

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Secure Care Accommodation for Children in Scotland

(produced by the Scottish Government)

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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 set of statistics on secure care and close support accommodation reported in *Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland*⁴, produced by the Scottish Government.
- 1.1.2 This assessment was partly conducted by self assessment. This means that the Chief Statistician of the Scottish Government has investigated the statistics covered by this report and has confirmed that they comply with those parts of the *Code of Practice* that are listed in annex 3 as having been self assessed, except where noted otherwise in this report. Compliance with the remaining practices has been assessed by the Assessment team.
- 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 materiality⁵. The Assessment team nonetheless assessed compliance with those practices in the *Code* shown as outside the scope of self assessment in annex 3, 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 detailed in paragraph 1.1.1 are designated as National Statistics, subject to the Scottish Government 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.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/02/7586>

⁵ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/guidance-about-assessment/criteria-for-deciding-upon-the-format-of-an-assessment-report.pdf>

- 1.2.2 During the course of this assessment, the Scottish Government's Chief Statistician has confirmed that he will take the following steps as a result of the self assessment:
- i. information about planned changes to the arrangements for collecting the data and presenting the statistics will be published well in advance of the release of the changed statistics, in future; and Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland will include information about the reasons for these changes; and
 - ii. the Scottish Government's Statement of Administrative Sources will be amended to include the administrative source for statistics on secure care accommodation for children.
- 1.2.3 The Scottish Government 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 The Scottish Government has not published information about the quality of the statistics or the uses made of them. The commentary does not provide context to the figures, or draw out any particular messages.
- 1.3.2 The Scottish Government changed the dates of the data collection period to the academic year for the first time in 2010-11. This improved the coherence of the statistics as it brought the data collection period in line with the looked after children and child protection statistics that are also presented in *Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland*. The statistics are accessible and presented in a range of formats: HTML, PDF and Excel tables.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

- 1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that the Scottish Government could strengthen its compliance with the *Code*. Those which the Assessment team considers essential to enable designation as National Statistics are listed in section 1.5. Other suggestions, which would improve the statistics and the service provided to users but which are not formally required for their designation, are listed at annex 1.

1.5 Requirements for designation as National Statistics

Requirement 1	Investigate and document the uses made of these statistics and use this information to support the development of the statistics (para 3.1).
Requirement 2	Publish additional information about the quality of these statistics in relation to use (para 3.4).
Requirement 3	Improve the commentary in the releases so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics (para 3.5).

2 Subject of the assessment

2.1 *Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland* is an annual statistical publication that brings together statistics on three main areas:

- Children looked after – covered in Assessment report 14⁶ on *Statistics on Children Looked After by Local Authorities in Scotland*;
- Child protection statistics – covered in Assessment report 67⁷, *Child Protection in Scotland*; and
- Secure care and close support accommodation statistics, which are the subject of this assessment.

2.2 'Secure care' refers to accommodation for children who pose a significant risk to either themselves or others and are likely to run away. In Scotland, children can be 'placed' in secure care accommodation by a children's hearing⁸ or by the order of a court. 'Close support' is residential accommodation that provides a safe, structured, nurturing environment. Children can be placed in close support either as a route into secure care accommodation or on the way out of secure care (to help with the transition back to their families or communities).

2.3 *Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland* presents statistics on the capacity for, and usage of, secure care and close support accommodation in Scotland. It includes statistics on the number of young people in secure care accommodation, by gender, age and length of stay. It also presents statistics on the average cost per place and on the number of staff working across the secure estate.

2.4 The statistics are produced from a set of spreadsheet returns that are completed by each secure unit within Scotland⁹. The Scottish Government collects aggregate information from each unit, and individual level information about the characteristics of the young person, admissions and discharges. The Scottish Government has collected information about children in secure care accommodation since 1987. It collected information about close support accommodation for the first time in 2010. The Scottish Government is exploring the possibility of moving to an online data collection system which could speed up the collection process and improve the arrangements for validating the data.

2.5 The statistics provide information about the range of secure and close support accommodation services in Scotland. They are used within the Scottish Government particularly in relation to monitoring capacity and usage of secure care accommodation, to plan future estate capacity and associated costs, and to answer parliamentary questions. They are also used by a range of external users and stakeholders, including the Secure Care Units themselves, local authorities who use secure care, and other public bodies and agencies who

⁶ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/assessment-report-14---children-looked-after-in-scotland--22-october-2009.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/assessment-report-67---child-protection-in-scotland.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.chscotland.gov.uk/>

⁹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Children/SurveySecureAccommodation>

have a similar interest to the Scottish Government in secure care accommodation

- 2.6 The Scottish Government estimates that it takes around 0.2 full-time equivalent posts to produce and publish the statistics on secure care and close support accommodation.

3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 The Scottish Government engages with users of these statistics through the Scotstat¹⁰ user consultation network. The Scottish Government has published the findings from a survey of users of these statistics that was carried out in autumn 2011. The survey elicited eight responses, and these indicated that users were generally satisfied with the statistical service provided. The Scottish Government told us that it has no immediate plans to repeat the survey, although it regularly consults users via Scotstat. The Scottish Government has published only high level summary information about the uses of these statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the Scottish Government should investigate and document the uses made of these statistics and use this information to support the development of the statistics¹¹ (Requirement 1). In meeting this Requirement we suggest that the Scottish Government refer to the types of use put forward in the Statistics Authority's Monitoring Brief, *The Use Made of Official Statistics*¹² when documenting use.
- 3.2 Following a consultation¹³ with users in 2011, the Scottish Government changed the collection period for these statistics from a financial year basis to an academic year basis. This was to bring the statistics into line with the looked after children and child protection statistics. The Scottish Government did not inform users about this change before it published the statistics for 2010-11 in February 2012. During the course of this assessment, the Chief Statistician of the Scottish Government confirmed that in future information about planned changes to the arrangements for collecting the data and presenting the statistics will be published well in advance of the release of the changed statistics; and *Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland* will include information about the reasons for these changes.
- 3.3 *Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland* provides links to publications that present similar statistics for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Scottish Government told us that inter-country comparisons are difficult to make as the use of secure care accommodation in the other administrations is determined by different legislation. The Scottish Government told us that it plans to publish additional information about the comparability of these statistics for different parts of the UK and will provide a link to where this information can be found in *Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland*.
- 3.4 *Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland* includes a background notes section which provides some information about how the statistics have been produced. The release provides little information about the quality of these statistics. The Scottish Government has produced additional information about the quality of these statistics but has not published this information. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the Scottish Government should publish additional information about the quality of these statistics in relation to use¹⁴ (Requirement 2). In meeting this Requirement, we suggest that the Scottish

¹⁰ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Children/scotstat>

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

¹² <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-briefs/monitoring-brief-6-2010--the-use-made-of-official-statistics.pdf>

¹³ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/933/0123672.pdf>

¹⁴ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 2 and Principle 8, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

Government publish information about the arrangements for assuring the quality of the data used to produce these statistics.

- 3.5 *Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland* provides some commentary about the statistics presented, although it does not draw out any particular messages. For example, the number of young people recorded as having a residential length of stay of less than one month doubled in 2010-11 compared with the previous time period. No explanation or speculation is given as to why this increase could have occurred, for example due to changes in policy or funding or the closure of residential units. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the Scottish Government should improve the commentary in the releases so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics¹⁵ (Requirement 3). We suggest that in meeting this requirement the Scottish Government consider the points detailed in annex 2.
- 3.6 The Scottish Government's Statement of Administrative Sources does not include the Secure Care and Close Support Accommodation Census. During the course of this assessment, the Chief Statistician for the Scottish Government confirmed that the Statement of Administrative Sources will be amended to include the administrative source for statistics on secure care accommodation for children.

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

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to the statistics on secure care accommodation for children produced by the Scottish Government, in the interest of the public good. These are not formally required for designation, but the Assessment team considers that their implementation will improve public confidence in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics.

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| Suggestion 1 | Refer to the types of use put forward in the Statistics Authority's Monitoring Brief, <i>The Use Made of Official Statistics</i> when documenting use (para 3.1). |
| Suggestion 2 | Publish information about the arrangements for assuring the quality of the data used to produce these statistics (para 3.4). |
| Suggestion 3 | Consider the points detailed in annex 2, in seeking to improve the statistical releases (para 3.5). |

Annex 2: Compliance with Standards for Statistical Releases

- A2.1 In October 2010, the Statistics Authority issued a statement on *Standards for Statistical Releases*¹⁶. 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 statistics on secure care and close support accommodation, 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 title of the release clearly describes the coverage and the period to which the statistics relate. The front page of the release includes the National Statistics and Scottish Government logos and the publication date. The release includes the name and contact details of the responsible statistician.

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

- A2.4 *Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland* for 2010-11 presents limited commentary for these statistics. This is the first year that statistics are presented for the academic year 1 August - 31 July and comparisons are made to previously published statistics, which refer to financial years.
- A2.5 The tables in the report contain many footnotes that are not numbered and are difficult to read due to the small text size. The release does not provide definitions for terms in the text or footnotes; for example, two footnotes for Table 3.3 use the (unexplained) term 'mothballed unit'.
- A2.6 The release contains tables and charts which are used to illustrate changes over time. The single chart in the section on Secure Care and Close Support is difficult to interpret and users would benefit from a more appropriate choice of chart layout.

Use language that is impartial, objective and professionally sound

- A2.7 The language used is impartial. The descriptions of proportions in the statistics are appropriate.

Include information about the context and likely uses

- A2.8 The release does not provide any information about the policy or operational context of the statistics. No information is given about the uses made of the statistics and no links provided to further information.

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

Include, or link to, appropriate metadata

A2.9 *Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland* includes an introduction which provides some information about what is meant by secure care and close support. The background notes to the release include a section titled 'Definitions and Data Quality', although this section provides little information about the quality of statistics on secure care and close support accommodation, and does not provide any definitions for these statistics. *Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland* provides links to the survey forms used to collect the data for these statistics, and to the accompanying guidance notes which provide information about the classifications used. The release includes a link on the front page to Excel tables containing background data.

Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A3.1 This assessment was conducted from March to May 2012.

A3.2 The Assessment team – Neil Jackson and Emily Gleeson – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of the Scottish Government in March. The Chief Statistician of the Scottish Government then assessed the statistics against the practices indicated in the table below and has confirmed that to the best of his knowledge, the Scottish Government complies with those practices, with the exception of any specific issues identified in this Report. The Scottish Government also provided an action plan on 23 April, and some written evidence about how it complies with the remaining practices, on 24 April. The Assessment team gathered some additional evidence from the Scottish Government through correspondence in May.

	Practices that have been self assessed by the Scottish Government	Practices assessed by the Authority's Assessment team
Principle 1: Meeting User needs	1, 3, 4, 5	2
Principle 2: Impartiality and objectivity	1, 3 - 9	2
Principle 3: Integrity	1 - 7	-
Principle 4: Sound methods and assured quality	1 - 5, 7	6
Principle 5: Confidentiality	1 - 6	-
Principle 6: Proportionate burden	1 - 5	-
Principle 7: Resources	1 - 7	-
Principle 8: Frankness and accessibility	3, 4, 6, 7	1, 2, 5
Protocol 1: User Engagement	1 - 6	7
Protocol 2: Release Practices	1 - 9	-
Protocol 3: Use of administrative sources for statistical purposes	1 - 4, 5a, b, c, d, f	5e

Summary of users contacted, and issues raised

A3.3 Part of the assessment process involves our consideration of the views of users. The Scottish Government approached some known and potential users of statistics on secure care accommodation for children. This process is not a statistical survey, but it provides 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 Scottish Government approached 16 users of these statistics and nine data suppliers. It received no responses from the users and one response from a data supplier in a secure accommodation unit. The data supplier indicated that the guidelines and instructions for supplying the data are clear and that data suppliers have recently been consulted over changes in data requirements. The data supplier has a clear understanding of what the data

are used for, but did not think that the Scottish Government has a clear understanding of what is involved in supplying the data. The data supplier suggested that it would be easier for the data to be supplied annually by calendar year.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

