

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Agriculture in Northern Ireland

*(produced by the Department of Agriculture
and Rural Development, Northern Ireland)*

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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 sets of statistics produced by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Northern Ireland (DARD) and reported in:

- *Northern Ireland Agricultural Market Report*⁴;
- *Northern Ireland Animal Feed Statistics*⁵;
- *Results of the December Agricultural Survey*⁶;
- *Egg Packers Survey*⁷;
- *Estimates of Crop Yield and Production*⁸;
- *EU Farm Structure Survey Northern Ireland*⁹;
- *Farm Incomes in Northern Ireland*¹⁰;
- *Northern Ireland Fertiliser Statistics*¹¹;
- *Northern Ireland Milk Price Statistics*¹²;
- *Northern Ireland Milk Production Statistics*¹³;
- *Northern Ireland Milk Utilisation Statistics*¹⁴;
- *Northern Ireland Agricultural Incomes*¹⁵;
- *Northern Ireland Pig Financial Results*¹⁶;
- *Statistical Review of Northern Ireland Agriculture*¹⁷;
- *The Agricultural Census in Northern Ireland (preliminary and final)*¹⁸; and

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.dardni.gov.uk/index/dard-statistics/agricultural-statistics/statistics-agriculture-prices/agricultural-market-reports.htm>

⁵ <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/publications/pubs-dard-statistics/feed-2011.htm>

⁶ <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/publications/pubs-dard-statistics/agricultural-survey-december-2010-24-february-2011.htm>

⁷ <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/publications/pubs-dard-statistics/publications-dard-statistics-eggpacker.htm>

⁸ http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/publications/pubs-dard-statistics/crop_yield_and_production_estimates_2010_-_2nd_december_2010.htm

⁹ <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/dard-statistics/statistical-reports/pubs-dard-statistics-european-structure-survey.htm>

¹⁰ <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/publications/pubs-dard-statistics/farm-incomes-in-northern-ireland-2009-10.htm>

¹¹ <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/publications/pubs-dard-statistics/ferts10-q1.htm>

¹² <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/publications/pubs-dard-statistics/pubs-dard-statistics-milkprice-2007.htm>

¹³ <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/publications/pubs-dard-statistics/pubs-dard-statistics-milk-prod-2007.htm>

¹⁴ <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/publications/pubs-dard-statistics/milkutil10.htm>

¹⁵ http://www.dardni.gov.uk/statistical_press_release_agricultural_incomes_2010.doc

¹⁶ <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/publications/pubs-dard-statistics/pigfin11.htm>

¹⁷ http://www.dardni.gov.uk/dard_stats_review_2010.pdf

¹⁸ <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/dard-statistics/statistical-reports/agricultural-census.htm>

- *Size and Performance of the Northern Ireland Food and Drinks Processing Sector, Subsector Statistics*¹⁹.

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 materiality²⁰. 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 *Statistical Review of Northern Ireland Agriculture* is a compendium publication. Assessments of compendium publications against the *Code of Practice* relate to the processes involved in preparing the publication, rather than in producing the statistics that are included. Those sets of statistics will normally be subject to separate assessment. Designation of a compendium publication as National Statistics therefore means that the producer body has, for example: identified and met user needs in terms of the content of the publication; considered the appropriateness of each series for inclusion; and written appropriate commentary.

1.1.4 This report is one of four assessing agriculture statistics across the UK: the assessment of Statistics on Agriculture in Scotland, produced by the Scottish Government has been published in report number 149; the assessment of Statistics on Agriculture in Wales, produced by the Welsh Government has been published in report number 151; and the assessment of Agriculture Statistics for England and the UK, produced by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has been published in report number 150. Selected agriculture statistics produced by Defra have already been assessed: Assessment report 22²¹ discussed *Agriculture in the UK* and selected crop and livestock statistics; and Assessment report 72²² discussed statistics on agricultural accounts and agricultural prices, as well as farm business statistics.

1.1.5 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

¹⁹ <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/dard-statistics/food-statistics/northern-ireland-food-and-drinks-processing-sector.htm>

²⁰ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/guidance-about-assessment/criteria-for-deciding-upon-the-format-of-an-assessment-report.pdf>

²¹ See footnote 1

²² See footnote 1

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 DARD implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by January 2012.

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

- 1.3.1 DARD publishes some information about the methods it uses to compile the statistics and about the quality of the statistics, but there is scope to provide more detailed information to assist users. Commentary is absent from some releases, and where it is included there is scope for more insight to help users' interpretation of the statistics.
- 1.3.2 DARD has sought to maximise the use of administrative systems to improve data quality and to minimise the burden on farmers responding to surveys. DARD statisticians work with colleagues responsible for monitoring agricultural policy, animal health and animal movements on the timing and extent of data collection via administrative systems, and carry out extensive preliminary work to ensure that these administrative data are suitable for use in producing official statistics.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

- 1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development, Northern Ireland 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 agriculture statistics, publish the relevant information and assumptions, and use them to better support the use of the statistics (para 3.2).
Requirement 2	Publish full details of the methods used to compile weekly, monthly and quarterly agriculture statistics (para 3.3).
Requirement 3	Publish information about the quality of all its agriculture statistics, including the main sources of bias and other error (para 3.4).
Requirement 4	Explain the distinction between National Statistics and the other types of statistics that are in the <i>Statistical Review of Northern Ireland Agriculture</i> ,

and confirm that the non-National Statistics are of adequate quality (para 3.5).

Requirement 5

Publish details about arrangements for maintaining the confidentiality of Agricultural Economy, and Farm Surveys statistics (para 3.6).

Requirement 6

Seek authorisation from the Chief Statistician of Northern Ireland for an exemption to the principle of confidentiality for the circumstances described in the *Agricultural Statistics (Northern Ireland) Order 2004*, and publish the details of this authorisation (para 3.7).

Requirement 7

Improve the commentary and analysis in agricultural releases to aid user interpretation of the statistics (para 3.8).

2 Subject of the assessment

2.1 Three separate branches within DARD produce its agriculture statistics:

- Farm Surveys Branch;
- Agricultural Economy Branch; and
- Resource Economics Branch.

2.2 DARD produces its agriculture statistics to meet EU regulations. Most of the information DARD uses to produce its agriculture statistics comes from data collected via survey. DARD obtains some of the data it uses from sources within the department such as the Animal and Public Health Information System (APHIS) which is designed to track cattle and sheep movements in Northern Ireland and also provides import and export data.

2.3 The following statistics are produced by DARD:

- *Northern Ireland Agricultural Market Report* is a weekly publication that presents weekly and quarterly statistics on the latest prices for a range of finished livestock, livestock products and crops, as well as breeding and store animals. DARD has published the report since 1980.
- *Northern Ireland Animal Feed Statistics* is a monthly publication that presents monthly, quarterly and annual information about the production of animal feedstuffs, and the use of raw materials in the production of animal feedstuffs. Feed manufacturers are required to provide relevant information to DARD under *The Statistics of Trade and Employment (Northern Ireland) Order 1988*²³.
- *Results of the December Agricultural Survey* provides a snapshot of the numbers of major livestock types and areas of cereals and conserved fodder at the beginning of December each year. The publication contains trend data since 1996. The survey is covered by the same regulatory requirement as that for the Agricultural Census.
- *Egg Packers Survey* is published every two years and provides information about the size and performance of the egg processing sector in Northern Ireland, the structure of the packing sector, egg production systems and the population of laying hens. DARD has produced these statistics since 1999.
- *Estimates of Crop Yield and Production* is compiled from cereal and potato survey data collected from farms by DARD officials every autumn to establish output for cereals and potato crops. The publication contains trend data since 1995. DARD sends crop yield data to Defra which compiles UK returns for Eurostat under relevant EU regulations²⁴.
- *EU Farm Structure Survey Northern Ireland* is published every three years based on information about livestock numbers and crop areas, farm labour, farm diversification and other elements that have been agreed with Eurostat in advance of the survey. The survey is designed to provide more detailed information about farm structures than is provided by *The Agricultural Census in Northern Ireland* and *December Agricultural Survey*.

²³ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1988/595/contents/made>

²⁴ Council Regulation (EEC) No 837/90 and Council Regulation (EEC) No 959/93

- *Farm Incomes in Northern Ireland* is based on data collected from the Farm Business Survey (FBS), a continuous annual survey that collects physical and financial accounting data from approximately 400 farms in Northern Ireland. FBS data are required to meet *EU Council Regulation 79/65/EEC*²⁵. *Farm Incomes in Northern Ireland* presents annual statistics on various measures of farm incomes and financial indicators. Following a user consultation in 2006/07 DARD replaced the previous headline measure (Net Farm Income) with a new indicator (Farm Business Income).
- *Northern Ireland Fertiliser Statistics* is an annual publication which presents statistics on the volume and nutrient content of sales of fertilisers to Northern Ireland farmers. DARD collects the data used to produce these statistics every month from fertiliser manufacturers and blenders, and has published the release since 1979.
- *Northern Ireland Milk Price Statistics* and *Northern Ireland Milk Production Statistics* are compiled from the Milk Production and Pricing Survey which collects up-to-date information about the value and volume of raw milk purchased from Northern Ireland farms. DARD has published these monthly reports since 1995.
- *Northern Ireland Milk Utilisation Survey* is an annual publication which presents information about the intake of milk by firms operating in Northern Ireland and tracks the use of this milk in the production of various milk products. DARD has produced these statistics since 1995.
- *Northern Ireland Agricultural Incomes* is published annually at the end of January and provides details of Total Income from Farming (TIFF) and represents the total income of all those with an entrepreneurial involvement in farming. DARD presents trend data from 1981. The agricultural account, in the form of Economic Accounts for Agriculture (EAA), is a satellite account to the European System of Accounts. The legal basis for the EAA is contained in *European Parliament and Council Regulation No: 138/2004/EC* and various European Commission Regulations²⁶.
- *Northern Ireland Pig Financial Results* is a monthly publication which brings together the latest information about feed costs and pig prices to monitor the financial performance of the pig production sector in Northern Ireland. DARD has produced these statistics since 1998.
- *Statistical Review of Northern Ireland Agriculture* is a compendium publication, summarising information published in some of the releases included in this assessment – for example *The Agricultural Census in Northern Ireland*. It is the primary source of statistics for the agricultural industry in Northern Ireland and has been published since 1964. It is published annually in March and contains a wide range of statistics on the agricultural economy (including Total Income from Farming), crop areas and livestock numbers as well as agri-food sector performance, the rural economy, and animal health and welfare.

²⁵ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/consleg/1965/R/01965R0079-20070101-en.pdf>

²⁶ *Commission Regulation No: 306/2005, Commission Regulation No: 909/2006 and Commission Regulation (EC) No 212/2008*

- *The Agricultural Census in Northern Ireland* is published annually based on information about livestock numbers, cropping area and the farm labour force collected through the annual Agricultural Census in June. The Agricultural Census has been carried out under *The Agricultural Statistics (Northern Ireland) Order 2004*²⁷ to comply with relevant EU regulations²⁸. DARD publishes preliminary results in late August each year and final summary results in mid-November, and the annual publication is released at the end of January in the following year. DARD publishes a separate database on its website containing time series data for selected variables since 1847 and also publishes low-level data on the Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service²⁹ website.
- *Size and Performance of the Northern Ireland Food and Drinks Processing Sector, Subsector Statistics* provides a range of information including the value of sales, and employment for each subsector of the food and drinks processing sector. DARD supplements the statistics with 15 performance indicators for each subsector. DARD has produced these statistics annually since 1993. DARD compiles these statistics from information provided by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment³⁰ and Invest Northern Ireland³¹ and from the financial accounts of food and drinks processing companies.

2.4 DARD uses its various agriculture statistics as an evidence base to answer Northern Ireland Assembly questions, and to inform the development, evaluation and review of agricultural policy – for example, in the *Review of Support Arrangements for Less Favoured Areas in Northern Ireland*³². The farming press, agriculture firms and trade organisations use the statistics to monitor the performance of the agricultural sector. The data which DARD supply to Defra and Eurostat are included in UK and EU agricultural datasets, respectively, and are used to support national and EU policy development and evaluation.

2.5 DARD informed us that the estimated annual cost of producing these statistics is £720,000. This comprises £550,000 for Farm Surveys statistics, £150,000 for Agriculture Economy statistics and £25,000 for Resource Economics statistics.

²⁷ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/2004/1109/contents>

²⁸ *EU regulations 1165/2008* (cattle, pigs and sheep) and *543/2009* (crops and land)

²⁹ <http://www.ninis.nisra.gov.uk/>

³⁰ <http://www.detini.gov.uk/>

³¹ <http://www.investni.com/>

³² http://www.dardni.gov.uk/lfa-full-report-new-with_cover.pdf

3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 In 2009 and 2010 DARD reviewed its Farming and Farm Business Performance statistics against the Authority's *Code of Practice*. The review has led to various changes, including the publication of improved documentation, and the development of DARD's Statistics Charter³³ - which lists the main users of the statistics. DARD told us that it plans to initiate similar reviews of other outputs against the *Code* later in 2011. The Authority welcomes this approach.
- 3.2 The Statistics Charter outlines various ways in which DARD aims to address users' needs. These include periodically carrying out surveys of users' views about the statistical outputs and inviting feedback on its outputs from users through publications and the website. In recent years DARD has carried out and published summaries of various user consultations about its statistics³⁴, including consulting users about proposed changes to Farm Income statistical indicators³⁵, and conducting a survey of users of *The Agricultural Census Northern Ireland*³⁶. DARD has published brief details about the main users of its statistics in its Statistics Charter. However information about the use made of the statistics is absent from the Statistics Charter and most releases. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DARD should take steps to develop a greater understanding of the use made of the agriculture statistics, publish the relevant information and assumptions, and use them to better support the use of the statistics³⁷ (Requirement 1). We suggest that when DARD when document uses, refer to the types of use put forward in the Statistics Authority's Monitoring Brief, *The Use Made of Official Statistics*³⁸.
- 3.3 For some agriculture statistics, DARD publishes full details of the methods it uses to compile the statistics. Following each EU Farm Structure Survey, DARD publishes a methodological report³⁹ which includes comprehensive methodological information including survey population and frame, and changes to the survey and use of administrative data. DARD's annual statistics publications include some information about data sources and the methods used to compile the statistics – for example, *Statistical Review of Northern Ireland Agriculture* includes information about the methods DARD uses to compile the Agricultural Account, and *Size and Performance of the Northern Ireland Food and Drinks Processing Sector* includes definitions of the terms used and explains the methods used to calculate the indicators used in the report. However, there is scope for DARD to publish more comprehensive information about the methods it uses to produce the statistics which it publishes more frequently (weekly, monthly and / or quarterly) – for example, on sample sizes, data collection and data analysis. As part of the designation

³³ <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/publications/pubs-dard-statistics/dardni-statement-of-compliance-2009.htm>

³⁴ <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/consultations/archived-consultations/consultations-fi-statistical-indicators.htm>

³⁵ <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/publications/pubs-dard-statistics/publications-dard-statistics-summary-responses-fi-consult.htm>

³⁶ <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/user-survey-2008-results.pdf>

³⁷ In relation to Principle 1, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

³⁸ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-briefs/monitoring-brief-6-2010---the-use-made-of-official-statistics.pdf>

³⁹ http://www.dardni.gov.uk/methodological_report_2007v2.pdf

as National Statistics, DARD should publish full details of the methods used to compile weekly, monthly and quarterly agriculture statistics⁴⁰ (Requirement 2).

- 3.4 DARD follows the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency's (NISRA) guidance on quality and NISRA uses the best practice guidelines as set out in ONS's Guidelines for Measuring Statistical Output Quality⁴¹. However, the releases include little information about the quality and reliability of the statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DARD should publish information about the quality of all its agriculture statistics, including the main sources of bias and other error⁴² (Requirement 3).
- 3.5 *Statistical Review of Northern Ireland Agriculture* is a compendium publication, pulling together a range of data from a wide variety of sources, such as the Agricultural Census and the Farm Business Survey. DARD provides notes and definitions in relation to these data. However the distinction between National Statistics and non-National Statistics (and non-official statistics) is not clear, and DARD should do more to inform users whether the statistics from other sources are broadly comparable in terms of quality with National Statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DARD should explain the distinction between National Statistics and the other types of statistics that are in the *Statistical Review of Northern Ireland Agriculture*, and confirm that the non-National Statistics are of adequate quality⁴³ (Requirement 4).
- 3.6 DARD has different arrangements for protecting confidentiality depending on the particular statistics involved. These include publishing information at the lowest possible level that does not disclose confidential information, and seeking permission from individual businesses to allow publication of statistics which may reveal information about the business. DARD has not published details of these arrangements. DARD has published details of the tests undertaken to protect confidentiality of Food and Drinks Processing statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DARD should publish details about arrangements for maintaining the confidentiality of Agricultural Economy, and Farm Surveys statistics⁴⁴ (Requirement 5)
- 3.7 DARD collects the June and December surveys under *The Agricultural Statistics (Northern Ireland) Order 2004* which includes provisions for protecting confidentiality and restrictions on the use of respondents' data. The Act makes provision for the non-statistical use of disclosive data under certain circumstances – for example by the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland and the Food Standards Agency. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DARD should seek authorisation from the Chief Statistician of Northern Ireland for an exemption to the principle of confidentiality for the circumstances described in the *Agricultural Statistics (Northern Ireland) Order 2004*, and publish the details of this authorisation⁴⁵(Requirement 6).
- 3.8 Commentary which aids users' interpretation is absent from some releases, for example *Northern Ireland Milk Prices Statistics*. The releases which include

⁴⁰ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

⁴¹ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/guidelines-for-measuring-statistical-quality/index.html>

⁴² In relation to Principle 4, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

⁴³ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

⁴⁴ In relation to Principle 5, Practice 4 of the *Code of Practice*

⁴⁵ In relation to Principle 5, Practice 5 of the *Code of Practice*

commentary are generally straightforward and easy to understand and include summaries which identify the main messages from the statistics, for example *EU Farm Structure Survey Northern Ireland*. However, there is scope within all the releases to publish insightful commentary to help users' interpretation and understanding and to provide more details about the policy context. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DARD should improve the commentary and analysis in agricultural releases to aid user interpretation of the statistics⁴⁶ (Requirement 7). We suggest that in meeting this requirement DARD should consider the points detailed in annex 2.

- 3.9 Several of the publications included in this assessment contain statistics derived from data collected using the same survey, or which relate to the same topic – for example, the three publications containing statistics on milk. Combining publications could provide a more coherent picture of related statistics – for example, combining *Northern Ireland Milk Prices Statistics* and *Northern Ireland Milk Production Statistics* could provide the opportunity for DARD to provide further insight into the market for milk. We suggest that DARD review the range of agriculture statistics publications with a view to rationalising them and improving coherence among the releases.
- 3.10 DARD has internal timetables for producing all of its statistical publications. In 2009, there was a delay publishing *Size and Performance of the Northern Ireland Food and Drinks Processing Sector, Subsector Statistics*. It is normally published in July but it was delayed until October due to a staff shortage. DARD informed users about the delay via the National Statistics Publication Hub. DARD told us that staffing resources are no longer an issue and the publication of the releases has not been delayed since 2009.
- 3.11 The *Code of Practice* requires National Statistics releases to be issued at 9.30 am on the day of publication. DARD publishes its weekly releases as soon as data become available – for example, the earliest the *Northern Ireland Agricultural Market Report* can be made ready for publication is around midday on a Thursday so DARD publishes it on Thursday afternoon rather than delaying the publication until 9.30 am on Friday. During the course of this assessment DARD applied for an exemption to the *Code* for weekly releases that are not published at 9:30 am.
- 3.12 DARD informed us that its statisticians work closely with colleagues responsible for monitoring agricultural policy, animal health and animal movements in increasing the use of existing administrative data sources for statistical purposes. Northern Ireland was the first UK country to develop a robust system for using the APHIS database in place of survey data for cattle population statistics. The APHIS database is included in DARD's Statement of Administrative Sources⁴⁷, but this includes little information about the quality of the data provided in comparison with survey data. We suggest that DARD provide a link to the quality audit of APHIS and the Cattle Tracing System published by Defra⁴⁸. The statisticians are currently working with colleagues responsible for monitoring animal movements on the use of administrative data on pigs to replace survey questions in the June and December surveys. The

⁴⁶ In relation to Principle 8, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

⁴⁷ http://www.dardni.gov.uk/statement_of_administrative_sources_for_statistical_purposes_v2.pdf

⁴⁸ <http://www.defra.gov.uk/statistics/files/defra-stats-foodfarm-landuselivestock-june-results-BovineRegisters.pdf>

Assessment team considers the use of administrative sources for the production of statistics as an example of good practice.

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to the DARD's Agriculture 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 | When documenting uses, refer to the types of use put forward in the Statistics Authority's Monitoring Brief, <i>The Use Made of Official Statistics</i> (para 3.2). |
| Suggestion 2 | Consider the points detailed in annex 2, in seeking to improve the statistical releases (para 3.8). |
| Suggestion 3 | Review the range of agriculture statistics publications with a view to rationalising them and improving coherence among the releases (para 3.9). |
| Suggestion 4 | Provide a link to the quality audit of APHIS and the Cattle Tracing System published by Defra (para 3.12). |

Annex 2: Compliance with Standards for Statistical Releases

A2.1 In October 2010, the Statistics Authority issued a statement on *Standards for Statistical Releases*⁴⁹. 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 Agriculture 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 majority of releases use titles that describe the coverage and the period to which the release relates. However, the title of some releases do not fully describe the statistics, for example, *EU Farm Structure Survey Northern Ireland*. Releases use standard headings and formatting for a National Statistics release. The text in some of the releases refers to unnumbered tables elsewhere in the release, which makes it difficult for the user to determine which table the text relates to. The inclusion of table numbers would help accessibility of *EU Farm Structure Survey Northern Ireland*. The National Statistics logo is absent from several releases, including *Size and Performance of the Northern Ireland Food and Drinks Processing Sector, Subsector Statistics* and the *Egg Packers Survey*.

A2.4 Several releases do not include a statement about the frequency of publication, including *The Agricultural Census in Northern Ireland*. The releases include the name of the originating department and the statistician responsible.

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

A2.5 Commentary which aids users' interpretation is absent from some releases, for example *Northern Ireland Milk Prices Statistics*. The releases which include commentary are generally straightforward and easy to understand and include summaries which identify the main messages from the statistics, for example *EU Farm Structure Survey Northern Ireland*. Those releases with commentary provide concise factual descriptions of the key messages, describing increases and decreases but only some provide further contextual analysis. Some releases include sections defining terms used within the release, but some releases, especially when describing livestock, use technical terms which are not defined.

⁴⁹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html>

Use language that is impartial, objective and professionally sound

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

Include information about the context and likely uses

A2.7 With the exception of *Farm Incomes in Northern Ireland*, information about uses is absent from the releases. The policy context for the statistics is included in *EU Farm Structure Survey Northern Ireland* but is absent from the other releases. The Agriculture Economy statistics which are published weekly, monthly or quarterly are simply tables and graphs – there is little accompanying text to explain or describe the figures. Some releases provide a brief description of the reasons for changes in the statistics. However, the statistics would be brought to life with greater information about the reasons for changes – for example: changes to agricultural policy; the impact of the weather and disease on livestock and arable crops; and information about the economic conditions and changes in supply and demand.

Include, or link to, appropriate metadata

A2.8 Information about methods is either absent or limited in its coverage. Some releases, for example *EU Farm Structure Survey Northern Ireland*, include comparisons with other EU countries. Estimates from some releases are published in provisional form with final results released later. Provisional data are marked as subject to revision when more complete data are available but information about the extent or timing of these revisions is absent.

Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A3.1 This assessment was conducted from May to October 2011.

A3.2 The Assessment team – Phil Grigor and Gary Wainman – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of DARD in May. Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 3 June. The Assessment team subsequently met DARD 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 19 responses from the user and supplier consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Agriculture press	1
DARD	3
European Union	2
Other Northern Ireland government	2
Other UK government	2
Private sector	3
Data suppliers	6

A3.5 Users were generally satisfied with the level, quality, presentation and accessibility of the statistics which, overall, meet users' needs. Some users reported that they would prefer: wider coverage of the statistics; more clarity about the methods which DARD uses; better harmonisation of some UK-wide aspects of the statistics; and more accessible data. A user indicated they would like the statistics to reflect changes in industry practice more quickly. Users were generally satisfied with the timeliness of the statistical publications and with the accessibility and helpfulness of the producer team.

A3.5 There were widely varying responses from suppliers. Some reported no problems providing the data while others found it burdensome, especially compiling the data into the format required by DARD and meeting the deadline for submission. Suppliers were satisfied with the guidance provided by DARD. There was little awareness among suppliers about the uses made of the data, and some suppliers queried whether DARD fully understands what is involved in providing the data. Some suppliers indicated that DARD consulted them

adequately about changes in data requirements but others reported that they had never been consulted.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

