
Director for Regulation

Debra Prestwood
Head of Profession for Statistics
Office for National Statistics
(by email)

22 March 2018

Dear Debra,

The Office for Statistics Regulation has been asked by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) whether the Alcohol-Related Deaths publication¹ can continue with National Statistics designation after a change in definition. The motivation to change the definition was to ensure standardisation across various government departments. A key part of any change to a National Statistics publication is to ensure user needs are met and the changes are well explained.

From speaking to users ourselves we understand the standardisation was generally welcomed, and the impact of the definition change has been explained clearly. We also thought ONS explained the impact of the definition change well in a separate analysis paper.² With this in mind I am happy to confirm that the newly named alcohol-specific death publication can be published with the National Statistics badge. This confirmation also applies to the alcohol-specific statistics published by the National Records Scotland (NRS) and Northern Ireland Statistics Research Agency (NISRA).

Whilst most users welcomed the change, there were points raised that could be considered further by ONS, NRS, and NISRA.

Firstly, the change in definition increases the risk of misinterpretation of the data. As ONS points out, with the new definition fewer causes of deaths are counted in the overall figure. The lower overall figure should not be interpreted as a real change but a result of the narrower definition. When including the deaths partially caused by alcohol the overall figure is higher. We think this has been well explained, but it is too soon to tell whether the efforts you have made to reduce misinterpretation are effective, and we would welcome your continued vigilance.

Secondly, alcohol-specific deaths only present a partial picture of the burden of alcohol on mortality. To understand what is happening completely users need to look at many different statistical publications produced by different organisations across the UK. Signposting to relevant statistics is provided, but it still can be easy to miss the bigger picture. We would encourage you to work with other organisations in considering how it is best to provide insight comprehensively to help users.

I have copied in the Head of Profession for Statistics at NRS and NISRA.

Yours sincerely



Ed Humpherson

Director General for Regulation

¹ Assessment report 200 www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/images-assessmentreport200statisticsonmortality_tcm97-41796.pdf

² www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/theimpactofusingthenewdefinitionofalcohol-specificdeaths/2017-10-27