

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics from the Family Resources Survey in Northern Ireland

*(produced by the Department for Social Development
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 set of statistics produced by the Department for Social Development Northern Ireland (DSD):

- *Family Resources Survey – Northern Ireland*⁴ (FRS);
- *Households Below Average Income – Northern Ireland*⁵ (HBAI); and
- *Family Resources Survey – Urban Rural Northern Ireland*⁶ (Urban/Rural).

1.1.2 The Act also allows the appropriate authority to request an assessment of other official statistics in order for them to gain National Statistics status. This report is in response to such a request in relation to *The Pensioners' Income Series Bulletin – Northern Ireland*⁷ (*Pensioners' Income*).

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.

1.2 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 the products listed at 1.1.1 above can be designated as National Statistics, 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.dsdni.gov.uk/index/stats_and_research/family_resources_survey.htm

⁵ http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/stats_and_research/stats-publications/stats-family-resource/households.htm

⁶ http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/stats_and_research/stats-publications/stats-family-resource/urban_rural_reports.htm

⁷ http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/stats_and_research/statistics_and_research-pensioners_income_series.htm

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

has determined that the statistics published in the product detailed in paragraph 1.1.2 can be designated as a new National Statistics product, subject to DSD implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by July 2012.

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

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

1.3.1 DSD has set up a user group for the *FRS* and *HBAI* statistics and consults users when making major changes to the statistics. Participation in the user group is mainly from government and academic users, and there is no representation from the voluntary sector. The needs of current and potential users and the uses made of these statistics are not well documented.

1.3.2 The publications are published between 20 and 24 months after the end of the survey reference period. Some users told us that the lack of timeliness reduced the usefulness of the statistics to them. The releases contain detailed data tables but little commentary to aid user interpretation of the statistics.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that DSD 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 (a) Take steps to engage with the wider user community outside of government, and make those steps known;
(b) Investigate and document the use made of these statistics by the wider user community, publish the relevant information and assumptions, and use them to better support the use of the statistics (para 3.1).

Requirement 2 Provide more information about the quality of the statistics in *Households Below Average Income – Northern Ireland* and *The Pensioners' Income Series Bulletin – Northern Ireland* and provide links to where more detailed information can be found (para 3.3).

Requirement 3 Improve the commentary in the releases so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics (para 3.4).

Requirement 4 Review the arrangements for the supply of data for these statistics to allow more timely publication dates for the statistics (para 3.5).

Requirement 5 Ensure that access to these statistics, outside the statutory period allowed for, is restricted to people essential for their production and publication (para 3.8).

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 The four releases covered by this assessment present the results for Northern Ireland from the Family Resources Survey (FRS). FRS is a continuous cross-sectional household survey which collects data on the income of private households across the UK and has been conducted since October 1992. The survey initially covered Great Britain (GB) but was extended to Northern Ireland in 2002-03. DSD is responsible for the Northern Ireland part of the Survey. Fieldwork in Northern Ireland is carried out for DSD by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency⁹ (NISRA). The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is responsible for the GB part of the survey, which is administered on its behalf by the Office for National Statistics¹⁰ (ONS) and the National Centre for Social Research¹¹ (NatCen).
- 2.2 *Family Resources Survey – Northern Ireland (FRS)* presents statistics for Northern Ireland on household income from different sources, including Social Security benefits, housing costs, and the circumstances of household members, such as whether someone gives or receives care or has childcare costs. DWP publishes the UK results from the FRS annually in *Family Resources Survey (Annual Report)*¹². The UK statistics were included in a recent assessment¹³, so for this report we have not looked in any detail at the methods used in collecting and analysing the data.
- 2.3 *Households Below Average Income – Northern Ireland (HBAI)* presents statistics on individuals' income by a range of personal characteristics, including by gender, age, disability and religious denomination. It presents statistics that provide insights into the standards of living of households in Northern Ireland. The release focuses on the lower part of the income distribution and is an important source of information on poverty in Northern Ireland. The income statistics are adjusted to take account of the different size and composition of households, and to allow comparisons between the living standards of different types of household. DWP publishes a similar report for the UK in *Households Below Average Income*¹⁴ and the Scottish Government publishes *Poverty and income inequality in Scotland*¹⁵.
- 2.4 *The Pensioners' Income Series Bulletin – Northern Ireland (Pensioners' Income)* is an annual publication which presents statistics on the levels, sources and distribution of pensioners' income and examines the position of pensioners within the income distribution of the population as a whole. *Pensioners' Income*

⁹ <http://www.csu.nisra.gov.uk/survey.asp4.htm>

¹⁰ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/index.html>

¹¹ <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/>

¹² http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/frs/2009_10/index.php?page=intro

¹³ Assessment Report 161: *Statistics on Household Resources*

<http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/assessment-reports/assessment-report-161---statistics-on-household-resources.pdf>

¹⁴ <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=hbai>

¹⁵ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2011/05/12142035>

present similar information for Northern Ireland to the information that DWP publishes for the UK in *Pensioners' Income Series*¹⁶.

- 2.5 *Family Resources Survey – Urban Rural Northern Ireland (Urban/Rural)* presents statistics on differences between household incomes in urban and rural areas in Northern Ireland. *Urban/Rural* is published annually, usually in November. There is no equivalent publication to *Urban/Rural* for the UK.
- 2.6 In 2009 DSD consulted users about proposals to withdraw *Pensioners' Income* and two other National Statistics releases based on the FRS, *Income Related Benefits: Estimates of Take Up in Northern Ireland*¹⁷ and *Individual Income Series*¹⁸ (*Individual Income*). DSD received few responses to the consultation, although most of those who responded opposed the withdrawal of these releases. Following the consultation DSD ceased production of *Income Related Benefits: Estimates of Take Up in Northern Ireland*. It replaced *Pensioners' Income* and *Individual Income* with two shorter bulletins containing headline figures and tables, but does not publish these bulletins as National Statistics. DSD has not requested an assessment of *Individual Income* as there is a strong possibility that it will discontinue the series on the grounds that it is rarely used.
- 2.7 These releases are used by DSD and other Northern Ireland government departments to assess the extent to which welfare policy measures are helping to address economic disadvantage. DSD uses the statistics to model Social Security benefit entitlement and to audit the uptake of benefits. *HBAI* presents measures of Child Poverty which are used to monitor outcomes from the Northern Ireland Administration's Children and Young People's Strategy¹⁹. The statistics are also used to monitor progress towards meeting the UK-wide poverty targets set out in the Child Poverty Act 2010²⁰. Save the Children and other charities use the statistics to inform their promotional campaigns and to lobby on behalf of low income households. The statistics are also used by private sector analysts to conduct assessments and evaluations.
- 2.8 DSD told us that it takes approximately 90 minutes to complete a survey questionnaire. The 2009/10 survey received a 65 per cent response rate. The total annual cost of conducting the survey in Northern Ireland is approximately £335,000. DSD deploy about 1.3 full time equivalent staff to produce and disseminate the survey findings.

¹⁶ http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=pensioners_income

¹⁷ http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/stats_and_research/statistics_and_research-take_up.htm

¹⁸ http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/stats_and_research/individual_income_series_reports.htm

¹⁹ <http://www.ofmdfmni.gov.uk/index/equality/children-young-people/children-and-young-people-strategy.htm>

²⁰ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga.2010/9/contents>

3. Assessment findings

- 3.1 DSD has established an *FRS* and *HBAI* user group which includes representatives from central government and academia, but not any representatives from the voluntary sector. Meetings of the user group are scheduled to take place twice a year. DSD has not published any information about the user group such as its terms of reference or minutes of meetings. DSD publishes some information in *FRS* and *HBAI* about the uses that are made of these statistics by central government, but has not published much information about the uses made of these statistics by non-government users or about their experiences of these statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DSD should (a) take steps to engage with the wider user community outside of government, and make those steps known; (b) investigate and document the use made of these statistics by the wider user community, publish the relevant information and assumptions, and use them to better support the use of the statistics²¹ (Requirement 1). We suggest that in meeting this requirement DSD refer to the generic classes of use put forward in the Authority's Monitoring Brief, *The Use Made of Official Statistics*²².
- 3.2 DSD publishes on its website its forward schedule of releases²³ for these statistics. The timetable shown for the 2012 releases are 'early 2012' for *Urban/Rural and Pensioners' Income* and 'Autumn 2012' for *FRS* and *HBAI*. In response to concerns raised by the Assessment team DSD told us that it would provide precise release dates for statistics due to be published within four weeks and indicate the expected month of release for statistics due to be published later in the year.. The latest releases of *Urban/Rural and Pensioners' Income* do not detail the date of their release in the releases themselves or on the DSD website. We suggest that DSD state the date of publication in *Urban/Rural and Pensioners' Income*.
- 3.3 *FRS* provides a description of the methods used to produce the statistics and the quality assurance procedures that have been adopted. It provides some information about the quality of the statistics, including information about the main sources of bias and error. It includes a table comparing some of the survey results with statistics on the recipients of benefits derived from the benefits system, which we regard as an example of good practice. *HBAI* and *Pensioners Income* contain discussions about sampling errors and provide confidence intervals for the main estimates of poverty and for pensioners' incomes respectively. They provide less information about other sources or error or bias and do not provide links to where more detailed information can be found about these issues. *Pensioners' Income* mentions that the *FRS* does not cover pensioners in care homes, but does not provide any further information about the implications for the statistics on pensioners' incomes. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DSD should provide more information about the quality of the statistics in *HBAI* and *Pensioners' Income*

²¹ In relation to Principle 1, Practices 1 and 2 of the *Code of Practice*

²² <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-briefs/monitoring-brief-6-2010---the-use-made-of-official-statistics.pdf>

²³ http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/stats_and_research/about-national-statistics-protocols-compliance.htm

and provide links to where more detailed information can be found²⁴ (Requirement 2).

- 3.4 *FRS* provides a bullet-point summary of the main points in each chapter but does not provide any additional commentary to assist users' understanding of the statistics. *HBAI* provides some limited commentary in each chapter. DSD does not publish information about how the findings in the releases relate to one another. The releases present the most recent findings from the *FRS*, but provide very little information about how the results have changed over time. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DSD should improve the commentary in the releases so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics²⁵ (Requirement 3). We suggest that in meeting this Requirement DSD consider the points detailed in annex 2.
- 3.5 *FRS* and *HBAI* are published in November, 20 months after the end of the reference period for the statistics. *Urban/Rural* and *Pensioners' Income* are published 21 to 24 months after the end of the reference period. Some users told us that the long delay between the reference period and the publication dates for these statistics made the statistics less useful. DSD told us that it does not receive the necessary datasets for these statistics from DWP until May, after DWP has published *FRS* and *HBAI* statistics for the UK. The Scottish Government publishes equivalent statistics for Scotland at the same time as DWP publishes the UK statistics. DSD told us that its Service Level Agreement with DWP is being revised to allow a more timely transfer of NI data. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DSD should review the arrangements for the supply of data for these statistics to allow more timely publication dates for the statistics²⁶ (Requirement 4).
- 3.6 The last releases of *Urban/Rural* and *Pensioners' Income* do not give contact details for the responsible statistician. DSD has confirmed that it will include contact names as well as contact details in all future releases.
- 3.7 DSD has taken action to ensure *Pensioners' Income* is accessible from the National Statistics Publication Hub²⁷ in response to concerns raised by the Assessment team about its accessibility.
- 3.8 The senior statistician in DSD provides briefing information about the latest statistics to the Social Development Minister and to a small number of officials 24 hours before the public release of the statistics, in accordance with the *Northern Ireland Pre-Release to Official Statistics Order*²⁸. When the senior statistician is not available, a senior official who is not part of the statistical production process takes responsibility for approving this briefing material, and has access to the statistics outside the 24 hours provided for in the Order. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DSD should ensure that access

²⁴ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 2 and Principle 8, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

²⁵ In relation to Principle 8, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

²⁶ In relation to Principle 1, Practice 4 of the *Code of Practice*

²⁷ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk>

²⁸ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2009/71/contents/made>

to these statistics, outside the statutory period allowed for, is restricted to people essential for their production and publication²⁹ (Requirement 5).

²⁹ In relation to Protocol 2, Practice 7 of the *Code of Practice*

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to DSD's statistics on family resources, 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 generic classes of use put forward in the Authority's Monitoring Brief, <i>The Use Made of Official Statistics</i> when documenting use (para 3.1). |
| Suggestion 2 | State the date of publication in <i>Family Resources Survey – Urban Rural Northern Ireland</i> and <i>The Pensioners' Income Series Bulletin – Northern Ireland</i> (para 3.2). |
| Suggestion 3 | 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*³⁰. 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 from the Family Resources Survey in Northern Ireland 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 and implicitly communicate the frequency of the releases. The geographical coverage of the statistics is included in their titles. All the National Statistics releases use appropriate headings and logos. The releases clearly identify the producer organisation, and recent releases of *FRS* and *HBAI* include the contact details of the responsible statistician but *Urban/Rural* and *Pensioners' Income* do not give the name of the responsible statistician. *FRS*, *HBAI* and *Urban/Rural* all include contents pages at the start. *Pensioners' Income* provides an insufficient account of what is included in the release, in terms of tables and subjects discussed.

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

- A2.4 *FRS*, *HBAI* and *Urban/Rural* include summaries which list key findings from the survey. The summaries do not always draw out the most interesting and relevant findings. The layout of *FRS*, *HBAI* and *Urban/Rural* results in the summary findings being located quite a long way into each report. The key points often re-iterate the findings of the previous year. Some however are entirely new or altered from the previous year but these are not highlighted so it is difficult to see that they contain new information. *Pensioners' Income* does not include key findings. The narrative is mainly confined to descriptions of the information presented in tables and charts, and does not provide any wider contextual information.
- A2.5 The language in each release is straightforward with explanations of the main terms but these are not always easy to find. For example, in *HBAI* the definition of 'poverty' is in a footnote to a table. The principal focus of comparison in *FRS* and *HBAI* is with the UK and, where appropriate, other UK nations and regions. Suitable comparisons are also made in *FRS*, *HBAI* and *Urban/Rural* between Local Government Districts within Northern Ireland. *FRS* and *Urban/Rural* present statistics mainly in tables. *HBAI* and *Pensioners' Income* use graphs

³⁰ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html>

as well as tables to present the statistics. *FRS* presents the statistics exclusively as tables and uses no other means to illustrate the main messages. All the statistics are expressed as percentages, and no information is presented about the actual level of household earnings.

Use language that is impartial, objective and professionally sound

A2.6 The text used in the releases is impartial and demonstrably evidence based. Descriptive statements in *FRS*, *HBAI* and *Urban/Rural* are consistent with the statistics. Some commentary in *Pensioners' Income* adopts broad language which could be open to different interpretations.

A2.7 All of the releases include descriptions of proportions, and changes that are professionally sound. *FRS* does not include time series. *HBAI* presents some time series but provides little accompanying commentary.

Include information about the context and likely uses

A2.8 *FRS* and *HBAI* include information about the operational context of the statistics, for example for the purposes of follow up studies looking at areas where there is high pensioner population and low uptake of pensioner benefits. Explanations of why the statistics are important and to whom, including how they are likely to be used are included in *FRS* and *HBAI* but not in the other releases. *Urban/Rural* and *Pensioners' Income* do not include information about their uses. The releases include some information about the reliability of the statistics. *HBAI* statistics are used to monitor progress towards UK Child Poverty targets and this is referred to in the release. There is little information in any of the releases about uses made by non-government users.

Include, or link to, appropriate metadata

A2.9 The releases include information about the sources and the methods used to compile these statistics. DSD's website provides links to the principal UK releases containing comparable data³¹.

³¹ http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/stats_and_research/family_resources_survey.htm

Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A3.1 This assessment was conducted from August 2011 to February 2012.

A3.2 The Assessment team – Neil Jackson and Iain Russell – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of DSD in October 2011. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 27 September 2011. The Assessment team subsequently met the DSD statisticians responsible for the releases during December 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

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

Central government	6
Academic	2
Charity	3

A3.5 Users responded that the releases provide useful information and were generally complimentary about the responsiveness of the statisticians to ad hoc requests. An exception is in respect to bespoke information requests for which DSD has to refer to DWP, who hold the required information. This reduces the responsiveness to the user. Issues raised included:

- concern that DSD has little control over the Northern Ireland component of the FRS, allied to a perception that DSD lacks the resources to follow a different approach;
- Concerns about the commentary and lack of analysis to explain what the statistics indicate in terms of progress against targets,
- lack of information about plans to report on severe child poverty³², and
- the lack of timeliness of some of the statistics making them less useful to users.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

³² http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/7177613.stm

