

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Demography and Vital Events in Northern Ireland

*(produced by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research
Agency)*

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About the UK Statistics Authority

The UK Statistics Authority is an independent body operating at arm's length from government as a non-ministerial department, directly accountable to Parliament. It was established on 1 April 2008 by the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*.

The Authority's overall objective is to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. It is also required to promote and safeguard the quality and comprehensiveness of official statistics, and good practice in relation to official statistics.

The Statistics Authority has two main functions:

1. oversight of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) – the executive office of the Authority;
2. independent scrutiny (monitoring and assessment) of all official statistics produced in the UK.

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ASSESSMENT AND DESIGNATION

The *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007* gives the UK Statistics Authority a statutory power to assess sets of statistics against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*. Assessment will determine whether it is appropriate for the statistics to be designated as National Statistics.

Designation as National Statistics means that the statistics comply with the *Code of Practice*. The *Code* is wide-ranging. Designation can be interpreted to mean that the statistics: meet identified user needs; are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and are explained well.

Designation as National Statistics should not be interpreted to mean that the statistics are always correct. For example, whilst the *Code* requires statistics to be produced to a level of accuracy that meets users' needs, it also recognises that errors can occur – in which case it requires them to be corrected and publicised.

Assessment Reports will not normally comment further on a set of statistics, for example on their validity as social or economic measures. However, Reports may point to such questions if the Authority believes that further research would be desirable.

Assessment Reports typically provide an overview of any noteworthy features of the methods used to produce the statistics, and will highlight substantial concerns about quality. Assessment Reports also describe aspects of the ways in which the producer addresses the 'sound methods and assured quality' principle of the *Code*, but do not themselves constitute a review of the methods used to produce the statistics. However the *Code* requires producers to "seek to achieve continuous improvement in statistical processes by, for example, undertaking regular reviews".

The Authority may grant designation on condition that the producer body takes steps, within a stated timeframe, to fully meet the *Code's* requirements. This is to avoid public confusion and does not reduce the obligation to comply with the *Code*.

The Authority grants designation on the basis of three main sources of information:

- i. factual evidence and assurances by senior statisticians in the producer body;
- ii. the views of users who we contact, or who contact us, and;
- iii. our own review activity.

Should further information come to light subsequently which changes the Authority's analysis, it may withdraw the Assessment Report and revise it as necessary.

It is a statutory requirement on the producer body to ensure that it continues to produce the set of statistics designated as National Statistics in compliance with the *Code of Practice*.

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1 Summary of findings

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 This is one of a series of reports¹ prepared under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*². The Act requires all statistics currently designated as National Statistics to be assessed against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*³. The report covers the sets of statistics included in the following National Statistics publications, produced by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA):

Demographic statistics

- *Population and Migration Estimates Northern Ireland*⁴;
- *Migration Statistics for Northern Ireland*⁵;
- *Northern Ireland Population Projections*⁶;
- *Population Projections for Areas Within Northern Ireland*⁷;
- *Household Projections for Northern Ireland and Areas Within Northern Ireland*⁸;

Vital events statistics

- *Deaths in Northern Ireland*⁹ which includes:
 - *Deaths Registered with Clostridium Difficile (C-Diff) Mentioned on the Death Certificate*¹⁰;
 - *Deaths Registered with Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA) Mentioned on the Death Certificate*¹¹;
 - *Alcohol Related Deaths in Northern Ireland*¹²; and
 - *Drug Related Deaths and Deaths due to Drug Misuse Registered in Northern Ireland*¹³.
- *Births in Northern Ireland*¹⁴;
- *Marriages, Divorces and Civil Partnerships in Northern Ireland*¹⁵;
- *The Registrar General's Quarterly Report*¹⁶; and
- *Registrar General Northern Ireland: Annual Report*¹⁷.

¹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

² http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga_20070018_en.pdf

³ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html>

⁴ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp17.htm>

⁵ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp18.htm>

⁶ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp20.htm>

⁷ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp47.htm>

⁸ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp21.htm>

⁹ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp23.htm>

¹⁰ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp29.htm>

¹¹ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp29.htm>

¹² <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp30.htm>

¹³ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp30.htm>

¹⁴ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp23.htm>

¹⁵ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp25.htm>

¹⁶ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp27.htm>

¹⁷ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp50.htm>

1.1.2 The Act requires all statistics currently designated as National Statistics to be assessed against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*. The Act also allows Ministers to request an assessment of other official statistics in order for them to gain National Statistics status. This report also covers the sets of statistics included in the following publications in response to such a request:

Demographic statistics

- *Small Area Population Estimates*¹⁸; and
- *Estimates of the Population Aged 85 and Over, Northern Ireland*¹⁹.

Vital events statistics

- *Popular First Names*²⁰; and
- *First Names Bulletin*²¹.

1.1.3 *Registrar General Northern Ireland: Annual Report* and Migration Statistics for Northern Ireland are compendium publications. Assessments of compendium publications against the *Code of Practice* relate to the processes involved in preparing the publication, rather than in producing the statistics that are included. Those sets of statistics will normally be subject to separate assessment. Designation of a compendium publication as National Statistics therefore means that the producer body has, for example: identified and met user needs in terms of the content of the publication; considered the appropriateness of each series for inclusion; and written appropriate commentary.

1.1.4 This report was prepared by the Authority's Assessment team, and approved by the Board of the Statistics Authority on the advice of the Head of Assessment.

1.2 Decision concerning designation as National Statistics

1.2.1 The Statistics Authority judges that the statistics covered by this report are readily accessible, produced according to sound methods and managed impartially and objectively in the public interest, subject to any points for action in this report. The Statistics Authority confirms that the statistics listed in 1.1.1 are designated as National Statistics and has determined that the statistics detailed in 1.1.2 can be designated as National Statistics, subject to NISRA implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by December 2011.

1.2.2 During the assessment process, NISRA sought to strengthen its compliance with the *Code of Practice* by promptly addressing issues that were raised by the Assessment team. NISRA has also informed us that it has started to implement the remaining Requirements listed in section 1.5. The Statistics Authority welcomes this.

¹⁸ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp125.htm>

¹⁹ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp134.htm>

²⁰ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp28.htm>

²¹ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp28.htm>

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

- 1.3.1 NISRA engages with users through formal groups such as the Census Advisory Group (CAG), the Statistics Advisory Committee²² and the Northern Ireland Statistics Coordinating Group. The Demography and Vital Events teams participate in a range of specialist working groups, including the Suicides Working Group and the National Population Projections Working Group. NISRA engages informally with regular users and documents all requests on a database and also undertakes a customer review of all its statistical outputs annually. Some of this user engagement has not been published. The teams also have strong links with their academic users, who often contribute to the *Annual Report*.
- 1.3.2 NISRA's website provides easy access points for the statistics, which are available in Excel spreadsheets to download and reuse. The statistics are also disseminated through the Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service²³ (NINIS) which provides area profiles and allows users to create interactive maps.
- 1.3.3 The detail of commentary in the statistical outputs is inconsistent, as is NISRA's approach to describing outputs as "statistical reports" or "press releases". Some releases contain limited explanation of the importance of the statistics or the ways in which they are used or could be used. The administrative data sources used to produce the vital events statistics are included in NISRA's Statement of Administrative Sources; however the administrative sources used in the production of migration statistics are not.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

- 1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that NISRA could strengthen its compliance with the *Code*. Those which the Assessment team considers essential to enable designation as National Statistics are listed in section 1.5. Other suggestions, which would improve the statistics and the service provided to users but which are not formally required for their designation, are listed at annex 1.

1.5 Requirements for designation as National Statistics

Requirement 1	Document how NISRA's population estimates compare with the equivalent statistics for the other countries in the UK, and the impact for users of the statistics (para 3.12)
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²² <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/aboutus/default.asp82.htm>

²³ <http://www.ninis.nisra.gov.uk/>

- Requirement 2** Re-examine the findings of the 2009 staff review to ensure that they have sufficient resources to produce demographic and vital events statistics to the standards of the *Code* (para 3.20)
- Requirement 3** Provide more information on the quality and reliability of demographic and vital events statistics in relation to the range of potential uses and limitations (para 3.21)
- Requirement 4** Provide relevant commentary and explanatory information to support the interpretation of the demographic and vital events statistics (para 3.23)

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) is the principal source of official statistics about socio-economic conditions in Northern Ireland. NISRA also incorporates the General Register Office for Northern Ireland (GRONI) which provides a civil registration service allowing the production of summary statistics about vital events (births, marriages, civil partnerships, divorces²⁴, deaths, and adoptions).
- 2.2 The statistics covered in this report are produced by two teams within NISRA's Demography and Methodology branch and cover various aspects of demography and vital events in Northern Ireland.

Demographic statistics

- 2.3 NISRA publishes a variety of population estimates annually:
- *Population and Migration Estimates Northern Ireland* (also referred to by NISRA as Mid-year Population Estimates). This output provides detailed population estimates and components of change for Northern Ireland and its administrative areas. Health Card Registrations data from the Health and Social Care Business Services Organisation (BSO) form the principal basis of the migration component of mid-year estimates.
 - *Small Area Population Estimates* (SAPE) supplements the *Population and Migration Estimates* release by providing statistics for wards, Output Areas²⁵ and settlements.
 - *Estimates of the Population Aged 85 and Over* provides additional population estimates, presenting estimates of the size of the very elderly population, including the number of centenarians, living in Northern Ireland.
- 2.4 Population estimates are used to allocate public expenditure to public services and to monitor progress against a Public Service Agreement²⁶ set out by the Northern Ireland Executive. The development of SAPE was vital to producing an updated Measure of Multiple Deprivation²⁷.
- 2.5 *Northern Ireland Population Projections, Population Projections for Areas Within Northern Ireland and Household Projections for Northern Ireland and Areas Within Northern Ireland* are published every two years. The statistics presented in *Northern Ireland Population Projections* are sourced from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), whereas *Population Projections for Areas Within Northern Ireland and Household Projections for Northern Ireland and Areas Within Northern Ireland* are produced by NISRA. Household projections contribute to the assessment of future housing demand in Northern Ireland and are funded by the Department of Regional Development and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

²⁴ Divorce information is obtained under legal agreement from the Northern Ireland Court and Tribunal Service.

²⁵ http://www.statistics.gov.uk/geography/census_geog.asp#oa

²⁶ PSA Target 21, Objective 2: Page 51 <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/pfgfinal.pdf>

²⁷ http://www.nisra.gov.uk/deprivation/nimdm_2010.htm

2.6 *Migration Statistics* is published annually and includes analysis of migration to and from Northern Ireland. In particular, interest in migration estimates has increased following the enlargement of the European Union from 15 member states in April 2004 to 27 states in January 2007, including A8 countries²⁸. Migration statistics are used to monitor migration flows to and from Northern Ireland and in the calculation of Northern Ireland population estimates and projections.

Vital events statistics

2.7 Vital events statistics are published quarterly in *Registrar General's Quarterly Report* and annually in topic-specific releases and *Registrar General Northern Ireland: Annual Report*. All vital events statistics are labelled provisional until *Annual Report* is published. Since 2004, *Annual Report* has included a chapter on a demographic topic of interest usually written by an academic or other expert in the field. For example, the 2008 report included "A Review of Cancer Mortality in Northern Ireland"²⁹ and the 2007 report included "Northern Ireland Demographic Projections"³⁰. NISRA is legally obliged³¹ to lay *Annual Report* before the Northern Ireland Assembly.

2.8 *Deaths in Northern Ireland, Births in Northern Ireland and Marriages, Divorces and Civil Partnerships in Northern Ireland* are published annually and provide a detailed analysis of the previous years' registrations. The four *Deaths by Cause* reports (MRSA, C-Diff, Alcohol and Drugs) were developed in response to requests for information regarding issues of public interest. This was evidenced by large volumes of ad-hoc requests related to the topics. The statistics were initially presented in detailed reports which provided information on methods and classifications. The tables are updated on an annual basis, with the original reports still available to provide the appropriate metadata.

2.9 Births and deaths statistics are used by NISRA to calculate population estimates and projections, and by a variety of Northern Ireland Government Departments and Health Trusts. NISRA has a mechanism under the Health and Personal Social Services Act 2001³² to provide the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for Northern Ireland (DHSSPSNI) with births and deaths statistics.

²⁸ A8 refers to the eight Eastern Europe countries which joined (Accession) the European Union in 2004; Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hungary and Slovakia

²⁹ "A review of Cancer Mortality in Northern Ireland" by Dr Anna Gavin and Dr David Donnelly of the Northern Ireland Cancer registry, Queen's University, Belfast

http://www.nisra.gov.uk/archive/demography/publications/annual_reports/historicalzip/2008.zip

³⁰ "Northern Ireland Demographic Projections" by Tony Dignan (an independent economic and social researcher)

http://www.nisra.gov.uk/archive/demography/publications/annual_reports/historicalzip/2006.zip

³¹ Section 34 of the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order, 2003:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/2003/413/contents>

Article 3 (3) of the Births and Deaths Registration (Northern Ireland) Order 1976:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1976/1041/introduction>

Section 154 of the Civil Partnership Act 2004: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/33/contents>

Section 5 of the Census Act Northern Ireland 1969: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/apni/1969/8/contents>

³² Section 51 of the Health and Personal Social Services Act (Northern Ireland) 2001:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2001/3/part/III/crossheading/miscellaneous?view=plain>

2.10 NISRA informed us that the cost of producing both these sets of statistics (demographic and vital events) is approximately £220,000 per year.

3 Assessment findings

Principle 1: Meeting user needs

The production, management and dissemination of official statistics should meet the requirements of informed decision-making by government, public services, business, researchers and the public.

- 3.1 NISRA engages with its users through formal groups such as the Census Advisory Group (CAG), the Statistics Advisory Committee³³ and the Northern Ireland Statistics Coordinating Group which give a high level steer to the work of the Demography team. Members of these groups are from a wide variety of backgrounds including academia, the private sector and charities. In addition, the Demography and Vital Events teams participate in some specialist working groups, including the Suicides Working Group and the Death Certificates Working Group which was formed after the Shipman Inquiry³⁴ to review the death registration process and make improvements to prevent an abuse of the system. These groups include representatives from GRONI, DHSSPSNI and BSO. The Demography team liaises with the National Population Projections Working Group and the UK Population Committee Working Group³⁵ (UKPCWG) which include representatives from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), National Records of Scotland (NRS) and the Welsh Government. The UKPCWG works to ensure that improvements to and development of population and migration statistics are coordinated across the four UK countries. It also considers the communication and dissemination of statistics, and collaboration with academics and other expert users.
- 3.2 NISRA told us that it documents all user requests on an internal database which is frequently reviewed to identify requests that could become regular outputs. As a result of such reviews, the Vital Events team published reports on *MRSA, C-Diff, Alcohol Related Deaths, and Drug related Deaths* with the data tables updated annually. A recent analysis of requests identified a user need for a detailed document describing how statistics on suicides in Northern Ireland are generated. The team plans to release reports on suicide and excess winter deaths in Northern Ireland later in 2011.
- 3.3 The Vital Events team attends the annual GRONI conference of Registrars to discuss any concerns they have about registrations data and in previous years the teams have presented their findings on demographic change at the conference. Furthermore, the teams work collaboratively with academics, who often contribute to the *Annual Report* and provide comment to the media.
- 3.4 NISRA conducted a public consultation in 2004 about the future provision of demography statistics and the questionnaire content of the 2011 Census. This consultation identified further user needs for demography statistics, and influenced two major developments in the last five years – improved migration statistics and the development of SAPE. A seminar was held in 2008 about

³³ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/aboutus/default.asp82.htm>

³⁴ <http://www.the-shipman-inquiry.org.uk/home.asp>

³⁵ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/data/methodology/specific/population/ukpc/default.asp>

population and household projections. NISRA also undertakes a customer review of all its statistical outputs annually. In June 2011, the statistics team published a short summary of the findings from the 2011 customer survey³⁶ on NISRA's website. The team has also provided links to the overall findings for NISRA. However, the Assessment team considers that more information could still be provided about CAG and the other groups that are consulted on these statistics. We suggest that NISRA publish the minutes and relevant papers of the CAG and other statistical groups on its website. We also suggest NISRA refer to the types of use put forward in the Monitoring Brief: *The Use Made of Official Statistics*³⁷ for guidance.

³⁶ http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/Official_national_stats.html

³⁷ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-briefs/index.html>

Principle 2: Impartiality and objectivity

Official statistics, and information about statistical processes, should be managed impartially and objectively.

- 3.5 NISRA releases population, demography and household statistics according to a published timetable and makes the statistics available free of charge on its website. It presents the statistics impartially and objectively.
- 3.6 In 2001 NISRA changed from using the ninth edition of the International Classification of Disease³⁸, which is used for coding cause of death, to the tenth edition. The change was announced in the 2000 *Annual Report*³⁹ before it came into effect and an Appendix provided a detailed explanation of the changes. In 2009 the Health and Social Service Boards became Health and Social Care Trusts. This change involved the division of one Board into two Trusts. NISRA provide statistics on the Board geography on request and both Board and Trust level statistics can be aggregated from statistics at lower level geographies.
- 3.7 The vital events statistics are published on a provisional basis until *Annual Report* is published. In June 2011, NISRA published two separate revisions policies⁴⁰ for population statistics and vital events statistics, which provide an explanation of the nature and extent of the revisions.
- 3.8 The teams told us that they do not charge for routine additional analysis for their demography and vital events statistics.

³⁸ <http://www.who.int/classifications/icd/en/>

³⁹ http://www.nisra.gov.uk/archive/demography/publications/annual_reports/historical/2000.pdf

⁴⁰ http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/Official_national_stats.html

Principle 3: Integrity

At all stages in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics, the public interest should prevail over organisational, political or personal interests.

- 3.9 No incidents of political pressure, abuses of trust or complaints relating to professional integrity, quality or standards were reported to or identified by the Assessment team.
- 3.10 The teams told us that they provide advice to colleagues within Northern Ireland government on the presentation and interpretation of the statistics to prevent misuse and misinterpretations. For example the Vital Events team produces a regular output on Asbestos related deaths⁴¹ for the Health and Safety Executive (HSENI) to publish. The statistics are produced because HSENI had previously published incorrect figures which may have been open to misinterpretation.

⁴¹ http://www.hseni.gov.uk/index/information_and_guidance/general_hseniinfo/statistics.htm

Principle 4: Sound methods and assured quality

Statistical methods should be consistent with scientific principles and internationally recognised best practices, and be fully documented. Quality should be monitored and assured taking account of internationally agreed practices.

- 3.11 NISRA publishes brief method guides for its *Population and Migration Estimates*⁴² and *Population Projections for Areas within Northern Ireland*⁴³ statistics on its website to support the statistical releases. A more detailed technical annex has been produced to support the *Household Projections for Areas within Northern Ireland*⁴⁴ release. Detailed information about methods used to produce SAPE is presented in a separate NISRA Occasional Paper⁴⁵ published in June 2010. These technical documents contain a description of the methods and classifications, and include an outline of the quality assurance process. The *Annual Report* also contains a technical annex which describes the basis for the production of all vital events statistics and provides some background information about the statistics.
- 3.12 The methods NISRA uses to produce these statistics are usually consistent with methods used in the other UK countries, but there are exceptions. Sub-national population projections are produced by the constituent countries of the UK using different methods. The UK Centre for Demography, which encompasses statisticians from NISRA and the other constituent UK countries, has published through ONS a paper⁴⁶ outlining the differences and similarities of approach across the four countries and provides some guidance on using the projections. NISRA's website provides links to this document. However, while the paper describes the methods adopted by each country, it could do more to describe the implications for comparisons between countries. A similar document⁴⁷ has also been authored by the UK Centre for Demography and published by the Welsh Assembly Government for household projections across the UK and is also available on NISRA's website. The countries also use different sources of information to generate the population estimates. There is insufficient documentation about the reasons for and the impact of the different methods used across the UK. As part of the designation as National Statistics, NISRA should document how its population estimates compare with the equivalent statistics for the other countries in the UK, and the impact for users of the statistics⁴⁸ (Requirement 1). We suggest that NISRA works with ONS, the Welsh Government and NRS to achieve this.
- 3.13 NISRA has produced consistent time series data, where appropriate, when it has changed the methods it uses to produce demography and vital events statistics. For example, it provided a revised time series of vital events for Health Boards following changes to the geographical classification. It also published statistics on drug-related deaths by old and new methods following

⁴² http://www.nisra.gov.uk/archive/demography/population/midyear/mye_methodology.pdf

⁴³ http://www.nisra.gov.uk/archive/demography/population/projections/lgd/Method_Sub_NI_Projs06.pdf

⁴⁴ http://www.nisra.gov.uk/archive/demography/population/household/HProjs_methodology.pdf

⁴⁵ http://www.nisra.gov.uk/archive/demography/population/small_area/SAPEdocFinal.pdf

⁴⁶ http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_population/snpp-2008/SNPP_guidance_for_users.pdf

⁴⁷ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp21.htm>

⁴⁸ In relation to Principle 4, Practices 2 and 6, and Principle 8, Practice 1 of the Code of Practice

changes to the data collection methods, and presented a comparison of the statistics produced using the old and new methods.

- 3.14 NISRA has published a document describing the quality assurance guidelines⁴⁹ for all vital events statistics. These guidelines outline how data are collected and assured for statistical purposes using trend and boundary analysis. However, there is not a similar document to describe the quality assurance of the demographic statistics. We suggest NISRA should publish quality assurance guidelines for its demographic statistics.
- 3.15 We were told that the close relationship between NISRA and the General Registrar's offices across Northern Ireland has resulted in improvements being implemented in the recording of registrations. This had led to an increase in the quality of the statistics.

⁴⁹ http://www.nisra.gov.uk/archive/demography/publications/vital_stats_QA.pdf

Principle 5: Confidentiality

Private information about individual persons (including bodies corporate) compiled in the production of official statistics is confidential, and should be used for statistical purposes only.

- 3.16 NISRA has assured us that it takes all necessary steps to protect the confidentiality of the data it collects. Birth and death records that are potentially disclosive are used in the production of population projections. The statisticians producing the demography and vital events statistics have confirmed that they follow the National Statistician's guidance for confidentiality protection. The statistics present aggregated data at levels that minimise the risk of identifying individuals. The team told us that it follows strict internal guidance to ensure data protection and confidentiality. In June 2011 NISRA published a confidentiality policy⁵⁰ on its website.
- 3.17 NISRA confirmed that it has signed data access agreements with the BSO for the sharing of health records data.

⁵⁰ http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/Official_national_stats.html

Principle 6: Proportionate burden

The cost burden on data suppliers should not be excessive and should be assessed relative to the benefits arising from the use of the statistics.

- 3.18 There is minimal burden on data suppliers for the demography and vital events statistics. Administrative data are supplied to NISRA by a number of organisations for use in migration statistics and population estimates. These include the BSO, the Defence Analytical Services Agency, ONS, and other Northern Ireland Government Departments.
- 3.19 The use of existing administrative sources, rather than more costly survey collections, in the production of the demographic statistics represents good value for money.

Principle 7: Resources

The resources made available for statistical activities should be sufficient to meet the requirements of this Code and should be used efficiently and effectively.

3.20 NISRA has 4 full-time equivalent employees producing the range of demographic and vital events statistics. NISRA conducted a review in 2009 of the resources allocated to producing demography statistics. The review indicated that there was a need for more staff working in demographic statistics in Northern Ireland. NISRA told us that since the review the Demographic and Vital Events teams have been restructured. However, the review's recommendations have not been fully implemented as there are no resources available to fill an additional team leader post. NISRA told us that it has limited capacity to develop or extend the range of statistics published. We are concerned that there may not be sufficient resource available to produce the current statistics to the standards of the Code. As part of the designation as National Statistics, NISRA should re-examine the findings of the 2009 staff review to ensure that they have sufficient resources to produce demographic and vital events statistics to the standards of the *Code*⁵¹ (Requirement 2).

⁵¹ In relation to Principle 7, Practice 1 of the Code of Practice

Principle 8: Frankness and accessibility

Official statistics, accompanied by full and frank commentary, should be readily accessible to all users.

- 3.21 As noted earlier, NISRA publishes quality assurance guidelines for the vital events statistics which go some way to explaining the quality and reliability of the statistics. However, there is a lack of information about the quality and the reliability of the statistics provided alongside the range of statistics, particularly in relation to the potential uses and limitations. As part of the designation as National Statistics, NISRA should provide more information on the quality and reliability of demography and vital events statistics in relation to the range of potential uses and limitations. In meeting this requirement, NISRA should review the summary text in the *Population Projections and Household Projections* releases to convey more prominently the nature of projections and their difference from forecasts⁵² (Requirement 3).
- 3.22 The *Registrar General's Quarterly Report* includes information on quarterly births, deaths, and marriages and civil partnerships. The quarterly reports are released as a PDF document. In addition, NISRA published the supporting data tables alongside the report for the fourth quarter of 2010, in June 2011.
- 3.23 The commentary and analysis within *Annual Report* provides factual information about the operational context of the statistics and the main drivers of change. The statistics are presented in graphs, tables and maps that enhance clarity. However, the commentary in other releases, in particular the *Population and Migration Estimates*, could be improved to offer more insight into what is driving changes. For example, Dungannon Local Government District had twice the Northern Ireland average population increase in 2009. The team told us that this was due to increased migration. Figure 3 in the 2009 *Population and Migration Estimates* shows that Dungannon had the highest percentage population change due to external migration (from outside Northern Ireland); the *Migration Statistics for Northern Ireland Report* shows that Dungannon has a much higher proportion of population from A8 countries (7.7 per cent) than the Northern Ireland average (2.2 per cent). The Assessment team believe that NISRA could have done more to explain these trends in more detail. In some of the demography and vital events releases, the reporting of the statistics is limited to describing the annual change in the figure. The commentary could be enhanced by providing a brief account of the known causes of change. Furthermore, there is limited explanation of the uses or potential uses of the statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, NISRA should provide relevant commentary and explanatory information to support the interpretation of the demographic and vital events statistics⁵³ (Requirement 4). The Authority has produced two statements on the 'standards for statistical releases'⁵⁴ and 'the value of statistical commentary'⁵⁵ which provide additional guidance on the Authority's view on what constitutes a 'good statistical release'.

⁵² In relation to Principle 8, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

⁵³ In relation to Principle 8, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

⁵⁴ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html>

⁵⁵ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/the-value-of-statistical-commentary.html>

- 3.24 NISRA publishes reports and tables in a variety of formats to suit different users. However, it is inconsistent in the way that it labels the releases, using a variety of terms – press releases, bulletins and statistical reports – without clear distinction in the style of the reports. We suggest NISRA review the current labelling of demography and vital events publications to ensure consistency and clarity.
- 3.25 NISRA’s website is easy to access and in June 2011 it added high level descriptions of each set of outputs to help users find the right information for their needs. This helps users understand how the supplementary outputs, such as SAPE and Deaths by Cause fit into the overall structure of the demography and vital events collection.

Protocol 1: User engagement

Effective user engagement is fundamental both to trust in statistics and securing maximum public value. This Protocol draws together the relevant practices set out elsewhere in the Code and expands on the requirements in relation to consultation.

3.26 The requirements for this Protocol are covered elsewhere in this report.

Protocol 2: Release practices

Statistical reports should be released into the public domain in an orderly manner that promotes public confidence and gives equal access to all, subject to relevant legislation.

- 3.27 In compliance with the *Pre-release Access to Official Statistics (Northern Ireland) Order 2009*⁵⁶, NISRA publishes lists on its website of the recipients given pre-release access⁵⁷ to its statistical publications.
- 3.28 The publication of most demography and vital events outputs are planned to coincide with those of ONS, the Welsh Government and NRS. The Demography and Vital Events teams publish a timetable⁵⁸ of forthcoming publications 12 months in advance.
- 3.29 In June 2011, NISRA added the name and contact details of the responsible statistician for the most recent releases.

⁵⁶ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2009/71/contents/made>

⁵⁷ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/aboutus/default.asp96.htm>

⁵⁸ <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp.htm>

Protocol 3: The use of administrative sources for statistical purposes

Administrative sources should be fully exploited for statistical purposes, subject to adherence to appropriate safeguards.

3.30 Statistics on migration in Northern Ireland are compiled from a variety of administrative sources, the most comprehensive of which is health card registrations data provided by the BSO. Additional data sources include the UK Border Agency's Worker Registration Scheme, National Insurance number registrations and higher education enrolments for non-UK or non-Ireland domiciled students. During the assessment process, NISRA informed us that it had reviewed its Statement to ensure that these sources were included.

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to NISRA's demography and vital events outputs, in the interest of the public good. These are not formally required for designation, but the Assessment team considers that their implementation will improve public confidence in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics.

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| Suggestion 1 | Publish the minutes and relevant papers of the CAG and other statistical groups on their website (para 3.4) |
| Suggestion 2 | Refer to the types of use put forward in the Monitoring Brief: <i>The Use Made of Official Statistics</i> (para 3.4) |
| Suggestion 3 | Work with ONS, the Welsh Government and NRS to achieve this (para 3.12) |
| Suggestion 4 | Publish quality assurance guidelines for the demography statistics (para 3.14) |
| Suggestion 5 | Review the current labelling of demography and vital events publications to ensure consistency and clarity (para 3.24) |

Annex 2: Summary of assessment process and users' views

- A2.1 This assessment was conducted from October 2010 to March 2011.
- A2.2 The Assessment team – Rachel Beardsmore and David Duncan-Fraser – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) in October 2010. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided in January 2011. The Assessment team subsequently met with NISRA during February 2011 to review compliance with the *Code of Practice*, taking account of the written evidence provided and other relevant sources of evidence. NISRA submitted further evidence against a number of draft Requirements on 16 June 2011. This material was reviewed by the Assessment team and those Requirements that were addressed have been removed from the report.

Summary of users contacted, and issues raised

- A2.3 Part of the assessment process involves our consideration of the views of users. We approach some known and potential users of the set of statistics, and we invite comments via an open note on the Authority's website. This process is not a statistical survey, but it enables us to gain some insights about the extent to which the statistics meet users' needs and the extent to which users feel that the producers of those statistics engage with them. We are aware that responses from users may not be representative of wider views, and we take account of this in the way that we prepare assessment reports.
- A2.4 The Assessment team received 19 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:
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|------------------------------|---|
| NI Government | 8 |
| NI Local Authorities | 2 |
| Other government departments | 4 |
| Academics | 2 |
| Other | 3 |
- A2.5 The variety of uses described by users reflects the variety of outputs and the range of users who responded. Government departments in Northern Ireland use population estimates in the calculation of rates, such as benefit uptake rates, and higher education participation rates. The statistics are also used to assess health inequalities and to compare regions. Local authorities use the statistics to develop and monitor policy and to plan local services. Academics use the data to analyse trends in NI demographics.
- A2.6 Users were very positive about the outputs. They were described as accessible, comprehensive, well-documented and of high quality. Users praised the efficiency of the team and stated that the statisticians were always accommodating and helpful. Users were also very satisfied with the level of engagement in the development of the statistics, with one user stating that the team is "keen to hear the views of users."

A2.7 There were still areas where users would like to see improvements. Some users would like to have statistics in more detail or for them to be available at lower geographical levels. Two users cited harmonisation across the UK as an important aspect that needed to be enhanced. The timeliness of the statistics was also an issue for some users; for example, the deaths registrations data are not finalised until the publication of the *Annual Report* 11 months after the reporting period.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

