

Assessment of compliance with the Code of
Practice for Statistics

Public Transport Statistics Northern Ireland

produced by Department for Infrastructure NI

The 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 found to comply with the standards of trustworthiness, quality and value in the Code are given accredited official statistics status (called National Statistics in the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007). 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.

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Overview

At the time of this report, the Public Transport Statistics Northern Ireland are published as official statistics.

The statistical report, which is published by the Department for Infrastructure (DfI), presents statistics on public transport operated by [Translink](#), the main public transport provider in Northern Ireland, bringing together information on public transport journeys, vehicles and staff.

The statistics on public transport are used for a range of purposes, for example to enable evidence-based decision making, such as that around the development and review of policies; to monitor changes over time; and to support the independent and transparent monitoring of the DfI's [Public Service Agreement](#) with Translink.

Why we did this review

A subset of these statistics were previously published within the [Northern Ireland Transport Statistics accredited official statistics report](#). However, following user feedback, the public transport statistics have been developed into their own standalone report. As such, they must be reassessed against [the Code of Practice for Statistics](#) before they can be considered for accreditation again. The Department for Infrastructure (DfI) NI requested that we conduct such an assessment, the findings of which are detailed in this report.

Highlighted findings

- The positive and collaborative relationship between the Analysis. Statistics and Research Branch (ASRB) in DfI and the data supplier Translink has helped both in maintaining appropriate knowledge of operational context and data collection methods.
- Users expressed confidence in the quality of the statistics, which are supported by the published background and quality reports.
- ASRB has effectively engaged with its user base, responding to queries and incorporating user feedback into the Public Transport Statistics Northern Ireland report.
- ASRB should make improvements to its website to improve ease of access to the range of statistics on the topic of transport in NI and provide a clearer framework for users to navigate to related statistical releases.
- The insight that ASRB provides in the statistical report could be enhanced further to aid interpretation of the statistics in a broader policy environment.

Our judgement

We have set out [two requirements](#) that we judge ASRB needs to meet for these statistics to become accredited official statistics. These focus on improving ease of access to the statistics for users on DfI's website and adding further context to the statistical report to strengthen the narrative and enhance the value of the statistics for users.

Next steps

ASRB has committed to set out an action plan on how it plans to address the requirements, providing OSR with an update in mid-July. ASRB has committed to aim to meet these requirements as part of the next release of data in September 2025.

Related links

[Regina McGeown to Ed Humpherson: Requesting an independent review for accreditation of Northern Ireland public transport statistics and road network and condition statistics](#)

[Ed Humpherson to Regina McGeown: Request for assessment of Northern Ireland Public Transport Statistics and Road Network and Condition Statistics](#)

Introduction

Background to the statistics

- 1.1 A subset of [Public Transport Statistics Northern Ireland](#) which is produced by the Analysis, Statistics and Research Branch (ASRB) within the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) were previously published as part of the [Northern Ireland Transport Statistics accredited official statistics report](#). This report covered information on the road network, public transport and accessible transport in Northern Ireland.
- 1.2 During June and July 2021, ASRB ran a [user consultation exercise](#), asking for feedback on proposals for a new official statistics publication on public transport and on the cessation of the Northern Ireland Transport Statistics report in its current format, following conversations with key users of the statistics. Following the feedback received, ASRB took the decision to cease production of the Northern Ireland Transport Statistics report, which was last published in September 2021 covering the period up to 2020–21.
- 1.3 ASRB also secured support to take forward proposals for the new public transport statistics release. The first standalone [Public Transport Statistics Northern Ireland](#) report, covering the period from 2019–20 to 2021–22, was published in March 2023 as official statistics. There have since been two further publications, with the [latest release in September 2024](#) covering the period up to 2023–24.
- 1.4 This publication has been evolving to further incorporate user feedback from a follow-up [user engagement exercise in 2023](#). For example, ASRB has improved the timeliness of the release from a 1-year lag to 6 months and included additional data, such as bus operating miles by vehicle fuel type. Developments to the public transport statistics are set out in DfI's [forward work plan](#).
- 1.5 Public Transport Statistics Northern Ireland is based on data from [Translink](#), the main public transport provider in Northern Ireland. Translink owns the databases that are used as the source data for the statistics, covering passenger journeys, income, mileage, assets and staffing.

Findings

Methods and assured quality

- 2.1 The statistics presented provide a comprehensive overview of public transport usage in Northern Ireland, covering usage patterns such as the number of passenger journeys, types of transport used and fare types; miles operated and fuel types; onboard facilities and compliance with accessibility regulations. The data help DfI shape policies to promote sustainable and active travel, including for use in DfI's Annual Report and Accounts. The data can be used to track changes in public transport use over time, including the effects of external factors like the pandemic, and inform the public and stakeholders about transport performance.
- 2.2 ASRB ensures that it has a good understanding of the validation and quality assurance checks that Translink conducts before providing the data. As is the case with most administrative systems, there may be some potential for manual entry errors. Translink carries out quality checks with the aim to mitigate this risk. These quality checks include the regular monitoring of ticketing equipment to ensure it is working correctly, as this ticketing information is fed into one of Translink's databases that is used in the compilation of data for ASRB, and internal and external auditing of systems. Additionally, data are reconciled between different systems; and staff are trained to ensure that all Translink staff members record details accurately and consistently and on the use of the databases and how to access the databases.
- 2.3 The ASRB team then carries out its own quality assurance on the data, such as checks for incorrect or missing data and comparisons of data with previous years. Any anomalies or errors identified as a result of these checks are referred back to Translink and can be corrected or resolved as appropriate.
- 2.4 ASRB also has plans to further strengthen its quality assurance arrangements. It aims to triangulate data with the outcomes of the [Travel Survey for Northern Ireland](#) (TSNI) from September 2025. Incorporating this extra quality assurance arrangement was delayed following delays to the previous year's TSNI publications due to the late arrival of data from the suppliers and the additional validation that has been required after quality issues were identified.
- 2.4 ASRB publishes this information on quality and quality assurance for users of the statistics in a clear and informative way in the [Background Quality Report](#). This information is further supported by the comprehensive Quality Assurance of Administrative Data ([QAAD](#)) document that has been produced in line with OSR's QAAD guidance.

- 2.6 ASRB has a constructive and collaborative relationship with its data supplier Translink, both informally and through more formal arrangements. For example, as part of developing the public transport statistics, ASRB staff met with Translink to agree the data requirements and the quality assurance procedures that Translink has in place. The teams also meet ahead of each new data collection to discuss any new requirements.
- 2.7 We heard from both Translink and ASRB of the positive relationship between the two teams. This relationship has resulted in ASRB maintaining appropriate knowledge of the operational context and collection methods of the source data. The data sources and collection methods are set out in detail in the [QAAD](#) document.
- 2.8 All of the users we spoke to expressed confidence in the quality of the statistics, with some users specifically referencing the published background and quality reports.

Accessibility

Statistical publication

- 2.9 The Public Transport Statistics Northern Ireland outputs include the statistical report, data tables (both in Excel and an accessible open-data source format which supports re-use of the data), an infographic and a statistical press release. We welcome that the statistics are presented in different formats aimed at different user groups. Some users we spoke to found that infographics aided understanding of the key messages from the statistics, particularly for those who are not from a statistical background or who do not work with statistics on a regular basis.
- 2.10 Further re-use of the data is made possible through the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)'s [data portal](#) under the theme "Travel and Transport". Through the data portal, users can view and filter the monthly passenger journeys data for their own requirements. Making data available through such tools gives users greater flexibility to interrogate the data in a way that best meets their needs, while reducing burden on the production team involved in writing the analysis within the main statistical bulletin. ASRB has also recently added data around buses by mileage and fuel type, and transport accessibility to the data portal.

Website navigation

- 2.11 Accessing the most relevant landing page and finding the desired statistics may not be a straightforward task for users. The DfI website provides several ways to navigate to the public transport statistics, such as the [public transport statistics](#) page, which also links to the [Public Transport Statistics Northern Ireland](#) page as

well as other transport statistics. There is also a [public transport page, which has links to a range of current, discontinued and ad hoc statistics and research](#). One user we spoke to noted that they would like improved access to the statistics, suggesting bringing all public transport related reports by DfI into one central page.

- 2.12 In addition, the titles for the range of transport data and statistics produced, or previously produced, by DfI are not always distinct, and it may not always be clear to users what they contain. The team has told us that work is in progress to improve navigation around the statistics and research areas of the DfI website.
- 2.13 One user flagged that on the publication [landing page](#), it is not always obvious which link leads to the main statistical report; documents such as the press release and infographic seem more prominent than the actual statistical report. This confusion has occurred as the HTML statistics report is hosted on NISRA's website, whereas the other items, such as the infographic and data tables, are hosted on DfI's website. The team told us that it is aware of this issue but faces challenges in addressing it due to technical limitations of its website – and publishing protocol.

Requirement 1: To enable users to more easily access the public transport statistics produced by DfI from its website, the ASRB team should review and publish a plan to improve the access and navigation to these statistics. ASRB should work with other statistical producer teams in DfI and colleagues in NISRA to also agree and set out in this plan how it will improve the ease of access to the range of statistics on the topic of transport in NI and provide a clearer way for users to navigate to related statistical releases. ASRB should involve users in any testing of planned improvements.

Meeting user needs

- 2.14 DfI recognised the need for official statistics on public transport for a range of purposes, such as to support evidence-based decision making, policy development and review, monitoring changes over time, and ensuring transparent oversight of the [Public Service Agreement](#) with Translink. The Public Service Agreement sets out a comprehensive framework for the delivery, management and monitoring of public passenger transport services in Northern Ireland, ensuring compliance with legal and regulatory requirements and promoting efficiency, safety and accessibility.
- 2.15 Users we spoke to as part of our review also recognise the value of these statistics, using them for purposes such as policy formulation within Northern Ireland and research on specific local issues.
- 2.16 DfI is open to feedback and engages effectively with its user base. Users commented positively on their experiences of engaging with the statistics team, finding the team helpful and responsive when dealing with queries and being willing to engage.

- 2.17 Public Transport Statistics Northern Ireland was developed following user engagement in 2021. DfI then carried out a further engagement exercise in 2023. This exercise identified additional data needs on topics such as the breakdown of mileage by fuel/ emissions type, data on safety and accidents, customer satisfaction, urban/rural statistics, accessibility, concessionary fares, and timetables and connections. DfI was open and fed back to users where it could and could not meet these needs when it published its [consultation outcome summary](#) – this included signposting users to other data sources on the DfI website and Translink website.
- 2.18 The views of some of the users we spoke to echoed some of the findings from the user consultation, such as a need for breakdowns of the data by fare-paying versus concessionary passengers and by urban/rural area and for data on station accessibility. Some of these needs were also themes covered in our [Review of Transport Accessibility Statistics](#) in 2022.
- 2.19 The team has since acted on some of the user needs identified from the consultation, such as including bus operating miles by vehicle fuel type and expanding the data on paying/non-paying passenger journeys to now include paid, subsidised and full-fare concession passenger journeys in the most recent statistical report published in 2024.
- 2.20 One user flagged to us that data that had previously been included in the now-ceased Transport Statistics publication, such as rolling stock split by locomotives and passenger coaches, route miles of track and number of stations, are not in the public transport statistics publication. The statistics team told us that the need for these particular data had not been raised in the user consultation, perhaps because route miles of track and number of stations remain fairly static, but that it is considering how best to address this need for users.
- 2.21 The data that Translink collects are for its operational purposes, such as for inclusion in its statutory accounts and for measuring targets and are collected through administrative systems. Therefore, due to the way the data are collected it is not feasible to meet all user needs, such as providing data below the NI level at a local council level. Other data needs, such as information on station accessibility, are [reported by Translink](#) with a [search facility](#) available for passengers, and data on user satisfaction and reasons people use public transport are available from the [Northern Ireland Continuous Household Survey](#).

Providing further insight

- 2.22 The Public Transport Statistics Northern Ireland report provides various counts and trends over time on a range of different topics. ASRB provides various caveats and guidance for users, such as information around disruptions due to industrial action,

to help them appropriately interpret the statistics. Our review identified areas where further context could be added to the statistical report to strengthen the narrative and enhance value for users. For example:

- Figures 11 and 12 include a breakdown by fuel type (diesel, diesel hybrid and zero emission). More insight could be provided for users to understand and interpret changes in the statistics, given moves to renewable energy and meeting net-zero targets for NI.
- Figure 4 shows revenue from passenger receipts. It could be helpful for users to understand what is driving the movements in these data, for example increased passenger numbers, annual fare increases (although we note that the [User Guidance section](#) in the statistical report highlights that Translink made fare revisions in March 2023, and there were further changes to some rail routes in November 2023). It would also be beneficial for users to know whether the data are presented as real or nominal values.
- Figure 2, which reports on public transport passenger journeys, helpfully shows the onset of travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the changes to restrictions are explained in detail in the [User Guidance section](#), to improve the visual interpretation of the data, the date when all restrictions were lifted could be added to Figure 2.

Requirement 2: To enhance the value of the public transport statistics, DfI should consider how it could add more relevant context to the statistical report to aid interpretation of the statistics in a broader policy environment, including drawing on the areas identified by this assessment.

List of requirements

Based on the findings of this review, we have identified two requirements that ASRB must fulfil for Public Transport Statistics Northern Ireland to become accredited official statistics (called National Statistics in the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007).

We expect ASRB to share a progress report with us by mid-July 2025.

Requirement 1: To enable users to more easily access the public transport statistics produced by DfI from its website, the ASRB team should review and publish a plan to improve the access and navigation to these statistics. ASRB should work with other statistical producer teams in DfI and colleagues in NISRA to also agree and set out in this plan how it will improve the ease of access to the range of statistics on the topic of transport in NI and provide a clearer way for users to navigate to related statistical releases. ASRB should involve users in any testing of planned improvements.

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