

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Children's Social Care in Northern Ireland

*(produced by the Department of Health, Social
Services and Public Safety, Northern Ireland)*

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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 sets of statistics produced by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety Northern Ireland (DHSSPS):

- *Sections 1, 2 and 4 of Children Order Statistical Tables for Northern Ireland*⁴;
- *Sections 1 and 3 of Children Order Statistical Trends for Northern Ireland*⁵;
- *Children Order Child Protection and Referral Statistics*⁶;

1.1.2 The remaining sections of the bulletins *Children Order Statistical Trends for Northern Ireland* (referred to in this report as *Statistical Trends*) and *Children Order Statistical Tables for Northern Ireland (Statistical Tables)* were covered in Assessment report 16⁷ published in October 2009.

1.1.3 Section 3 of this report 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 materiality⁸. 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.

1.1.4 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 <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.dhsspsni.gov.uk/children_order_statistical_tables_for_northern_ireland_2009_-_10_version_11c.pdf

⁵ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/microsoft_word_-_2_children_order_statistical_trends_for_northern_ireland_2004-05_to_2009-10_-_tab_b22.pdf

⁶ [http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/microsoft_word_-_2__tab-](http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/microsoft_word_-_2__tab-a_children_order_child_protection_and_referral_statistics_quarter_ending_30_september_2011.pdf)

[a_children_order_child_protection_and_referral_statistics_quarter_ending_30_september_2011.pdf](http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/microsoft_word_-_2__tab-a_children_order_child_protection_and_referral_statistics_quarter_ending_30_september_2011.pdf)

⁷ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

⁸ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/guidance-about-assessment/criteria-for-deciding-upon-the-format-of-an-assessment-report.pdf>

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 paragraph 1.1.1 are designated as National Statistics, subject to DHSSPS implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by June 2012.

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

1.3.1 DHSSPS has initiated a Regional Information Group (RIG) to improve the quality of the statistics and monitor their use.

1.3.2 The bulletins contain technical notes and provide signposting to several background documents including the use of administrative sources; a revisions policy; a quality report; a confidentiality statement; and pre-release access lists published on the DHSSPS website. DHSSPS has not published any information about how the statistics relate to each other. There is scope to improve the quality of the commentary and to provide more contextual information to help users to interpret the statistics.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that DHSSPS 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	Publish information about the use made of these statistics by non-government users and about their experiences of these statistics (para 3.3).
Requirement 2	Review options for improving the timeliness of these statistics to meet users' needs (para 3.4).
Requirement 3	Review the coherence of <i>Statistical Tables</i> and <i>Statistical Trends</i> to ensure that they meet user needs (para 3.5).
Requirement 4	Review the quality assurance procedures for these statistics to take account of planned changes to the arrangements for data collection (para 3.6).

Requirement 5

Include more commentary and analysis in the statistical releases for these statistics, to aid user interpretation (para 3.8).

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 This assessment covers statistics about children's social care in Northern Ireland. These statistics provide information about some of the most vulnerable children in society and provide an indication of how well government is responding to their needs.
- 2.2 The following sets of statistics produced by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety Northern Ireland (DHSSPS) are covered in this report:
- *Children Order Statistical Tables for Northern Ireland*⁹; Section 1 (Child Protection); Section 2 (Children in Need); and Section 4 (Day Care Provision for children).
 - *Children Order Statistical Trends for Northern Ireland*¹⁰; Section 1 (Child Protection); and Section 3 (Children in Need).
 - *Children Order Child Protection and Referral Statistics*¹¹.
- 2.3 DHSSPS produces these statistics by collating data supplied by Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts in Northern Ireland. The HSC Trusts hold the data on a management information system called SOS CARE. HSC Trusts produce Children Order Returns in aggregate form automatically from this system and send the data to DHSSPS within six weeks of the end of the reference period.
- 2.4 Until 2004/05 these statistics were published in a single release. In response to users' needs, the statistics were separated into two bulletins. The objective was to publish *Statistical Tables* as an early release with the more detailed *Statistical Trends* published at a later date. *Child Protection and Referral Statistics* has been published as a separate quarterly bulletin from March 2010.
- 2.5 *Statistical Tables* is released annually and relates to the position as of the end of March for the given reference year. This bulletin presents the statistics by HSC Trust and includes some key findings comparing the latest year's statistics with those for the previous year.
- 2.6 *Statistical Trends* is released annually. Sections 1 and 3 present statistics about child protection and children in need. The release presents some trend statistics and contains some graphs and commentary.
- 2.7 *Child Protection and Referral Statistics* details the numbers of children on the child protection register for each HSC Trust by legal status and age, and the

⁹ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/children_order_statistical_tables_for_northern_ireland_2009_-_10_version_11c.pdf

¹⁰ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/microsoft_word_-_2_children_order_statistical_trends_for_northern_ireland_2004-05_to_2009-10_-_tab_b22.pdf

¹¹ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/microsoft_word_-_2_tab_-_a_children_order_child_protection_and_referral_statistics_quarter_ending_30_september_2011.pdf

number of child protection referrals by source of referral. It presents key findings without additional commentary.

- 2.8 DHSSPS has established a Regional Information Group (RIG)¹², to facilitate access to information provided by the HSC Trusts, and other relevant bodies, to meet the needs of the Department and its Minister. The work programme overseen by RIG aims to ensure that information is provided to agreed standards of timeliness and quality and that arrangements for data collection are sufficient to enable DHSSPS to meet its statutory obligations under the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*. A sub-group of RIG will oversee a comprehensive review of all the data returns provided by the HSC Trusts to DHSSPS to develop more efficient processes for data supply, and to reduce the burden on the Trusts.
- 2.9 DHSSPS was not able to provide us with an estimate for the cost of producing these statistics, but told us that it is currently in the process of developing a system to estimate these costs.
- 2.10 The main users of these statistics are within DHSSPS, other government departments, HSC Trusts and voluntary organisations. The statistics are used to develop and monitor child care policy and to monitor changes in the children in need population.

¹² http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/cib_stakeholder_board_tor.pdf

3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 DHSSPS has a webpage¹³ that provides information about how it engages with users of these statistics. This includes a *Children's Community Statistics User Engagement Plan*¹⁴ which sets out DHSSPS' approach to documenting the needs of users and the use they make of the statistics. A stakeholder group¹⁵ within DHSSPS meets twice a year. DHSSPS engages with its data suppliers, some of whom are also users, through the Community Liaison Group which also meets every six months. This group comprises officials within DHSSPS, the HSC Board and representatives from each of the HSC Trusts. The agenda for the most recent meeting is published online¹⁶.
- 3.2 DHSSPS has taken steps to engage with other users of these statistics. It carried out a consultation with external users in September and October 2010. It routinely includes a feedback questionnaire in the annual statistical bulletins, although this does not elicit much response from users. DHSSPS also keeps a record of ad hoc requests. DHSSPS does not publish any summaries of the feedback received, consultation responses or minutes of meetings with users.
- 3.3 The statistical bulletins provide a short statement about the uses that are made of these statistics. DHSSPS also publishes a quality report¹⁷ for these statistics which provides some additional information about the use made of the statistics within DHSSPS. This document identifies other users of these statistics, including charities, advocacy groups, regulatory groups, adoption and fostering agencies, voluntary organisations, and the general public. DHSSPS does not provide information about the uses made of the statistics by these users, or about the extent to which the statistics meet their needs. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should publish information about the use made of these statistics by non-government users and about their experiences of these statistics¹⁸ (Requirement 1). In meeting this Requirement, we suggest that DHSSPS (a) refer to the generic classes of use put forward in the Authority's Monitoring Brief, *The Use Made of Official Statistics*¹⁹ and (b) publish more complete information about the use made of these statistics within DHSSPS and by the Health and Social Care Trusts, and about these users' experiences of these statistics.
- 3.4 DHSSPS publishes *Children Order Child Protection and Referral Statistics* within two months of the reporting quarter. DHSSPS aims to publish *Statistical Tables* and *Statistical Trends* within 12 months of the relevant reporting year. HSC Trusts are given six weeks after the end of the reporting year to supply the data. DHSSPS told us that late submissions of data sometimes results in delays to the publication. Some users told us that the long delay between the end of the reporting year and the publication of *Statistical Tables* and *Statistical Trends* limits the value of these statistics. DHSSPS expects developments

¹³ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/statistics_and_research-user_engagement.htm

¹⁴ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/cib_user_engagement_plan-2.pdf

¹⁵ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/cib_stakeholder_board_tor.pdf

¹⁶ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/clg_14.11.11_-_summary_for_internet.pdf

¹⁷ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/quality_report_for_childrens_statistics-3.pdf

¹⁸ In relation to Principle 1, Practices 2 and 5 of the *Code of Practice*

¹⁹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-briefs/monitoring-brief-6-2010---the-use-made-of-official-statistics.pdf>

arising from RIG will allow the data needed for these statistics to be supplied more efficiently. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should review options for improving the timeliness of these statistics to meet user needs²⁰ (Requirement 2).

- 3.5 *Statistical Trends* is published as a companion bulletin to *Statistical Tables*. *Statistical Trends* provides information covering a number of years whereas *Statistical Tables* focuses on the latest year. DHSSPS told us that the original plan had been to publish *Statistical Tables* shortly after the end of the reference period, to provide users with timely high level annual data, and then to release *Statistical Trends* some weeks later. However, in recent years both bulletins have been published on the same day, or just two weeks apart. The presentation of duplicate statistics in the two annual bulletins could be confusing for users. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should review the coherence of *Statistical Tables* and *Statistical Trends* to ensure that they meet user needs²¹ (Requirement 3).
- 3.6 We came across examples of differences in the figures presented in *Statistical Tables* and *Statistical Trends* which were not identified or explained. The bulletins include information about the quality of the statistics, linking to a quality report²² for children's statistics. However this quality report does not provide information about what checks are carried out on the data. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should review the quality assurance procedures for these statistics to take account of planned changes to the arrangements for data collection²³ (Requirement 4).
- 3.7 Suppliers told us that collating the data for these statistics is time-consuming. DHSSPS is taking steps to reduce the burden on its suppliers through the work programme overseen by RIG.
- 3.8 The bulletins follow a similar format, including the way in which technical information is presented, and the inclusion of a summary of key points and a glossary. *Statistical Trends* highlights some key points in each section with comparisons with previous years. There is a lack of commentary and analysis about the policy context of the statistics. For example, no information is provided about the possible reasons for changes over time. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should include more commentary and analysis in the statistical releases for these statistics, to aid user interpretation²⁴ (Requirement 5). We suggest that in meeting this requirement DHSSPS consider the points detailed in annex 2.
- 3.9 DHSSPS publishes a schedule for publications on its website. In response to comments from the Assessment team, DHSSPS has updated the schedule to ensure that it covers a 12 month timetable. The schedule draws attention to any delays to the scheduled publication dates, and explains the reasons for these delays.

²⁰ In relation to Principle 1, Practice 4 of the *Code of Practice*

²¹ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 3 of the *Code of Practice*

²² http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/quality_report_for_childrens_statistics-3.pdf

²³ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 3 of the *Code of Practice*

²⁴ In relation to Principle 8, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

- 3.10 DHSSPS previously published the three bulletins only in PDF format. In response to comments from the Assessment team, DHSSPS now publishes the reports in different formats that enable and encourage analysis and re-use.

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to DHSSPS's statistics on children's social care, 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 (a) refer to the generic classes of use put forward in the Authority's Monitoring Brief, *The Use Made of Official Statistics*; and (b) publish more complete information about the use made of these statistics within DHSSPS and by the Health and Social Care Trusts, and about these users' experiences of these statistics (para 3.3).

Suggestion 2 Consider the points detailed in annex 2, in seeking to improve the statistical bulletins (para 3.8).

Annex 2: Compliance with Standards for Statistical Releases

- A2.1 In October 2010, the Statistics Authority issued a statement on *Standards for Statistical Releases*²⁵. 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 children’s social care 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 introductory text describes the contents of the release and the period to which the statistics relate. *Statistical Trends* and *Statistical Tables* are referred to as ‘companion bulletins’, but they do not provide any information about the difference or similarities in the statistics contained in each bulletin.
- A2.4 All the bulletins include the name of the producer body. The name and contact details of the responsible statistician are included on the front and back pages of the bulletins.
- A2.5 *Statistical Tables* previously presented two different publication dates, one on the footer of the front page and a different date on the inside cover. DHSSPS has corrected this discrepancy in the latest release.

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

- A2.6 Each release includes a Key Findings section which reports on a selection of the statistics in the release, but there is no summary of the main messages from the statistics.
- A2.7 There is limited commentary in bullet form in *Statistical Trends*. It details rises and falls in the figures but does not provide any explanations of the changes or wider contextual information.
- A2.8 The language used in the publications is mostly straightforward and clear. Technical terms are explained in the text and further data definitions are supplied for *Statistical Tables* and *Child Protection and Referral Statistics*.
- A2.9 *Statistical Trends* provides a useful Appendix presenting a comparison between HSC Trusts over time, and per 10,000 of the relevant population. However, this duplicates some information presented in *Statistical Tables*, and the figures do not always match correctly. This is likely to confuse readers.

²⁵ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html>

Use language that is impartial, objective and professionally sound

A2.10 The statistics are presented impartially. The descriptions that exist about trends and changes in the statistics are professionally sound.

Include information about the context and likely uses

A2.11 The only use of the data referred to is use within DHSSPS.

A2.12 The bulletins include information about the quality of the statistics, linking to a quality report for children's statistics. This quality report does not explain what validation checks are carried out on the data. The annual bulletins state that the data for the annual reports are available six weeks after the end of the reference period but it does not explain why the bulletins are published seven months after this date.

Include, or link to, appropriate metadata

A2.13 Each release includes a Technical Notes section which provides information about the data quality, data collection, revisions policy, use of administrative sources and disclosure conventions. Each report includes a section on related publications containing details of statistics on similar themes published by other Administrations in the United Kingdom.

A2.14 There is no information about how the three bulletins are related and the data that each of the other bulletins contains.

Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A3.1 This assessment was conducted from November 2011 to January 2012.

A3.2 The Assessment team – Neil Jackson and Emily Gleeson – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of DHSSPS in November. The Assessment team subsequently met DHSSPS during December to review compliance with the *Code of Practice*. This assessment built on the findings from Assessment Report 16 which had already covered statistics presented in certain sections of *Statistical Trends* and *Statistical Tables*. The Assessment team used the written evidence from that assessment, which was reviewed and updated as part of the meeting with DHSSPS in December.

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

HSC Trusts	3
Charity	2
Health Service Agency	1

A3.5 Some users reported that the usefulness of the annual *Statistical Tables* bulletin was limited because it is not sufficiently timely. Suppliers reported that the data collation process is onerous and expressed an interest in reviewing the data collation systems currently in place. Users were complimentary about their engagement with the producer team. Some users, especially those outside HSC Trusts, said that they would like increased contact and a stronger relationship with DHSSPS, especially around notification of new bulletins and the future development of the statistics. Several users said that they would like additional detailed information or some minor changes to tables to make them more user friendly.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

