

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Religious Communities and the Labour Market in Northern Ireland

*(produced by the Office of the First Minister and
Deputy First Minister)*

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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 reported in the *Labour Force Survey Religion Report*⁴ (*Religion Report*), produced by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Northern Ireland (OFMDFM).
- 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 materiality⁵. 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 published in the *Religion Report* are designated as National Statistics, subject to OFMDFM implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by November 2012.
- 1.2.2 OFMDFM 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 OFMDFM has regular informal contact with users of these statistics. It provides useful information about the conduct of the Labour Force Survey in Northern

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.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/index/equality/equalityresearch/research-publications/labour-force-religion-reports.htm>

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

Ireland and about the quality of the statistics, but there is limited information about non-sampling error.

1.3.2 The *Religion Report* is clear and factual, but does not describe the policy or legislative context, or present any information about why an analysis of labour market statistics by religion has been produced. It does not explain how the statistics are used.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that OFMDFM 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	Provide additional information about sources of non-sampling error, including information about community response rates (para 3.3).
Requirement 2	(a) Inform users about the introduction of a second question about religion, the reasons for this, and the plans for consulting users. (b) Reproduce the actual questions that are asked about religion. (c) Provide more information about the composition of respondents whose religion is classified as 'other/non determined' (para 3.4).
Requirement 3	Improve the commentary in the release so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics (para 3.5).

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 The *Religion Report* presents statistics about the labour market status of the Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland. It includes information about the number and proportion that are in employment, are unemployed and are economically inactive and compares the two communities in terms of percentage point differences and ratios. For example the ‘unemployment gap’ is the percentage point difference in unemployment rates between the two groups, while the ‘unemployment differential’ is the ratio of their unemployment rates.
- 2.2 The statistics are drawn from the Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey (LFS), which was described in Assessment Report 29⁶. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) commissions the LFS in Northern Ireland and was responsible for publishing most of the statistics from the survey until April 2011. Fieldwork and data preparation are carried out by the Central Survey Unit of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). NISRA is also now responsible for the publication of most labour market and economic statistics for Northern Ireland. However OFMDFM, which has policy responsibility for fair employment legislation in Northern Ireland⁷, has produced the *Religion Report* since 2002 and continues to do so.
- 2.3 The statistics are used by the Equality Commission⁸ to assist with its statutory duty⁹ to monitor equal opportunities and community background. Community background, in this context, means those who are classified as belonging to either the Protestant or the Catholic community in Northern Ireland. OFMDFM uses the statistics to monitor trends in community background and to carry out Equality Impact Assessments¹⁰. The statistics are used by other organisations with an interest in equal opportunities, for example, by the Community Relations Council¹¹ in its publication, *The Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report*¹². They are also of interest to academic researchers, the media and the general public.
- 2.4 The LFS in Northern Ireland first included a question about the religion of respondents in 1990, following the introduction of legislation in 1989¹³ which required employers to submit a monitoring return containing a breakdown of the religious composition of the company's workforce.

⁶ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/assessment-reports/assessment-report-29---assessment-of-labour-market-statistics-for-northern-ireland.pdf>

⁷ The *Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998*, amended by the *Fair Employment and Treatment Order (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003*, makes it unlawful to discriminate on the grounds of religious belief:

[http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/index/equality/fair-employment/fair_employment_and_treatment_\(ni\)_order.htm](http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/index/equality/fair-employment/fair_employment_and_treatment_(ni)_order.htm)

⁸ <http://www.equalityni.org/site/default.asp?secid=home>

⁹ http://www.equalityni.org/sections/default.asp?cms=Your+Rights_Fair+employment+%26+treatment&cmsid=2_56&id=56&secid=2#pagetop

¹⁰ <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/policylink-integrated-impact-assessment>

¹¹ <http://www.community-relations.org.uk/>

¹² <http://www.community-relations.org.uk/peace-monitor>

¹³ *Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act 1989*, repealed by the *Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998*; <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1999/3209/made>

- 2.5 The *Religion Report* is published annually, usually in the November or December after the calendar year to which the survey data relate. The estimated annual cost of the report is £5,000. This covers analysis of the data and publication of the report, but not the data collection costs.

3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 The team in OFMDFM responsible for publishing the *Religion Report* has not established a user group for these statistics, although it is represented on a NISRA group for users of Northern Ireland labour market statistics. The team told us that it has regular informal engagement with users of the statistics in OFMDFM and in the Equality Commission although it has not documented this engagement. OFMDFM carried out a comprehensive review of the Report and of the requirements of users in 2004 and 2005. The findings from this review resulted in changes to the *Religion Report* in 2006, and form the basis for the current publication. OFMDFM told us that it no longer has any record of the findings from that review. The *Religion Report* was presented to the Statistics Advisory Committee¹⁴ which reviewed the content, although it did not recommend any significant changes.
- 3.2 OFMDFM gathered information about the views of users of the *Religion Report 2010* through an online survey, emails to users and telephone interviews, and published user feedback¹⁵ on its website. The published document provides some information about the uses that are made of these statistics. In response to the Assessment team's initial findings, OFMDFM has added information about the number of users who provided views about the statistics, and how it plans to respond to the feedback that was provided. It has also published a document about user engagement and user needs¹⁶.
- 3.3 The *Religion Report* includes an appendix which provides useful information about the conduct of the LFS and about the quality of the statistics, including response rates and a discussion of sampling error. OFMDFM has also published a summary quality report¹⁷ which provides additional information – pointing out, for example, that people in communal establishments are not included in the LFS sample. The summary quality report does not discuss the possibility of differential response between the two communities and does not provide information about the extent of partial and proxy responses. As part of the designation as National Statistics, OFMDFM should provide additional information about sources of non-sampling error, including information about community response rates¹⁸ (Requirement 1). We suggest that OFMDFM provide a link in the *Religion Report* to the summary quality report.
- 3.4 The question about religion in the Northern Ireland LFS has been modified from the question asked in the Great Britain survey, in order to distinguish between Protestants and Catholics. The *Religion Report* provides information about the religious classifications but does not reproduce the actual question that is asked about religion. The proportion of respondents whose religious affiliation is classified as 'other/non determined' has increased over the years and currently accounts for around one in ten of the working age population. This group includes people who belong to a non-Christian religion, people with no religion at all and people who refused to answer the question, but the number in each of these categories is not provided. Many users, including the public bodies responsible for anti-discrimination policy, have a greater need for

¹⁴ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/aboutus/default.asp.htm>

¹⁵ <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/labour-force-religion-reports>

¹⁶ <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/lfs-user-engagement-june-2012.pdf>

¹⁷ <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/summary-quality-report-feb-2012.pdf>

¹⁸ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 2 and Principle 8, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

information about community background than religious belief, so in 2012 respondents who state that they do not belong to a religion are being asked a further question about the religion they were brought up in. We were told that users will be consulted about the options for making use of this additional information once the impact of the new question has been analysed. As part of the designation as National Statistics, OFMDFM should (a) inform users about the introduction of the second question about religion, the reasons for this, and its plans for consulting users; (b) reproduce the actual questions that are asked about religion and (c) provide more information about the composition of respondents whose religion is classified as 'other/non determined'¹⁹ (Requirement 2).

- 3.5 The release is clear and factual, but does not present any information about why an analysis of labour market statistics by religion has been produced, and does not explain how the statistics are used. The release does not provide information about the current policy context, for example, about steps that have been taken to prevent discrimination on religious grounds in the labour market. It does not discuss any of the factors that may contribute to different labour market outcomes for each community, or identify factors that may help to explain long term trends. As part of the designation as National Statistics, OFMDFM should improve the commentary in the release so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics²⁰ (Requirement 3). We suggest that in meeting this requirement OFMDFM should consider the points detailed in annex 2.
- 3.6 Appendix A of the *Religion Report* contains over 100 tables of statistics in pdf format. In response to the Assessment team's initial findings, OFMDFM has also published these tables in spreadsheet format, in order to facilitate further analysis. The data used to produce the *Religion Report* are deposited with the UK Data Archive as part of the annual LFS dataset²¹. We suggest that OFMDFM draw this to the attention of users.
- 3.7 OFMDFM has published a list²² of post-holders who have been granted pre-release access to these statistics. The list refers to certain categories of post (for example, special advisers to Ministers) but does not make clear exactly how many people are granted access. We were told that in some instances (for example, the Executive Information Service²³) the release is sent to a shared mailbox. We suggest that OFMDFM specify the number of post-holders in each category and ensure that the use of a shared mailbox does not compromise pre-release access.

¹⁹ In relation to Protocol 1 Practice 7, and Principle 8, Practices 1 and 3 of the *Code of Practice*

²⁰ In relation to Principle 8, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

²¹ <http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/lfseuroA.asp>

²² http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/pre_release_access_list.pdf

²³ <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/executive-information-service>

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to OFMDFM's *Labour Force Survey Religion Report*, 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 | Provide a link in the <i>Religion Report</i> to the summary quality report (para 3.3). |
| Suggestion 2 | Consider the points detailed in annex 2, in seeking to improve the statistical releases (para 3.5). |
| Suggestion 3 | Inform users about the availability of the underlying data for the <i>Religion Report</i> (para 3.6). |
| Suggestion 4 | Specify the number of post-holders in each category or pre-release access and ensure that such access is not compromised by the use of shared mailboxes (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*²⁴. 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 *Labour Force Survey Religion Report*, 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 is clear as to the survey year and by implication the period of time to which the statistics relate, but the geographic coverage could be more prominent (the words 'Northern Ireland' appear only in the NISRA logo). The introduction makes it clear that the release is presenting new results for a calendar year but it also includes information about changes to the LFS and changes in reporting arrangements that took place some years ago. Some of this information might be better explained in the technical notes annexed to the release. The construction of an annual database from the quarterly waves of the LFS is explained in these notes.
- A2.4 Appropriate logos are used on the title page and the introduction explains the respective roles of DETI and NISRA in commissioning the survey and carrying out the fieldwork. Full contact details are given for the responsible statistician, although that term is not used.
- A2.5 The table of contents gives a good idea of the topics covered, but there is no list of tables.

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

- A2.6 Each chapter starts with a bullet point summary of the main findings and in some cases puts these in the context of trends since 1992. The release does not include an overall summary or a set of headline findings. OFMDFM's user feedback document suggests that there is particular interest in the unemployment differential, but this estimate does not appear until half way through the release.
- A2.7 The commentary is factual and brings out the main trends and points of variation between the two communities. It does not provide any information about the historical or policy context, and there is no discussion of the factors that may contribute to differences in labour market status and outcomes.

²⁴ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html>

Use language that is impartial, objective and professionally sound

A2.8 The text is impartial and evidence based. Descriptive statements are consistent with the statistics. Numerous charts are embedded in the text to illustrate patterns and trends in the data.

Include information about the context and likely uses

A2.9 We were told that the statistics provide evidence for key elements of the Northern Ireland Programme for Government and the Delivering Social Change Framework, and that they assist local authorities with their duties under s.75 of the *Northern Ireland Act 1998*. Neither the policy nor legislative context is explained in the release.

Include, or link to, appropriate metadata

A2.10 The technical notes provide information about the methods used in the LFS, the sampling strategy, response rates and weighting procedures, as well as definitions and classifications. Confidence intervals are provided for some of the key indicators, but it would be helpful to have more information about sources of non-sampling error. The notes alert users to changes in the LFS, such as the recent redefinition of 'working age' to reflect the increase in state pension age for women.

A2.11 The release does not signpost users to any related statistics, for example on the labour market in Northern Ireland or to other statistics on the two communities. Nor does it mention whether comparable statistics are available for other parts of the UK, Ireland or the EU.

Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

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

A3.2 The Assessment team – Neil Jackson and Jill Barelli – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of OFMDFM in April. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 14 May. The Assessment team subsequently met OFMDFM 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 five responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Central government	4
Charity	1

A3.5 Users were satisfied with the format and content of the *Religion Report* and with the information provided about how the statistics have been produced. Some of the users were complimentary about OFMDFM's responsiveness to queries about the statistics. One user told us that it would be helpful to have access to the data in spreadsheet format, to facilitate further analysis. One user indicated that they felt that there was scope for the producer team to do more to understand the needs of users, and to provide further analysis of factors that may contribute to different labour market outcomes for each community.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

