

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Post-school Education, Training and Employment

(produced by the Department for Education)

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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*.

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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 Act requires all statistics currently designated as National Statistics to be assessed against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*³. The report covers the set of post-school statistics produced by the Department for Education (DfE) and reported in:

- *Participation in Education, Training and Employment by 16-18 Year Olds in England*⁴ (*Participation*); and
- *Level 2 and 3 Attainment by Young People in England Measured using Matched Administrative Data: Attainment by Age 19 (Provisional)*⁵ (*Attainment*).

1.1.2 The Act also allows departments to request an assessment of other official statistics in order for them to gain National Statistics status. In response to such a request this report also covers the sets of official statistics reported in *NEET Statistics – Quarterly Bulletin*⁶ (*NEET*).

1.1.3 Section 3 of this report adopts an ‘exception reporting’ approach – it includes text only to support the Requirements made to strengthen compliance with the *Code* and Suggestions made to improve confidence in the production, management and dissemination of these statistics. This abbreviated style of report reflects the Head of Assessment’s consideration of aspects of risk and materiality⁷. The Assessment team nonetheless assessed compliance with all parts of the *Code of Practice* and has commented on all those where some remedial action is recommended.

1.1.4 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.

1.2 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

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.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html>

⁴ <http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/allstatistics/a00196804/16-18-participation-sfr>

⁵ <http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/allstatistics/a00196704/level-2-and-3-attainment-by-age-19>

⁶ <http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/datasets/a00199328/dfe-neet-statistics-quarterly-brief-quarter-3-2011>

⁷ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/guidance-about-assessment/criteria-for-deciding-upon-the-format-of-an-assessment-report.pdf>

in this report. The Statistics Authority confirms that the statistics published in *Participation* and *Attainment* are designated as National Statistics and has determined that the statistics published in *NEET* can be designated as a new National Statistics product, subject to DfE implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by June 2012.

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

- 1.3.1 DfE brings together data from a range of administrative and survey sources, reflecting the different types of education, training and employment of young people. The statistics meet the needs of the main users in local and central government. DfE has regular contact with these users, and suppliers, and has developed close ties with other central government departments and agencies with an interest in education.
- 1.3.2 The post-school statistical releases are more suited to expert users and provide only brief commentary about participation and attainment. However DfE presents more detailed commentary about young people not in education, employment or training. The releases clearly set out the differences between the data sources used, although they could provide further information about the quality and reliability of the statistics.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

- 1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that DfE 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	Confirm that, in future, a statement explaining the nature and extent of revisions will be provided at the same time that the statistics are released (para 3.1).
Requirement 2	Provide more information about the quality and reliability of the post-school statistics in relation to the range of potential uses (para 3.2).
Requirement 3	Provide users with links to equivalent statistics for other countries of the UK and publish summary information about any differences (para 3.3).
Requirement 4	Improve the commentary in the post-school statistical releases so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics (para 3.4).
Requirement 5	Review the pre-release access lists with a view to reducing them so that they are restricted to those

people who genuinely require pre-release access (para 3.5).

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 The Department for Education (DfE) publishes statistics on post-school education and training in England. It presents the numbers and proportions of young people aged between 16 and 18 years old participating in full- and part-time education and work-based learning in *Participation in Education, Training and Employment by 16-18 Year Olds in England (Participation)*. The statistics were first published in this form⁸ in 2000 when statistics on participation in education were combined with statistics on the labour market status of young people. *Participation* includes statistics by gender, labour market status, full- or part-time participation, type of institution attended, qualification type (academic or vocational) and qualification level⁹.
- 2.2 DfE has published estimates of attainment at age 19 in *Level 2 and 3 Attainment by Young People in England Measured using Matched Administrative Data: Attainment by Age 19 (Provisional) (Attainment)*. Since 2005 the *Attainment* statistics have been derived from matched administrative sources. Previously, DfE published estimates based on the Labour Force Survey¹⁰ (LFS). The matched data methodology was introduced on the recommendation of a National Statistics Quality Review¹¹.
- 2.3 *NEET Statistics – Quarterly Bulletin (NEET)* presents an overview of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) for ages between 16 and 24 years. It brings together figures from three sources: the annual statistics from *Participation*, quarterly estimates from the most recent LFS data, and regional estimates derived from the Client Caseload Information System (CCIS)¹². CCIS is an administrative database used by Local Authorities (LAs) to record information about the level of educational attainment, training activity and employment status of young people. DfE compiles LA-level NEET estimates from data held on CCIS and publishes¹³ the statistics on its website. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) additionally prepares regional NEET estimates using the LFS for ages 16-24, on behalf of DfE. DfE publishes these tables alongside *NEET* on its website.
- 2.4 Previously, DfE used the post-school statistics to monitor Public Service Agreement¹⁴ targets that related to: participation of young people aged 16-18; attainment at age 19, and the proportion of young people that is NEET. DfE also used the statistics to monitor progress towards National Indicator targets for LAs, for example, on ‘narrowing the gap indicators’ for those receiving free-

⁸ From 1985 to 1999 the figures on education, Government-sponsored and employer-funded training and other education and training (mainly privately funded) were presented separately.

⁹ Qualifications have different levels of difficulty, for example Level 2 represents GCSE A* - C and equivalents, while Level 3 represent A levels and equivalents

¹⁰ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/surveys/respondents/household/labour-force-survey/index.html>

¹¹ NSQR no 38: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/quality/nsqr/theme/children--education-and-skills/index.html>

¹² <http://www.education.gov.uk/16to19/participation/a0074374/nccis-management-information-requirement-from-the-client-caseload-information-system-ccis>

¹³ Connexions Service NEET figures:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/16to19/participation/neet/a0064101/strategies-for-16-to-18-year-olds-not-in-education-employment-or-training-neet>

¹⁴ In 2010, Public Service Agreement Targets ceased to be used as National Indicators
<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=20784973#contents-10>

school meals at age 15. DfE currently uses the statistics to measure progress against some of its Impact Indicators¹⁵, published in its Business Plan¹⁶, which are reported quarterly to HM Treasury. The NEET statistics support the *Building Engagement, Building Futures* strategy¹⁷. The statistics are also used by other central government departments and agencies, in particular BIS, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Young People's Learning Agency. The attainment statistics feed into BIS's Post-16 Education and Skills statistical release¹⁸. Other users include voluntary organisations which use the statistics to support the delivery of their services to young people, and academics who use the statistics for research purposes.

- 2.5 DfE supplies Eurostat¹⁹ with UK-level NEET statistics based on the LFS. ONS is developing a harmonised NEET measure, largely based on DfE's approach, with the support of the devolved administrations.
- 2.6 The staff cost to DfE of producing *Participation* is around £60,000. The cost of producing *Attainment* is around £160,000, including around £100,000 for the provision of matched data, which is also used by the Department for other purposes. It costs DfE around £8,000 per year to produce *NEET*. This excludes the cost of collecting the CCIS data.

¹⁵ Impact Indicators measurement annex:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/aboutdfe/departmentalinformation/business%20plan/a0077279/department-for-education-business-plan-may-2011>

¹⁶ <http://www.education.gov.uk/aboutdfe/departmentalinformation/Business%20Plan>

¹⁷ <http://www.education.gov.uk/a00200853/building-engagement-building-futures>

¹⁸ <http://www.bis.gov.uk/analysis/statistics/further-education>

¹⁹

http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/employment_social_policy_equality/youth_policy/dashboard_youth

3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 The post-school statistical releases present provisional statistics, and highlight where revisions have been made to previously published statistics. However the releases do not sufficiently explain the reason for, nor indicate the impact of, the revisions. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DfE should confirm that, in future, a statement explaining the nature and extent of revisions will be provided at the same time that the statistics are released²⁰ (Requirement 1).
- 3.2 DfE provides some background information in the statistical releases about the underlying data sources, and describes some comparability issues. For example, NEET clearly states that CCIS data are based on actual age, whereas LFS data and administrative data held by DfE are based on academic year. The releases provide confidence intervals for the measures based on the LFS, both nationally and regionally. However, DfE gives little information about other aspects of the quality of the statistics, for example, the completeness of the statistics derived from the administrative sources, or the success rate of matched records. Some information about the coverage of the CCIS data is given in DfE's Statement of Administrative Sources²¹, but this is not highlighted in the statistical releases or on the relevant webpage. The post-school statistical releases also do not comment on the quality of the statistics in relation to the range of potential uses. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DfE should provide more information about the quality and reliability of the post-school statistics in relation to the range of potential uses²² (Requirement 2).
- 3.3 The statistics relate to England. The statistical releases do not provide links to equivalent statistics for the other parts of the UK or explain any differences in the ways that these statistics are defined. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DfE should provide users with links to equivalent statistics for other countries of the UK and publish summary information about any differences²³ (Requirement 3).
- 3.4 *Participation* and *Attainment* include brief commentary alongside the detailed tables. This commentary tends to focus on comparisons with the previous year. Neither release uses charts to illustrate the findings in the main body of the releases. *NEET* uses charts to illustrate the main findings for each source of NEET statistics and presents them alongside the commentary. The descriptions of the statistics are generally straightforward but could be clarified in places, for example, explaining the terms or acronyms within the main body of the report. All releases should provide more narrative which goes further than describing the rises and falls in the statistics, and provide a context to help users to interpret the statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DfE should improve the commentary in the post-school statistical releases so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics²⁴ (Requirement 4). We suggest

²⁰ In relation to Principle 2, Practice 6 of the *Code of Practice*

²¹ <http://www.education.gov.uk/a00196932>

²² In relation to Principle 4, Practice 2 and Principle 8, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

²³ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 6 of the *Code of Practice*

²⁴ In relation to Principle 8, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

that in meeting this requirement DfE should consider the points detailed in annex 2.

- 3.5 DfE grants 36 people pre-release access to *Participation*, 25 people pre-release access to *Attainment* and 48 people pre-release access to *NEET*. It told us that it does review these each time the releases are published. Despite this, and as part of the designation as National Statistics, DfE should review the pre-release access lists with a view to reducing them so that they are restricted to those people who genuinely require pre-release access²⁵ (Requirement 5).

²⁵ In relation to Protocol 2, Practice 7 of the *Code of Practice*

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes a suggestion for improvement to DfE’s post-school statistical outputs, in the interest of the public good. It is not formally required for designation, but the Assessment team considers that its implementation will improve public confidence in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics.

Suggestion 1

Consider the points detailed in annex 2, in seeking to improve the statistical releases (para 3.4).

Annex 2: Compliance with Standards for Statistical Releases

- A2.1 In October 2010, the Statistics Authority issued a statement on *Standards for Statistical Releases*²⁶. Whilst this is not part of the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*, the Authority regards it as advice that will promote both understanding and compliance with the *Code*. In relation to the statistical releases associated with DfE's post-school statistics, this annex comments on compliance with the statement on standards.
- A2.2 In implementing any Requirements of this report (at paragraph 1.5) which relate to the content of statistical releases, we encourage the producer body to apply the standards as fully as possible.

Appropriate identification of the statistics being released

- A2.3 *Attainment* refers to the geographical coverage of the release and reference period in its title but the titles for *Participation* and *NEET* do not. All releases use standard headings, formatting and logos. *NEET* clearly states the frequency of the release; the frequency of *Participation* and *Attainment* is not specifically stated, though it is implied within the text.
- A2.4 All releases clearly display the name of the originating department and the responsible statistician. All releases state or imply which statistics are new, or have been updated since the previous publication.
- A2.5 *NEET* includes a short description of what is covered within each section. *Participation* and *Attainment* do not set out what each section includes, but include a brief introduction which provides an overview of the release.

Include commentary that is helpful to the non-expert and presents the main messages in plain English

- A2.6 *Participation* and *Attainment* include key points sections which present the main messages. *NEET* does not include a key points section.
- A2.7 Generally the language used is straightforward, but in places the releases use terms or acronyms that are not sufficiently explained. *Attainment* discusses Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications, but it is not clear what these qualifications are until the end of the release. Given the focus of the release (educational attainment), good explanations of Level 2 and 3 qualifications are fundamental for understanding and interpreting the statistics appropriately; these terms are not explained at the outset.
- A2.8 *Attainment* provides an explanation of the statistics in the main body of the release, which compares the most recent data with previous years. The commentary is divided into sections about qualification type, institution type, gender and free school meals (used as a proxy for deprivation). Some tables are presented alongside the commentary; however, graphs are not used to

²⁶ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html>

illustrate trends. *NEET* uses graphs to illustrate the main findings from each source of NEET data and presents them alongside commentary. *Participation* illustrates trends using graphs, but these are at the rear of the report rather than alongside the main text. Aside from the key points section, *Participation* does not present any commentary alongside the statistics to aid user interpretation.

Use language that is impartial, objective and professionally sound

A2.9 The language used in all releases is impartial, objective and professionally sound. The descriptive statements within all releases are demonstrably consistent with the statistics presented.

Include information about the context and likely uses

A2.10 None of the releases provides sufficient factual information about the policy or operational context in which the statistics have been collected and will be used. None of the releases provide any information about the uses of the statistics, or comments on the quality and reliability of the statistics in relation to the range of potential uses.

Include, or link to, appropriate metadata

A2.11 All releases include some information about the sources, methods and definitions used to compile the statistics. There is scope to provide or link to more information about how the statistics are compiled, for example, by clarifying how LFS data are used to estimate the participation statistics. The releases do not clearly specify (or link to information about) which population data are used, the adjustments that are made to these data, and any associated sources of error.

A2.12 *Participation* uses the International Labour Organisation's definitions of labour market status to enhance the comparability of the statistics. *NEET* states that some measures of NEET young people are not directly comparable with others, and briefly describes some key differences, for example LA administrative data are based on calendar age. *Attainment* and *Participation* do not provide more information about other similar sources. *Attainment* provides links to other relevant releases. Furthermore, none of the releases makes suitable comparisons with other related statistics, for example, the equivalent statistics in UK devolved administrations.

A2.13 The releases include some information about the quality and reliability of the statistics. For example, *Participation* explains that due to the margin of error surrounding local level population estimates, some participation rates at local authority level can exceed 100 per cent. None of the releases includes, or provides links to, more information to give a more complete picture of the quality of the statistics, including information about sources of error.

Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A3.1 This assessment was conducted from November 2011 to March 2012.

A3.2 The Assessment team – Penny Babb and Ruth James – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of DfE in November. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 2 December 2011. The Assessment team subsequently met DfE during December 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

A3.3 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.

A3.4 The Assessment team received 12 responses from the user and supplier consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Central government	3
Local government	3
Non-departmental public body	1
Voluntary sector	1
Suppliers	4

A3.5 The statistics are used in local government to inform plans for raising the participation age and curriculum priorities and to measure the progressive attainment of different populations of young people. The voluntary sector organisation uses the statistics to provide a national context and illustrate the need for its work.

A3.6 Users are satisfied with the level of engagement from producers and find them responsive and helpful. Generally, users are satisfied that the statistics meet their needs but some users highlighted areas of concern. Some users felt that the use of ONS population data for LAs compromised the accuracy of the statistics. One user commented that differences in definitions and methodology between the attainment statistics and DfE's performance tables were a source of confusion. Some users commented on the language and explanations used in the releases, implying that there is room for improvement. Overall, users told us that the statistics are helpful to their work.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

