

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Council Tax Levels set by Local Authorities in England

*(produced by the Department for
Communities and Local Government)*

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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.

Contact us

Tel: 0845 604 1857

Email: authority.enquiries@statistics.gsi.gov.uk

Website: www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk

UK Statistics Authority
Statistics House
Myddelton Street
London EC1R 1UW

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Council Tax Levels set by Local Authorities

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ASSESSMENT AND DESIGNATION

Under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*, the UK Statistics Authority has a statutory function to assess sets of statistics against the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, with a view to determining whether it is appropriate for the statistics to be designated, or to retain their designation, as National Statistics.

Designation as National Statistics means that the statistics are deemed to be compliant with the Code of Practice. Whilst the Code is wide-ranging, designation may be broadly interpreted to mean that the statistics meet identified user needs; are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and are well explained.

Designation also signifies that, subject to any caveats in this report, the Statistics Authority judges that the statistics are readily accessible, produced according to sound methods and managed impartially and objectively in the public interest.

Assessment reports will not normally comment further, for example on the validity of the statistics as a social or economic measure; though reports may point to such questions if the Authority believes that further research would be desirable.

Designation as National Statistics will sometimes be granted in cases where some changes still need to be made to meet fully the requirements of the Code, on condition that steps are taken by the producer body, within a stated timeframe, to address the weaknesses. This is to avoid public confusion and does not reduce the obligation to comply with the Code.

Designation is granted on the basis of the information provided to the Statistics Authority, primarily by the organisation that produces the statistics. The information includes a range of factual evidence and also assurances by the producer organisation. The views of users are also sought. Should further information come to light subsequently which changes the Authority's analysis, the Assessment report may be withdrawn and revised as necessary.

Once designated as National Statistics, it is a statutory requirement on the producer organisation to ensure that the set of statistics continues to be produced, managed and disseminated 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 reports prepared under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*¹. 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. The report covers *Council Tax Levels set by Local Authorities in England* statistics produced by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

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.

1.2 Decision concerning designation as National Statistics

1.2.1 The Statistics Authority confirms that the statistics published in *Council Tax Levels set by Local Authorities in England* are designated as National Statistics, subject to DCLG implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by October 2010.

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

1.3.1 The statistics are collected under statute and, since local authorities (LAs) cannot collect Council Tax without having submitted the data to DCLG, non-response does not arise. The data are summarised into weighted averages for various types of local authority and presented alongside some historical data. The Statistical Release is well-structured with an appropriate summary and analysis with main points highlighted. Each release also contains a useful glossary and clear, helpful, background notes. The chart in the Release is very well presented.

1.3.2 Users are satisfied with the output and the analytical service received.

1.3.3 The organisation of the statistical system in DCLG is decentralised with a small team in the Head of Profession's² unit. Neither a statistical programme nor a work plan has been prepared and the only budget allocated to the Head of Profession relates to recruitment and expenses for the Head of Profession and related meetings.

1.3.4 User engagement is limited to specific audiences and should be broadened.

¹ http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga_20070018_en.pdf

² A Head of Profession is the person in a Department with overall responsibility for statistical functions.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

- 1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that DCLG 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 below. 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

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| Requirement 1 | Take steps to engage more effectively with users, make those steps known and publish information about users' experiences (para 3.2). |
| Requirement 2 | Adopt systematic statistical planning arrangements (para 3.3). |

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 The statistical release³ provides information about Council Tax levels and associated information for the forthcoming financial year and changes over the previous year. This output was first published as a statistical release in 2005. Prior to this, the information was published in a policy release. The March issue of the release reflects the tax levels set by local authorities before budget capping decisions are taken by the Government.
- 2.2 The statistics are derived from information provided on Budget Requirement (BR) forms. These are submitted by all 326 authorities that issue Council Tax bills and all 95 major precepting authorities in England. Precepting authorities are bodies that can ask those that issue Council Tax bills to collect money on their behalf. Examples of precepting authorities are county councils, police authorities, fire and rescue authorities and the Greater London Authority. The data are collected from local authorities under regulations which are published each year in a Statutory Instrument laid before Parliament. The 2009 Regulations⁴ and the related explanatory memorandum can be found on the Office of Public Sector Information's website.
- 2.3 The data are used within government to inform public and parliamentary debate on Council Tax levels and trends. If capping is being considered, some of the data, together with summary information, will be circulated within government ahead of publication. This information will underpin decisions on whether Ministerial action to cap an individual local authority's set Council Tax level. Should an authority be capped, the authority may have to adjust the previously submitted budgetary requirements and submit its revised data to DCLG. Following any adjustments to local authority budgetary requirements, a revised statistical release will be published⁵.
- 2.4 The data also enable DCLG and its partners to assess progress against Departmental Strategic Objective 1 (DSO1)⁶, in particular Indicator 1.6, *Average percentage increase in Band D Council tax*.
- 2.5 The Council Tax requirement⁷ figure for each year is also used to estimate accrued Council Tax for the Office for National Statistics for use in Public Sector Finance statistics and the National Accounts.
- 2.6 Local authorities use the data to identify the level set by comparator authorities to ensure value for money, though they cannot adjust their levels once their data have been returned to DCLG.
- 2.7 The media and public use the information to compare Council Tax levels between authorities.

³ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statistics/counciltax200910>

⁴ Statutory Instrument No 204 at <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si200902>

⁵ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statistics/counciltax200910update>

⁶ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/corporate/about/howwework/publicserviceagreements/departamentalstrategicobjectives/>

⁷ Council Tax requirement is an amount calculated, in advance of each year, by each billing authority and by each major precepting authority. It is the amount of revenue to be met from council tax, and is equivalent to an authority's Band D council tax multiplied by its council tax base.

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 The main users of these statistics are the relevant policy group within DCLG and local government. The data are required to be submitted to DCLG by law. Consultation on any change in requirements for data or the presentation of the output occurs through the Central and Local Information Partnership (CLIP) - Finance group: the members represent the policy group, the suppliers of the data and the users. The group meets on an ad hoc basis and agendas, papers and minutes are published on the CLIP website⁸.
- 3.2 For DCLG as a whole, several other CLIP groups serve as the primary focus for consultation. Wider engagement with users is limited to CLIP and British Urban and Regional Information Systems Association annual conferences. The Assessment team would expect to have seen evidence of other user identification and engagement. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DCLG should take steps to engage more effectively with users, make those steps known and publish information about users' experiences⁹ (Requirement 1).
- 3.3 The planning of statistical activities in DCLG is currently decentralised to business areas. The absence of co-ordinated statistical planning arrangements limits the extent to which the views of the potential wider user-base are taken into account. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DCLG should adopt systematic statistical planning arrangements as the basis for consultation with users¹⁰ (Requirement 2). This could be achieved through the preparation of, and consultation about, a department-wide plan of statistical activities. A summary of comments received should be published.

⁸ <http://www.clip.local.gov.uk/lgv/core/page.do?pagelId=31626>

⁹ In relation to Principle 1 Practices 1, 2 and 5 of the Code of Practice

¹⁰ In relation to Principle 1 Practices 2 and 3 of the Code of Practice

Principle 2: Impartiality and objectivity

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

- 3.4 The statistics are released six days after the date set for the return of data. The public is informed of the release through both the DCLG schedule of releases and the National Statistics Publication Hub.
- 3.5 In a year when capping impacts on the budget requirement data appearing in the statistics release, new data will again be available in advance to policy colleagues and ministers if required. This is to ensure local authority capping actions have been followed before the publication of the revised figures.
- 3.6 Changes to the presentation of the statistics are discussed with policy colleagues a year in advance and promulgated through CLIP - Finance group. Papers for, and reports of, these meetings are published on the CLIP website¹¹.
- 3.7 The statistics are presented impartially and objectively and are accompanied by useful, neutral commentary.
- 3.8 Policy statements from DCLG are published on a separate area of its website.

¹¹ <http://www.clip.local.gov.uk/lgv/core/page.do?pageId=31626>

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.

- 3.9 No incidents of political pressure, abuses of trust or complaints relating to professional integrity, quality or standards were reported or identified by the Assessment team.
- 3.10 The Head of Profession held a workshop in March 2009 with those who produce statistics in DCLG which covered integrity and the procedures to be followed should any interference be observed. New entrants to the DCLG Statistician Group are informed of the procedures at the induction meetings. Each Statistician is responsible for reporting incidents to the Head of Profession.

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.

- 3.11 Once signed off by the Chief Financial Officer of the Local Authority, the raw data are fixed and can only be changed if the Secretary of State for DCLG requires it.
- 3.12 The data are appropriately weighted to produce averages for both England as a whole and different type of authority, region, and so on. The relevant calculations and terminology are explained in the Release notes. The users contacted as part of this assessment noted that adequate discussion on changes took place in the CLIP - Finance group and that methodological suggestions from them were heard, discussed and, if agreed, implemented.
- 3.13 The Statistical Release in England is available before that in Wales and Scotland. The data from these countries is not included in the release but links to the relevant websites are provided.
- 3.14 DCLG has published central quality guidelines¹².
- 3.15 Departmental Audit reports and Quality Reviews on statistics are published by DCLG on their website.¹³

¹² <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statisticalnoticequalityguidance>

¹³ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/citiesandregions/measuringmultipledeprivation> and http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0809/5th_validation_report.aspx

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.

- 3.16 The Council Tax levels data collected and published are aggregates and averages and no confidentiality issues arise in this case.
- 3.17 The arrangements for protecting the confidentiality of all data collected by DCLG are published in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's (ODPM) Statement of Compliance with the National Statistics Code of Practice. We suggest this is updated to reflect the Code of Practice for Official Statistics and the fact that the ODPM no longer exists.
- 3.18 When DCLG receives or sends out confidential data, appropriate safeguards are in place to protect the data.

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.

- 3.19 The Council Tax levels data are derived for operational purposes within the local authorities. The data are then provided to DCLG on forms whose details are defined by Statutory Instrument. The response cost is not given or estimated.
- 3.20 DCLG has published evidence of actions to reduce the burden on data suppliers through their simplification plan and the specific reviews of sets of statistics.

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.

- 3.21 The resources for statistics within DCLG are handled separately by each policy division and, consequently, an overall statistical budget and work plan is not produced. The Assessment team noted that, for new collections or outputs, the Head of Profession has a procedure in place which allows resource issues to be raised through an Evidence Strategy Group. We suggest that the total resources allocated to statistics in the Department should be reviewed with confirmation that they are sufficient to permit the standards of the Code of Practice to be met.
- 3.22 Statistical staff recruitment and training are linked to the Government Statistical Service (GSS) competency framework. Statistical vacancies arising in the Department are advertised to a 'family' of departments¹⁴ and, if not filled, through general electronic advertising across the GSS.

¹⁴ Department for Communities and Local Government, Department for Transport, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Department of Energy and Climate Change; and OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education).

Principle 8: Frankness and accessibility

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

- 3.23 The Assessment team considers that *Council Tax Levels set by Local Authorities in England* meets several of the criteria of a good statistical release with a summary of key points and an analysis of the data, including time comparisons, followed by notes to assist users. A useful glossary and information on data quality are also provided. However, the links to the Departmental Objective (see para. 2.6) and capping (see para. 2.5) are not mentioned as part of the context of the data. We suggest that the note on the use of the data should be expanded to include these uses.
- 3.24 Table 5 of the release shows information by class of authority¹⁵. The classification of authorities to these different classes can be found in a spreadsheet on the website¹⁶ rather than in the release itself. We suggest that access to the information on the class of authority be improved for users.
- 3.25 Statistical publications on website are available in HTML format making them accessible to people with visual disabilities.
- 3.26 Alongside the release, the same and other relevant tables are provided for download in Excel format: this allows reuse of data.
- 3.27 An adequate records management policy for DCLG is available on its Intranet.

¹⁵ Inner London Borough, Outer London Borough, Greater London Authority, Metropolitan districts, Metropolitan police authorities, Metropolitan fire and rescue authorities, Shire unitary authorities, Shire counties, Shire districts, Shire police authorities and Shire fire and rescue authorities.

¹⁶ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/statistics/xls/1349741.xls>

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.

3.28 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.

- 3.29 If capping is being considered, some of the data, together with summary information, will be circulated within government ahead of publication. This information will underpin decisions on whether Ministerial action to cap an individual local authority's budget requirement is necessary. This release of information before publication in the Statistical Release is for operational purposes and is thus compliant with the Code. As noted under Principle 8, this use is not explained in the release.
- 3.30 DCLG publishes a pre-release access list for these statistics in their final form. All outputs are published on the National Statistics Publication Hub according to the published timetable.
- 3.31 The latest release of *Council Tax Levels set by Local Authorities in England* statistics includes the contact details of the responsible statistician.
- 3.32 Government statements about statistics are available on a separate area of DCLG's website.

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.

3.33 DCLG has published a Statement of Administrative Sources¹⁷.

¹⁷ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statementadministrativesources>

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to the *Council Tax Levels set by Local Authorities in England* produced by the Department for Communities and Local Government, 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.

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| Suggestion 1 | Update the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's (ODPM) Statement of Compliance with the National Statistics Code of Practice to reflect the Code of Practice for Official Statistics and the fact that ODPM no longer exists. (para 3.17) |
| Suggestion 2 | Review the total resources allocated to statistics in the Department and confirm that they are sufficient to meet the standards of the Code of Practice. (para 3.21) |
| Suggestion 3 | Expand the note on the use of the data to include other known and potential uses. (para 3.23) |
| Suggestion 4 | Improve access to the information on the class of authority for users. (para 3.24) |

Annex 2: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A2.1 This assessment was conducted from November 2009 to March 2010.

A2.2 The Assessment team – Ed Swires-Hennessy and Rachel Beardsmore - agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of the DCLG in November. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided in draft on 8 January. The Assessment team subsequently met with the DCLG during February to review compliance with the Code of Practice, taking account of the written evidence provided and other relevant sources of evidence. A final version of the Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 19 February.

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 3 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Policy user	1
Local authority representatives	2

A2.5 Users understand how DCLG processes their data and feel that consultation is adequate. The timing of the release of the individual data is the only issue arising. As the release is usually published in late March or early April, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) also collects the raw data and, in some years, so has the Local Government Association. The alternate collections are undertaken to get an early indication of the levels authorities are setting. DCLG and CIPFA exchange information to ensure both data sets are of the best possible quality. This process is for the purpose of quality assurance and CIPFA have signed an agreement which will be kept on record to ensure data will not be released prior to publication in any form and to name the CIPFA officials who have this access.

A2.6 The main use of the data inside the DCLG is to identify the need for capping of an authority's Council Tax level and, outside DCLG, is for inter-authority comparison and benchmarking. Both the individual authority data and the summary statistics are needed.

A2.7 Communication and consultation amongst the producer, policy group within the DCLG and users / suppliers outside are perceived as being effective.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment documents

Assessed publication: <http://www.local.communities.gov.uk/finance/ctax/ctax0910.htm>

List of assessment reports published to date¹⁸

1. Statistics from the National Drug Treatment Monitoring System
National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse
2. Recorded Crime in Scotland
Scottish Government
3. Statistics on Enrolments at Schools and in Funded Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland
Department of Education, Northern Ireland
4. Road Casualty Statistics
Department for Transport
5. UK Energy Sector Indicators
Department of Energy and Climate Change
6. Statistics on Road Freight
Department for Transport
7. Prison Population Projections
Ministry of Justice
8. Migration Statistics
Office for National Statistics
9. Statistics on International Development and the ODA:GNI Ratio
Department for International Development
10. The Scottish Health Survey
Scottish Government
11. Scottish House Condition Survey
Scottish Government
12. Scottish Crime and Justice Survey
Scottish Government
13. Statistics on Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England
Department for Children, Schools and Families
14. Statistics on Children Looked After by Local Authorities in Scotland
Scottish Government
15. Statistics on Children Looked After by Local Authorities in Wales
Welsh Assembly Government
16. Statistics on Children Looked After by Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland
Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Northern Ireland
17. Wealth in Great Britain
Office for National Statistics
18. Statistics on the National Child Measurement Programme
NHS Information Centre
19. Average Weekly Earnings
Office for National Statistics
20. Energy Statistics
Department of Energy and Climate Change
21. 18 Weeks Referral to Treatment Statistics
Department of Health
22. Agriculture in the UK and selected crop and livestock statistics
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

¹⁸ Published reports are available at: <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

23. Child Benefit Statistics
Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs
24. Producer Price Indices
Office for National Statistics
25. Services Producer Price Indices
Office for National Statistics
26. Scottish Household Survey outputs
Scottish Government
27. Scottish Labour Market Statistics
Scottish Government
28. Special Assessment of the 2011 Censuses in the UK: Phase 1
Office for National Statistics, the General Register Office for Scotland and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
29. Labour Market Statistics for Northern Ireland
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Northern Ireland
30. Child and Working Tax Credit Statistics
Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs
31. Emissions Statistics
Department of Energy and Climate Change
32. Council Tax Levels set by Local Authorities
Department for Communities and Local Government
33. Welsh Labour Market Statistics
Welsh Assembly Government
34. UK Labour Market Statistics
Office for National Statistics

