

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Civil Partnerships

*(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*.

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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 statistics reported in *Civil Partnerships in the UK*⁴, produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).
- 1.1.2 This report is shorter than normal. In particular, section 3 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 materiality⁵. The Assessment team nonetheless assessed compliance with all parts of the *Code of Practice* and has commented on all those in respect of which some remedial action is recommended.
- 1.1.3 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 in this report. The Statistics Authority confirms that the statistics published in *Civil Partnerships in the UK* can be designated as National Statistics, subject to ONS implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by July 2011.

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

- 1.3.1 ONS has recently made some improvements to the presentation of *Civil Partnerships in the UK* and its associated Excel tables. The statistics are regarded by users as timely, with annual figures published six months after the end of the year. ONS also recently published a *Summary Quality Report* (SQR) for civil partnerships which includes information about methods, quality and the use made of civil partnerships statistics.

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.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=14675>

⁵ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/guidance-about-assessment/criteria-for-deciding-upon-the-format-of-an-assessment-report.pdf>

1.3.2 Some information that users would like is not currently available to ONS – for example, information on nationality, and on the usual place of residence. ONS may be able to obtain information on this from the ‘notice information’ held by the General Register Office (GRO). The statistics would be strengthened by improvements to the commentary and analysis that accompany them, including a comparison with trends in marriage and divorce statistics.

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 3.1).
Requirement 2	Review the commentary in <i>Civil Partnerships in the UK</i> so that it aids the interpretation of the statistics (para 3.4).

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 *Civil Partnerships in the UK* presents statistics on civil partnerships which were registered in the UK, following the introduction of the Civil Partnership Act 2004⁶. Statistics on civil partnerships are presented by year, country, area of formation, and on the age, gender and previous legal partnership status of the individuals. The release also presents statistics on the number of civil partnership dissolutions and the age, gender and previous legal partnership status of the civil partners obtaining a dissolution. ONS also publishes a high level summary of civil partnership statistics on its website in the form of a 'web nugget'⁷, and provides detailed tables in the form of Excel spreadsheets⁸.
- 2.2 The civil partnership formation data underpinning the statistics for England and Wales come from the General Register Office (GRO). The civil registration record is loaded on to a database by the registrar who registered the partnership, and downloaded daily to ONS. Civil partnership dissolutions are registered by ten courts in England and Wales⁹. Information about the dissolution is recorded by the courts on a form which is sent to ONS daily.
- 2.3 The civil partnership formation data underpinning the statistics for Scotland come from the National Records of Scotland (NRS) (previously the General Register Office for Scotland), and for Northern Ireland from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). NRS and NISRA also publish their own statistical releases on civil partnerships. There are some minor differences in the way that these statistics are compiled, which are explained in the accompanying notes to the ONS statistics.
- 2.4 The latest annual release of *Civil Partnerships in the UK* was published in August 2010, six months after the end of the reference period. Users we spoke to were positive about the timeliness of the statistics. Quarterly tables of civil partnership statistics are released in the *Vital Statistics: Population and Health Reference Tables*¹⁰ (formerly the *Population Trends and Health Statistics Quarterly Reference Tables*).
- 2.5 ONS estimates that these statistics cost approximately £32,000 to produce.
- 2.6 Civil partnership statistics are used by the Government Equalities Office (GEO), which is responsible for policy on civil partnerships and other equality matters. The Welsh Assembly Government also uses ONS civil partnership statistics to produce its own release specifically relating to Welsh data¹¹. Other users include charities and campaign groups for gay and lesbian rights and equality issues, businesses such as civil partnership planners, and family lawyers.

⁶ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/33/contents>

⁷ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=1685>

⁸ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=14675>

⁹ http://www.hmcourts-service.gov.uk/infoabout/divorce/civil_partnership_dissolution.htm

¹⁰ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/STATBASE/Product.asp?vlnk=15354>

¹¹ <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/headlines/pop2009/hdw20090804/?lang=en>

Some local authorities use civil partnership statistics to provide an indication of the sexual orientation of their population (for example, Kent County Council¹²).

¹² http://www.kent.gov.uk/your_council/kent_facts_and_figures/equalities_and_diversity/civil_partnerships.aspx

3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 ONS consulted users during the development of its statistics on civil partnerships. In 2005 it set up a Civil Partnership Statistics Working Group (CPSWG), which aimed to ensure that statistics on civil partnership formations and dissolutions met user needs. The CPSWG involved representatives from local authorities and central government and met every two months until the first statistics were released. The meetings did not include users from outside government, and ONS has not consulted users since. ONS recently published a *Summary Quality Report*¹³ (SQR) for statistics on civil partnerships which includes assumptions about how the statistics are used. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should take steps to develop a greater understanding of the use made of the statistics, publish relevant information and assumptions and use them to better support the use of the statistics¹⁴ (Requirement 1). As part of this, we suggest ONS refer to the types of use put forward in the Monitoring Brief: *The Use Made of Official Statistics*.
- 3.2 The SQR contains information about the methods used to compile the statistics and a summary of various aspects of their quality. The information is helpful and comprehensive. We suggest ONS include definitions of 'date of formation' and 'date of registration' in this document. We further suggest that ONS seek user feedback on the content of the SQR.
- 3.3 Some users would like more information than is presented in the statistical release – in particular on the nationality and usual place of residence of civil partners. While this information is not currently available to ONS, GRO holds 'notice information', which might shed light on these areas. ONS statisticians reported that obtaining such information is not a current priority for them. We suggest that ONS investigate access to 'notice information' in light of the information on use gained from implementing Requirement 1.
- 3.4 ONS recently made some changes to the presentation of *Civil Partnerships in the UK*, and the Excel tables that accompany it, to improve their accessibility. While this is a positive step, the Assessment team considers that further improvements are necessary to the commentary and analysis that accompany the statistics. For example, some users we contacted would like to see comparisons with trends in marriage statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should review the commentary in *Civil Partnerships in the UK* so that it aids interpretation of the statistics¹⁵ (Requirement 2). We suggest the revised commentary include comparisons with trends in marriage statistics and with survey estimates of the civil partnership rate. As part of reviewing the commentary we suggest that ONS refer to the Statistics Authority's Standards for Statistical Releases¹⁶ for further guidance.
- 3.5 One user we contacted expressed concern over the choice of words used in the headline for the 2008 News Release for civil partnerships¹⁷. The user felt that the headline 'UK civil partnerships fall by 46 per cent in 2007' led to

¹³ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/methodology-and-quality/quality/qual-info-economic-social-and-bus-stats/quality-reports-for-social-statistics/civil-partnerships.pdf>

¹⁴ In relation to Principle 1 Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

¹⁵ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

¹⁶ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/statement---standards-for-statistical-releases.pdf>

¹⁷ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/cpsp0608.pdf>

misinformed media reporting because it did not reflect the point made in the release itself that many same-sex couples in long-standing relationships took advantage of the opportunity to formalise their relationship in 2005, as soon as the legislation was implemented.

- 3.6 The *Code* requires National Statistics releases to be issued at 9.30 am 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 9.30 am. ONS informed us that this matter was being reviewed as part of its web development programme, and that it expected its new website to be implemented on 30 April 2011. The Head of Assessment agreed an exemption from Protocol 2 Practice 4 for ONS until that date. The exemption request, and the Head of Assessment's response are available on the Statistics Authority's website¹⁸. Subsequently, ONS has announced that it does not expect to be able to comply with this practice until the end of August 2011¹⁹. The Assessment team has asked ONS to submit a report describing the nature of the breach of the *Code* from 1 May 2011, and to log and report to the Authority details about delayed releases.
- 3.7 Four individuals are granted pre-release access to statistics on civil partnerships. A record of their job titles and departments is published on ONS's website²⁰.

¹⁸ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/exemption-requests/index.html>

¹⁹ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about/what-we-do/programmes-projects/web-development/index.html>

²⁰ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/ns-standard/cop/compliance/annual/civil-partnerships.html>

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to ONS's *Civil Partnerships in the UK*, 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	As part of documenting the use of these statistics (see Requirement 1), refer to the types of use put forward in the Monitoring Brief: <i>The Use Made of Official Statistics</i> ²¹ (para 3.1).
Suggestion 2	Include definitions for 'date of formation' and 'date of registration' in the SQR (para 3.2).
Suggestion 3	Seek user feedback on the content of the SQR (para 3.2).
Suggestion 4	Investigate access to 'notice information' in light of the information on use gained from implementing Requirement 1 (para 3.3).
Suggestion 5	Include comparisons with trends in marriage statistics and with survey estimates of the civil partnership rate in the revised commentary (para 3.4).
Suggestion 6	Refer to the Statistics Authority's Standards for Statistical Releases for further guidance (para 3.4).

²¹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-briefs/monitoring-brief-6-2010---the-use-made-of-official-statistics.pdf>

Annex 2: Summary of assessment process and users' views

- A2.1 This assessment was conducted from October 2010 to January 2011.
- A2.2 The Assessment team – Joe Cuddeford, Jill Barelli and Cecilia MacIntyre – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of ONS in October. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 28 October. The Assessment team subsequently met ONS during January 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 10 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Local Government	1
Central Government	2
Internal ONS	1
Parliament	1
Private individual	1
Private sector	2
Campaign group	1
Academia	1

A2.5 Three users mentioned timeliness as a strength of the statistics. In general, users were positive about the statistics and were satisfied that they met their basic needs. All were positive about any contact they had had with the producer team, although this was always initiated by the user.

A2.6 The most common criticisms from users concerned "level of detail", with users wanting information on nationality, local authority area and area of usual residence, and step families. One user suggested that it would be useful to be able to link formation records to dissolution records for research purposes, but recognised that this might not be straightforward to achieve. One user felt the headline for the 2007 News Release was misleading, and that the perception that civil partnerships have 'crashed' still has an effect on the civil partnership market today.

A2.7 Two users suggested that the statistics could be linked more clearly to marriage statistics. One user felt the commentary did not add much insight, adding that there had been changes to legislation that have affected the

statistics, but that attention has not been drawn to this. Another user suggested that ONS could present comparisons of the administrative estimates of formation with survey estimates of the civil partnership rate.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

