

Statistics on
Children Looked
After by Health
and Social Care
Trusts in Northern
Ireland

*Department of
Health, Social
Services and
Public Safety,
Northern Ireland*

Statistics on Children Looked After by Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland

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About the UK Statistics Authority

The UK Statistics Authority is an independent body operating at arm's length from government as a non-ministerial department, directly accountable to Parliament. It was established on 1 April 2008 by the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*.

The Authority's overall objective is to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. It is also required to promote and safeguard the quality and comprehensiveness of official statistics, and good practice in relation to official statistics.

The Statistics Authority has two main functions:

1. oversight of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) – the executive office of the Authority;
2. independent scrutiny (monitoring and assessment) of all official statistics produced in the UK.

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ASSESSMENT AND DESIGNATION

Under the provisions of the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007, the UK Statistics Authority has a statutory function to assess sets of statistics against the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, with a view to determining whether it is appropriate for the statistics to be designated, or to retain their designation, as National Statistics.

Designation as National Statistics means that the statistics are deemed to be compliant with the Code of Practice. Whilst the Code is wide-ranging, designation may be broadly interpreted to mean that the statistics meet identified user needs; are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and are well explained.

Assessment reports will not normally comment further, for example on the validity of the statistics as a social or economic measure; though reports may point to such questions if the Authority believes that further research would be desirable.

Designation as National Statistics will sometimes be granted in cases where some changes still need to be made to meet fully the requirements of the Code, on condition that steps are taken by the producer body, within a stated timeframe, to address the weaknesses. This is to avoid public confusion and does not reduce the obligation to comply with the Code.

Designation is granted on the basis of the information provided to the Statistics Authority, primarily by the organisation that produces the statistics. The information includes a range of factual evidence and also assurances by senior statisticians in the producer organisation. The views of users are also sought. Should further information come to light subsequently which changes the Authority's analysis, the Assessment report may be withdrawn and revised as necessary.

Once designated as National Statistics, it is a statutory requirement on the producer organisation to ensure that the set of statistics continues to be produced in compliance with the Code of Practice.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 This is one of a series of reports prepared under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*¹. The report covers Children Looked After (CLA) statistics for Northern Ireland, produced by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in Northern Ireland (DHSSPS). These statistics cover children who are looked after by local authorities or are eligible for local authority aftercare support services.
- 1.2 The CLA statistics produced by DHSSPS cover Northern Ireland, and include a section focusing on UK data. Each UK administration produces and releases data on children looked after by its own local authorities (or HSC Trusts in Northern Ireland). These distinct publications have different underlying definitions, methods of data collection and dissemination. As part of the initial pilot set of assessments, the CLA statistics from all four UK administrations were assessed. Cross-cutting UK issues are discussed further in Section 5.
- 1.3 The Statistics Authority will be inviting comments on both the process for assessment and the presentation of Assessment reports, with a view to further development of the arrangements in the coming months. The forward programme of Assessments can be found on the Authority's website² along with further information on the principles and procedures for assessment³.
- 1.4 The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

Section 2 Summary of findings, highlighting the main strengths and weaknesses in relation to the Code of Practice. This summary includes the UK Statistics Authority's decision in relation to designation as National Statistics.

Section 3 Subject of the assessment, an overview of the statistics and their history.

Section 4 The Assessment team's detailed assessment, providing more details about the assessment of compliance against each principle and protocol of the Code of Practice.

Section 5 The UK position, highlighting cross-cutting issues from the assessment of *Children Looked After* statistics for all four UK administrations.

Annex 1 Suggestions for improvement.

Annex 2 Summary of the assessment process and users' views.

¹ http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pga/ukpga_20070018_en.pdf

² <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/programme-of-assessment/index.html>

³ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/principles---procedures/index.html>

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.

2 Summary of findings

2.1 Decision concerning designation as National Statistics

2.1.1 The Statistics Authority confirms that the statistics on Children Looked After for Northern Ireland published by DHSSPS in the publications listed below are designated as National Statistics, subject to DHSSPS implementing the enhancements listed in sections 2.4 and 2.5 and reporting them to the Authority by April 2010.

- Sections 2 and 4 of the *Children Order Statistical Bulletin*⁴
- Section 3 of the *Children Order Statistical Tables*⁵
- *Adoption of Looked After Children in Northern Ireland*⁶
- *Northern Ireland Care Leavers*⁷
- *Former Care Leavers in Northern Ireland*⁸
- *Outcome Indicators for Looked After Children*⁹

2.1.2 Designation as National Statistics means that the statistics are deemed to be compliant with the Code of Practice, and thus that they meet identified user needs; are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and are well explained.

2.1.3 Designation also signifies that, subject to any caveats in this report, the Statistics Authority judges that the statistics are readily accessible, produced according to sound methods and managed impartially and objectively in the public interest.

2.2 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

2.2.1 The Statistics Authority is satisfied that the statistics on Children Looked After for Northern Ireland published by DHSSPS in the publications listed in para 2.1.1 above are compliant with most aspects of the Code of Practice. The DHSSPS statisticians have improved the coverage of statistics on children looked after through the introduction of additional outputs, which meet the needs of the central users within DHSSPS. They have also sought to achieve continuous improvement through the introduction of online survey collections and by commissioning a quality review of the statistics by the ONS Methodology Consultancy Service.

2.2.2 However, the needs of users outside of the DHSSPS are not sufficiently taken into account, and the range and naming of publications makes the information less accessible to external users than is ideal.

⁴ http://www.DHSSPS.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/stats-cib_pubs/stats-cib-children_order_bulletin.htm

⁵ http://www.DHSSPS.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/stats-cib_pubs/stats-cib-children_order_bulletin.htm

⁶ http://www.DHSSPS.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/stats-cib_pubs/statistics_and_research-cib_ad1.htm

⁷ http://www.DHSSPS.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/stats-cib_pubs/stats_research_cib_oc1.htm

⁸ http://www.DHSSPS.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/stats-cib_pubs/stats_and_research_cib_oc3.htm

⁹ http://www.DHSSPS.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/stats-cib_pubs/stats_and_research_cib_oc2.htm

2.2.3 The DHSSPS statisticians consider that the current level of resource is insufficient to comply with the Code of Practice. The requirements for designation as National Statistics set out in this report will have resource implications which DHSSPS will need to consider.

2.3 Detailed recommendations

2.3.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that DHSSPS could strengthen its compliance with the Code. Those which the Assessment team considers essential to enable designation as National Statistics are listed in sections 2.4 and 2.5 below. Other suggestions, which would improve the statistics and the service provided to users but which are not central to their designation, are listed at annex 1.

2.4 Requirements for designation as National Statistics

Requirement 1	Publish plans for engaging with users, and document their needs (para 4.6)
Requirement 2	Take into account the views of the new Stakeholder Boards in determining the statistical work programme (para 4.6)
Requirement 3	Report how the recommendations in the ONS Methodology Consultancy Service review of the CLA statistics are to be addressed (para 4.15)
Requirement 4	Publish the arrangements for protecting confidential data (para 4.16)
Requirement 5	Review the resources allocated to these statistics and confirm that the resources made available are sufficient to meet the standards of the Code of Practice (para 4.22)
Requirement 6	Review the publication plan for these statistics to ensure that users can easily identify and access information relevant to their needs (para 4.23)
Requirement 7	Ensure all statistics are released with appropriate commentary and analysis that is impartial and policy-neutral (para 4.24)
Requirement 8	Take appropriate steps to deposit the statistics with the relevant national archive (para 4.25)
Requirement 9	Ensure that statistical releases can be accessed from the National Statistics Publication Hub (para 4.27)

- Requirement 10** Identify the earliest feasible date for the publications and bring forward publication to that date (para 4.28)
- Requirement 11** Publish records of those who have pre-release access to the statistics (para 4.29)
- Requirement 12** Review the departmental Statement of Administrative Sources in the light of the recently published guidance from the National Statistician, and include in this Statement the arrangements for auditing the quality of the data provided by HSC Trusts (para 4.32)

2.5 UK-wide requirements

2.5.1 Cross-cutting UK issues are discussed further in Section 5. The corresponding requirement is below:

- UK Requirement 1** The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), the Welsh Assembly Government, the Scottish Government and DHSSPS should document clearly the differences between each administration's CLA statistics and scope out the feasibility and need for a comparable data subset (para 5.2.5)

3 Subject of the assessment

- 3.1 This assessment covers the set of statistics released by DHSSPS on looked-after children in Northern Ireland in the following publications:
- Sections 2 and 4 of the '*Children Order Statistical Bulletin*'
 - Section 3 of the '*Children Order Statistical Tables*'
 - *Adoption of Looked After Children in Northern Ireland* (AD1)
 - *Northern Ireland Care Leavers* (OC1)
 - *Outcome Indicators for Looked After Children* (OC2)
 - *Former Care Leavers in Northern Ireland* (OC3)
- 3.2 'Looked after' is the term used in the Children Order (Northern Ireland) 1995 to describe all children in the care of a HSC Trust or accommodated by a HSC Trust for 24 hours or more. The statistics play an important role in planning, delivering and evaluating the care provided for them.
- 3.3 Originally there was a single compendium publication of Personal Social Services statistics. The coverage of the publication grew in response to user needs and this eventually led to a number of smaller publications. Currently, statistics on looked-after children are covered in six separate publications. The *Children Order Statistical Tables* are an early release of information covered in the *Children Order Statistical Bulletin*. The other releases cover separate data collections including children in care for 12 months or longer (OC2), care leavers aged 16 to 18 (OC1), former leavers at their 19th birthday (OC3) and children adopted from care (AD1).
- 3.4 Sections 2 and 4 of the *Children Order Statistical Bulletin* include analysis and commentary on looked-after children by age, gender, type of placement, duration of care and legal status. The bulletin is published in spring and relates to the position at the end of March the previous year. Section 3 of the *Children Order Statistical Tables* covers the same information but is released earlier, in November each year, without commentary. The *Bulletin* also includes a section comparing data from across the UK, which is not included in the earlier release of the *Tables*.
- 3.5 The *Adoption of Looked After Children in Northern Ireland* release covers children adopted from care in Northern Ireland during the year ending 31 March. Analysis includes breakdowns by gender and age, and the durations between different stages in the adoption process. It is published in March of the following year (12 months after the reference period).
- 3.6 The *Care Leavers* release covers young people aged 16 to 18 who left care in Northern Ireland during the year ending 31 March. The release includes information on the educational achievements and economic activity of young people leaving care, their age, religion, ethnicity, disability, length of time in care, and latest care placement. It is published in April of the following year (13 months after the reference period).

- 3.7 The *Former Care Leavers* release covers former care leavers who reached their 19th birthday in the year ending 31 March. The release includes information on economic activity, contact with social services and living accommodation of young people who have left care. It also includes information on their age and gender, religion, ethnicity, disability, length of last placement in care, legal status and last placement in care. It is published in May of the following year (14 months after the reference period).
- 3.8 The release *Outcome Indicators for Looked After Children* in Northern Ireland covers children looked after continuously for at least 12 months at 30 September. It includes information on the educational achievements of these young people at Key Stage Assessments, and GCSE/GNVQ. It also includes information on their age and gender, religion, disability, length of time in care, placement type, offences and convictions, and health assessments completed. It was last published in May 2009, covering the year ending September 2006.
- 3.9 The data for all the publications are collected from HSC Trusts. The HSC Trusts hold data on looked-after children on a management information system known as SOS CARE. Most of the data collected for the statistics come from SOS CARE, with some additional data collected from other systems within HSC Trusts. DHSSPS requires HSC Trusts to complete a series of aggregate statistical returns using data from this system.
- 3.10 The information is used within DHSSPS and other Northern Ireland government departments to inform policy on looked-after children. These children are among the most vulnerable groups in society. The statistics provide information about these children and the type of care that is provided for them. The data are important to fostering and adoption agencies, children's charities and other organisations that monitor and campaign for children in need and carry out research in this area. These organisations, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the public are likely to use the data to evaluate how well HSC Trusts are meeting the needs of the children they look after.
- 3.11 Earlier this year, DHSSPS commissioned the ONS Methodology Consultancy Service to review the set of statistics on looked-after children.

4 Detailed assessment

Principle 1: Meeting user needs

The production, management and dissemination of official statistics should meet the requirements of informed decision-making by government, public services, business, researchers and the public.

- 4.1 Within DHSSPS, the statistics inform policy on looked-after children. They are used as an indicator of the performance of local authorities, and are important to the range of organisations and groups who monitor and campaign for children in need.
- 4.2 The DHSSPS statistics team told us that it meets regularly with policy colleagues to ensure that the statistics meet their needs. This policy team has responsibility for the allocation of funds, and as a result has a strong influence on the statistics work plan.
- 4.3 Consultation with external users is somewhat limited. DHSSPS meets the HSC Trusts every six months. The focus of these meetings is to support Trusts in their role as suppliers rather than to discuss the data needs of Trusts. It is not clear that this opportunity is used to its full potential; in particular, since the meeting is attended by those responsible for supplying the data, the data needs of the Trusts may not be adequately discussed. The introduction of two new Stakeholder Boards (see para 4.6 below) is expected to address the data needs of Trusts.
- 4.4 Engagement with other external users is currently limited to a readership survey attached to the *Children Order Statistical Bulletin*, although response to this has been low. DHSSPS also keeps a comprehensive record of *ad hoc* requests. It told us that it uses this to identify common user needs, for possible inclusion in the publications.
- 4.5 Statistics on looked-after children are covered in six separate publications. We do not think that this release strategy is the best way of meeting users' needs. In the other UK administrations these releases are collated into one or two publications, and the release date is closer to the reference period. This is discussed further in Principle 8.
- 4.6 The HSC Trusts were restructured in March 2007, when 11 Trusts were merged into five. This has led to plans to establish two Stakeholder Boards to consider user needs. The Boards are to meet every six months, starting in September 2009. One of the Boards will be an internal group, made up of the key users of statistics. It will consider information priorities and approve business plans. The other Board will include the Trusts, the Public Health Agency and Patient Client Council amongst others. It will provide a forum to consider the needs of key health and social care users and other users. It will also seek to ensure that information collection is not duplicated and the data are widely accessible and meet the needs of the diverse user group. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should publish a plan for

engaging with users, and document their needs¹⁰ (Requirement 1). This should outline the role of the two new Stakeholder Boards. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should take into account the views of the new Stakeholder Boards in determining the statistical work programme¹¹ (Requirement 2). This will help ensure that statistical developments are influenced by the wider public interest. We suggest that DHSSPS extends membership of the Stakeholder Boards to external users, reviews the work of the group in the coming year, and publishes an update on progress.

¹⁰ In relation to Principle 1 Practice 2, Principle 1 Practice 5 and Protocol 1 Practice 1 of the Code of Practice

¹¹ In relation to Principle 1 Practice 3 and Protocol 1 Practice 7 of the Code of Practice

Principle 2: Impartiality and objectivity

Official statistics, and information about statistical processes, should be managed impartially and objectively.

- 4.7 DHSSPS publishes all the statistical bulletins on its website, free of charge.
- 4.8 The statistics are not routinely revised. DHSSPS told us that there have been no recent errors in the publications, so there have been no statements on revisions or corrections. There have been some delays to publications, or to elements of publications, due to concerns with the quality of the data. DHSSPS told us that these delays and new publication dates were announced on its website. However, the website is not easy to navigate and the Assessment team had difficulty finding this information. We suggest DHSSPS review the content and structure of its website to ensure users can easily access relevant information and announcements.
- 4.9 There have been no recent changes to the methods used in the production of these statistics.

Principle 3: Integrity

At all stages in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics, the public interest should prevail over organisational, political or personal interests.

4.10 No incidents of political pressures, abuses of trust or complaints relating to professional integrity, quality or standards were reported to or identified by the Assessment team.

Principle 4: Sound methods and assured quality

Statistical methods should be consistent with scientific principles and internationally recognised best practices, and be fully documented. Quality should be monitored and assured taking account of internationally agreed practices.

- 4.11 The data are collected by the HSC Trusts and are held on a management information system called SOS CARE, which is run by the Trusts. The Trusts need to collect this information for their own operational purposes. For the Children Order Bulletin and Tables, algorithms are used within SOS CARE to automatically produce summary tables for each Trust. The Trusts provide the statistics team with Excel files of aggregated data.
- 4.12 For the other surveys the Trusts complete an online questionnaire for each looked-after child, which is submitted to DHSSPS via the internet. These data undergo a set of pre-programmed validation checks. The Trusts need to resolve any queries before these data are accepted. The statistics team quality assures the data, checking for internal consistency and trends, and following up any queries with the Trusts.
- 4.13 There is no wider quality assurance of the data submitted by Trusts, and no checks that all Trusts are applying the same standards. There have been data quality issues in the past, particularly in terms of how Trusts interpret the guidance. In common with the position in the other UK administrations, DHSSPS have to rely on suppliers to submit accurate data. This is discussed further under Protocol 3.
- 4.14 The reorganisation of the HSC Trusts led to the creation of a new Health and Social Care Board (HSC Board), established to oversee the work of the HSC Trusts. Part of the role of the HSC Board will be to carry out the data collection work for the production of the CLA statistics. This will require staff to be trained to collect the data, and will mean that the statistics team in DHSSPS become one step removed from the data collection exercise. The statistics team also told us that the new Board will provide appropriate training for the staff collecting the data. The statistics Head of Profession in DHSSPS will have the power to audit any element of the data collection process, to ensure the quality of the data. Nevertheless, this transfer of responsibilities presents risks to the quality and continuity of the CLA statistics. We suggest DHSSPS publish a plan for the transfer of data collection for these statistics to the new HSC Board, to cover how the department will ensure the standards set out in the Code of Practice continue to be applied.
- 4.15 The statistics team recently commissioned the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Methodology Consultancy Service to review the processes behind the statistics. This was in response to particular concerns, raised by internal users, relating to data quality. The review made a number of recommendations, in particular highlighting uncertainty within the Trusts around the checks required to ensure a high quality return. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should report how the recommendations in the ONS Methodology

Consultancy Service review of the CLA statistics are to be addressed¹²
(Requirement 3).

¹² In relation to Principle 4 Practice 1 of the Code of Practice

Principle 5: Confidentiality

Private information about individual persons (including bodies corporate) compiled in the production of official statistics is confidential, and should be used for statistical purposes only.

4.16 DHSSPS has assured us that it takes all necessary steps to protect the confidentiality of the data it collects. The information is collected and stored in a secure environment. Statistical returns transferred electronically are afforded the protection provided by the DHSSPS secure network. Published tables are processed for confidentiality in accordance with guidelines issued by ONS. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should publish the arrangements for protecting confidential data¹³ (Requirement 4).

¹³ In relation to Principle 5 Practice 4 of the Code of Practice

Principle 6: Proportionate burden

The cost burden on data suppliers should not be excessive and should be assessed relative to the benefits arising from the use of the statistics.

- 4.17 Meetings are held twice a year with representatives from the Trusts who provide the data. This forum provides an opportunity for the statistics team to explain any new data requirements, and also for Trusts to comment on the potential burden of providing this information.
- 4.18 DHSSPS told us that it has introduced some measures to reduce the burden on suppliers, such as online survey collection tools. It attends SOSKARE manager meetings to promote statistical purposes in any amendments to administrative systems. In addition, it has investigated the possibility of reducing the burden further by accessing the data held in SOSKARE directly, rather than going through the Trusts. DHSSPS hoped to roll this out in 2010, but the introduction of the new HSC Board will transfer responsibility for collecting the data away from the statistics team. It is not yet clear whether the new system accessing SOSKARE data directly will be implemented.
- 4.19 Collecting information directly from SOSKARE is expected to reduce the overall burden on Trusts. DHSSPS has not undertaken any work to establish the costs and benefits of this proposal, and DHSSPS does not collect any information on the cost to the Trusts of supplying the data. We suggest DHSSPS engages with the producers of CLA statistics for England, Scotland and Wales to learn from their experience in estimating costs to local authorities of supplying the data and develop an approach to producing estimates for Northern Ireland¹⁴.
- 4.20 The ONS Methodology Consultancy Service review of these statistics concluded that there was a lack of co-ordination across the different information requirements that DHSSPS places on the Trusts. As well as increasing the burden placed on the Trusts, this can impact on data quality; conflicting requirements have in the past led to confusion within the Trusts, for instance in terms of the definitions to use. DHSSPS intend to mitigate this by using the new external stakeholder board to make requests for data more co-ordinated and reduce cost burden.

¹⁴ In relation to Principle 6 Practice 1 of the Code of Practice

Principle 7: Resources

The resources made available for statistical activities should be sufficient to meet the requirements of this Code and should be used efficiently and effectively.

4.21 The team responsible for producing statistics in DHSSPS comprises five statisticians and a part-time administrative officer. Due to the broad spectrum of work carried out in the branch, only two statisticians deal with information on children's services, including children looked after statistics. The team considers that its current level of resources is insufficient to meet various requirements of the Code of Practice. They highlighted areas where they need additional resources to help them meet the requirements of the Code of Practice. These areas include:

- improving documentation of the methods used;
- informing users about the quality of the statistics;
- providing quality management training for staff; and
- improving computing systems.

4.22 The team expects that the transfer of data collection work to the new HSC Board will increase the team's overall work burden. In addition, they see the ONS review and the assessment against the Code of Practice as creating further pressures. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should review the resources allocated to these statistics and confirm that the resources made available are sufficient to meet the standards of the Code of Practice¹⁵ (Requirement 5).

¹⁵ In relation to Principle 7 Practice 1 of the Code of Practice

Principle 8: Frankness and accessibility

Official statistics, accompanied by full and frank commentary, should be readily accessible to all users.

- 4.23 Unlike other UK administrations, which publish one or two releases per year drawing together the different sources of data, DHSSPS publishes a separate release for each data source. This means there are six separate publications covering data children looked after in Northern Ireland. DHSSPS told us that this is because they collect more detailed information than other administrations. However, users we contacted told us that the range and naming of the publications is confusing, and the Assessment team had difficulty accessing these statistics on the DHSSPS website. The different products are difficult to identify, and are not always accompanied by clear product information, such as forthcoming release dates, and information on errors and delays. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should review the publication plan for these statistics to ensure that users can easily identify and access information relevant to their needs¹⁶ (Requirement 6).
- 4.24 The *Children Order Statistical Tables* are released as Excel files only, with little accompanying text. The corresponding bulletin is released later, with additional analysis and commentary, including comparative data from other parts of the UK. Releasing the tables on their own, with little commentary, does not make the information accessible to all users. The other statistical releases are accompanied by extensive commentary and analysis. Some introductory text appears to favour particular government policies, and in other places there are elements of commentary missing such as discussion of the uses of the statistics, details of the methods used and the quality of the data. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should ensure all statistics are released with appropriate commentary and analysis that is impartial and policy-neutral¹⁷ (Requirement 7).
- 4.25 As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should take appropriate steps to deposit the statistics with the relevant national archive¹⁸ (Requirement 8).

¹⁶ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 4 of the Code of Practice

¹⁷ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 2 and Principle 2 Practice 2 of the Code of Practice

¹⁸ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 7 of the Code of Practice

Protocol 1: User engagement

Effective user engagement is fundamental both to trust in statistics and securing maximum public value. This Protocol draws together the relevant practices set out elsewhere in the Code and expands on the requirements in relation to consultation.

4.26 The requirements for this protocol are covered elsewhere in this report.

Protocol 2: Release practices

Statistical reports should be released into the public domain in an orderly manner that promotes public confidence and gives equal access to all, subject to relevant legislation.

- 4.27 DHSSPS publishes on its website the list of those who have had pre-release access to the CLA statistics. The statistics are not currently available through the National Statistics Publication Hub. DHSSPS told us that they have trained staff to enable them to use the Publication Hub, but they were unable to log on to the system. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should ensure that statistical releases are available through the National Statistics Publication Hub¹⁹ (Requirement 9).
- 4.28 Most of the users who responded to us were dissatisfied with the timeliness of the data. Timeliness ranges from eight months for the *Children Order Statistical Tables*, to 31 months for the latest *Outcome Indicators* release. The statisticians told us they are making improvements to the timeliness of their releases. For example, DHSSPS expects to publish the next *Outcome Indicators* release within 12 months of data collection. However, the experience of the other UK administrations suggests it should still be possible to improve the timeliness of the remaining releases. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should identify the earliest feasible date for the publications and bring forward publication to that date²⁰ (Requirement 10).
- 4.29 Lists of those people granted pre-release access are published on the DHSSPS website for the *Outcome Indicators for Looked After Children and Former Care Leavers in Northern Ireland* publications. There are no published pre-release access lists for the other publications, although the Assessment team recognises some outputs pre-date April 2009, when the pre-release legislation came into effect. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should publish records of those who have pre-release access to the statistics²¹ (Requirement 11).

¹⁹ In relation to Protocol 2 Practice 3 of the Code of Practice

²⁰ In relation to Principle 1 Practice 4 and Protocol 2 Practice 1 of the Code of Practice

²¹ In relation to Protocol 2 Practice 7 of the Code of Practice

Protocol 3: The use of administrative sources for statistical purposes

Administrative sources should be fully exploited for statistical purposes, subject to adherence to appropriate safeguards.

- 4.30 As discussed under Principle 6, the statistics team at DHSSPS is aware of the opportunities available in terms of direct data downloads from the SOS CARE system and are making efforts to maximise this opportunity. The statistics team told us that they have liaised with the other UK administrations to discuss options for obtaining CLA data from other sources, through linking data sources. While they are not currently in a position to do this, they hope that over time it will become a possibility.
- 4.31 DHSSPS has taken positive steps to exploit existing data sources related to looked-after children. We suggest that DHSSPS explore ways of ensuring that statistical needs are considered at the earliest stages of development of new administrative systems covering all children services. This will make it easier for these systems to be designed with statistical purposes in mind from the start.
- 4.32 DHSSPS has a Statement of Administrative Sources, as required by the Code of Practice. The publications do not include information on the quality of the underlying data held by HSC Trusts. The data undergo validation checks when they are submitted, but DHSSPS statisticians do not undertake any wider quality assurance or audit of the data held by the Trusts. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DHSSPS should review their Statement of Administrative Sources in the light of the recently published guidance from the National Statistician, and include in this Statement the arrangements for auditing the quality of the data provided by HSC Trusts²² (Requirement 12). We also suggest that DHSSPS takes steps to ensure that relevant information from the audits is passed to the team responsible for CLA statistics.
- 4.33 The statistics team discussed the difficulty of minimising the risk that users obtain and use the underlying management data before the official CLA statistics are published. This could undermine the value of and confidence in the National Statistics product. The Head of Profession recognised his role in challenging any use of the administrative data which might undermine the value of the National Statistics.

²² In relation to Protocol 3 Practice 5 of the Code of Practice. Practice 5 (e), requires the Statement to identify the arrangements for auditing the quality of administrative data used for statistical purposes.

5 The UK position

5.1 The assessment programme

- 5.1.1 The CLA statistics produced by DHSSPS cover Northern Ireland. Each UK administration produces and releases data on looked-after children to cover its own local authorities (or Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland). This results in distinct publications, each with different underlying definitions, methods of data collection and dissemination.
- 5.1.2 The CLA statistics produced by all four administrations were included in the initial assessment programme to enable the assessment team to explore these statistics from a UK perspective. The statistics produced by England, Scotland and Wales are the subject of Assessment Reports 14, 15, and 16 respectively. This chapter considers cross-cutting UK issues.

5.2 UK data availability and common issues

- 5.2.1 Statistics on looked-after children for the UK as a whole are included in *Regional Trends*, produced by the Office for National Statistics. The Northern Ireland *Children Order Statistical Bulletin* also includes a section on UK-wide data. Neither of the other administrations include UK data in their CLA releases.
- 5.2.2 There are differences in the coverage of the *Children Looked After* statistics for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, mostly due to differences in the legislative backgrounds. In Scotland, children who are in need of care and protection may have a supervision requirement placed on them. Most of these children are allowed to stay at home under the supervision of a social worker. The legal definition of looked-after children in Scotland includes these children. This is not the case in the rest of the UK, where looked-after children are those placed in the care of a local authority or provided with accommodation for more than 24 hours. This is the single biggest definitional difference across the outputs, and has a considerable effect on the comparability of the data. For example, the proportion of children placed in foster homes in Scotland is considerably lower than elsewhere in the UK, because more children are looked after in their own homes in Scotland.
- 5.2.3 The UK data in both *Regional Trends* and the Northern Ireland bulletin are accompanied by a number of caveats, to reflect the differences in the definitions in each administration.
- 5.2.4 Users who responded to this assessment exercise were usually interested in one particular set of CLA statistics, but some users specifically look for UK data, and there were some common issues that arose across the different administrations. These issues include producing outcome indicators for older age groups, and challenging the quality of the data provided by local authorities (or HSC Trusts in Northern Ireland). Users who specifically look for UK data said that their use of the statistics is limited by the definitional differences and the inconsistent time-periods across the different sets of CLA statistics.

- 5.2.5 As part of the designation as National Statistics, DCSF, the Welsh Assembly Government, the Scottish Government and DHSSPS should document clearly the differences between each administration's CLA statistics and scope out the feasibility and need for a comparable data subset²³ (UK Requirement 1).
- 5.2.6 A common issue across the UK set of *Children Looked After* statistics is the quality assurance or audit of the data held by local authorities. In England, this issue was raised in December 2006 by a National Audit Office review of the data systems underpinning DCSF's PSA targets. The Code, under Protocol 3 Practice 5e, requires the organisational Statement of Administrative Sources to identify the arrangements for auditing the quality of administrative data used for statistical purposes. The position in each administration differs slightly and this issue has been addressed in section 4 of the individual assessment reports.
- 5.2.7 There is a four-nation data working group on these statistics. This group meets twice a year and we were told that it is an effective forum, providing the statisticians from each administration with an opportunity to update each other on recent issues and developments. It is important that this forum is used to consider how best to meet the needs of users of UK data. It should also be used to share best practice. This will ensure developments are based on existing experience, rather than each administration investing resource to develop independently. Specific examples of good practice across the four administrations include the work in DCSF to link to other data sources (Children in Need, National Pupil Database); and in Wales, the collection of information on the cost to local authorities of providing the data. We suggest DCSF, the Welsh Assembly Government, the Scottish Government and DHSSPS ensure best practice is shared, to make best use of resources across the four administrations.

²³ In relation to Principle 4 Practice 6 of the Code of Practice

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to the 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 | Extend membership of the Stakeholder Boards to external users, reviews the work of the group in the coming year, and publishes an update on progress (para 4.6) |
| Suggestion 2 | Review the content and structure of the DHSSPS website to ensure users can easily access relevant information and announcements (para 4.8) |
| Suggestion 3 | Publish a plan for the transfer of data collection for these statistics to the new HSC Board, to cover how the department will ensure the standards set out in the Code of Practice continue to be applied (para 4.14) |
| Suggestion 4 | Engage with the producers of CLA statistics for England, Scotland and Wales to learn from their experience in estimating costs to local authorities of supplying the data and develop an approach to producing estimates for Northern Ireland (para 4.19) |
| Suggestion 5 | Explore ways of ensuring that statistical needs are considered at the earliest stages of development of new administrative systems covering all children services (para 4.31) |
| Suggestion 6 | Take steps to ensure that relevant information from the audits of the quality of the data provided by local authorities is passed to the team responsible for CLA statistics (para 4.32) |
| Suggestion 7 | Ensure best practice is shared with the Welsh Assembly Government, the Scottish Government and DCSF, to make best use of resources across the four administrations (para 5.2.7) |

Annex 2: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A2.1 This assessment was conducted from April to August 2009.

A2.2 The Assessment team met representatives of DHSSPS at an initial meeting in April 2009. Some background information was provided by DHSSPS during April 2009, and Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 8 June 2009. The Assessment team subsequently met with DHSSPS on 30 July 2009 to confirm and clarify the written evidence provided.

Summary of users contacted, and issues raised

A2.3 The assessment team received 6 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

HSC Trusts	4
Government departments	1
Third Sector (Children)	1

A.2.4 Most were dissatisfied with the timeliness of the data, and the range and naming of the publications was seen as confusing.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

http://www.DHSSPS.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/stats-cib_pubs/stats-cib-children_order_bulletin.htm

http://www.DHSSPS.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/stats-cib_pubs/stats-cib-children_order_bulletin.htm

http://www.DHSSPS.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/stats-cib_pubs/statistics_and_research-cib_ad1.htm

http://www.DHSSPS.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/stats-cib_pubs/stats_research_cib_oc1.htm

http://www.DHSSPS.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/stats-cib_pubs/stats_and_research_cib_oc3.htm

http://www.DHSSPS.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/stats-cib_pubs/stats_and_research_cib_oc2.htm

