



# Quality and Methodology Information (QMI) for Northern Ireland marriage statistics

## Introduction

The purpose of this QMI is to inform users about the quality of Marriage Statistics in Northern Ireland and associated outputs. It describes the quality of the data and details any points that should be noted when using the outputs. Marriage Statistics are derived from information recorded when all marriages (both civil and religious) are registered, as a legal requirement, as part of civil registration in Northern Ireland.

## Background to Vital Events Data

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) produce statistics on births, deaths, marriages, civil partnerships and adoptions from civil registration events which are registered with the General Register Office (GRO). Figures on divorces and civil partnership dissolutions are compiled from returns of 'Decrees made Absolute' supplied by the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service. Vital Events data is produced on a daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly and annual basis depending on user requirements.

Statistics which are produced from vital events registered in Northern Ireland are of a high quality and should have complete population coverage as it is a legal requirement to register any of these events that occur in Northern Ireland.

## Contacts

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Dimension	Assessment by the Author
Relevance	<p><b><i>The degree to which the statistical product meets user needs in both coverage and content.</i></b></p> <p>Registration of marriages in Northern Ireland is a legal requirement under the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003. Each party to an intended marriage in Northern Ireland must submit a separate completed marriage notice, relevant documents, declarations and fees to the Registrar for the district in which the marriage is to take place. A copy of the notice form is available at:  <a href="https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/MarriageNoticeFormHumanist.pdf">https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/MarriageNoticeFormHumanist.pdf</a></p> <p>Notice should be submitted to a District Registrar in a District Registration Office between 28 days and 12 months before the intended date of marriage. Only in exceptional circumstances will the Registrar General allow a marriage to take place if 28 days' notice has not been given. Where the Notice is accepted, a Marriage Schedule will be issued 14 days before the ceremony takes place.</p> <p>Ahead of a marriage date, either party may be asked to visit the Registrar's Office to clear up any queries, and/or to collect the Marriage Schedule. A Registrar may reject a Notice application if they have reasonable grounds for suspecting that the information or evidence provided is false, or if there is a legal impediment to the marriage. A marriage cannot take place in Northern Ireland unless a Marriage Schedule has been issued.</p> <p>In Northern Ireland a marriage has to be carried out by an officiant who has been approved by GRO (a registrar or religious celebrant). If a marriage was carried out by someone who was not an officiant the registrar would not register the marriage when the schedule was returned. The parties would be advised their marriage was not legal and that they would need to go through a civil ceremony either in a register office or approved venue.</p> <p>Councils in Northern Ireland approve venues for weddings such as hotels, restaurants, historic building etc. – religious building do not need to be approved. If a marriage was arranged for a venue that had not been previously approved this would also have to be completed before the marriage took place.</p> <p>All marriages should be registered within 3 working days of the ceremony upon return of the Schedule. On average, 97 per cent of marriages are registered within 7 days of the date of marriage. This figure increases to 99 per cent by day 28. During registration all information is entered on to an electronic system called the Northern Ireland Registration Office System (NIROS), which is managed by NISRA's General Registrar Office (GRO). Statisticians within NISRA's Vital Statistics team have access to the data contained within NIROS for analysis on behalf of the Registrar General for Northern Ireland.</p> <p>In view of the legal requirement to register all marriages, the coverage of the data is complete for the population of Northern Ireland. The content of the information collected reflects what is possible legally and the ongoing needs of users.</p>



Published figures relate only to marriages which have taken place in Northern Ireland. As such, this includes marriages of individuals whose usual residence is outside Northern Ireland and excludes marriages of usual residents where the marriage took place while outside Northern Ireland.

Key users of marriage statistics include NISRA to report on social and demographic trends.

The distinction between cohabitation and marriage is of importance to policy makers too, as well as to social and political commentators. Issues of policy interest include legal rights and responsibilities of cohabiting partners, the welfare of children of unmarried parents, the stability of families, housing demand, and the numbers of lone parent families.

Lawyers, solicitors and those involved in family law, lobby groups, as well as academics and researchers in demography and social sciences, are often interested in marriage statistics. Organisations such as Eurostat and the United Nations use marriage statistics to make international comparisons.

Also, organisations in the voluntary sector use NISRA marriage statistics for comparison purposes and to support campaigns.

Those involved in the 'marriage business' for example hotels and catering businesses, bridal shops and wedding planners often wish to see marriage statistics.

Marriages data in Northern Ireland is also available for research purposes within the [Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study \(NILS\)](#) and [Administrative Data Research for Northern Ireland \(ADR-NI\)](#).

#### Accuracy

***The proximity between an estimate and the unknown true value.***

##### *Data Collection*

All marriages in Northern Ireland should be registered within 3 working days from the date of ceremony. There are occasions where the parties to the marriage do not return the Schedule to the registrar to have the marriage registered. 78 per cent of marriages in NI are registered within 3 days of the marriage, which rises to 99 per cent within 28 days. GRO have a process in place to follow up on schedules that have not been returned and have the means to carry out a late registration of a marriage.

During the registration a provisional copy of the information is shared with the informant before the registration is finalised and the informant is asked to check the information supplied and verify that it is both complete and accurate (e.g. to check that all spellings/dates are correct). Any further errors can be addressed at this stage, before being finalised on GRO's electronic system (NIROS). Once the registration is complete, details become final. Marriages in NI cannot be re-registered.

Some couples choose to get married abroad. There is no legal requirement for those marriages of persons usually resident in Northern Ireland, but solemnised outside Northern Ireland, to be registered by GRO. These marriages are registered in the jurisdiction the marriage takes place and are therefore not included in these statistics. Up until January 2014 British Nationals who got married abroad could register their event with the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) who would then forward the



certificate to GRO E&W. These certificates were then forwarded to the GROs in NI and Scotland. The FCO office made the decision to cease the service for depositing marriages documents with them and subsequently the UK GROs.

#### *Validation*

There are some validation checks built into NIROS to help the Registrar with this process. Information supplied at marriage registration is generally believed to be correct since both parties sign a declaration on the marriage notice form to state that all the particulars provided are true. Wilfully supplying false information may render the informant liable to prosecution for perjury.

Marriage statistics are extracted directly from NIROS and are subjected to further checks by the Vital Statistics Team in Demography & Methodology Branch. Further details of these checks are available on the NISRA website:

[https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/vital\\_stats\\_QA\\_0.pdf](https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/vital_stats_QA_0.pdf)

#### **Timeliness and Punctuality**

***Timeliness refers to the time gap between publication and the reference period. Punctuality refers to the gap between planned and actual publication dates.***

#### *Timeliness*

In Northern Ireland breakdowns of marriage registrations are published in the Registrar General Quarterly Update, published on the last working day of the quarter, one quarter in arrears.

Following a review of Vital Statistics in 2015, the annual release of provisional marriage statistics was discontinued.

Finalised annual figures for the reference year, including detailed breakdowns, are usually published within 11 months of the end of the reporting period through the Registrar General Annual Report. Similar arrangements pertain across the rest of the UK reflecting user needs in the respective territories.

For more information on related releases, the [Statistics Release Calendar](#) is available online and provides 28 days advance notice of release dates.

#### *Punctuality*

The Vital Statistics Publication Schedule is available on the NISRA Website. This is published at the start of each financial year at the following link:

<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/vital-statistics-documentation>

The [.GOV.UK release calendar](#) provides 28 days advance notice of releases. In the unlikely event of a change to the pre-announced release schedule, public attention will be drawn to the change and the reasons for the change will be explained fully at the same time, as set out in the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#).

The release of marriage statistics has been delayed once. Following the introduction of a GRO's new electronic Civil Registration system (NIROS) in February 2016, quality checks carried out on the marriage database suggested that the data were incomplete. Further investigation by NISRA confirmed that there were missing entries across all registration districts in Northern Ireland. This was confirmed to be an error on the part of the system. A fix to this error was applied in early 2017. Following the receipt of

	<p>the missing registrations, the first release for 2016 marriage data took place in April 2017 rather than September 2016 as originally planned.</p>
<p><b>Accessibility and Clarity</b></p>	<p><b><i>Accessibility is the ease with which users are able to access the data, also reflecting the format in which the data are available and the availability of supporting information. Clarity refers to the quality and sufficiency of the metadata, illustrations and accompanying advice.</i></b></p> <p><i>Accessibility</i></p> <p>The NISRA website is the primary vehicle for the release of marriage statistics in Northern Ireland. A combination of narrative, charts, graphs and data (specifically tailored to draw out the key findings from the statistics) may be downloaded in PDF and Microsoft Excel.</p> <p>Marriage data by Northern Ireland administrative and statistical (including small area) geographies are available on the <a href="#">Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information System (NINIS)</a>. A combination of interactive maps, charts, graphs and data may be created and downloaded in Microsoft Excel, CSV &amp; PDF formats.</p> <p>NISRA vital statistics can provide ad-hoc analysis of marriage data free of charge to users upon request.</p> <p>Marriage data in Northern Ireland is also available for research purposes within the</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study (NILS)</b>; a large-scale, representative data-linkage study created by linking data from the Northern Ireland Health Card Registration system to the 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011 Census returns and to administrative data from other sources, including vital events. More information is available at: <a href="https://www.nisra.gov.uk/support/research-support/northern-ireland-longitudinal-study-nils">https://www.nisra.gov.uk/support/research-support/northern-ireland-longitudinal-study-nils</a></li> <li>• <b>Administrative Data Research for Northern Ireland (ADR-NI)</b> which helps trained social and economic researchers to access project-specific linked, de-identified administrative data in a secure environment. More information is available at: <a href="https://www.nisra.gov.uk/support/research-support/administrative-data-research-northern-ireland-adr-ni">https://www.nisra.gov.uk/support/research-support/administrative-data-research-northern-ireland-adr-ni</a></li> </ul> <p><i>Clarity</i></p> <p>Basic quality information relevant to each release is available in the background notes of the relevant Statistical Bulletin.</p> <p>See <a href="http://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/births-deaths-and-marriages/marriages">www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/births-deaths-and-marriages/marriages</a></p>
<p><b>Coherence and Comparability</b></p>	<p><b><i>Coherence is the degree to which data that are derived from different sources or methods, but refer to the same topic, are similar. Comparability is the degree to which data can be compared over time and domain.</i></b></p> <p>Registration of Marriages (Ireland) Act 1863 made it a legal requirement for all marriages to be registered from 18 July 1863. Since then legislative changes have allowed for more detailed information to be collected from the informant at registration, but the basic information remains consistent e.g. bride &amp; groom names, Venue details etc.</p> <p>Registration data is the primary source of marriage statistics in Northern Ireland.</p>

	<p>Limited marriage figures are available back to 1887, with more detailed tables being available in more recent years. Marriage outputs are produced using the geographic boundaries in place during the year the marriage was registered. This approach means that changes in boundaries can affect the comparability of statistics over time.</p> <p>There is some degree of comparability in marriage statistics between countries within the UK. Annual marriage statistics for the United Kingdom and its constituent countries are all based on the details collected when marriages are registered. NISRA, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the National Records of Scotland (NRS) quality assure all data enabling detailed marriage statistics to be published. Throughout the UK, marriage statistics are based on the number of marriages <i>registered</i> in the reference period.</p> <p>Some differences exist;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Following the implementation of the <a href="#">Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013</a>, the first marriages in England and Wales of same-sex couples took place on 29 March 2014. Same sex marriages in Scotland came into effect on 16 December 2014 following the introduction of <a href="#">The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014</a>. The first ceremonies took place on 31 December 2014.</li> <li>- Same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland has been legal since 13 January 2020, as legislated by the <a href="#">Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019</a>. Between 2014 and 2019, marriage statistics for Northern Ireland were not directly comparable with the rest of the UK, however, henceforth such statistics will be comparable.</li> <li>- In England and Wales, Civil partners have been able to convert their civil partnership into a marriage, if they so desired, from 10 December 2014. Figures on marriages of same-sex couples are now included within ONS annual marriages release alongside figures on marriages of opposite-sex couples.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Assessment of User Needs and Perceptions</b></p>	<p><b><i>The processes for finding out about users and uses, and their views on the statistical products.</i></b></p> <p>All Vital Statistics publications specifically invite users to provide any feedback they might have in respect of the content, format and relevance of the release. No negative feedback has been received as part of this process.</p> <p>Customer satisfaction in NISRA is monitored through the People Survey. More specific feedback for Vital Events is sought through the <a href="#">Vital Events Statistics User Survey</a>. Feedback is incorporated into future outputs where possible.</p>
<p><b>Performance, Cost and Respondent Burden</b></p>	<p><b><i>The effectiveness, efficiency and economy of the statistical output.</i></b></p> <p>While there is a legislative requirement to register a marriage within 3 days, there is no subsequent respondent burden unless of course they fail to fulfil their legal obligations in this respect. The production and quality assurance processes, which are considered to be both cost effective and efficient, have been streamlined wherever possible and are kept under review from a continuous improvement perspective.</p>
<p><b>Confidentiality, Transparency and Security</b></p>	<p><b><i>The procedures and policy use to ensure sound confidentiality, security and transparent practices.</i></b></p>



NISRA adhere to the United Kingdom Statistics Authority (UKSA) *Code of Practice for Statistics* and the [National Statistician's Guidance: Confidentiality of Official Statistics](#) in the collection and dissemination of marriage statistics.

NISRA will comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016 and the Data Protection Act (DPA) 2018 which is an Act of Parliament governing the protection of personal data.