

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Adoptions in England and Wales

*(produced by the Office for National
Statistics)*

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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 Statistics³. The report covers the set of statistics reported in *Adoptions in England and Wales*⁴ produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).
- 1.1.2 This report is shorter than normal. In particular, section 3 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 listed at paragraph 1.1.1 can be designated as National Statistics, subject to ONS implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by January 2011 for Requirement 6 and by April 2011 for Requirements 1 to 5 and 7.

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

- 1.3.1 ONS has revamped its presentation of adoption statistics and now publishes a statistical bulletin with commentary and summary charts. It also releases the data tables in Excel format. The published adoption statistics provide a relatively limited amount of information about adoptions due to the limited information available from the Adopted Children Register (ACR), upon which

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.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=15049>

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

adoption statistics are based. ONS could go further, however, in exploring the potential for linking to other sources of data.

1.3.2 ONS has a detailed quality assurance process to validate the data but provides little metadata about the data collection process or the quality of the statistics in the statistical bulletin and associated tables.

1.3.3 ONS has documented its understanding of the interests of different types of users in the data but has little engagement with them about the statistics.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that ONS 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	Take steps to develop a greater understanding of the use made of adoption statistics; publish the relevant information and assumptions and use them to better support the use of the statistics (para 3.1).
Requirement 2	Publish information about the methods and quality of the adoption statistics and ensure that it is clearly signposted in the bulletin and data tables (para 3.2).
Requirement 3	Signpost users to similar statistics produced for Scotland and Northern Ireland, and related statistics produced by DfE (para 3.3).
Requirement 4	Review the commentary in the adoption statistics bulletin to ensure that it enables appropriate interpretation of the data (para 3.4).
Requirement 5	Explore the feasibility of improving the timeliness of these statistics (para 3.5).
Requirement 6	Ensure that all releases are issued at 9.30am on the day of release (para 3.6).
Requirement 7	Investigate the feasibility and user need for linking the adoptions data to other sources in order to maximise the value of these statistics (para 3.7).

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 *Adoptions in England and Wales* presents statistics on adoptions which took place following court orders in England and Wales. The statistics are presented by gender, age, and the marital status of the child's biological parents. ONS also publishes a high level summary of adoption statistics on its website in the form of a 'web nugget'⁶, and provides detailed tables in the form of Excel spreadsheets^{7,8}.
- 2.2 The data underpinning these statistics comes from the General Register Office (GRO), which holds a register of all adoptions granted by the courts within England and Wales and those foreign adoptions⁹ which have been registered with the Registrar General¹⁰. GRO maintains the Adopted Children Register (ACR), to enable a record to be kept which shows the adoptive details of the child, as ordered by the court, and enables a certificate to be issued which supersedes the original birth certificate. It also enables the adopted individual to access their birth information at a later date.
- 2.3 Upon issuing an adoption order, the issuing court sends a copy of the order to GRO by post. The transfer of data from GRO to ONS is covered by the *Statistics Act*, which allows the Registrar General to disclose information from the Adopted Children Register to ONS for statistical purposes.
- 2.4 Until 2010, ONS published adoption statistics as part of the FM2¹¹ publication, on a calendar year basis. In 2007 ONS decided that it would publish the adoption statistics separately from the marriages and divorces data, to improve timeliness, with a first release in National Adoptions Week in November. The release included data tables and a news story on the ONS website which presented headline findings with a summary chart.
- 2.5 This year, ONS made some improvements to the way adoption statistics are released. A new Statistical Bulletin, *Adoptions in England and Wales*, presents the main findings with charts, while more detailed statistics and time series from 1974 are available in the Excel tables. These changes followed improvements made by ONS to the means of receiving adoptions data from GRO, developing a database to hold a ten year data series, and overcoming the need for manual data entry. This has led to improvements in quality assurance and responsiveness to user data queries.
- 2.6 ONS estimates that these statistics cost approximately £13,000 to produce.

⁶ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=592>

⁷ http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_compendia/Final_Adoptions_Tables.xls

⁸ http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_population/historic-adoption-tables.xls

⁹ Children born and adopted overseas can be registered on the ACR providing the adoptive parent(s) are habitually resident in England or Wales at the time of the adoption. Children born (and whose birth was registered) in England and Wales but adopted overseas can also be registered on the ACR. These data are not included in the ONS statistics.

¹⁰ <http://www.direct.gov.uk/gro>

¹¹ FM2 was an annual publication of marriage, divorce and adoption statistics. It is no longer published.

- 2.7 Statistics on adoptions for Scotland and Northern Ireland are produced by the respective devolved administrations. The Department for Education (DfE) produces related statistics on children looked after by local authorities and those adopted from care, in England.
- 2.8 ONS considers that adoption statistics could be used by the European Parliament, the voluntary sector, such as the British Association for Adoption and Fostering, academics and researchers and the media. ONS receives parliamentary questions on adoptions, for example queries about the number of adoptions in particular parliamentary constituencies. Many of the queries ONS receives cannot be answered because of the limitations of the data collected at the court and entered into the register. We were told by ONS that people would like to see statistical information about the adopting parents, in particular the number of same-sex couples adopting, and step-parent adoptions.

3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 ONS carried out a user consultation in 2010 about plans to discontinue the FM2 publication. ONS asked users to comment on the adoption tables and plans to drop a particular table as the data were no longer available. The consultation was publicised on the product page for the FM2 and the 'In Brief' section of Population Trends. ONS received no comments that related to adoption statistics. The statisticians provided us with a description of how they thought the statistics were used, but this description is not published and there is no other documentation about use. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should take steps to develop a greater understanding of the use made of adoption statistics. It should publish the relevant information and assumptions and use them to better support the use of the statistics¹² (Requirement 1).
- 3.2 Some information about adoptions legislation is included in the Excel tables. However, ONS provides insufficient information about the methods used to collect and produce the statistics in *Adoptions in England and Wales*. For example, there is no explanation of the process the courts use to record the data or of the arrangements for transferring data to GRO and ONS. There is also very little information given about the quality of these statistics, such as the completeness or accuracy of the data. ONS told us that they receive a complete dataset from GRO, but ONS do not provide information on the quality of the data recorded by GRO, or explain the processes used by GRO to collect the data. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should publish information about the methods and quality of the adoption statistics and ensure that it is clearly signposted in the bulletin and data tables¹³ (Requirement 2).
- 3.3 *Adoptions in England and Wales* does not include links to corresponding statistics for Scotland or Northern Ireland. A table is published in the *Annual Abstract of Statistics*¹⁴ that draws together statistics on adoptions from the four countries, albeit without explanation of the comparability of the sources. Related statistics are also produced by DfE. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should signpost users to similar statistics produced for Scotland and Northern Ireland, and related statistics produced by DfE¹⁵ (Requirement 3).
- 3.4 Since discontinuing the FM2 publication, ONS has improved the presentation of *Adoptions in England and Wales*. The updated release contains well laid out charts, key findings, and some background notes. The commentary describes the trend over the past decade but does not comment on the potential impact of recent legislation on the data; users' understanding of the statistics would also be enhanced by referring to other statistics on recent patterns in family formation. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should review the commentary in the adoption statistics bulletin to ensure that it enables

¹² In relation to Principle 1 Practice 2 of the Code of Practice.

¹³ In relation to Principle 4 Practices 1 and 2 of the Code of Practice.

¹⁴ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/Product.asp?vlnk=94>

¹⁵ In relation to Principle 4 Practice 6 and Principle 8 Practice 4 of the Code of Practice.

appropriate interpretation of the data¹⁶ (Requirement 4). We suggest that ONS seeks user feedback on the format of the new statistical release.

- 3.5 ONS has brought forward the publication date of these statistics from March (15 months after the end of the year to which the statistics relate) to the previous November. November was chosen to coincide with the National Adoptions Week. ONS told us that it might be possible to publish earlier if it asked for the data from GRO earlier, and GRO has indicated that this would be possible in principle. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should explore the feasibility of improving the timeliness of these statistics¹⁷ (Requirement 5).
- 3.6 The Code requires National Statistics releases to be issued at 9.30am on the day of publication. ONS's website systems do not enable releases to be published simultaneously, which means that there is sometimes a delay beyond 9.30am. ONS informed us that this matter is being reviewed as part of the web development programme, which is due to be completed in early 2011. As part of the designation as National Statistics ONS should ensure that all releases are issued at 9.30am on the day of release¹⁸ (Requirement 6).
- 3.7 ONS receives an extract of data held on a database (the ACR) by the General Register Office (GRO). The ACR is populated from information sent to GRO from courts handling adoption cases. It does not contain variables such as ethnicity or area of residence, which would be useful to users, although GRO has indicated that such information may be held by the courts for other purposes. The ACR does contain personal data that would allow ONS to link to other sources, such as DfE's School Census, but this information is not currently passed on to ONS. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should investigate the feasibility and user need for linking the adoptions data to other sources in order to maximise the value of these statistics¹⁹ (Requirement 7).

¹⁶ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 2 of the Code of Practice.

¹⁷ In relation to Protocol 2 Practice 1 of the Code of Practice.

¹⁸ In relation to Protocol 2 Practice 4 of the Code of Practice and previously specified in Assessment Reports 34, 45, 47 and 56.

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

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes a suggestion for improvement to ONS adoption statistics, in the interest of the public good. It is not formally required for designation, but the Assessment team considers that its implementation will improve public confidence in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics.

Suggestion 1

Seek feedback from users on the new statistical release (para 3.4).

Annex 2: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A2.1 This assessment was conducted from August to October 2010.

A2.2 The Assessment team – Joe Cuddeford and Penny Babb – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of ONS in August 2010. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 31 August. The Assessment team subsequently met ONS during October 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

A2.3 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.

A2.4 The Assessment team received 5 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Government department	2
Local government	1
Academic	1
Voluntary sector	1

A2.5 Some of the users would like more detailed data such as ethnicity and disability, however these variables are not provided to GRO by the courts. Other users were happy with the timeliness and presentation of the statistics. Two users had had contact with the statisticians at ONS who produce these statistics, and were happy with the response they received.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

