

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Families and Households in the UK

*(produced by the Office for National
Statistics)*

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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 Act also allows the National Statistician to request an assessment of other official statistics in order for them to gain National Statistics status. This report is in response to such a request. The report covers the set of statistics reported in *Families and households in the UK*⁴, produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

1.1.2 This report is shorter than normal. In particular, section 3 adopts an ‘exception reporting’ approach - it includes text only to support the Requirements made to strengthen compliance with the *Code* and Suggestions made to improve confidence in the production, management and dissemination of these statistics. This abbreviated style of report reflects the Head of Assessment’s consideration of aspects of risk and materiality⁵. The Assessment team nonetheless assessed compliance with all parts of the *Code of Practice* and has commented on all those in respect of which some remedial action is recommended.

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 Statistics Authority confirms that the statistics published in *Families and households in the UK* can be designated as National Statistics, subject to ONS implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by December 2011.

1.2.2 ONS has informed the Assessment team that it has started to implement the Requirements listed in section 1.5. The Statistics Authority welcomes this.

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.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/family-demography/families-and-households/2001-to-2010/index.html>

⁵ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/guidance-about-assessment/criteria-for-deciding-upon-the-format-of-an-assessment-report.pdf>

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

- 1.3.1 *Families and households in the UK* presents some clear analysis of the statistics and there is good supporting information that explains the data sources, data quality and outlines other sources of related statistics that are available. The tables of data provide confidence intervals and coefficients of variation, both of which are well explained and help users interpret the statistics.
- 1.3.2 ONS developed *Families and households in the UK* in response to users' requests for statistics on families and households. Some of the uses are well documented. However, there is considerable overlap with analysis presented in ONS's *Social Trends*⁶ publication and it is not clear that *Families and Households in the UK* meets a distinct user need.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

- 1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that ONS 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	Publish information about users' experiences of <i>Families and households in the UK</i> (para 3.1).
Requirement 2	Review the presentation of the statistics in the release (para 3.3).
Requirement 3	Establish whether there is a distinct user need for <i>Families and households in the UK</i> in addition to <i>Social Trends</i> (para 3.4).
Requirement 4	Review the timetable for the production of <i>Families and households in the UK</i> to ensure that it is released at the earliest opportunity (para 3.6).

⁶ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/social-trends-rd/social-trends/2011/index.html>

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 ONS published *Families and households in the UK* for the first time in April 2011. The release presents statistics on the structure and number of families and households, over the period 2001 to 2010. It includes analysis of the types of family (married, cohabiting, civil partnership, lone parent), the number of children in families and similar analysis of the number of households, noting that a household can consist of more than one family.
- 2.2 These statistics present information about the changing structure of families and households over the last decade. This information is important to a range of groups:
- those working in policy development within government, especially to assess the likely uptake of benefits;
 - charities that provide support for single parent families and that use the statistics to inform and promote their cause;
 - academics who use the statistics to illustrate changes over time in family types;
 - the private sector which uses the statistics to establish the size of the target audience for products and services; and
 - the media for informing articles on topics such as changes in society.
- 2.3 The statistics are based on data from ONS's Labour Force Survey⁷ (LFS). The LFS is a household survey of people in the UK. Its primary purpose is to provide information about the UK labour market but it also collects contextual socio-economic and demographic data, such as family and household types. The LFS household datasets are produced twice a year, for the April to June quarter and October to December quarter. *Families and households in the UK* is based on data from the April to June quarter. Headline results from the LFS are published each month in ONS's *Labour Market Statistics Bulletin*⁸, which was the subject of Assessment report 34⁹.
- 2.4 ONS also publishes statistics on households and families in *Social Trends*¹⁰. Information about families and households is collected in other household surveys, and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) publishes household estimates and projections¹¹ based on ONS Census data for England and Wales.
- 2.5 ONS estimates that the first release of *Families and households in the UK* cost £29,000 to produce, but much of this cost was associated with developing the release, so ONS expects future releases will cost between £11,000 and £22,000.

⁷ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/surveys/a-z-of-surveys/labour-force-survey/index.html>

⁸ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/lms/labour-market-statistics/september-2011/index.html>

⁹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/article.asp?ID=2665>

¹¹ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/housing/housingresearch/housingstatistics/housingstatisticsby/householdestimates/>

3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 ONS told us that it developed *Families and households in the UK* as a response to a range of user requests for statistics on the topic. The statisticians approached a selection of known users during the development of the output. The first release of *Families and households in the UK* was published in April 2011. ONS has not yet published any information about users' experiences of the statistics. ONS told us that it didn't receive much user feedback on the release, but that it intends to engage with users at relevant seminars and user groups. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should publish information about users' experiences of *Families and households in the UK*¹² (Requirement 1).
- 3.2 ONS has published a *Summary Quality Report for Families and Households*¹³ (SQR) that provides information about methods and data quality, including the limitations of the LFS, and links to further information. Statistics on households and families are available from other sources – for example, from other household surveys and DCLG's household projections. The SQR provides useful information about these alternative data sources and the reasons for choosing to base the statistics on data from the LFS. We regard this as an example of good practice. The SQR does not include comparisons of the different estimates produced by the different sources and it includes little information about their relative strengths. For example, when users are interested in statistics particularly affected by known limitations of the LFS, it may be more appropriate to direct them to a different source. ONS has produced some of this analysis but has not published the documentation. We suggest that ONS publish further guidance on the quality of the different sources in relation to the range of potential uses, so that users can identify the most appropriate source for their needs.
- 3.3 *Families and households in the UK* includes useful commentary and analysis and appropriate information about methods and quality. However, the release should include more time series analysis and graphical representations of the data. It could also include information about the wider European and international context. ONS included a request for user feedback in the release and told us that it intends to tailor the next report to reflect this feedback. ONS emphasised that resource constraints limit the extent of additional analysis it can include in *Families and household in the UK*, but within these constraints, ONS continues to investigate what can be published to meet user needs. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should review the presentation of the statistics in the release¹⁴ (Requirement 2). We suggest that ONS refer to annex 2 when it considers how to improve the release.
- 3.4 ONS has published analyses of households and families in *Social Trends* since 1970, most recently in April 2011 coinciding with the publication of *Families and households in the UK*. There is considerable overlap between *Families and households in the UK* and the relevant chapter of *Social Trends*. It is not clear

¹² In relation to Principle 1, Practice 5 of the *Code of Practice*

¹³ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/family-demography/families-and-households/2001-to-2010/summary-quality-report.pdf>

¹⁴ In relation to Principle 8, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

whether each release is meeting a distinct user demand and so whether *Families and households in the UK* represents an efficient use of resources. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should establish whether there is a distinct user need for *Families and households in the UK* in addition to *Social Trends*¹⁵ (Requirement 3).

- 3.5 The team in ONS responsible for analysing the underlying LFS data (including responding to user requests) works in a separate division to the team that produces *Families and households in the UK*. It is not clear whether information about the LFS dataset (for example, about reweighting) and information about users is always shared between the two teams. We suggest that ONS review the way that information is shared between teams within ONS working on related statistics, to ensure that those using common datasets are communicating effectively.
- 3.6 *Families and households in the UK* was published in April 2011 using data from the LFS that related to the April to June quarter in 2010. This underlying LFS data was initially released in September 2010. ONS told us that the lag before publication of *Families and households in the UK* reflected the time taken to establish the content, because it was a new release. However, the next release is scheduled for 'early 2012' while the underlying LFS data became available in September 2011. In our view, it need not take five months to update *Families and households in the UK*. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should review the timetable for the production of *Families and households in the UK* to ensure that it is released at the earliest opportunity¹⁶ (Requirement 4).
- 3.7 No-one was granted pre-release access to the release.
- 3.8 The Code requires National Statistics releases to be issued at 9.30am on the day of publication. ONS's website systems historically did not enable releases to be published simultaneously, which meant that there was sometimes a delay beyond 9.30am. ONS reviewed this matter as part of its web development programme, and has informed the Statistics Authority that its website is now able to issue National Statistics releases at 9.30am.

¹⁵ In relation to Principle 7, Practice 4 of the *Code of Practice*

¹⁶ In relation to Protocol 2, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to ONS's *Families and Households in the UK*, 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 further guidance on the quality of the different sources in relation to the range of potential uses, so that users can identify the most appropriate source for their needs (para 3.2). |
| Suggestion 2 | Refer to annex 2 when considering how to improve the release (para 3.3). |
| Suggestion 3 | Review the way that information is shared between teams within ONS working on related statistics, to ensure that those using common datasets are communicating effectively (para 3.5). |

Annex 2: Compliance with the Standards for Statistical Releases

A2.1 In October 2010, the Statistics Authority issued a statement on *Standards for Statistical Releases*¹⁷. Whilst this is not part of the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*, the Authority regards it as advice that will promote both understanding and compliance with the *Code*. This annex comments on compliance of *Families and households in the UK* with the statement on standards.

A2.2 In implementing any Requirements of this report (at paragraph 1.5) which relate to the content of statistical releases, we encourage the producer body to apply the standards as fully as possible.

Appropriate identification of the statistics being released

A2.3 The title of the release clearly describes the coverage and the period to which the statistics relate. It identifies the originating department and provides contact details for the responsible statistician. The first paragraph of the release presents a clear summary of what is included. The frequency of the release is not explicitly stated, but it is clear it is an annual release due to the time periods presented. The release does not make it clear which of the statistics are new, nor when the underlying data from the LFS were first published. However, the frequency with which the underlying data are compiled and updated is covered in related documentation. This is a new designation, so the release does not yet display the 'National Statistics' logo.

Include commentary that is helpful to the non-expert and presents the main messages in plain English

A2.4 The release highlights key findings at the outset. The language used in the release is straightforward and the concepts of family and household type are explained in the text and in the Notes section of the release. The release includes commentary on the statistics that describes and offers explanations for the changes between 2001 and 2010. In some places the narrative could be clearer and there is room for more analysis – for example, to include more time series charts and comparisons between each of the UK countries and internationally.

Use language that is impartial, objective and professionally sound

A2.5 The text is impartial and objective throughout and the commentary is consistent with the statistics presented. The commentary and analysis is professionally sound. Statistics are provided with confidence intervals and coefficients of variation, both of which are clearly explained.

¹⁷ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html>

Include information about the context and likely uses

A2.6 Factual information about the use of the statistics is included in the *Frequently Asked Questions*¹⁸ published alongside the main release. The Notes section of the release refers users to the SQR for more information about quality. This describes the limitations of the underlying data, including its coverage, and describes other data sources that are available. However, there is little comparison of the data from the different sources and no explanation of their relative quality, in relation to potential uses.

Include, or link to, appropriate metadata

A2.7 The release briefly states that the LFS is the source of the statistics and provides links to further information. The SQR provides some further detail about the survey and useful links. The release covers the UK. There have been no changes to methods or definitions. There is no indication whether the statistics will be subject to regular revision.

¹⁸ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/family-demography/families-and-households/2001-to-2010/index.html>

Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A3.1 This assessment was conducted from May to July 2011.

A3.2 The Assessment team – Jacob Wilcock and Emma Bowditch – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of ONS in May. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 13 May. The Assessment team subsequently met the ONS during June 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

A3.3 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.

A3.4 The Assessment team received 6 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Government	3
Private sector	1
Academic	1
Voluntary sector	1

A3.5 Users welcomed the information available through *Families and households in the UK*. Those who responded had used the data to inform research and to produce factsheets and briefing. Overall feedback was positive and users were complimentary about their engagement with the statistics team in ONS that produces the release. The timeliness and frequency of the release was queried by one user, who also suggested that tables could include percentages, as these are problematic to generate when data are rounded.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

