

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Education and Training in the UK and Vulnerable Children in England

(produced by the Department for Education)

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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 Department for Education (DfE) and reported in:

- *Education and Training Statistics for the United Kingdom*⁴ (ETS);
- *Children Accommodated in Secure Children's Homes at 31 March: England and Wales*⁵ (SCH); and
- *Private Fostering Arrangements in England*⁶ (PFA).

1.1.2 The Act also allows departments 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 and covers the set of statistics reported in *Characteristics of Children in Need in England*⁷ (CIN).

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

¹ <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.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/allstatistics/a00200448/education-and-training-statistics-2011>

⁵ <http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/allstatistics/a00196858/childrenaccommodatedinsecurechildrenhomes>

⁶ <http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/allstatistics/a00196818/private-fostering>

⁷ <http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/allstatistics/a00199334/children-in-need-in-england-2010-11>

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

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

1.2 Decision concerning designation as National Statistics

1.2.1 The Statistics Authority judges that the statistics covered by this report are readily accessible, produced according to sound methods and managed 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 in paragraph 1.1.1 are designated as National Statistics and has determined that the *Children in Need* statistics can be designated as new National Statistics product, subject to DfE implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5, and reporting them to the Authority by October 2012.

1.2.2 DfE 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 compendium of *Education and Training Statistics* provides UK level totals and comparisons between countries in a policy area which is fully devolved. This is a useful service for users of statistics, even though there is no summary description of the education system in each country to provide background context.

1.3.2 The collection of data on children in need has recently been developed in order to obtain child-level, rather than aggregate, data from local authorities. This opens up the possibility of much better tracking of the outcomes for children who come to the attention of social services, through linking with other DfE databases. The data from local authorities are of variable quality, but DfE provides helpful guidance to assist users when making comparisons.

1.3.3 The statistics on private fostering arrangements are required for DfE policy purposes but it is unlikely that they provide a full and accurate picture of the extent and nature of such arrangements.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that DfE 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 impact of the introduction of the CIN Census on the children in need statistics (para 3.3).
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Requirement 2	Provide information to users about the comparability of the SCH statistics with related statistics produced by the Ministry of Justice (para 3.4).
Requirement 3	Investigate the extent and nature of under-recording of private fostering arrangements, publish the results and consider what steps might be taken to increase the utility of the statistics (para 3.6).
Requirement 4	Clarify the appropriate uses of the statistics on private fostering; provide information about the strengths and limitations of the statistics in relation to these uses; and consider whether the title of the release should be changed to make it clear that it is notifications to LAs that are being measured, rather than the extent of private fostering (para 3.6).
Requirement 5	Improve the commentary in <i>Education and Training Statistics</i> and in the vulnerable children statistical releases so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics (para 3.7).
Requirement 6	Update the Statement of Administrative Sources so that it includes the administrative systems used to produce the secure children homes statistics (para 3.9).

2 Subject of the assessment

2.1 The Department for Education (DfE) and its predecessor departments have published the annual statistical volume *Education and Training Statistics for the United Kingdom (ETS)* since 1967. It is a compendium publication that brings together statistics for England and the devolved administrations, using data supplied by a range of organisations including DfE, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, the Higher Education Statistics Agency and the devolved administrations. A concordat sets out the framework for the co-operation between the departments and administrations, ratified by their respective ministers.

2.2 *ETS* was last reviewed in 2003. The scope and content of the report has changed over time to reflect developments in the sector. In the past it included some international comparisons, but users requiring that information are now referred to statistics published by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)⁹. *ETS* currently includes statistics on:

- schools – pupil characteristics, types of school, teacher numbers;
- post-compulsory education and training – institutions and staff, participation rates, job related training;
- qualifications and destinations – GCSE, A level and their equivalents, attainment of vocational qualifications, higher education attainment and destination of school leavers and graduates;
- education expenditure; and
- population.

2.3 *ETS* is used by DfE's international team to supplement the UK statistics it provides to organisations such as OECD and Eurostat¹⁰ under *Regulation EC 452/2008*¹¹. The statistics are also included by the Office for National Statistics in its own compendium publications, for example *Social Trends*¹². Given reducing resources, DfE has conducted a number of reviews of *ETS* to assess the user need. It believes that although much interest is now focused on the statistics for individual countries, there is still strong interest in the UK statistics from a small number of users. DfE told us that it is committed to the ongoing compilation of the UK education and training statistics, but is considering whether to continue with the annual report or to make the statistics available in another form. The annual cost of producing *ETS* is around £20,000.

2.4 DfE is also responsible for children's services in England. It publishes statistics on looked-after children (which were the subject of a previous assessment¹³) and produces a range of statistics on services for safeguarding vulnerable children: *Children Accommodated in Secure Children's Homes (SCH)*; *Private Fostering Arrangements (PFA)*; and *Characteristics of Children in Need (CIN)*.

⁹ http://www.oecd.org/topicstatsportal/0,2647,en_2825_495609_1_1_1_1_1,00.html

¹⁰ <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/education/introduction>

¹¹ http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11092_en.htm

¹² <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/social-trends-rd/social-trends/index.html>

¹³ Assessment report 13 <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

- 2.5 Statistics on children accommodated in secure children's homes were first published by DfE (then called the Department for Education and Skills) in 2003 when it assumed responsibility from the Department of Health (DH). Such homes provide care and accommodation to young people who have been detained or sentenced by the Youth Justice Board (YJB) and those who have been remanded to secure local authority (LA) accommodation. The main purpose of *SCH* is to enable DfE and the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills¹⁴ (Ofsted) to monitor the use of the specialist accommodation by LAs and the YJB.
- 2.6 The *SCH* statistics are produced from a small, aggregated data return supplied by each secure home. There are 16 such homes in England and one in Wales. Some placements are cross-border and *SCH* contains combined statistics for England and Wales and further statistics for England alone. DfE collects data and publishes statistics from the Welsh *SCH* at the request of the Welsh Government. *SCH* presents statistics on the numbers of places approved, and the numbers of children accommodated by sex, age, length of stay and type of placement. DfE publishes all the statistics collected in the data return on its website, alongside the pdf of the release, including time series statistics from 2007.
- 2.7 A privately fostered child is a person under the age of 16 (18 if disabled) who is cared for by someone other than a parent or close family relative¹⁵. Under the *Children Act 2004*¹⁶ and Regulations made in 2005¹⁷, parents and carers have a legal duty to notify the local social services authority about private fostering arrangements. On receiving notification of a fostering arrangement, the LA must visit the child within 7 working days and satisfy itself that the child's welfare is being satisfactorily safeguarded. LAs also have a responsibility to promote and encourage the notification of private fostering arrangements. *PFA* has been produced annually since 2005, following the implementation of the 2004 legislation, and is based on a short, aggregate return from each LA to DfE. The department publishes the LA level statistics on its website, alongside a pdf of the statistics release. *PFA* covers new and ongoing private fostering notifications by age group and country of birth of the child, and includes information about the proportion of scheduled visits made within the timescale laid down in the legislation. These statistics have informed reviews of policy and legislation in this area and have been used by the Advisory Group on Private Fostering¹⁸. Outside government, they are used by third sector organisations, for example in a 2011 briefing note about the link between private fostering and child trafficking¹⁹.
- 2.8 *CIN* presents the numbers of children referred to and assessed by LA social care services. Subtracting (from the total) the number of referrals that are

¹⁴ <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/children-and-families-services>

¹⁵ As defined in section 105 of the *Children Act 1989*

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents>

¹⁶ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/31/contents>

¹⁷ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2005/1533/contents/made>

¹⁸ <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/Adoptionandforstoring/Page1/DCSF-00198-2010>

¹⁹ http://www.ecpat.org.uk/sites/default/files/understanding_papers/understanding_private_fostering.pdf

assessed as requiring no further action gives an estimate of children in need, who are classified according to the primary type of need (such as abuse or neglect, or the disability or illness of the parent or child). The release also presents information about children who are the subject of child protection plans, including the category of abuse (neglect, emotional, physical or sexual) that has prompted the authorities to put a plan in place.

- 2.9 DfE previously collected data about referrals and assessments through an aggregated return, but in 2008 it introduced the CIN Census, which consists of a data record for each child. The first statistics from the CIN Census covered six months from October 2008 and were published as experimental statistics. DfE used to publish²⁰ CIN statistics in provisional form each September, followed by the final statistics in November. Following a user consultation in February 2012, DfE announced²¹ in April that it would no longer release the CIN statistics in provisional form. It has also brought forward the release of the final statistics to October. DfE links the data from the CIN Census to the National Pupil Database and to the Children Looked After data. We were told that there are plans to analyse the linked data and publish statistics on the educational outcomes of children in need in future research reports.
- 2.10 The CIN statistics are used to benchmark individual LAs against similar authorities and nationally. They were included in LA performance indicators until 2010-11. DfE is now developing an impact indicator²² in respect of vulnerable children and local child safeguarding. This is as a result of the Munro Review²³ of child protection in England, which recommended ‘a more flexible approach to child services to enable local authorities to develop their own effective services rather than focusing on meeting central government targets’²⁴. The Government published its response²⁵ to the review in July 2011 and established an implementation group with representatives from local authority children’s services, the social work profession, education, police and health services.
- 2.11 Ofsted uses the vulnerable children statistics in its inspections of local children’s services. Voluntary sector bodies use the statistics to inform their own policies and support their lobbying activities. Examples of bodies using the statistics in this way include Action for Children²⁶, the British Association for Adoption and Fostering²⁷, and the NSPCC²⁸.
- 2.12 DfE told us that the annual cost of producing *SCH* is around £3,000 and *PFA* costs about £12,000, including data collection, quality checking and preparation

²⁰ <http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/allstatistics/a00196856/dfe-referrals-assessments-and-children-who-were-th>

²¹ <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/STR/d001063/OSR08-2012.pdf>

²² <http://www.number10.gov.uk/transparency/find-all-other-government-data/departments-for-education-indicator-data/>

²³ <http://www.education.gov.uk/munroreview/index.shtml>

²⁴ <http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/inthenews/a0077182/independent-review-into-child-protection-says-free-professionals-from-central-government-control-to-let-them-do-their-jobs-properly>

²⁵ <http://www.education.gov.uk/munroreview/government.shtml>

²⁶ <http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/>

²⁷ <http://www.baaf.org.uk/>

²⁸ <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/>

of the releases. The CIN Census costs £175,000, including the annual operating cost of collecting the data and publishing the statistics.

3 Assessment findings

User engagement

- 3.1. DfE runs a focus group for LA data suppliers which was initially used to advise on the introduction and development of the CIN Census. The group is now open to all LAs with preference given to those who have not previously attended. DfE also regularly sends newsletters to the LA suppliers before and during the collection of the vulnerable children data. DfE has undertaken user consultations²⁹ for *ETS*, *PFA*, *SCH* and *CIN*. While 26 users responded to the consultation about *ETS*, no users responded to the three vulnerable children consultations. DfE told us that it emailed each of the users that had previously been in contact about the statistics, as well as publicising the consultations on its website. We suggest that DfE ask its users about their preferred mode of engagement.

Children in need

- 3.2. Research³⁰ commissioned by DfE into the availability and comparability of safeguarding children statistics in the UK suggested that it would be beneficial for England and Scotland to publish statistics on the source of referrals, as this would make it possible to explore how the public and different professional groups respond to concerns that children are in need or at risk of harm. The research also drew attention to the way comparative analysis can be hindered by differences in the categories used (for example, in relation to age or ethnicity) and in the points in the child welfare process when data are collected. A review³¹ of child neglect by the University of Stirling, commissioned by Action for Children also highlighted a need for greater consistency in statistical reporting methods across the UK. Action for Children told us that the national datasets for Wales and Northern Ireland provide a more detailed picture of child neglect than in England. We suggest that DfE consider the categories used to collect information about referrals, neglect and abuse by the devolved administrations, with a view to adopting an improved and more consistent classification.
- 3.3. *CIN* includes technical notes that set out the main definitions, the nature of the data collection and the method for deriving the data confidence indicators that are used to rate the quality of information provided by each LA. It can be difficult to obtain consistent and reliable data from over 150 authorities and we regard these indicators as an example of good practice. The releases explain the change in the method of data collection from LAs and the data quality issues that arose in the implementation of the CIN Census. However, DfE has not published information comparing the two data sources to enable users to understand the impact of the change on the statistics – for example, whether the move to individual records has led to more complete recording of the number of children in need or to improvements in data quality. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DfE should publish information about the

²⁹ <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/onlinesurveys.shtml>

³⁰ <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-RB153>

³¹ <http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/neglect>

impact of the introduction of the CIN Census on the children in need statistics³² (Requirement 1).

Secure children homes

- 3.4. SCH provides a brief outline of the data source and the quality of the statistics. It highlights the fact that Ministry of Justice (MoJ) publishes monthly statistics about the children and young people in custody within secure children's homes, secure training centres and young offender institutions. However DfE does not make clear how its statistics differ from MoJ's statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DfE should provide information to users about the comparability of the SCH statistics with related statistics produced by MoJ³³ (Requirement 2).

Private fostering

- 3.5. According to *PFA*, 1,649 children were in private fostering arrangements on 31 March 2011. This figure is widely believed to be an underestimate, but despite claims that the real figure could be in the tens of thousands, there is little firm evidence³⁴. A paragraph on data quality in *PFA* urges caution: 'These figures are believed to be an underestimate... We are not clear whether the increase in arrangements seen is due to increased activity in private fostering or an improvement in the reporting of such arrangements'. Research³⁵ commissioned by the former Department for Children, Schools and Families found that although parents and carers are legally obliged to notify LAs, most cases of private fostering are reported by social workers, teachers and other statutory agencies. The LAs that participated in this research believed that the work they were doing to raise awareness in such agencies was the main explanation for any increase in notifications.
- 3.6. Although *PFA* provides information about the activities of LAs in respect of private fostering, we cannot be sure whether the statistics give a true picture of the numbers, trends, geographical distribution and characteristics of the children involved in these arrangements. The introduction to the release states that: 'These figures are important because they monitor the impact of the legislation changes in 2005...' but the statistics cannot readily be used for this purpose unless they can differentiate between underlying changes in the level of private fostering and changes in reporting. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DfE should investigate the extent and nature of under-recording of private fostering arrangements, publish the results and consider what steps might be taken to increase the utility of the statistics³⁶ (Requirement 3). It should also clarify the appropriate uses of the statistics on private fostering; provide information about the strengths and limitations of the statistics in relation to these uses; and consider whether the title of the release

³² In relation to Principle 4, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

³³ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 6 of the *Code of Practice*

³⁴ See, for example, the Report of the Advisory Group on Private Fostering (pp 32-35):

<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/Adoptionandforstereing/Page1/DCSF-00198-2010>

³⁵ <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/RSG/Adoptionandforstereing/Page1/DCSF-RR229>

³⁶ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

should be changed to make it clear that it is notifications to LAs that are being measured, rather than the extent of private fostering³⁷ (Requirement 4).

Commentary and other issues

- 3.7. *ETS* provides a factual summary of the key figures but does not include any charts to highlight trends or mention factors that may contribute to changes over time or differences between parts of the UK. We were informed of proposed changes to the vulnerable children releases that will result in better explanation of the legislative context and associated technical terms. *PFA* and *SCH* will include charts for the first time. The commentary in the vulnerable children releases tends to focus on rises and falls in the latest statistics compared with previous years. It does not highlight the factors that may influence these changes or relate the findings to the policy or operational context. While *PFA* provides the legal background to the statistics, it is not made sufficiently clear how they are used to meet the Department's intention to monitor the performance of LAs in meeting their responsibilities under the relevant legislation. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DfE should improve the commentary in *ETS* and in the vulnerable children statistical releases so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics³⁸ (Requirement 5). We suggest that in meeting this requirement DfE should consider the points detailed in annex 2.
- 3.8. DfE has published lists of post-holders who have been granted pre-release access to *ETS* and to the vulnerable children statistics. These lists refer in some instances to categories of post (for example, 'special advisers') but do not make clear exactly how many people are granted access. We were told that in some such cases the release is sent to a shared mailbox. We suggest that DfE specify the exact number of post-holders given pre-release access and consider whether access could be more carefully controlled.
- 3.9. DfE's Statement of Administrative Sources includes the data sources for private fostering and the CIN Census but does not include information about secure children's homes data. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DfE should update the Statement of Administrative Sources so that it includes the administrative systems used to produce the secure children homes statistics³⁹ (Requirement 6).

³⁷ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 2 and Principle 8, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

³⁸ In relation to Principle 8, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

³⁹ In relation to Protocol 3, Practice 5 of the *Code of Practice*

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to DfE's *ETS* and vulnerable children statistics, in the interest of the public good. These are not formally required for designation, but the Assessment team considers that their implementation will improve public confidence in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics.

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| Suggestion 1 | Ask users about their preferred mode of engagement (para 3.1). |
| Suggestion 2 | Consider the categories used to collect information about referrals, neglect and abuse by the devolved administrations, with a view to adopting an improved and more consistent classification (para 3.2). |
| Suggestion 3 | In seeking to improve the statistical releases, consider the points detailed in annex 2 (para 3.7). |
| Suggestion 4 | Specify the exact number of post-holders given pre-release access and consider whether access could be more carefully controlled (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*⁴⁰. 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 DfE's *ETS* and vulnerable children 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 releases have titles that set out the coverage and latest reference period. The three National Statistics releases (*PFA*, *SCH* and *ETS*) each show the National Statistics logo. Each of the releases makes the originating department clear. The three vulnerable children releases each give the name and contact details for the responsible statistician. The pdf version of *ETS* does not include this information but provides a generic email address for users to comment on the statistics, and signposts users to the home pages of the other departments and devolved administrations for queries and further information. This may not be very helpful for users with detailed statistical enquiries.
- A2.4 Each of the vulnerable children releases begins with an introduction outlining the content and explaining the main concept, for example, private fostering and secure children homes. *ETS* includes a contents list and sets out the main changes to the latest volume.

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

- A2.5 Each chapter in *ETS* consists of a bullet point summary and a set of tables. While the commentary gives a factual description of the key figures it does not provide an overview of trends in education and training, or highlight any of the factors that might contribute to changes over time or to differences between the administrations.
- A2.6 The commentary for *PFA* and *SCH* is particularly brief, with a short list of bullet points and no charts to illustrate the main findings. However, DfE is planning to improve the vulnerable children releases and has provided us with mock up versions showing the changes. All will in future include charts and slightly fuller commentary, with separate documents covering (i) methods and (ii) data uses and quality. The planned changes for *CIN* provide a much better explanation of the legislative context and technical terms, not all of which are currently defined when first used.
- A2.7 The commentary in the vulnerable children releases tends to focus on rises and falls in the latest statistics compared with previous years. It does not highlight any factors that might influence the changes, or – with the exception of *PFA* –

⁴⁰ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html>

relate the findings to the policy or operational context. The commentary in *CIN* is mainly focused on the referral process. Additional statistics on the characteristics of children (for example, sex, age, ethnicity, disability and type of need) are available in supplementary tables on the website but not discussed in the commentary. The *CIN* releases do not refer to the outcomes for the children or explain that DfE plans to link the data to the National Pupil Database and Children Looked After data in order to explore outcomes in more detail.

Use language that is impartial, objective and professionally sound

A2.8 The language used is objective and generally the way that the statistics are presented is sound. However, *PFA* describes the steady rise in the number of notifications without directly referring to the under-reporting of private fostering arrangements and to DfE's aim to increase the level of reporting.

Include information about the context and likely uses

A2.9 *ETS* does not provide information about the uses made of the statistics and does not provide any background information about the school, further and higher education systems in each country, or about qualifications and curricula.

A2.10 The vulnerable children releases each have a paragraph in the technical notes outlining the main use of the statistics: in future, this information will go into a separate quality document. In order to deal with the varying quality and completeness of data supplied by LAs, DfE has constructed helpful 'data confidence indicators'. These provide an overall rating for each type of measure in *CIN* – for example, number of referrals, or assessments completed on time. DfE advises users not to compare those LAs with the lowest confidence rating for a particular measure. *PFA* mentions concerns about under-reporting of private fostering leading to an under-estimate of the total number of children in such arrangements. However, it does not relate the quality of the statistics to the stated use in monitoring the impact of the legislative changes.

Include, or link to, appropriate metadata

A2.11 *ETS* has a section on data sources which defines some terms and includes an overview of methods, coverage and classifications.

A2.12 The vulnerable children releases provide an outline of data sources, methods, data quality and (where relevant) the steps taken to protect confidentiality. The current explanations in *SCH* and *PFA* tend to focus on definitions with some general statements about the quality of the statistics. However, the planned methods documents include data collection forms, process maps, and a detailed list of validation checks - which we regard as good practice. *CIN* includes extensive descriptions of the data confidence indicator and its derivation. The *CIN* releases also highlight the difficulty some LAs have experienced in providing record-level data and explain the methods used to account for missing LA data in producing estimated totals for England.

Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

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

A3.2 The Assessment team – Jill Barelli and Penny Babb – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of DfE in March. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 26 and 27 April for *ETS* and vulnerable children, respectively. The Assessment team subsequently met DfE during May 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 7 responses from the user/supplier consultation for *ETS* and 20 responses for vulnerable children. The respondents were grouped as follows:

a) *ETS*:

DfE	2
Other central government	2
Devolved administration	2
FE private sector	1

b) Vulnerable children:

DfE	2
Local government	16
Trade body	1
Voluntary sector	1

A3.5 The responses regarding *ETS* included only one user: the rest were from data suppliers. The user was content with the information and help that they received from the DfE statistics team. The suppliers were also content with engagement and said that the guidance material was clear. One of the devolved administrations suggested comparing the performance of pupils across the UK using the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment⁴¹ (the PISA survey) rather than using GCSEs and their equivalents.

A3.6 Most of the vulnerable children responses were from suppliers who were also users of the statistics. The suppliers said that they would collect the data for their own purposes, irrespective of the need to provide them to DfE. The LA

⁴¹ http://www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,2987,en_32252351_32235731_1_1_1_1_1,00.html

suppliers of CIN data said that developing the record level return had been more burdensome than providing aggregate data. However, they recognised the value of DfE being able to link the data with other data sources. Generally the suppliers felt that the guidance was sufficiently clear, although some were less satisfied with the help received from the DfE help desk. Some felt that DfE did not have a good appreciation of what was involved in providing the vulnerable children statistics. It was recognised that the Munro Review may change both the nature of social service practice, as well as the data that would need to be provided to DfE.

- A3.7 The voluntary sector user highlighted the need to separately identify neglect from 'abuse and neglect'. Some users said that they would like more notice of the release of statistics as they said they have to reconcile their figures with the published statistics. There was also interest in receiving the statistics earlier. Some found it difficult to locate the statistics that they needed on DfE's website but users were content with the presentation of the statistics. The users and data suppliers were generally content with engagement with the statistics team, although some were interested in attending the focus group but were not aware that it is open to them.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

