

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Child Support in Great Britain

*(produced by the Child Maintenance and Enforcement
Commission)*

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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 *Child Support Agency National Statistics; Quarterly Summary of Statistics*⁴ produced by the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission (CMEC).
- 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 *Child Support Agency National Statistics* are designated as National Statistics, subject to CMEC implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by April 2012.

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

- 1.3.1 The Child Support statistics are produced from management information generated from the systems used to administer child support payments. Cases which have to be managed ‘off-system’ are also included. CMEC uses two administrative systems to administer child support payments; the subsequent impact on the statistics is not made clear. Some statistics are based on samples but confidence intervals or other quality measures for these are not published.

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.childmaintenance.org/en/publications/statistics.html>

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

1.3.2 The Child Support statistics are presented at GB level within the two releases, and regional and local authority level statistics are available in Excel spreadsheets on CMEC's website. CMEC has recently commenced working with other countries – such as the USA, Australia and New Zealand – with the aim of identifying common measures to aid international comparisons of Child Support statistics.

1.3.3 CMEC publishes useful information about quality, methodology and stakeholder engagement; however, the documents are not easy to find on CMEC's website and are not linked to from the releases. There is also scope for the commentary within the releases to be improved, including more information about the policy and operational context.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that the CMEC 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	Confirm that a statement will be published explaining both the nature and extent of revisions at the same time as they are released (para 3.2).
Requirement 2	Publish suitable measures of quality – such as confidence intervals – for the Child Support statistics (para 3.3).
Requirement 3	Provide clearer links to the metadata from the Child Support statistics (para 3.4).
Requirement 4	Provide information about the policy and operational context, including any relevant targets, within the releases (para 3.6).
Requirement 5	Improve the commentary in the releases so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics (para 3.7).

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 The Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission (CMEC) is responsible for the child maintenance system in Great Britain. It was established⁶ as a non-departmental public body in 2008, assuming responsibility for the Child Support Agency (CSA) from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP): the CSA is the operational body of CMEC. The Public Bodies Bill⁷, which was given Royal Assent on 14 December 2011, provides for the abolition of the Commission and the transfer of its functions back to DWP. A public consultation⁸ was carried out between October 2011 and January 2012 on the proposed changes. The Head of Profession within DWP has overall responsibility for these statistics, supported by CMEC's Finance and Commercial Director.
- 2.2 *Child Support* is published every three months and presents quarterly and annual rolling data; it is usually published around one month after the latest reporting period. It is produced in conjunction with DWP's Information Governance and Security Directorate. DWP also produce a summary of Child Support statistics – *Child Support Agency Quarterly Summary of Statistics First Release*⁹ – which although carrying the National Statistics logo, is more akin to a press release. CMEC's statistics cover a wide range of performance measures including: the number of live and assessed cases; the intake, and numbers of cleared and uncleared cases; the number of children benefiting from child maintenance; the value of maintenance collected and arranged; and the value of outstanding arrears.
- 2.3 The statistics are based on data extracted from the systems used to administer the two existing statutory child maintenance schemes in GB. These are cases operating under the current scheme¹⁰ rules on the Child Support 2 (CS2) computer system and those operating under the old scheme rules on both the CS2 and the Child Support Computer Systems (CSCS). Technical issues exist on many cases administered on the CS2; as a result these cases are administered off system on a database known as the Clerical Cases Database (CCD). The statistics are based on the entire CS2 system, a five per cent extract from the CSCS, and all cases managed off-system¹¹.
- 2.4 The statistics are used by CMEC and DWP to: monitor the performance of the CSA against key indicators; inform briefings; answer Parliamentary Questions; set internal performance measures; and to evaluate policy. Other users include external interest groups such as Gingerbread¹² and Child Poverty Action Group¹³, which use the statistics to review and monitor the performance of the

⁶ Under the Child Maintenance and Other Payments Act 2008

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/6/contents>

⁷ <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2010-11/publicbodieshl.html>

⁸ <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/consultations/2011/cmec-abolition.shtml>

⁹ <http://www.childmaintenance.org/en/publications/stats0911.html>

¹⁰ The original scheme was set up in 1993; the new scheme was set up in 2003

¹¹ 'Off-system' cases are those which, due to technical reasons, cannot be administered on the CS2 system. These cases are managed through a clerical database.

¹² <http://www.gingerbread.org.uk/>

¹³ <http://www.cpag.org.uk/>

CSA, to inform discussions with stakeholders and MPs, and to research the effectiveness of social policy.

- 2.5 CMEC told us the production of these statistics costs approximately £40,000 each year.

3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 CMEC consulted users of its Child Support statistics in June 2009. In September 2009, CMEC published a response¹⁴ to the user needs that it had identified detailing the actions it was taking; it subsequently published an update¹⁵ on actions taken in October 2010. CMEC told us that it also requests feedback from users on each publication, but does not receive many comments. CMEC published¹⁶ a policy document outlining its stakeholder engagement process in November 2010; more recently it has published a helpful document¹⁷ on its website explaining the use made of these statistics. CMEC told us it has commenced working with other countries – such as the USA, Australia and New Zealand – with the aim of identifying common measures to aid international comparisons of child support statistics; this work is being led by colleagues in New Zealand and is ongoing. We suggest that when available, CMEC provide more information – or publish relevant meeting notes and papers – about this useful work to improve international comparability.
- 3.2 In 2008 a methodological change relating to how money was received for certain cases had a significant impact on the statistics. CMEC clearly explained the reasons for the revisions and provided an analysis of the impact. More recently, smaller revisions have been made to the statistics. In the June 2011 release outstanding arrears figures were revised to match the audited accounts; however, the extent of the revisions and the impact on the statistics has not been explained. As part of the designation as National Statistics, CMEC should confirm that a statement will be published explaining both the nature and extent of revisions at the same time that they are released¹⁸ (Requirement 1).
- 3.3 The source data for the Child Support statistics come from the systems used to administer applications for, and payments of, child support. There are two systems in place: CSCS and CS2, which superseded CSCS in 2003. Statistics from CS2 are compiled from all cases on the system, whereas statistics from CSCS are compiled from a five per cent sample¹⁹. In addition, a number of cases are managed ‘off-system,’ although CMEC told us that all of these cases are included in the statistics. While the quality report published by CMEC explains that the CSCS statistics are subject to sampling errors, which may increase as the number of cases on this system decreases, there is no quantitative measure of these errors, for example in the form of standard errors or confidence intervals. As part of the designation as National Statistics, CMEC should publish suitable measures of quality – such as confidence intervals – for the Child Support statistics²⁰ (Requirement 2).

¹⁴ <http://www.childmaintenance.org/en/publications/consultations.html>

¹⁵ See footnote 12

¹⁶ <http://www.childmaintenance.org/en/publications/policy-statements.html>

¹⁷ <http://www.childmaintenance.org/en/publications/qss-information.html>

¹⁸ In relation to Principle 2, Practice 6 of the *Code of Practice*

¹⁹ CMEC told us that 5 per cent samples are used for CSCS as this was the convention in place when the management information was first collected from the system. The use of the 5 per cent sample has continued as the cost of moving to 100 per cent outweighed the benefits.

²⁰ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

- 3.4 CMEC publishes useful information about who uses the statistics and what they are used for²¹, the data collection methods²², and the quality of the statistics²³. However, these documents are not easy to find on CMEC's website and there are no links to them from the statistical release. As part of the designation as National Statistics, CMEC should provide clearer links to the metadata from the Child Support statistics²⁴ (Requirement 3).
- 3.5 *Child Support* provides estimates of child maintenance in GB. The Child Maintenance Enforcement Division in Northern Ireland does not produce equivalent Child Support statistics but does publish Client Fund Accounts²⁵. CMEC does not refer to this publication which would provide users with some useful information about Child Support in Northern Ireland. We suggest that CMEC provide links or other appropriate signposting to Northern Ireland Client Fund Accounts and publish information about any differences and the reasons for the differences.
- 3.6 *Child Support* includes a brief outline of the roles and responsibilities of CMEC and the period that the statistics cover. Although a *Users and Uses* document has been published, the release does not provide users with an explanation of the policy or operational context; for example, whether the statistics are used to measure progress against any national indicators²⁶. As part of the designation as National Statistics, CMEC should provide information about the policy and operational context, including any relevant targets, within the release²⁷ (Requirement 4).
- 3.7 The commentary and analysis in the release tends only to describe increases and decreases in the statistics. Furthermore, comparisons are generally only against the previous quarter, despite long time series being presented in tables and graphs. There is no in-depth analysis, for example comparing the old and new schemes, or the level of staffing and cost of administration with the clearance rates. As part of the designation as National Statistics, CMEC should improve the commentary in the release so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics²⁸ (Requirement 5). We suggest that in meeting this requirement CMEC should consider the points detailed in annex 2.

²¹ See footnote 9

²² <http://www.childmaintenance.org/en/publications/metadata.html>

²³ <http://www.childmaintenance.org/en/publications/quality-report.html>

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

²⁵ <http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/dsd-resource-account-2011.pdf>

²⁶ See page 8: <http://www.childmaintenance.org/en/pdf/Delivery-plan-11-12.pdf>

²⁷ In relation to Principle 8, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

²⁸ 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 CMEC's Child Support 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 | Provide more information – or publish relevant meeting notes and papers – about this useful work to improve international comparability when it becomes available (para 3.1). |
| Suggestion 2 | Provide links, or other appropriate signposting to Northern Ireland Client Fund Accounts and publish information about any differences and the reasons for the differences (para 3.5). |
| Suggestion 3 | Consider the points detailed in annex 2, in seeking to improve 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*²⁹. Whilst this is not part of the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*, the Authority regards it as advice that will promote both understanding and compliance with the *Code*. In relation to the statistical releases associated with these Child Support 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 release is generally referred to as the '*Child Support Agency Quarterly Summary of Statistics*' (QSS) although it has a different title on the PDF document: '*Child Support Agency National Statistics: June 2011*'. The title does not adequately describe what the statistics are about, which time period they relate to, or their geographical coverage.
- A2.4 The First Release is published as a DWP release whereas *Child Support* is published as a CMEC report. The reason for this is not made clear in either of the releases. The DWP publication is more akin to a press release.
- A2.5 The release provides a contents page identifying the subjects discussed, but not the tables and graphs presented. Within the release there is a note to say that outstanding arrears figures have been revised (and why); however, there is no statement explaining the extent of these revisions.

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

- A2.6 *Child Support* provides a list of 'Key Facts' (21 in total) but these do not always provide the most interesting points. Most of them simply provide a comparison with the previous quarter. DWP's First Release presents 9 of these 'Key Facts' (plus one additional point not included in the main report's Key Facts) as 'Main Findings'.
- A2.7 Most of the technical language included in the release is explained within the text or within notes underneath the table or charts. However, it is not always easy to follow or understand this information, especially when tables have many detailed notes.

²⁹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html>

A2.8 The release tends only to include descriptions of increases and decreases. Furthermore, the comparisons are generally only against the previous quarter, despite long time series being presented in tables and graphs. There is no in-depth analysis, for example comparing the old and new schemes, or the level of staffing and cost of administration with the clearance rates. Graphs and tables often have different starting periods and some graphs are difficult to interpret because of the long time series presented. Tables are presented with lines delineating a break in the time series, but the effects of the changes are not quantified.

Use language that is impartial, objective and professionally sound

A2.9 Much of the text used is impartial, and descriptions are consistent with the statistics. Four tables and one graph within the release refer to 'children benefiting from maintenance.' *Child Support* does not provide any justification for the assertion that children benefit from the money that is paid on their behalf.

A2.10 The release states that 'overall totals are subject to a degree of sampling variation'; however, this is not quantified or discussed further. There is no reference to non-sampling variability in the release.

Include information about the context and likely uses

A2.11 *Child Support* provides a brief explanation of the history, roles and responsibilities of the CMEC. A brief explanation of a change in legislation which affects the statistics is also provided. There is no explanation of the policy or operational context, or national indicators.

A2.12 The publication claims that the statistics from April 2008 'accurately' reflect the performance of cases managed 'off-system'; however, this is not fully explained. Where there are issues with the quality of the statistics, a note is provided underneath the table or chart. There is no discussion of the quality or reliability of the statistics in relation to potential uses within the release, although the *Users and Uses* document states what the statistics should and should not be used for.

Include, or link to, appropriate metadata

A2.13 The publication provides a brief explanation that the statistics are sourced from the CSA's two statutory child maintenance schemes – CS2 and CSCS – and that some cases are administered off-system. There is no further information about data collection methods in the releases. Definitions are provided throughout the publication in notes, but a glossary of terms would be useful.

A2.14 The statistics cover child maintenance in GB. No information is provided about Child Support Client Fund Accounts produced by Child Maintenance Enforcement Division Northern Ireland. A link is provided to Ministry of Justice statistics on Outcomes of Appeals and Monthly Social Security and Child Support Agency Tribunal Service. CMEC publishes regional level statistics in Excel tables but these are not referred to or linked to within the release.

Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A3.1 This assessment was conducted from September to December 2011.

A3.2 The Assessment team – Rachel Beardsmore and David Duncan-Fraser – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of CMEC in September. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 29 September 2011. The Assessment team subsequently met CMEC during November 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:

CMEC/CSA	4
DWP	1
Voluntary Sector	1

A3.5 In general, users were happy with the content and layout of *Child Support*. The users who responded to our consultation told us that the statistics are primarily used to provide external stakeholders, with evidence of CSA's performance. The statistics are also used to help formulate briefing packs for DWP Ministers, as well as helping to supplement other statistics published by DWP. One user told us that additional analysis – either as a one-off exercise or on an annual basis – of wider statistics on the child maintenance population would be useful; such as those children in receipt of support through family-based arrangements.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

