS documents. A Summary Quality Report (SQR), containing information on methods and quality, will be released alongside the statistics. ONS provided a draft of the SQR as part of the evidence submitted for this Assessment.
- 3.10 The draft statistical release seen by the Assessment team included a table containing coefficients of variation for high-level estimates of employment. This measure allows users to calculate a confidence interval. We suggest ONS considers providing confidence intervals as some users may prefer these. The statistical release will provide information on the response rate of the BRES, while the SQR will explain various aspects of quality including non-sampling errors.
- 3.11 A series of automated validation checks are carried out on data from the BRES to identify inconsistencies and identify areas for investigation. Coherence checks are carried out against other business surveys, and where differences are found the business is contacted to check whether the data are accurate.
- 3.12 Alongside the release of *Annual Employment Figures*, ONS plans to publish an article on the discontinuity between estimates of employment based on the ABI/1 and the new estimates based on the BRES. We were also told that it might be possible to revise ABI/1 estimates to produce a consistent time series of employment. Included in the draft statistical release are notes to explain that caution should be taken when comparing BRES estimates with ABI/1 estimates will result in discontinuous estimates. We were told that a link will be provided to an article explaining the impact of the discontinuity between estimates. We were also told that ONS is working on re-scaling the data, but that a re-scale may not be appropriate if it goes back too far. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should produce consistent historical data for *Annual Employment Figures* where possible and provide information about their quality¹⁴ (Requirement 2).
- 3.13 Employment data for Northern Ireland were not previously available from the ABI/1. The BRES will provide estimates for Northern Ireland, allowing UK-wide comparisons over time.

¹⁴ In relation to Principle 4 Practice 7 of the Code of Practice.

Principle 5: Confidentiality

Private information about individual persons (including bodies corporate) compiled in the production of official statistics is confidential, and should be used for statistical purposes only.

- 3.14 ONS has assured us that it takes all necessary steps to protect the confidentiality of the data that it collects. ONS has developed statistical disclosure control policies for different types of statistical outputs. ONS told us that these policies balance the requirements for protecting confidentiality with user needs. Statistics released in *Annual Employment Figures* are presented at a high level, with minimal risk of disclosure.
- 3.15 NOMIS provides users with access to more detailed data than are available elsewhere. For ABI/1 data, users could apply to ONS for a *Chancellor of the Exchequer's Notice* – a form of data access agreement which provides a legal gateway for users to access potentially disclosive employment data. There is a charge for this service (see para 2.4). These arrangements will continue for data collected in the BRES. Potentially disclosive statistics will be flagged to the user. ONS is currently developing additional methods of disclosure control for these statistics.

Principle 6: Proportionate burden

The cost burden on data suppliers should not be excessive and should be assessed relative to the benefits arising from the use of the statistics.

3.16 The burden placed on businesses responding to the BRES is measured via a separate voluntary survey and reported in the ONS Simplification Plan¹⁵. There are special arrangements in place for some large businesses, which can complete an Excel spreadsheet rather than filling in a separate paper questionnaire for each site. Further efficiencies in collection methods are being considered by ONS, such as internet data collection.

¹⁵ http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_other/SimplificationPlan2009.pdf

Principle 7: Resources

The resources made available for statistical activities should be sufficient to meet the requirements of this Code and should be used efficiently and effectively.

- 3.17 The introduction of the BRES has allowed ONS to make cost savings by combining two previous surveys. The production of *Annual Employment Figures* appears to be adequately resourced.
- 3.18 A centralised recruitment process in ONS ensures that appropriately skilled people are employed in the production process. Appropriate competency frameworks are in place and staff are supported in developing their skills.

Principle 8: Frankness and accessibility

Official statistics, accompanied by full and frank commentary, should be readily accessible to all users.

- 3.19 Previously, ABI/1 statistics were released solely through the NOMIS website, without an accompanying statistical bulletin. ONS published a statistical bulletin for ABI/1 for the first time in December 2009. The 'web consultation' (mentioned at para 3.1) was therefore geared towards users of the NOMIS data rather than the new statistical release of *Annual Employment Figures*. We suggest ONS seek feedback from users about the new statistical release.
- 3.20 The NOMIS website will include a further breakdown of the number of employees, by region and industry. Detailed employee estimates from the BRES will be accessible by application only.
- 3.21 We were told that additional data tables, with detailed geographic breakdowns, were to be made available on ONS's website instead of being directly included in the statistical release. We suggest that the statistical release provides clear links to these tables and information about the quality of these estimates.
- 3.22 The draft of *Annual Employment Figures* seen by the Assessment team contained commentary on the statistics which aid their interpretation. The potential for more detailed analysis will increase as data become available for more years. The commentary does not include information regarding the policy or operational context. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should include factual information about the policy or operational context of these statistics¹⁶ (Requirement 3).
- 3.23 The draft release contained some technical terms, such as '2-digit industries', which were not explained for the non-expert user. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should ensure that technical terms are explained in the release¹⁷ (Requirement 4).

¹⁶ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 2 of the Code of Practice.

¹⁷ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 5 of the Code of Practice.

Protocol 1: User engagement

Effective user engagement is fundamental both to trust in statistics and securing maximum public value. This Protocol draws together the relevant practices set out elsewhere in the Code and expands on the requirements in relation to consultation.

3.24 The requirements for this Protocol are covered elsewhere in this report.

Protocol 2: Release practices

Statistical reports should be released into the public domain in an orderly manner that promotes public confidence and gives equal access to all, subject to relevant legislation.

- 3.25 All ONS releases are accessible through the National Statistics Publication Hub. ONS publishes a full timetable of releases, and announces any changes to the timetable.
- 3.26 Many of the users that responded to the Assessment team's consultation had concerns about the timeliness of ABI/1 statistics, which were previously published 15 months after the end of the data collection period. The first release of *Annual Employment Figures* will also be published 15 months after the end of the data collection period. However, ONS told us that they plan to improve the timeliness of the 2011 release of *Annual Employment Figures* by three months, publishing in September 2011 rather than December 2011. ONS told us that it would be difficult to make further improvements to the timeliness of the statistics without compromising on accuracy, because there are often a lot of late returns or errors that need to be followed up with businesses.
- 3.27 ONS told us that a decision has yet to be made on whether to grant any pre-release access to *Annual Employment Figures*. If it decides to do so, then as part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should publish records of those who have pre-release access to the statistics¹⁸ (Requirement 5).
- 3.28 The Code requires National Statistics releases to be issued at 9.30am on the day of publication. ONS's website systems do not enable releases to be published simultaneously, which means there is sometimes a delay beyond 9.30am. ONS informed us that this matter is being reviewed as part of the web development programme, which is due to be completed in early 2011. As part of the designation as National Statistics ONS should ensure that all releases are issued at 9.30am on the day of release¹⁹ (Requirement 6).

¹⁸ In relation to Protocol 2 Practice 7 of the Code of Practice.

¹⁹ In relation to Protocol 2 Practice 4 of the Code of Practice and previously specified in Assessment Reports 34, 45, 47 and 56.

Protocol 3: The use of administrative sources for statistical purposes

Administrative sources should be fully exploited for statistical purposes, subject to adherence to appropriate safeguards.

3.29 Data from VAT and PAYE registers are used to identify new businesses. A sample of these businesses is contacted for the BRES to ensure that records are correct for the IDBR and to gather additional information about the businesses for *Annual Employment Figures*. This is an example of maximising the use of administrative data.

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to *Annual Employment Figures*, in the interest of the public good. These are not formally required for designation, but the Assessment team considers that their implementation will improve public confidence in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics.

- | | |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Suggestion 1 | Use the ABI/1 user list to alert users to any future consultation exercises (para 3.1). |
| Suggestion 2 | Publish the internal summary report of the BRES web consultation and circulate to respondents (para 3.1). |
| Suggestion 3 | Use the information provided by those applying for a data licence to improve the understanding of the use made of these statistics, and to make improvements to <i>Annual Employment Figures</i> (para 3.4). |
| Suggestion 4 | Revise the user statement in the statistical release in light of the understanding gained from implementing Requirement 1 (para 3.5) |
| Suggestion 5 | Consider providing confidence intervals for the statistics (para 3.10). |
| Suggestion 6 | Seek feedback from users on the <i>Annual Employment Figures</i> release (para 3.19). |
| Suggestion 7 | Include clear links to the additional tables in the statistical release (para 3.21). |

Annex 2: Summary of assessment process and users' views

- A2.1 This assessment was conducted from September to November 2010.
- A2.2 The Assessment team – Joe Cuddeford and Kim Reimann – agreed the scope and timetable for this assessment with ONS in May 2010. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 1 June 2011. The Assessment team subsequently met ONS during September 2010 to review compliance with the Code of Practice, taking account of the written evidence provided and other relevant sources of evidence.

Summary of users contacted, and issues raised

A2.3 Part of the assessment process involves our consideration of the views of users. We approach some known and potential users of the set of statistics, and we invite comments via an open note on the Authority's website. This process is not a statistical survey, but it enables us to gain some insights about the extent to which the statistics meet users' needs and the extent to which users feel that the producers of those statistics engage with them. We are aware that responses from users may not be representative of wider views, and we take account of this in the way that we prepare assessment reports.

A2.4 The Assessment team received 16 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Users within ONS	2
Local authorities	7
Government departments	2
Private sector	3
Not-for-profit organisations	2

A2.5 Most of the users we contacted were previous users of ABI/1 statistics. Some were aware of the BRES, but since statistics from the BRES have not yet been published, users provided views on their experience of ABI/1 statistics, or, in some cases, on the basis of their understanding of ONS's plans for the BRES. Users were generally happy with the way they had been consulted with by ONS, although some were not clear on what the plans for the introduction of the BRES were.

A2.6 The plan to publish *Annual Employment Figures* as a statistical release, rather than releasing data tables only as for ABI/1, was seen as a positive step as, for example, users can be informed about changes in a more organised way. There were positive comments about the ABI/1 (for example consistency, comprehensiveness and level of detail), and some areas which users wanted to see improved with the BRES (for example better explanation of the methods used, clearer caveats, and improved timeliness). Some users were concerned that they would not have access to the same level of detail – however, ONS has assured us that they will.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

Draft release of the statistical bulletin, *Annual Employment Figures: Business Register
Employment Survey, 2009*

