

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Pre-School Education Provision and Early Years Profile Results in England

(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 following set of statistics produced by the Department for Education (DfE):

- *Provision for Children under Five Years of Age in England (PFC)*⁴; and
- *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Results in England (EYFSP)*⁵.

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 materiality⁶. 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 listed in section 1.1.1 are designated as National Statistics, subject to DfE implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by January 2012.

1.2.2 DfE has informed the Assessment team that it has started to implement the Requirements listed in section 1.5. The Statistics Authority welcomes this.

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/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001009/index.shtml>

⁵ <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000961/index.shtml>

⁶ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/guidance-about-assessment/criteria-for-deciding-upon-the-format-of-an-assessment-report.pdf>

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

- 1.3.1 DfE ensures that new data collection proposals do not create unnecessary burden or duplication on suppliers through consultation with its Star Chamber Scrutiny Board (SCSB). The group has secondary objectives to discuss developments in education and children's services data, making recommendations where appropriate, for example about changes to definitions or collections.
- 1.3.2 DfE has published a useful statement⁷ on user engagement that outlines how it will meet users' needs. DfE makes all its statistics available online through its Research and Statistics Gateway⁸.
- 1.3.3 *PFC* and *EYFSP* provide some information on the quality and reliability of these statistics, which could be expanded. The commentary and analysis in the releases do not provide much information on the context and likely uses of these 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	Investigate and document the use made of these statistics and the types of decisions they inform, and publish information about users' experiences of these statistics (para 3.1).
Requirement 2	Provide more detailed information on the quality and reliability of these statistics in relation to the range of potential uses, and prepare and disseminate commentary and analysis that aids interpretation (para 3.4).

⁷ <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/ns-sp-userengv2.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/>

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 DfE produces statistics on the number of children under five in free early education places in different educational settings (such as those in the maintained, private, voluntary and independent sectors), and the achievements of children aged five in six areas of learning⁹. These statistics are presented at national and local authority (LA) level for England.
- 2.2 *PFC* is an annual release that provides information about the number of pre-school children who receive some free education by type of provider and age group. The statistics are used by LAs to help allocate funding through the dedicated schools grant, and by the Government to monitor the take up of free education entitlement. The Government had a target in 2010 that 25 per cent of the most disadvantaged three-year-olds in all LAs should receive 15 hours of free education provision per week. DfE collects the data used to produce the *PFC* statistics through the School Census, Early Years Census and the School Level Annual Census. These returns provide DfE with child-level information about the number of three and four-year-olds receiving some free early education in these settings.
- 2.3 *EYFSP* presents annual statistics on the achievement of children aged five against 13 separate scales. The scales consist of nine 'scale points' and are grouped into six areas of learning. DfE also provides supplementary tables for the percentage of children achieving a particular number of scale points within each assessment scale. These were previously released as 'Individual Scale Point' experimental statistics in 2008 and 2009. DfE collects the data used to produce *EYFSP* statistics from LAs, which provide all of the data relating to those children in receipt of funding at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Before 2007, LAs were responsible for submitting a random ten per cent sample of their individual level child records, and an aggregate dataset covering all children.
- 2.4 Data for these statistics are extracted mainly from the schools' management information systems and loaded into a computerised system known as COLLECT. The data are collected under the *Childcare Act 2006 (Provision of Information about Young Children) (England) Regulations*¹⁰. LAs are responsible for supplying these data to DfE and ensuring that schools and other early years' providers have the appropriate data systems in place. The data are then validated by DfE to ensure that they have been submitted in the correct format and are consistent with data from previous years.
- 2.5 DfE estimated that around 0.6 full-time equivalent (FTE) statisticians are involved in the production of its statistics on *PFC*, and 0.5 FTE to produce *EYFSP*.

⁹ The six areas of learning are: Personal, Social and Emotional Development; Communication, Language and Literacy; Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy; Knowledge and Understanding of the World; Physical Development; and, Creative Development

¹⁰ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2007/712/made>

3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 DfE told us that the main users of both sets of statistics are colleagues within DfE responsible for development and monitoring of early years' education policy. Knowledge about the wider use of the statistics is less developed. DfE recently conducted a short user consultation on PFC statistics, although only one response was received. DfE has not published any information about users' experiences of EYFSP statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DfE should investigate and document the use made of these statistics and the types of decisions they inform, and publish information about users' experiences of these statistics¹¹ (Requirement 1). In meeting this Requirement, we suggest DfE refer to the types of use put forward in the Statistics Authority's Monitoring Brief, *The Use Made of Official Statistics*¹².
- 3.2 DfE currently engages with the users of these statistics through its 'Information about Children, Education and Schools' (ICES) group that meets to discuss data collection issues, and to seek feedback on the statistics from LAs. DfE publishes the agendas and papers¹³ from ICES on its website. We were told that this group is likely to be phased out and replaced with smaller, more-focused, user groups. DfE told us that it is in the process of developing these groups for these statistics and has published information¹⁴ on its website to inform users about them. DfE have also provided information on this user engagement in *PFC*. We suggest that DfE publicise these new groups alongside the EYFSP statistics.
- 3.3 The PFC statistics are produced using data from several sources including the Early Years and School Censuses; links to more detailed information is provided on the DfE website. The detailed information about the data sources that DfE has published on its website is not easily accessible from the *EYFSP* statistical release. We suggest that DfE provide better links to the information about data sources in *EYFSP*.
- 3.4 *PFC* and *EYFSP* provide some factual information about the operational context of the statistics and about data sources and some aspects of quality. DfE has published no information about the relevance or the comparability of these statistics. The Assessment team considers that this information could be improved by providing more information on why these statistics are collected, and on what targets or policies these statistics are used to monitor. The commentary could be expanded to include more analysis of trends and links to related statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DfE should improve *PFC* and *EYFSP* by providing more detailed information on the quality and reliability of these statistics in relation to the range of potential uses, and prepare and disseminate commentary and analysis that aids interpretation¹⁵ (Requirement 2). We suggest that in meeting this requirement DfE should consider the points detailed in Annex 2.

¹¹ In relation to Principle 1, Practice 2 and Practice 5 of the *Code of Practice*

¹² <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-briefs/index.html>

¹³ <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/adminandfinance/schooladmin/ims>

¹⁴ <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/usergroups.shtml>

¹⁵ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 2 and Principle 8, Practice 1 and 2 of the *Code of Practice*

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to the DfE Pre-School Provision and Early Years Profile Results statistics, 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 | Refer to the types of use put forward in the Statistics Authority's Monitoring Brief, <i>The Use Made of Official Statistics</i> when documenting use (para 3.1). |
| Suggestion 2 | Publicise its new user groups alongside the EYFSP statistics (para 3.2). |
| Suggestion 3 | Provide better links to the information about data sources in <i>EYFSP</i> (para 3.3). |
| Suggestion 4 | 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*¹⁶. 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 the PFC and EYFSP 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 The titles of the releases include the period to which the statistics relate. The geographical coverage of the statistics is included in the titles. All of the releases use appropriate headings and logos for a National Statistics product. The releases clearly identify the producer organisation, and include the name and contact details of the responsible statistician.

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

A2.4 *PFC* and *EYFSP* each include a short summary and key points section at the start. The language used in the releases is mostly straightforward, with some explanation of the technical terms within the main text. However, the use of terms such as 'working securely within' and 'working beyond the Early Learning Goals' in *EYFSP* could be explained better.

A2.5 The main messages in the releases are not clear and the presentation lacks a longer time series, which could provide a better indication of any changes over time rather than simply reporting changes since the last year. The commentary in the releases is basic and does not, for example, make comparisons over time or between areas within the country. *PFC* includes a short summary about what uses are made of the statistics. No information on uses, or likely uses, is given in *EYFSP*.

Use language that is impartial, objective and professionally sound

A2.6 The text used in the releases is impartial and evidence based. The descriptions of proportions, changes and trends in the releases are appropriate.

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

Include information about the context and likely uses

A2.7 The releases do not include sufficient information about the operational or policy context of the statistics. Neither do the releases include information about whether these statistics are used to monitor government targets, and what they show in the context of those targets. It is appropriate to identify targets and policies in factual terms.

Include, or link to, appropriate metadata

A2.8 *PFC* and *EYFSP* each contain a technical notes section that provides a useful overview of the data collection arrangements and quality issues. The most recent release of *PFC* includes a section on statistics from the other countries of the UK, which provides a short overview and links to where these statistics can be found. DfE does not provide information about the comparability of the statistics for Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland with those presented in *PFC*. *EYFSP* does not include information about statistics for the other countries of the UK.

Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A3.1 This assessment was conducted from April to September 2011.

A3.2 The Assessment team – David Duncan-Fraser and Joe Cuddeford – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of DfE in April. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 20 May. The Assessment team subsequently met DfE during June 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 four responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Academia	1
Policy	2
Other government dept	1

A3.5 The users who responded to the consultation conducted as part of this assessment were generally content with the statistics and engagement with the statistics team in DfE. One user mentioned that they would like the level of detail available to be improved to allow further analysis. DfE told us that as part of the Government's transparency agenda they were seeking to make more detail available.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

