

Review of compliance with the Code of
Practice for Statistics

Labour Market Survey Statistics

Statistics producer: Northern Ireland Statistics and
Research Agency

Report by: Office for Statistics Regulation

June 2026

The Office for Statistics Regulation

Statistics should serve everyone, helping enhance knowledge about every section of society and the economy, and people's place within them.

The Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) provides independent regulation of official statistics produced in the UK. Official statistics are statistics produced by Crown bodies and other organisations listed within an [Official Statistics Order](#), on behalf of the UK Government or the devolved governments.

We aim to enhance public confidence in statistics produced by government by setting the standards that they must meet in [the Code of Practice for Statistics](#). We ensure that producers uphold these standards by conducting reviews of statistics against the Code. 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.

Compliance review

A compliance review is a review of any official statistics (or [accredited official statistics](#)) to establish the extent to which they meet the standards of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value in the Code of Practice for Statistics. We might undertake a review with a view to accrediting a set of statistics (this type of compliance review is called an assessment), focus on a specific issue or involve a high-level check of ongoing compliance.

A range of factors determine the scope of and approach to a compliance review, including the type of statistics, their accreditation status, the producer history, the profile of the statistics and the reasons for initiating the review.

Contents

The Office for Statistics Regulation.....	1
Compliance review.....	2
Overview.....	3
Why we did this review	4
Highlighted findings	5
Our judgement	5
Next steps	6
Recommendations	6
Findings	7
Transparency	8
Labour market survey.....	8
User engagement	9
Methodology and Data Quality	10
Quality Criteria	10
UK-level estimates.....	11
Organisations engaged during this review	11

Overview

At the time of this report, statistics from Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)'s [Labour Market Report](#) are published as accredited official statistics.

NISRA's Labour Market Report is published monthly and draws on multiple sources, which include the Labour Force Survey (LFS). These statistics provide a wide range of key labour market statistics in Northern Ireland, including headline estimates of employment, unemployment and economic inactivity, as well as feeding into [ONS's monthly labour market updates](#).

This report is the first in a series of reviews looking at NISRA's transition to its new Labour Market Survey (LMS) and how it is ensuring that the new labour market estimates produced from the LMS meet the standards set out in [the Code of Practice for Statistics](#).

Why we did this review

The LFS is the main household survey used to compile official estimates of the UK labour market. It is vital for informing the public about many aspects of the labour market. NISRA collects and processes the survey data in Northern Ireland and feeds the information to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to produce UK estimates.

ONS decided to redevelop the LFS in Great Britain and move to an online-first approach in 2020, influenced by falling response rates and the change in data collection necessitated by management of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. Following that, NISRA chose to redevelop its own labour market survey in Northern Ireland, and [informed users of this move in 2024](#). NISRA's focus was on developing a short survey with the key labour market indicators for NI stakeholders, and it planned to remove questions where the data were not used or where data were available from other sources. This led to NISRA developing its Labour Market Survey (LMS) alongside ONS's new survey (the transformed LFS, or TLFS).

We are carrying out this review of NISRA's transformation programme due to the importance of these statistics for private and public sector decision making within Northern Ireland and at the UK level. OSR published a [report](#) in April 2026 on ONS's transformation of its LFS for Great Britain. This NISRA focused review aims to address the following questions:

- Is NISRA effectively handling the transformation of labour market statistics, including engaging with users to understand whether proposed improvements meet user needs and being transparent about its work?
- Is NISRA adequately assuring itself and users about the quality of statistics produced using new data and methods?

- Is NISRA effectively seeking ways to ensure statistics are coherent at the UK level, in line with user needs?

Highlighted findings

- NISRA has balanced response rate and data quality considerations with user needs in developing a shorter survey. In response to falling response rates for the longer LFS, NISRA engaged with its main users in 2024 to provide an overview of the planned transformation and seek feedback. NISRA chose to develop a shorter survey, focusing on key labour market topics to maximise the number and quality of survey responses for Northern Ireland.
- Although NISRA has published a [question-mapping document](#) and information on the results of the LMS in one of its transformation updates, information is spread over multiple publications and some users are still not clear which content from the old survey will not be included in the new survey or if removed content will be available from other sources.
- Most users spoke highly of NISRA's approach to engaging with them and were confident that NISRA would deliver the LMS. NISRA regularly engages with a range of government departments, academics, research institutes and Northern Ireland users. NISRA has also attended ONS's LFS/TLFS user groups to provide updates to a wider set of users. Despite attending these forums, some users told us that they were not clear about NISRA's plans for transitioning or how their views were collated and used to inform decision making.
- NISRA is currently performing quality assurance on the data from the LMS and finalising how it will assess the readiness of the LMS. It has published information on response rates and the achieved sample, but it has not yet published further quality assurance work, such as discontinuity analysis. It is not currently clear on what basis NISRA will decide it is ready to transition to the LMS.
- NISRA and ONS have worked collaboratively to ensure delivery of cohesive UK-level labour market estimates. Transitioning to two new surveys (the LMS and the TLFS) with differing content and timelines has presented a range of challenges for both producers. Whilst this work is still ongoing, and we have been told that ONS and NISRA have a data strategy, this has not yet been published.

Our judgement

Overall, NISRA has taken a considered approach to developing a shorter labour market survey, balancing response rates, data quality and user needs, and has engaged widely with users and stakeholders. However, there remains a lack of clarity and transparency for some users—particularly around survey content changes, readiness criteria for transition, and the wider UK data strategy.

This report identifies six recommendations for NISRA to take forward to provide users with greater clarity about the transition, the quality of the new labour market statistics and how user need will be met. These recommendations are set out in full in the [following section](#). We recognise that this project is still ongoing. NISRA have explained that they have plans in place to deliver on our recommendations as part of the transformation programme.

Next steps

This report is the first in a series of compliance reviews on NISRA's Labour Market Survey transformation. Through our engagement with NISRA, we recognise that NISRA plans to deliver a range of publications as the project progresses. We expect NISRA to write to us in six months to provide an update on progress against these recommendations, but we will continue to engage with NISRA throughout the transformation process.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this review, we have identified six recommendations that NISRA should address to enhance the statistics' Trustworthiness, Quality and Value:

- To give users clarity on NISRA's plans for transitioning to the new survey, NISRA should publish a project roadmap and user engagement strategy setting out key milestones and updates.
- To give users clarity on how the survey might meet their needs, NISRA should make it clearer for users to see which questions from the LFS will not be included in the LMS and offer possible solutions where data gaps may arise.
- To ensure all users understand how their views are acted upon, NISRA should publish information on how it is collating user views and using them to inform decision making. Where user feedback is not being acted on, this decision should be explained to users.
- To ensure users can understand the impact of the survey design changes on the estimates, NISRA should publish its discontinuity analysis, which reconciles the differences between the LFS and the LMS, methodology and quality assurance information once it is finalised.
- Once they are developed, we recommend that NISRA publish the criteria that it is using to assess the quality of the LMS and its readiness to transition as soon as possible. This should include information on how the LMS is performing against these criteria.
- For transparency, NISRA should publish information about the solutions it has worked out with ONS for producing the UK-level estimates.

Findings

Transparency

NISRA has generally been clear and transparent in its communication about the transformation of its labour market statistics. Users are satisfied with NISRA's communication on most aspects of the transformation of labour market statistics. NISRA has published [transformation updates](#) on its website throughout the transformation. The most recent update provides users with information on NISRA's progress to date, next steps and early analysis on the sample from the new survey, which shows positive results both in terms of the sample size and its representativeness.

NISRA's ad hoc approach to providing updates means that key updates are provided in a timely way, but some users told us this approach did not fully meet their needs as they did not know when to expect updates. Additionally, some users told us that they were unclear on the content of the survey and the timeline for the project. NISRA told us that it plans to publish a transition roadmap for users as part of wider user engagement strategy for delivering the new survey to make the transition period clearer for users.

Recommendation 1: To give users clarity on NISRA's plans for transitioning to the new survey, it should publish a project roadmap and user engagement strategy setting out key milestones and a timetable for updates.

Labour market survey

In response to ONS's plans to transform the LFS, NISRA considered its options for producing labour market statistics in Northern Ireland, reviewing the existing LFS survey questions and engaging with users to understand how the LFS data are used. It found that some data collected from the LFS are not used and/or are available from other sources and shared high-level information on survey content with users in its [Transformation User Update](#).

At this time ONS was planning to move forward with its Transformed Labour Force Survey (TLFS) which was intended to be a relatively extensive online survey. However, social survey response rates were declining and NISRA's view was that the breadth of data collected in the ONS TLFS may lead to response rate and data quality challenges, so it decided to move away from ONS's approach and develop its own labour market survey.

NISRA has since developed its own online labour market survey which focuses on key labour market topics. NISRA told us that it has worked closely with ONS to develop a 'must have' list of key labour market questions to ensure that consistent UK-level labour market estimates can be produced alongside ensuring that NI users' needs are met and

removing content which is not used or available from other sources to shorten the survey. This approach was taken to maximise response rates and the quality of responses.

Whilst we are satisfied NISRA has made an informed decision to use a shorter survey, balancing response rate and data quality considerations with user needs, some users remain concerned about the impact of the changes to the survey and whether the new survey will meet their needs. NISRA has published a [question-mapping document](#) on its website and [some high level comparisons between the LFS and the LMS](#), but some users are still not clear which content from the old survey will not be included in the new survey or if removed content will be available from other sources.

Recommendation 2: To give users clarity on how the survey might meet their needs, NISRA should make it clearer for users to see which questions from the LFS will not be included in the LMS and offer solutions where data gaps may arise.

User engagement

NISRA regularly engages with users through a range of channels. NISRA has its own user group for labour market statistics. [Minutes](#) from this group are published on the website alongside copies of its labour market statistics newsletter. NISRA also engages with users one-to-one and has attended ONS's user groups on multiple occasions to provide updates for UK-level data users. This engagement includes government departments, academics, the Central Statistics Office (CSO), research institutes and think tanks.

Despite some concerns about project timelines and the content of the survey, users spoke highly of their engagement with NISRA and are confident that NISRA will deliver a high-quality output. Users told us that they were not clear on NISRA's plans for transitioning to the new survey, both in terms of the timing and the impact that this will have. They told us that they are concerned about the impact this will have on their own analysis and how they can use estimates from the new survey. Some users commented that whilst they had good engagement generally with NISRA, on occasions where they had shared with NISRA their views on what they would like to see from the new labour market survey, users were unsure how their views were used to inform decision making or, if they were not used, why.

Recommendation 3: To ensure all users understand how their views are acted upon, NISRA should publish information on how it is collating user views and using them to inform decision making. Where user feedback is not being acted on, this decision should be explained to users.

Methodology and Data Quality

NISRA's transformed LMS has had a higher response rate and is representative of the population, with low numbers of incomplete responses. The [latest transformation update](#) informs users that the response rate is 60.2%, and 95% of responses are complete responses. Further analysis demonstrates to users that the weighted sample represents the population when broken down by age, region and deprivation level.

NISRA is still performing quality assurance tests on the data it has collected from the new survey. NISRA's achieved sample from the new survey has exceeded its targets in terms of the response rate, the level of missingness and the representativeness. NISRA is still analysing the differences between the old and the new survey to ensure that it can explain these differences to users when it transitions to the new survey as its main data source. NISRA plans to publish this analysis on completion.

NISRA is still developing the methods it will use for the LMS but expects this to be ready soon. NISRA has shared information with users in its latest transformation update, including how the weighting methods it uses ensures that the achieved sample is representative of the population. NISRA also told us that it is working closely with ONS to ensure that the methods used deliver UK-consistent estimates.

Whilst we recognise that this work is still ongoing, we expect NISRA to publish information for users as soon as it is ready to support the use of the data and statistics.

Recommendation 4: To ensure users can understand the impact of the survey design changes on the estimates, NISRA should publish its discontinuity analysis, which reconciles the differences between the LFS and the LMS, methodology and quality assurance information once it is finalised.

Quality Criteria

We would have expected NISRA to have communicated the quality criteria it is using to assess the readiness of the new survey and a timeline of when it plans to make key decisions at this stage of the transformation. Users are uncertain about NISRA's plans for transitioning to the new survey and what criteria NISRA will use to assess the quality of the new survey. NISRA told us it is still developing its measures of success and quality criteria which is disappointing. We expect NISRA to publish this information as soon as possible.

Recommendation 5: To ensure public confidence in the robustness of the new statistics, NISRA should publish the criteria that it is using to assess the quality of the LMS and its readiness to transition as soon as possible. This should include information on how the LMS is performing against these criteria.

UK-level estimates

NISRA's redevelopment of its LFS alongside ONS's redevelopment has led to challenges to ensure that the surveys are designed and processed to produce UK-level estimates. In collaboration with users, NISRA and ONS are working closely together to ensure that cohesive UK-level estimates can be delivered for users both during and after the transformation. NISRA and ONS agreed a 'must have' list for aligned UK labour market estimates, which informed the development of the new surveys in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. They are also collaborating on the methods that they will use to generate the estimates.

Transitioning to two new surveys (the LMS and the TLFS) with different content and timelines has presented a range of challenges for both producers. It is likely that NISRA's transition will occur at a different time to ONS's, which presents additional challenges in delivering UK-level estimates. Whilst this work is still ongoing, and we have been told that ONS and NISRA have worked together to align outputs and to identify a clear path forward to maintain current publication timeliness, this has not yet been published.

Users told us that UK-level estimates are a priority for most users of labour market statistics in Northern Ireland and across the rest of the UK. Some users need UK-level estimates, and some need to compare Northern Ireland against the rest of the UK. It is vital that NISRA and ONS deliver cohesive UK-level estimates.

Recommendation 6: For transparency, NISRA should publish information about the solutions it has worked out with ONS for producing the UK-level estimates and on which data will and will not be consistent across the UK.

Organisations engaged during this review

Bank of England

Department for Communities in Northern Ireland

Department for Economy in Northern Ireland

Department for Work and Pensions in Northern Ireland

HM Treasury

Office for National Statistics

