

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on the Activity of Coroners

(produced by the Ministry of Justice)

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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 *Statistics on deaths reported to coroners*⁴, produced by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ).
- 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 *Statistics on deaths reported to coroners* can be designated as National Statistics, subject to the MoJ implementing the enhancement listed in section 1.5 and reporting it to the Authority by July 2011.

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

- 1.3.1 The statistics cover only those deaths reported to coroners. Statistics on registered deaths in England and Wales are published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS)⁶. The Assessment team considers the release to be clear and well-presented.

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.justice.gov.uk/coronersannual.htm>

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

⁶ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/product.asp?vlnk=15096>

1.3.2 MoJ has a good relationship with the coroners who supply the data and who are themselves also users of the statistics. In 2008 MoJ started producing summaries of the statistics for each coroner district which are sent to individual coroners. MoJ told the Assessment team that these have been well received by coroners.

1.3.3 The commentary and explanatory material in the *Statistics on deaths reported to coroners* release could be strengthened to help users to interpret the data and their quality appropriately. Further information could usefully be provided to users on the arrangements for reporting deaths to coroners and how the figures relate to mortality statistics

1.4 Detailed recommendations

1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that the MoJ 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	Make information on the quality of the statistics available to users, in particular identifying the strengths and limitations of the statistics in relation to their likely use (para 3.3).
Requirement 2	Include further information in the release about which deaths are reported to coroners and how these figures relate to mortality statistics produced by ONS (para 3.4).
Requirement 3	Investigate options for improving the clarity of the title of the release (para 3.5).

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 The annual bulletin *Statistics on deaths reported to coroners* presents statistics on the work of coroners in England and Wales. Data are obtained from statistical returns submitted by all coroners in the 115 coroner districts under the requirements of the *Coroners Act 1988*⁷. The statistical bulletin includes details of trends in the total deaths referred to coroners, the results of inquests and post-mortem examinations carried out and the time taken to process cases. Coroners are also responsible for reporting on the number of finds under the *Treasure Act 1996*⁸ and details are included in the bulletin.
- 2.2 Statistics on the work of coroners have been published since around 1860 and until 1938 were confined to inquests. A statistical bulletin has been published⁹ since 1980. Coroners can submit the data electronically or on paper to MoJ by February each year for publication in May. MoJ carries out quality assurance checks including contacting individual coroners regarding potentially anomalous data. The cost to MoJ of producing the statistics is estimated to be around £40,000.
- 2.3 In 2005 MoJ made changes to the way in which coroners record some cases, resulting in changes to the counting methods and presentation of the statistics in the release. The 2005 release included an explanation of the changes and revised data back to 1995 (see para 3.3).
- 2.4 The Coroners Advisory Group is the main forum for discussing changes to *Statistics on deaths reported to coroners*. This group meets six times a year and is attended by coroners, MoJ statisticians and medical experts. MoJ plans to improve future releases in order to better meet users' needs. These improvements include information on inquests involving deaths in custody and further detail on the types of post-mortem carried out.
- 2.5 MoJ identified four main groups of users:
- government departments - to manage the coroner service, to develop new policy, and to answer Parliamentary Questions and other correspondence from Members of Parliament;
 - local authorities (which are responsible for coroners' remuneration) - for performance management;
 - coroners - to monitor individual caseload, and for comparisons across the coroner service generally; and
 - voluntary sector organisations (such as Inquest and Cruse, which support bereaved families) to monitor patterns and trends in deaths reported to coroners.

⁷ Section 28(2) of the 1988 Act states 'Every coroner shall also ... furnish to the Secretary of State returns in relation to inquests held and deaths inquired into him in such form and containing such particulars as the Secretary of State may direct'.

⁸ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/24/contents>

⁹ The Home Office had responsibility for producing the annual statistics from 1981 to 2005.

Responsibility was subsequently transferred to the Department for Constitutional Affairs from 2006 and MoJ in 2007.

3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 As part of this assessment, MoJ produced a document which outlined the users and uses of the statistics. The Assessment team felt that this was a useful document; we suggest that MoJ make it more widely available.
- 3.2 Coroners themselves are one of the main users of these statistics and MoJ produces a separate one-page summary of the statistics for each coroner district in addition to the main release. These are clear and well-presented and may be of interest to other users although MoJ does not currently publish them. The Assessment team suggests that MoJ publish the summaries for coroner districts.
- 3.3 The process by which coroners provide the necessary information to MoJ varies according to the management systems used by each coroner. Most coroners use a system provided by an external contractor. Some coroners use alternative computer systems and some use a paper-based system. Information about these differences in recording systems could usefully be provided to users, as different systems might have an impact on the quality of the statistics. There may also be other information about quality that could be provided, such as common errors in completing forms submitted to MoJ, and the impact of potential differences in coroners' interpretation of which cases reported to them required 'further action'. As part of the designation as National Statistics, MoJ should make information on the quality of the statistics available to users, in particular identifying the strengths and limitations of the statistics in relation to their likely use¹⁰ (Requirement 1).
- 3.4 The figures in *Statistics on deaths reported to coroners* represent around 40 to 50 per cent of the total registered deaths in England and Wales. The proportion of registered deaths reported to coroners is included in the release although the Assessment team felt that a more detailed explanation of the process by which deaths are reported to coroners would be helpful to users. As part of the designation as National Statistics, MoJ should include further information in the release about which deaths are reported to coroners and how these figures relate to mortality statistics produced by ONS¹¹ (Requirement 2).
- 3.5 The title of the release does not give users a clear indication of the content of the release – for example the inclusion of statistics on casework under the provisions of the Treasure Act 1996 and earlier legislation. As part of the designation as National Statistics, MoJ should investigate options for improving the clarity of the title of the release¹² (Requirement 3).

¹⁰ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

¹¹ In relation to Principle 8, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

¹² In relation to Principle 8, Practice 4 of the *Code of Practice*

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to MoJ's *Statistics on deaths reported to coroners* release 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 Make the users and uses document more widely available (para 3.1).

Suggestion 2 Publish the summaries for coroner districts (para 3.2).

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 – Catherine Barham and Joe Cuddeford – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of MoJ in October 2010. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 2 November 2010. The Assessment team subsequently met MoJ during January 2011 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 3 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:
- | | |
|------------------|---|
| Coroner | 1 |
| Academic | 1 |
| MoJ statistician | 1 |
- A2.5 Those who responded to the consultation were content with the statistics and found them timely and informative for their use. The respondents mentioned that their contact with the producers was good.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

