

Assessment of compliance with the Code of
Practice for Statistics

Family Practitioner Services Statistics in Northern Ireland

(produced by the Health and Social Care Business
Services Organisation)

Office for Statistics Regulation

We provide independent regulation of all official statistics produced in the UK. Statistics are an essential public asset. We aim to enhance public confidence in the trustworthiness, quality and value of statistics produced by government.

We do this by setting the standards they must meet in the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#). We ensure that producers of government statistics uphold these standards by conducting assessments against the Code. Those which meet the standards are given National Statistics status, indicating that they meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and value. We also report publicly on system-wide issues and on the way statistics are being used, celebrating when the standards are upheld and challenging publicly when they are not.

Introduction

- 1.1 This assessment considered the following statistics about Family Practitioner Services in Northern Ireland, published by the Health and Social Care Business Services Organisation (BSO):
 - [General Pharmaceutical Services and Prescribing Statistics](#)
 - [General Dental Services Statistics](#)
 - [General Ophthalmic Services Statistics](#)
 - [General Medical Services Statistics](#)
 - [Family Practitioner Services Compendium](#)
 - [Prescription Cost Analysis](#)
- 1.2 Through the developments made to the statistics over the last few years, and in requesting this assessment, the team at BSO has demonstrated a strong commitment to the standards required of the Code of Practice for Statistics.
- 1.3 We judge that these statistics meet the highest standards of the Code. We have not identified any requirements for the statistics to achieve National Statistics status. OSR therefore recommends that the UK Statistics Authority designate the statistics as National Statistics.

Trustworthiness

Championing the Code of Practice for Statistics

- 1.4 BSO is a trusted and respected producer of official statistics. Strong analytical leadership within BSO has been instrumental in building this trustworthiness. For example, since coming into post, the Senior Statistician has advocated the application of the principles of the Code of Practice to all those involved in producing, publishing and using statistics and data in the organisation. This has resulted in the redevelopment of BSO's statistical releases in line with the Code and user feedback, and the publication of code compliance and policy documents. The Senior Statistician is well respected across the organisation and is involved in organisation-wide activities, including sitting on the Family Practitioner Services Senior Management Team. The Senior Statistician has also previously briefed the BSO Senior Management Team on official statistics and the management team's responsibilities in relation to them.

Transparency

- 1.5 Another aspect of BSO's practices which supports its trustworthiness is the approach the statisticians take to transparency. BSO publishes a [statistics charter](#) and a [statement of compliance regarding pre-release access](#). These documents comprehensively set out how BSO complies with the Code of Practice, including detailed policies on revisions and errors, user engagement and pre-release. The [results of previous user surveys and follow up interviews](#) have been published, including actions implemented and planned. It is excellent to hear that BSO plans to publish the R code for some of its visualisations – this is a great way to enhance transparency and to facilitate the sharing of knowledge among producers.

- 1.6 While we did not identify any formal requirements, we did suggest some minor changes to further enhance the trustworthiness of BSO's statistics. BSO has taken all of these on board – for example, it has committed to implementing and publishing an 'issues log'. This will bring together information about revisions and errors, including what steps have been taken to reduce the risk of repeating errors. As well as increasing transparency for users, the team reflected that this will serve as a useful resource for new staff, identifying common pitfalls and lessons learned.

Quality

Supporting users to understand quality

- 1.7 We found that BSO provides users with the information that they need to understand the quality of the statistics. For example, the annual reports include a good balance of statistical reporting, insightful commentary and information about quality. Comparisons of the statistics over time, and with other UK nations, are provided alongside relevant caveats for users making such comparisons. BSO has also published a Quality Assurance of Administrative Data (QAAD) report for each topic area (for example, [this QAAD report](#) for the General Pharmaceutical Services statistics). These are easy to find and are very detailed, covering aspects such as claims processes and quality assurance checks. A list of strengths and weaknesses and the implications of these for users is also included in each QAAD report.
- 1.8 The data used to produce BSO's statistics come from administrative data sources. Most of these are payment claims data, where there is an incentive for claimants to submit on time, so there is good coverage across all the statistics. Consequently, the level of uncertainty around the statistics is low and any estimates are deemed to be very robust. It is good to see that BSO is careful in its use of language when discussing estimates (for example using descriptions such as 'almost' or 'around'). We encourage the team to continue to think about how uncertainty is communicated to users.

Engagement with data suppliers

- 1.9 The statisticians at BSO have built excellent relationships with their data suppliers, who also work within the organisation. An analyst liaison group, co-chaired by the Senior Statistician and the Senior Data Analyst, provides a forum for raising issues formally – for example, data managers making statisticians aware of planned system changes, or statisticians raising data requirements for upcoming work. The statisticians work closely with their data suppliers on ad hoc requests and project work, as well as for official statistics. This provides another more informal route for communicating data issues to suppliers. The result of this strong engagement is that data quality is continually being improved and the statisticians have a solid understanding of the data they are using.

Value

Uses and users of the statistics

- 1.10 The Family Practitioner Services statistics and underlying data are used by a variety of different people, from those working in health and social care services in

Northern Ireland to academics and journalists. They are valuable for many purposes, including:

- Planning health and social care services, including resource allocation
- Monitoring the performance of health and social care services
- Developing government policies and monitoring their effectiveness
- Producing impact assessments for particular drugs
- Academic research
- Informing the public about health care services in Northern Ireland

- 1.11 BSO makes the statistics and data available in several ways in order to meet the varying needs of these users. For example, annual statistical reports are published alongside infographic summaries, interactive visualisations such as maps, and data tables. The statistics are also released on a quarterly basis in data tables, and GP prescribing data are released monthly as open data. Finally, underlying data are made available for reuse via the Honest Broker Service, allowing approved users to access the data and link to other sources for their own analysis.
- 1.12 To further enhance the offering for users, during the first two quarters of 2022/23, BSO is planning to add time series charts and main findings infographics to each of its quarterly releases. This will be particularly beneficial for users who require a quick visual summary of the statistics – a request we heard from some users during our assessment.

User engagement and addressing user feedback

- 1.13 BSO demonstrates a strong commitment to improving its statistics to meet user needs through the range of user engagement activities it carries out. These include formal surveys and direct stakeholder conversations. Engagement activities are done on an ongoing basis as part of annual work plans for the statistics. [User engagement action plans](#) published by BSO show where improvements have been made to meet requirements identified by users – and we heard from many users that they find BSO to be approachable, professional and keen to help.
- 1.14 Users told us that where they request specific analyses, BSO will consider producing these as official statistics on an ongoing basis. For example, during the assessment process we received feedback that it would be helpful for some users to have practice lists broken down by demographic factors. BSO is currently working on meeting this request through an annual release of data, to be published later this year.
- 1.15 BSO also demonstrates a commendable openness to considering new approaches to user engagement. For example, the team is exploring the idea of an online user engagement event to showcase and explain the statistics to users. This would be used as another opportunity to ask users for suggested improvements to the outputs.

Accessibility and Reproducible Analytical Pipelines

- 1.16 The statisticians at BSO are motivated to improve their statistics using new technologies and technological solutions. For example, the team is in the process of

reviewing and improving the accessibility of the data tables and pdf reports. The statisticians may find the [monthly accessibility clinics](#), run for the Government Statistical Service, a useful support as they carry out this work. The team acknowledges that a move to html outputs, which would [further improve accessibility](#), will need to be a longer-term endeavour due to limitations of the current website. A refresh of the BSO website is planned to be completed over Summer 2022, providing the opportunity for html developments. It is encouraging to hear that the statisticians have ideas for improving the design of the website and that they will have the opportunity to input to it. This will be important as it will improve user experience of the statistics and increase the chance that the statistics can be found and used.

- 1.17 Another area where the statisticians at BSO demonstrate their desire to improve and innovate is in the planned development of [Reproducible Analytical Pipelines](#) (or RAP). BSO aims to implement RAP principles in its General Medical Services quarterly publication and will then share learning with those responsible for other quarterly publications. While the team feels that resource will be the main challenge for these developments, it is ensuring that some time is allocated in its annual work programme and hopes to make progress over the course of 2022/23. Our report [Reproducible Analytical Pipelines: Overcoming barriers to adoption](#) encourages this iterative approach to implementing RAP principles, as well as other suggestions for how BSO can plan for and then carry out RAP developments, based on the experiences of other statistics producers.

