

# Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

## School Statistics for Northern Ireland

*(produced by the Department of Education,  
Northern Ireland)*

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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.

### **Contact us**

Tel: 0845 604 1857

Email: [authority.enquiries@statistics.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:authority.enquiries@statistics.gsi.gov.uk)

Website: [www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk](http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk)

UK Statistics Authority  
Statistics House  
Myddelton Street  
London EC1R 1UW

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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*.

# Contents

Section 1: Summary of findings

Section 2: Subject of the assessment

Section 3: Assessment findings

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

Annex 2: Summary of the assessment process and user views

# 1. Summary of findings

## 1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 This is one of a series of reports<sup>1</sup> prepared under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*<sup>2</sup>. The report covers the following National Statistics produced by the Department of Education<sup>3</sup>, Northern Ireland:

- *Pupil: Teacher Ratios and Teacher Workforce Statistics in Grant Aided Schools in Northern Ireland*<sup>4</sup>
- *Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers*<sup>5</sup>
- *Compendium of Northern Ireland Education Statistics (school statistics)*<sup>6</sup>

1.1.2 The Department of Education agreed that the following statistics that it produces, which do not currently carry the National Statistics designation, should also be covered by this assessment:

- *Attendance at Grant-Aided Primary, Post-Primary and Special Schools*<sup>7</sup>
- *Summary of Annual Examination Results*

1.1.3 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 Authority confirms that the statistics detailed in para 1.1.1 above are designated as National Statistics, subject to the Department of Education implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by January 2011.

1.2.2 The Statistics Authority has determined that the statistics detailed in para 1.1.2 above are designated as new National Statistics products. These designations

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

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga\\_20070018\\_en.pdf](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga_20070018_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch\\_pg/32-statistics\\_and\\_research\\_statistics\\_on\\_education\\_pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg/32-statistics_and_research_statistics_on_education_pg.htm)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch\\_pg/32\\_statistical\\_publications-indexofstatisticalpublications\\_pg/32\\_statistical\\_publications\\_pressreleases\\_pg/32\\_statistical\\_publications\\_pupil\\_teacher\\_ratios\\_pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg/32_statistical_publications-indexofstatisticalpublications_pg/32_statistical_publications_pressreleases_pg/32_statistical_publications_pupil_teacher_ratios_pg.htm)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch\\_pg/32\\_statistical\\_publications-indexofstatisticalpublications\\_pg/32\\_statistical\\_publications\\_pressreleases\\_pg/32\\_national\\_statistics\\_school\\_leavers\\_pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg/32_statistical_publications-indexofstatisticalpublications_pg/32_statistical_publications_pressreleases_pg/32_national_statistics_school_leavers_pg.htm)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.deni.gov.uk/compendium\\_200809.pdf](http://www.deni.gov.uk/compendium_200809.pdf) Note: This is produced jointly with the Department of Employment and Learning and includes statistics on higher and further education which will be the subject of a future assessment.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch\\_pg/32\\_statistical\\_publications-indexofstatisticalpublications\\_pg/32\\_statistical\\_publications\\_pressreleases\\_pg/statistics\\_and\\_research\\_-\\_national\\_statistics\\_attendance.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg/32_statistical_publications-indexofstatisticalpublications_pg/32_statistical_publications_pressreleases_pg/statistics_and_research_-_national_statistics_attendance.htm)

are subject to the Department of Education implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by January 2011 with the exception that *Summary of Annual Examination Results* should not carry the National Statistics logo until after the relevant enhancements have been implemented.

### **1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses**

- 1.3.1 The Department of Education engages with a wide range of users and a formal consultation process is built into its annual data collection cycle. It publishes documentation on the uses of some of the sets of statistics. However, little documentation is published that demonstrates how users' needs and views influence the statistical planning process.
- 1.3.2 These statistics have undergone considerable recent development and further developments are underway. The Department of Education has responded to emerging user needs by developing pupil-level datasets and more detailed statistics on the teacher workforce. Nevertheless, the range of school statistics available for Northern Ireland remains less extensive than that in other parts of the UK.
- 1.3.3 New systems are being introduced to enable more automated collection of administrative data. This will allow more detailed analysis whilst reducing the burden on suppliers. Since June 2009 the Department of Education has prepared and published a range of statements<sup>8</sup> on how it complies with various aspects of the Code, including its practices on publications, revisions and errors, confidentiality and the use of administrative sources.
- 1.3.4 The main publications are accompanied by documentation that outlines methods, validation processes, the protection of confidential data, and information about the main uses of the statistics. The presentation of these statistics could be improved in some respects. At the time of the assessment there was no publication associated with the dataset *Summary of Annual Examination Results*.

### **1.4 Detailed recommendations**

- 1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that the Department of Education 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.

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch\\_pg/32\\_statistics\\_and\\_research\\_statistical\\_policies\\_and\\_assessment/32\\_statistics\\_and\\_research\\_statistical\\_policies-2.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg/32_statistics_and_research_statistical_policies_and_assessment/32_statistics_and_research_statistical_policies-2.htm)

## 1.5 Requirements for designation as National Statistics

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|----------------------|---|
| <b>Requirement 1</b> | Publish documentation on the needs of users and the uses of statistics on school leavers and examination results (para 3.3).  |
| <b>Requirement 2</b> | Publish information about how the Department of Education takes account of user views in its statistical planning processes (para 3.5).   |
| <b>Requirement 3</b> | Describe the processes in place to ensure the security of statistical processes which draw on administrative data from schools, and state how the relevant legislation and Codes of Practice governing the transfer of personal data are adhered to, the protection of confidentiality and the handling of sensitive data (para 3.18) |
| <b>Requirement 4</b> | Publish an estimate of the cost burden to schools of supplying data for these statistics (para 3.21).   |
| <b>Requirement 5</b> | Publish a statistical release on the <i>Summary of Annual Examination Results</i> that meets the standards of the Code (para 3.24).   |
| <b>Requirement 6</b> | Draw attention in the <i>Summary of Annual Examination Results</i> to the availability of datasets of attainment statistics for individual schools, and make these datasets available on request with appropriate explanation to encourage informed use (para 3.25).  |
| <b>Requirement 7</b> | Improve the presentation of these statistics and ensure professional standards for the presentation of tables and charts are observed (para 3.28).  |
| <b>Requirement 8</b> | Take appropriate steps to archive these statistics with the relevant national archive (para 3.29).  |

## 2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.2 These statistics relate to publicly-funded schools in Northern Ireland. They present the latest information on, and recent trends in, attendance rates, pupil: teacher ratios, attainment levels and destinations of school leavers. The statistics inform the general public and the Northern Ireland Assembly on the human resources and performance of the school system in Northern Ireland. They provide vital information for the management of schools by school principals, Education and Library Boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the Department of Education. The statistics are used by parents, schools, school management bodies and by the Education and Training Inspectorate as benchmarks against which to consider the quality of individual schools. They enable comparisons to be made between different school management systems (controlled, Catholic Maintained and Grant Maintained) and are used to compare aspects of the education system in Northern Ireland with education systems in other parts of the UK, the Republic of Ireland and elsewhere.
- 2.3 A major review<sup>9</sup> of these statistics took place in 2005. *Statistics on Enrolments in Schools and in Funded Pre-school Education in Northern Ireland*, produced by the Department of Education, was the subject of Assessment Report 3<sup>10</sup> in 2009 and the Authority has since confirmed the designation of the products covered in that assessment as National Statistics. This previous assessment covered many of the organisational aspects of compliance with the Code of Practice by the Department of Education as a producer of National Statistics.
- 2.4 The majority of data used in these publications are collected by schools for their own operational purposes. Data are submitted by schools directly to the Department of Education. This is mostly done electronically from the Schools Information Management System (SIMS) but paper returns are still used in some cases. SIMS is managed by C2k<sup>11</sup> – a joint initiative by the five Education and Library Boards to support information communications technology in schools in Northern Ireland.
- 2.5 Data on enrolments, examination results and attendance are supplied by schools to the Department of Education in a single return, referred to as the School Census. Schools also complete and submit a School Leaver Survey. Teacher numbers are taken from the teacher payroll and are verified by schools.
- 2.6 *Pupil: Teacher Ratios and Teacher Workforce Statistics in Grant Aided Schools in Northern Ireland* presents pupil: teacher ratios and teacher numbers for different types of schools. Teacher numbers are used in workforce planning and pupil: teacher ratios provide a measure of the staffing levels in schools that is easily compared between different school systems. They provide teachers and teacher unions with a measure of teacher workload, and provide the public with a measure of the share of a teacher's attention that an individual pupil can expect.

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch\\_pg/32\\_statistics\\_and\\_research-national\\_statistics\\_quality\\_review\\_pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg/32_statistics_and_research-national_statistics_quality_review_pg.htm)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.c2kni.org.uk/>

- 2.7 *Attendance at Grant-Aided Primary, Post-Primary and Special Schools Summary Statistics* (attendance statistics) gives the percentage of half days missed by pupils in a school year. Detailed statistics on attendance, giving breakdowns by different pupil groups and school types, are published later. The Department of Education started collecting attendance data at pupil level in 2008, in response to a report by the Northern Ireland Audit Office<sup>12</sup>. These statistics are used to monitor absenteeism, to identify the main causes and to design targeted approaches to improve attendance.
- 2.8 *Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers* presents statistics on the highest qualifications gained by students leaving school, their destinations and the proportion of school leavers achieving 5+ GCSEs at grades A\* to C. These statistics provide important indicators of the outcomes of school education. They are used to monitor progress against targets under several Public Service Agreement targets<sup>13</sup> including PSA 10: helping children and young people achieve through education, and PSA 19: raising standards in schools.
- 2.9 The *Summary of Annual Examination Results* is a dataset of GCSE and A Level results. School-level data are made available through the Schools+ section<sup>14</sup> of the Department of Education's website rather than through a statistical publication. The Schools+ database is not included in the current assessments as it is not an official statistics product. Newspapers use these statistics to produce league tables that rank schools according to their examination results.
- 2.10 The *Compendium of Northern Ireland Education Statistics* presents time series for key education statistics summarised on a single A3 sheet. It gives a high level overview of education in Northern Ireland. It covers school, further and higher education and is produced jointly by the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning. It is produced every two years.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/pubs/onereport.asp?arc=True&id=163&dm=0&dy=0>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.pfgbudgetni.gov.uk/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.denidata.nics.gov.uk/appinstitutes/instmain.aspx>

### 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 Department of Education statisticians have formal links with user organisations including the Education and Training Inspectorate, Education and Library Boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, and Higher Education Institutions through the Education Research Forum. The producers engage with external users through a range of fora. These include the C2k Liaison group, Local Management of Schools groups, the Using Schools Information Data (USID) group, and the Northern Ireland Education Research Forum. Producers also engage with users informally through email and meetings.
- 3.2 Formal consultation takes place each year through the annual school census process. Users working within the school system are invited to register requests for changes to the variables that are collected from the School Information Management System. In 2009 the Department of Education consulted on its first publication of attendance statistics collected at pupil-level through a web based questionnaire and focus groups.
- 3.3 The Department of Education provided the Assessment team with documentation of the uses of these statistics. This documentation is published for statistics on teacher numbers and pupil: teacher ratios<sup>15</sup>, and attendance<sup>16</sup>. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the Department of Education should publish documentation on the needs of users and the uses of statistics on school leavers and examination results<sup>17</sup> (Requirement 1).
- 3.4 The producers have responded to emerging user needs by developing pupil-level datasets and more detailed statistics on the teacher workforce. They have addressed a user need for more timely attendance statistics by publishing a summary release ahead of the detailed statistics.
- 3.5 The Department of Education publishes some information about statistical planning arrangements and priority setting on its website. It also publishes statistical reports according to a published timetable. However, it does not publish documentation explaining how users' needs inform its statistical planning processes. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the Department of Education should publish information about how it takes account of user views in its statistical planning processes<sup>18</sup> (Requirement 2).
- 3.6 The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) conducts an annual customer satisfaction survey for users of statistics produced by the various Northern Ireland government departments. A summary of findings

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<sup>15</sup> [http://www.deni.gov.uk/ptr-teacher\\_numbers\\_info\\_and\\_procedures\\_doc.pdf](http://www.deni.gov.uk/ptr-teacher_numbers_info_and_procedures_doc.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.deni.gov.uk/school\\_attendance\\_statistics\\_-\\_data\\_collection.doc](http://www.deni.gov.uk/school_attendance_statistics_-_data_collection.doc)

<sup>17</sup> In relation to Principle 1 Practice 2 of the Code of Practice

<sup>18</sup> In relation to Principle 1 Practices 3 and 5 of the Code of Practice

across all departments<sup>19</sup> is published on NISRA's website and details of the responses for users by department are supplied to the various producers. We suggest the Department of Education publish a summary of the responses of its statistics users to NISRA's customer satisfaction survey, subject to confidentiality constraints.

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<sup>19</sup> [http://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/Nisra\\_Customer\\_Survey\\_2008\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](http://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/Nisra_Customer_Survey_2008_Final_Report.pdf)

## Principle 2: Impartiality and objectivity

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

- 3.7 The Assessment team consider that these statistics are managed impartially and objectively. They are published without associated policy statements.
- 3.8 The Department of Education has published a statement of its policy on revisions and errors<sup>20</sup> on its website. Changes to data collections and outputs are recorded on a change log on the C2k system. We suggest the Department of Education make this change log publicly available. In 2003/04 the introduction of a new verification procedure for teacher numbers led to a reduction in the teacher count. This change is clearly shown as a discontinuity in time series and is explained in the publications.
- 3.9 The Department of Education does not charge for any statistical services but reserves the right to do so.

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<sup>20</sup> [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch\\_pg/32\\_statistics\\_and\\_research\\_national\\_statistics\\_information.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg/32_statistics_and_research_national_statistics_information.htm)

### 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.**

- 3.10 No incidents of political pressures, abuses of trust or complaints relating to professional integrity, quality or standards were reported to or identified by the Assessment team.
- 3.11 In 2006, as part of the response to the recommendations of the findings of the Statistics Commission<sup>21</sup>, the Department of Education sought Ministerial approval to publish school-level attainment statistics on its website. The producers told the Assessment team that the responsibility for such decisions now rests with the Chief Executive of NISRA and not with the Minister
- 3.12 Department of Education statisticians have not had occasion to comment publicly on the misuse of these statistics. They told us that, should such a need arise, they would comment through the department's press office or the Chief Executive of NISRA.

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<sup>21</sup> Statistics Commission (2005) *School Education Statistics: User Perspectives* (Report 26), Statistics Commission, London. [http://www.statscom.org.uk/C\\_399.aspx](http://www.statscom.org.uk/C_399.aspx)

## 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.**

- 3.13 The Department of Education has documented and published the procedures it follows to produce these statistics, including collection and validation processes, for all of the statistical outputs covered by this assessment.
- 3.14 Most data are transferred from schools electronically and are subject to various automated validity checks. Some data collection is still carried out through paper returns from schools. The Department of Education is working to automate the transfer of all data. All data are checked and signed off by the schools. The Department of Education carries out further validation checks and engages directly with schools over any anomalous data.
- 3.15 The Department of Education includes comparable data from other parts of the UK on attendance, pupil: teacher ratios and participation within the relevant publications. It provides links to school statistics for other parts of the UK on its website.
- 3.16 The Department work with The Information Standards Board (ISB) for Education, skills and children's services in England<sup>22</sup> to promote the comparability of school statistics across the UK – for example, there has been recent work to harmonise the categories used to record the ethnicity and the country of birth of pupils. The Department of Education is working to improve the comparability of statistics on GCSE pass rates with DfE statistics for England by including data on the number of pupils passing English and Mathematics. We suggest the Department of Education work with DfE, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Assembly Government to investigate options for producing comparable statistics across the four administrations.

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.escs-isb.org.uk/>

## 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.**

- 3.17 At the time of the first electronic lift of pupil-level data, post-primary schools providing confidential data to the Department of Education signed a Data Interchange Agreement. This Agreement included information for schools on how the Department of Education sought to protect confidentiality. The Department for Education advised schools to send parents a form, generated from the C2k system, to collect relevant data, with the final decision on the content of the form resting with schools. This form does not give details of what information is shared and how confidentiality is protected, although this information is available on the Department of Education's website. The need for Data Interchange Agreements (DIA's) was superseded by the introduction of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003<sup>23</sup>. In order to reassure schools and the public in relation to handling of personal data, the Department of Education publishes its policies and procedures on the web.
- 3.18 The Department of Education publishes a confidentiality statement<sup>24</sup> which is currently under review. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the Department of Education should describe in this statement the processes in place to ensure the security of statistical processes which draw on administrative data from schools, and state how it adheres to the relevant legislation and Codes of Practice governing the transfer of personal data, the protection of confidentiality and the handling of sensitive data<sup>25</sup> (Requirement 3). We also suggest the Department of Education work with schools to ensure that parents are informed about how pupil confidentiality is protected.
- 3.19 The conditions of employment of all Northern Ireland civil servants include a 'duty of confidentiality'. The Department of Education told the Assessment team that all staff with access to confidential data have completed training in data protection. At the time of the assessment, NISRA was consulting about the completion of a new confidentiality declaration.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2003/20030424.htm>

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch\\_pg/32\\_statistics\\_and\\_research\\_national\\_statistics\\_information.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg/32_statistics_and_research_national_statistics_information.htm)

<sup>25</sup> In relation to Principle 5 Practices 3 and 6, and Protocol 3 Practice 1 of the Code of Practice

## **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.**

- 3.20 C2k liaises with schools on how to complete their data returns and provides support through a helpdesk.
- 3.21 The Department of Education has undertaken a survey of schools during the 2009/10 School Census to establish the burden of supplying data for these statistics. This does not cover the burden imposed by validation processes; nor does it cover the School Leaver Survey. As part of the designation as National Statistics the Department of Education should publish an estimate of the cost burden to schools of supplying data for these statistics<sup>26</sup> (Requirement 4).

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<sup>26</sup> In relation to Principle 6 Practice 1 of the Code of Practice

## 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.**

- 3.22 The Department of Education has a team of ten statisticians and two administrative staff responsible for the production of school statistics. The baseline budget for producing all school statistics (including enrolment statistics) was £435,000 for 2009/10. Further funds are made available for research and development. The production of these statistics appears to be sufficiently resourced to meet the standards of the Code of Practice. The Department of Education told us that current resource levels are insufficient to make certain improvements to these statistics that would address important user needs (see paragraph 3.26 under Principle 8).
- 3.23 Learning and development policies and competency frameworks for statisticians working in government departments in Northern Ireland are developed and delivered centrally by NISRA.

## Principle 8: Frankness and accessibility

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

- 3.24 The Department of Education does not publish data from the *Summary of Annual Examination Results* through a statistical release. Instead, it makes the data available to the general public through the Schools+ database on its website. This presents statistics for individual schools alongside averages for Northern Ireland. Statistics from the underlying dataset are made available to known users and on request. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the Department of Education should publish a statistical release on the *Summary of Annual Examination Results* that meets the standards of the Code of Practice<sup>27</sup> (Requirement 5).
- 3.25 The absence of a dataset of school level examination results limits the accessibility of these statistics and makes it difficult to analyse and to re-use the statistics. School-level is a natural level of disaggregation for these statistics that will support a range of analyses of interest and can be safely supported given confidentiality constraints. As part of the designation as National Statistics the Department of Education should draw attention in the *Summary of Annual Examination Results* to the availability of datasets of attainment statistics for individual schools, and make these datasets available on request with appropriate explanation and commentary to encourage informed use<sup>28</sup> (Requirement 6).
- 3.26 The Department of Education considers that contextual value added scores would provide a suitable statistical basis for comparing the effectiveness of schools. The development of this is now feasible as pupils are identified using a single Unique Personal Number and so can be tracked when they move school. The Department of Education statisticians told us that they would need additional resources to carry out the necessary analytical work. We suggest the Department of Education prioritise the development of statistics that would support contextual value added analysis in its statistical planning processes.
- 3.27 Most statistical publications include summaries of key points, graphs, time series and comparative data for other parts of the UK. These statistics are used to assist in the monitoring of government targets, and where relevant the publications include information on the targets and highlight the relevant statistics.
- 3.28 The format of tables and graphs, and links with the text were unclear in some publications. The Assessment team has provided the Department of Education with a list of examples where it considers that the presentation of these statistics could be improved. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the Department of Education should improve the presentation of these statistics and ensure professional standards for the presentation of tables and charts are observed<sup>29</sup> (Requirement 7).

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<sup>27</sup> In relation to Principle 2 Practice 3 and Principle 8 Practice 6 of the Code of Practice

<sup>28</sup> In relation to Principle 8 Practices 3 and 6 of the Code of Practice

<sup>29</sup> In relation to Principle 8 Practice 2 of the Code of Practice.

3.29 At the time of the assessment the Department of Education was in discussion with NISRA, the UK Data Archive, and DfE on how best to archive these statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the Department of Education should take appropriate steps to deposit the statistics with the relevant national archive<sup>30</sup> (Requirement 8).

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<sup>30</sup> In relation to Principle 8 Practice 7 of the Code of Practice.

## **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.**

3.30 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.**

- 3.31 The Department of Education has published a statement on pre-release access to statistics<sup>31</sup> on its website. This document includes lists of individuals granted pre-release access to the statistical products covered by this assessment.
- 3.32 All statistical releases published since November 2009 are available through the National Statistics Publication Hub. At the time of the assessment some older products were not accessible. The Department of Education has been experiencing technical problems with updating the Publication Hub but these issues are being addressed to meet the requirements of an earlier assessment<sup>32</sup>. All the statistics covered by this assessment are now available on the Publication Hub.

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<sup>31</sup> [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch\\_pg/32\\_statistics\\_and\\_research\\_national\\_statistics\\_information.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg/32_statistics_and_research_national_statistics_information.htm)

<sup>32</sup> See Assessment report 3, Requirement 8.

### **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.**

3.33 The Department of Education has published a Statement of Administrative<sup>33</sup> Sources on its website. This complies with the practices under Protocol 3.

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<sup>33</sup>[http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch\\_pg/32\\_statistics\\_and\\_research\\_national\\_statistics\\_information.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg/32_statistics_and_research_national_statistics_information.htm)

## Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to school statistics produced by the Department of Education 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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|---------------------|---|
| <b>Suggestion 1</b> | Publish a summary of the responses of its statistics users to NISRA's customer satisfaction survey subject to confidentiality constraints (para 3.6).   |
| <b>Suggestion 2</b> | Make publicly available the change log that records changes to data collections and outputs on the C2k system (para 3.8).   |
| <b>Suggestion 3</b> | Work with the Department for Education, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Assembly Government to investigate options for producing comparable statistics across the four administrations (para 3.16). |
| <b>Suggestion 4</b> | Work with schools to ensure that parents are informed about how pupil confidentiality is protected (para 3.18).   |
| <b>Suggestion 5</b> | Prioritise the development of statistics that would support contextual value added analysis in its statistical planning processes (para 3.26).  |

## Annex 2: Summary of assessment process and users' views

- A2.1 This assessment was conducted from November 2009 to June 2010.
- A2.2 The Assessment team – Neil Jackson and Cecilia Macintyre - agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of the Department of Education in November. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 4 December. The Assessment team subsequently met the Department of Education during December to review compliance with the Code of Practice, taking account of the written evidence provided and other relevant sources of evidence.

### 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 sets 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 these 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 analysed responses from user consultation carried out by NISRA. The Assessment team validated this through further independent user consultation, contacting 25 users and 20 schools. This assessment also takes into account the user consultation carried out as part of our earlier assessment of school enrolment statistics produced by the Department of Education, as some comments applied to the full suite of Northern Ireland school statistics.

NISRA customer survey respondents	21
Respondents to previous assessment	8
Respondents to this assessment	5 (including 3 Department of Education staff)

- A2.5 In addition, a parent contacted the assessment team and provided correspondence which detailed their concerns about the process of transferring personal data between a school and the Department of Education for statistical purposes.
- A2.6 The NISRA survey asked respondents to describe their level of satisfaction with the overall service provided by statisticians in the Department of Education, the skills of the staff, the accessibility of the staff and the timeliness of response. Just over half reported that they were 'very satisfied' with all of the above. Most others reported that they were 'satisfied' with some aspects and 'very satisfied' with others. One user reported dissatisfaction with timeliness.
- A2.7 Most of the users who provided feedback to the Assessment team reported that the statistics met their needs and that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the way that the producers engaged with them. One external user reported that

it was not easy to contact the producers using the general contact number provided. One user commented that they would like to have further disaggregation available by variables such as free school meal entitlement, special educational needs, gender and ethnic group, and suggested that the department should publish lists of variables for which analyses were available on request. Department of Education users reported that they would welcome developments that would allow better analysis of outcomes in terms of value-added and contextualisation, and welcomed the introduction of Unique Pupil Numbers.

**Key documents/links provided**

Written Evidence for Assessment for the Department of Education

Written Evidence for Assessment for NISRA

Written Evidence for Assessment forms for the individual products



