

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Hospitals 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 set of statistics produced by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety Northern Ireland (DHSSPS):

- *Inpatient and Daycase Activity Statistics*⁴ (*Inpatients*);
- *Outpatient Activity Statistics*⁵ (*Outpatients*);
- *Mental Health and Learning Disability*⁶ (*Mental Health*);
- *Emergency Care Statistics*⁷ (*Emergency Care*); and
- *Northern Ireland Firework Injuries*⁸ (*Firework Injuries*).

1.1.2 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 materiality⁹. The Assessment team nonetheless assessed compliance with all parts of the *Code of Practice* and has commented on all those in respect of which some remedial action is recommended.

1.1.3 This report was prepared by the Authority’s Assessment team, and approved by the Board of the Statistics Authority on the advice of the Head of Assessment.

1.2 Decision concerning designation as National Statistics

1.2.1 The Statistics Authority judges that the statistics covered by this report are readily accessible, produced according to sound methods and managed impartially and objectively in the public interest, subject to any points for action in this report. The Statistics Authority confirms that the statistics covered in this report are designated as National Statistics, subject to DHSSPS implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by October 2012.

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/inpatient_hospital_statistics_2010-11.pdf

⁵ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/ni_hospital_statistics_-_outpatient_activity_2010_11.pdf

⁶ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/hospital_statistics_-_mental_health__2010-11_.pdf

⁷ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/a_e_annual_report__2010-11_final.pdf

⁸ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/hospital-stats/emergency_care-3/firework-stats.htm

⁹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/guidance-about-assessment/criteria-for-deciding-upon-the-format-of-an-assessment-report.pdf>

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

- 1.3.1 DHSSPS has recently improved its user engagement via quarterly meetings of two groups, a customer survey and the business planning process. It has not published information about the use made of the statistics.
- 1.3.2 Until 2009/10 DHSSPS published the statistics now included in *Inpatients*, *Outpatients*, *Mental Health* and *Emergency Care* in one release. The separate releases have improved accessibility for users. There is scope to improve the commentary and provide contextual information to further assist 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

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|----------------------|--|
| Requirement 1 | Take steps to develop a greater understanding of the use made of the statistics, publish the relevant information and assumptions and use them to better support the use of the statistics (para 3.1). |
| Requirement 2 | Publish more information about the quality of the statistics (para 3.2). |
| Requirement 3 | a) provide more information in <i>Mental Health</i> about the nature of the experimental statistics, including information about their quality and reliability; and b) publish a plan to review the data sources and methods used to produce the experimental statistics, to ensure that they are produced to a level of quality that meets users' needs (para 3.3). |
| Requirement 4 | Improve the commentary and include contextual information in the releases so that they aid user interpretation of the statistics (para 3.6). |

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 This report covers five annual statistical releases produced by the Hospital Information Branch of DHSSPS. Prior to 2009/10 the statistics included in *Inpatients, Outpatients, Mental Health and Emergency Care* were published in a single release.
- 2.2 There are three types of hospital attendance: inpatients are individuals whose treatment requires them to stay in hospital overnight; day patients are those who attend a hospital for tests or surgery but do not need to stay overnight; and outpatients are those who are referred to see a consultant but do not stay in hospital.
- 2.3 *Inpatient and Daycase Activity Statistics (Inpatients)* presents statistics for the most recent financial year on the total number of inpatient and day patient admissions to hospitals, bed occupancy rates, available beds, average length of stay, theatre utilisation and hospital births. Statistics are presented by hospital, Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust, and by medical specialty.
- 2.4 *Outpatient Activity Statistics (Outpatients)* presents statistics on patient activity at consultant-led outpatient services for the past financial year. The statistics show the numbers of new and review attendances, missed appointments, and appointments cancelled by patients and hospitals. Tables in the release present statistics for each hospital, HSC Trust and medical specialty. The release for 2010/11 also included, for the first time, statistics about specialist services provided as part of Northern Ireland's Integrated Clinical Assessment and Treatment Services¹⁰ (ICATS).
- 2.5 *Mental Health and Learning Disability (Mental Health)* provides statistics on the number of patients who were admitted under the Mental Health and Learning Disability Programmes of Care¹¹ (POC for the most recent financial year. It covers the numbers of admissions, inpatients, daycases, outpatients and bed occupancy rates. Further statistics are presented for each hospital and HSC Trust.
- 2.6 *Emergency Care Statistics (Emergency Care)* presents statistics on attendance and waiting times at emergency care departments for the most recent financial year. It provides a breakdown of the statistics by hospital and HSC Trust. The release also provides statistics on patient transport and emergency response times.
- 2.7 *Northern Ireland Firework Injuries (Firework Injuries)* presents statistics on the number of people injured by fireworks who were treated at emergency care departments during the Halloween period. The Halloween period is defined as two weeks before and two weeks after Halloween (31 October). It presents

¹⁰ These specialist services assess and treat patients who do not require urgent treatment. Their aim is to help reduce outpatient waiting times

¹¹ This includes mental illness, child and adolescent psychiatry, forensic psychiatry and psychotherapy

some trend information and statistics on the types of injuries received, the types of fireworks used and the age and sex of the injured person.

- 2.8 The statistics for the four hospital releases are based on a combination of data extracted from HSC Trusts' systems and a series of forms. The statistics for *Firework Injuries* are provided by each HSC Trust on a form.
- 2.9 DHSSPS policy officials use the four hospital statistics releases to develop and evaluate policy; to answer Assembly Questions; to brief ministers; to assess performance against Public Accounts Committee recommendations; and to assess HSC productivity. Organisations within the Health Service such as HSC Trusts, the HSC Board and the Patient Client Council use the statistics to monitor trends. Other users outside of DHSSPS, such as politicians, the media, lobby groups and members of the general public use these statistics to assess the overall performance of the Health Service. The Minister for Health in Northern Ireland uses *Firework Injuries* to report progress towards reducing the number of persons injured as a result of fireworks and to assess the impact of fireworks awareness, safety and enforcement campaigns.
- 2.10 DHSSPS told us that the four Hospital Statistics releases cost around £35,000 per annum to produce. *Firework Injuries* costs around £1,400.

3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 DHSSPS's Hospital Information Branch (HIB) engages with external users through the Hospital Liaison Group¹² and the Regional Information Group¹³ both of which meet four times a year. DHSSPS carried out a customer survey in November 2011 and published the results¹⁴. HIB publishes its business plan on DHSSPS's website along with an invitation to users to input to the process for the following year¹⁵. Users within DHSSPS are invited to contribute to the annual business planning process, the outcomes of which DHSSPS publishes on its website¹⁶. Further engagement with users within DHSSPS is primarily through the Information and Analysis Directorate (IAD) stakeholder group¹⁷. Apart from a short statement in the releases about the purpose of these statistics, there is no documentation of the uses to which the statistics are put. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should take steps to develop a greater understanding of the use made of the statistics, publish the relevant information and assumptions and use them to better support the use of the statistics¹⁸ (Requirement 1). We suggest that DHSSPS refer to the types of use put forward in the Statistics Authority's Monitoring Brief, *The Use Made of Official Statistics*¹⁹ when documenting use.
- 3.2 The releases provide little information about the quality of the statistics. A short statement in the releases notes that the statistics were validated by HSC Trusts prior to publication and that HIB perform a series of checks on the data to verify consistency. There are no detailed quality guidelines published. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should publish more information about the quality of these statistics²⁰ (Requirement 2). The releases refer to the processes that DHSSPS has developed to validate and quality assure the data used to produce these statistics. We suggest that DHSSPS publish information about the arrangements for validating and quality assuring the data used to produce these statistics.
- 3.3 *Mental Health* includes experimental statistics on reasons that appointments are cancelled. The release provides little information about the nature of these statistics. DHSSPS has not published any information about how it has involved users in the development of these experimental statistics; and has not produced plans to describe how it will evaluate them. As part of the designation as National Statistics DHSSPS should a) provide more information in *Mental Health* about the nature of the experimental statistics, including information about their quality and reliability; and b) publish a plan to review the data sources and methods used to produce the experimental statistics, to ensure

¹² http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/hospital-stats/statistics_and_research-user_engagement-hosp.htm

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

¹⁴ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/hib_customer_satisfaction_survey_2010-11.pdf

¹⁵ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/hib_business_plan_2011_12.pdf

¹⁶ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/summary_of_hib_business_planning_12-13.pdf

¹⁷ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/cib_stakeholder_board_tor.pdf

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

¹⁹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-briefs/index.html>

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

that they are produced to a level of quality that meets users' needs²¹ (Requirement 3).

- 3.4 *Inpatient, Outpatient, Mental Health and Emergency Care* contain a short statement at the beginning of the report directing users to similar statistics published elsewhere in the UK; firework statistics are no longer published by the other administrations. Legislative differences and the different administrative systems used to produce hospital statistics make it difficult to make direct comparisons between the four administrations. However there is some scope to provide users with more information about the comparability of the statistics and to provide improved links, for example to comparable statistics presented on the ONS website. We suggest that DHSSPS publish information to explain the reasons why the Northern Ireland hospital statistics are not comparable with those produced in the other countries of the UK.
- 3.5 DHSSPS commissioned ONS to carry out a review of the methods used and the presentation of the statistics. DHSSPS told us that the recommendations of this review were implemented. We suggest that DHSSPS publish the findings of this review.
- 3.6 The releases provide factual information about the changes in the statistics compared with the previous year, and trends over five years. They do not describe the policy or operational context, or provide contextual information which would aid user interpretation of the statistics. For example *Inpatients, Outpatients* and *Mental Health* present statistics by HSC Trust but there is no contextual information about the size of the base population used which would help to interpret these statistics. In some cases the key messages in the statistics are not clearly brought out in the releases. For example, the statistics in *Firework Injuries* suggest that most injuries are sustained by young people, primarily male, and it would seem helpful to give this finding greater prominence in the release. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should improve the commentary and include contextual information in the releases so that they aid user interpretation of the statistics²² (Requirement 4). We suggest that in meeting this requirement DHSSPS should consider the points detailed in annex 2.
- 3.7 DHSSPS publishes additional statistics for Hospital Statistics in Excel format on its website. These Excel files are not linked to from the releases. We suggest that DHSSPS include clear links to the additional Excel tables in all the statistical releases.

²¹ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 5 and Protocol 1, Practice 5 of the *Code of Practice*

²² In relation to Principle 8, Practices 1 and 2 of the *Code of Practice*

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to DHSSPS's hospital 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.

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| Suggestion 1 | Refer to the types of use put forward in the Statistics Authority's Monitoring Brief, <i>The Use Made of Official Statistics</i> when documenting use (para 3.1). |
| Suggestion 2 | Publish information about the arrangements for validating and quality assuring the data used to produce these statistics (para 3.2). |
| Suggestion 3 | Publish information to explain the reasons why the Northern Ireland hospital statistics are not comparable with those produced in the other countries of the UK (para 3.4). |
| Suggestion 4 | Publish the findings of the ONS commissioned review (para 3.5). |
| Suggestion 5 | Consider the points detailed in annex 2, in seeking to improve the statistical releases (para 3.6). |
| Suggestion 6 | Include clear links to the additional Excel tables in all the statistical releases (para 3.7). |

Annex 2: Compliance with Standards for Statistical Releases

- A2.1 In October 2010, the Statistics Authority issued a statement on *Standards for Statistical Releases*²³. While 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 Hospital Statistics 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 clearly describe the coverage and period to which the statistics relate and the publication date. Each release includes the National Statistics, DHSSPS and Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) logos on the front page.
- A2.4 The releases provide the name and contact details of the lead statistician. There are lists of tables and figures. A more detailed table of contents would help users to locate information on definitions or methods, and find details about the sections within the releases.
- A2.5 Experimental statistics contained in *Mental Health* are not clearly marked. A note in the Appendix is the only place where these statistics are identified as experimental.

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

- A2.6 Each release provides key points on the front page. The language used in the releases is generally straightforward, although it would be useful to have an introduction to provide context and direct users to sections that they are most interested in. *Inpatients* and *Outpatients* could provide more information about what is meant by inpatients, day patients and outpatients, and how they differ.
- A2.7 The releases include charts and graphs which illustrate trends over time and compare HSC Trusts and hospitals. The commentary describes changes in the statistics but does not explain the overall trends or how the statistics relate to each other. For example, there is no explanation of the relationship between the number of admissions under the Maternity Programme of Care and the number of births in *Inpatients*. The main message in *Firework Injuries* is presented in a press notice issued alongside the release but is not clearly brought out in the release.

²³ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html>

A2.8 There is some overlap between the statistics presented in *Inpatients*, *Outpatients* and *Mental Health*. For example, *Mental Health* and *Inpatients* present statistics on inpatients admitted under the Mental Health Programme of Care. It would be helpful to users to link the reports appropriately.

Use language that is impartial, objective and professionally sound

A2.9 The text is objective and the statistics are described in an impartial way. The commentary is professionally sound. The releases do not provide enough information about the quality of the statistics. A short statement at the beginning of the releases summarises the data validation process but there are no published quality guidelines.

Include information about the context and likely uses

A2.10 The releases contain little information about the uses of the statistics, although they list organisations which may use the statistics. NISRA publishes statistics on births registered in Northern Ireland. This release is not referenced in *Inpatients* and it could be useful for users of the statistics to be aware of where further related statistics can be found.

Include, or link to, appropriate metadata

A2.11 The releases state the sources of the statistics and each provides a paragraph at the beginning of the report relating to the purpose but they do not provide links to the metadata. *Inpatients*, *Outpatients*, *Mental Health* and *Emergency Care* provide some links to similar statistics in the other UK administrations and *Firework Injuries* states the reason that these are not available for other areas of the UK.

Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A3.1 This assessment was conducted from December 2011 to April 2012.

A3.2 The Assessment team – Emily Gleeson and Neil Jackson – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of DHSSPS in December. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 7 February. The Assessment team subsequently met DHSSPS during April 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 6 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

HSC Trust	4
Other health service	2

A3.5 Users were generally content with the statistics and felt they are consulted sufficiently by DHSSPS with regard to changes being made to the statistics. Some of those who supply the data noted that the data would be routinely gathered for internal monitoring purposes even if not required by DHSSPS. The manual returns were noted to have a resource burden to complete and return. The Hospital Liaison Group was mentioned as a good forum for DHSSPS to share information with users.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

