

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Marriages and Divorces

*(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 report covers the set of statistics reported in *Marriages in England and Wales*⁴ and *Divorces in England and Wales*⁵, produced by the Office for National Statistics.
- 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 materiality⁶. 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 *Marriages in England and Wales* and *Divorces in England and Wales* can be designated as National Statistics, subject ONS implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by February 2012.

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/vsob1/marriages-in-england-and-wales--provisional-2009/index.html>

⁵ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/vsob1/divorces-in-england-and-wales/2009/index.html>

⁶ <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 ONS has recently made some improvements to the presentation of *Marriages in England and Wales*, and to *Divorces in England and Wales* and its associated Excel tables. ONS also recently published a Summary Quality Report (SQR) and Metadata report for these statistics which includes information about the background to the statistics and some information about the uses of them.
- 1.3.2 The statistics could be strengthened by improving the commentary and analysis that accompany them. Statistics are available over a long time period but the dissemination could be improved by reviewing the format, metadata and signposting.

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 on the quality of marriage and divorce statistics in relation to uses (para 3.2).
Requirement 2	Provide more commentary about the statistics and review the presentation of these statistics in the releases (para 3.3).
Requirement 3	Review the format of the published statistics to encourage analysis and re-use, and provide more documentation on the sources of the historical statistics (para 3.4).

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 *Marriages in England and Wales* presents provisional statistics on marriages by sex, age, previous marital status and type⁷ of ceremony. ONS also publishes a summary of marriage statistics on its website⁸, and provides accompanying tables⁹ in the form of Excel spreadsheets. These tables include the provisional statistics for the current year and finalised statistics for the previous year.
- 2.2 The data for marriage statistics come from the information entered in the marriage register when a marriage ceremony is performed. A certified copy of each marriage entry is transferred to the General Register Office (GRO) for the compilation of central records¹⁰, and then sent to ONS where the data are keyed into an ONS system and verified. From 2011, it is planned that the marriage registration information will be transferred electronically from GRO to ONS, using GRO's Registration Online (RON) System.
- 2.3 *Divorces in England and Wales* presents statistics on divorces following court orders in England and Wales. The statistics are presented by age at divorce of each party and by duration of marriage. Statistics are also presented on the characteristics of children of divorced couples. ONS provides detailed tables¹¹ in the form of Excel spreadsheets. ONS also releases additional quarterly statistics on marriage and divorce as part of *Vital Statistics: Population and Health Reference Tables*¹² on its website.
- 2.4 The data for divorce statistics come from information collected by courts on 'D105' forms when a divorce is granted. The paper forms are transferred to ONS and keyed into an ONS system for use in the production of the statistics. ONS also uses this information for compiling the Central Index of Decrees Absolute¹³ on behalf of Her Majesty's Courts Service (HMCS)¹⁴.
- 2.5 Until 2010, ONS published marriage and divorce statistics as part of the *Marriage, Divorce and Adoption Statistics (Series FM2)*¹⁵ publication, on a calendar year basis. In 2010 a major review of FM2 was undertaken by the vital statistics team. As a result ONS decided to release marriage and divorce statistics separately to improve timeliness, and to review the contents of the detailed tables.
- 2.6 ONS estimates that the marriage statistics cost approximately £160,000 to produce and estimate this will be reduced by half for 2011 outputs as ONS will

⁷ These refer to either religious or civil procedures for marriage

⁸ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/vsob1/marriages-in-england-and-wales--provisional-/2009/marriages-summary.html>

⁹ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcm%3A77-210946>

¹⁰ <http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Governmentcitizensandrights/Registeringlifeevents/index.htm>

¹¹ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcm%3A77-210936>

¹² <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/vsob1/vital-statistics--population-and-health-reference-tables/spring-2011/index.html>

¹³ http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Governmentcitizensandrights/Registeringlifeevents/Marriagesandcivilpartnerships/DG_175718

¹⁴ <http://www.justice.gov.uk/about/hmcts/index.htm>

¹⁵ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/all-releases.html?definition=tcm%3A77-27463>

no longer manually key in the marriage registrations. ONS estimates that the divorce statistics cost approximately £110,000 to produce; £90,000 of this is provided by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) for the production of the Central Index of Decrees Absolute.

2.7 Marriage and divorce statistics are used by:

- ONS to estimate the marital status of the population, and for answering Parliamentary Questions and enquiries from the public;
- the Department for Work and Pensions to model inheritance of state pensions and to produce forecasts of state pensions by marital status;
- the UK Border Agency and the Ministry of Justice to inform policy and development of legislation; and
- commercial organisations, such as hotels and catering businesses for planning and marketing purposes.

2.8 Other users include Eurostat, the voluntary sector, lawyers and solicitors, and academic researchers with an interest in demography and social sciences. The statistics are widely reported in the press and media.

3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 Statistics on marriages and divorce were previously published in a combined publication (*FM2*), alongside statistics on adoptions. ONS reviewed this publication in 2010, after the requirement to lay this report before Parliament was removed. Users were consulted as part of this review, and ONS published the outcome¹⁶ of the consultation on its website. Following the review, the marriage, divorce and adoption statistics were published separately. The content and format of the detailed tables were also revised. ONS told us that it received few responses to the user consultation, and it assumed that most users were content. A summary of uses is provided in the marriages release, which helpfully identifies an unmet need for statistics on marriage by ethnicity and explains that the information needed to produce such statistics is not recorded on the marriage register. Some information about the uses of divorce statistics is included in a summary quality report¹⁷.
- 3.2 ONS publishes information about the quality of the statistics but does not provide information about the quality in relation to uses. For example, *Marriages in England and Wales* excludes the marriages of residents of England and Wales which occur abroad, but includes marriages which occur in England and Wales of people usually resident abroad. ONS mentions this in the release but does not provide information about the likely scale of these types of marriage or how this might impact on the uses of marriage statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should publish information on the quality of marriage and divorce statistics in relation to uses¹⁸ (Requirement 2).
- 3.3 ONS recently changed the presentation of *Marriages in England and Wales* and *Divorces in England and Wales*, and the tables that accompany these releases. While this is a positive step, the Assessment team considers that further improvements to the commentary and analysis that accompany the statistics are necessary. For example, the commentary reports mainly comparisons with earlier years, with no discussion of the importance of these trends. Some users commented on the lack of commentary in the releases of the relationship between statistics of marriages and divorces, and civil partnerships and dissolutions. ONS told us that it is planning to publish an article in *Population Trends*¹⁹ in which it will make such comparisons. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should provide more commentary about the statistics and review the presentation of these statistics in the releases²⁰ (Requirement 3). We suggest that in meeting this requirement ONS should consider the points detailed in Annex 2. We also suggest that the revised commentary draw on the forthcoming article on comparisons of trends in related statistics of marriage, divorce and civil partnerships.
- 3.4 ONS publishes statistics on marriages since 1845 and on divorces since 1858. An academic user commented that the format in which the statistics are

¹⁶ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/vsob1/divorces-in-england-and-wales/2009/outcome-of-marriage--divorce-and-adoption-statistics-review-and-lookup-file-for-new-tables.pdf>

¹⁷ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/quality/quality-information/social-statistics/summary-quality-report-for-divorces-in-england-and-wales.pdf>

¹⁸ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 1 of the Code of Practice

¹⁹ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/all-releases.html?definition=tcm%3A77-27989>

²⁰ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 2 of the Code of Practice

released is not convenient for carrying out additional analysis of historical data, because of the publication in separate computer files and the lack of documentation about sources. The metadata accompanying the releases include further information on comparable statistics for earlier years, but it is not clear from these what format these statistics are available in, or from where they can be accessed. There is little documentation within the datasets and no references given of the sources of the statistics, some of which were previously published in printed volumes. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should review the format of the published statistics to encourage analysis and re-use, and provide more documentation on the sources of the historical statistics²¹ (Requirement 4).

- 3.5 *Marriages in England and Wales* and *Divorces in England and Wales* include some headline statistics from Scotland and Northern Ireland, and give references to where more detailed statistics can be obtained. The layout and format of the detailed tables vary between the producers in different administrations, which can make it difficult to carry out analysis of UK data. We suggest that ONS provide information and guidance to assist users to analyse UK statistics on marriage and divorce, and explore the feasibility of providing statistics in formats that enable easy analysis at a UK level.
- 3.6 The Ministry of Justice publishes statistics on divorces within *Judicial and court statistics*²² and ONS includes similar information within *Divorces in England and Wales*. The differences between the numbers of divorces as recorded by the two sets of statistics are small – 1.2 per cent for 2009. ONS footnotes information about reasons for the differences between these statistics. Statisticians at ONS and the Ministry of Justice are working together with HM Courts and Tribunals Service to reconcile the remaining differences²³, and as part of this work, ONS has carried out a data matching exercise. We suggest that ONS publish a plan for the project to reconcile differences between MoJ and ONS statistics on divorce.
- 3.7 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.
- 3.8 Two people are granted pre-release access to divorce statistics. A record of their job titles and departments is published on ONS's website²⁴. There is no pre-release access to marriage and divorce statistics.

²¹ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 6 of the Code of Practice

²² <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/statistics-and-data/courts-and-sentencing/judicial-annual.htm>

²³ This is part of a work programme by MoJ and ONS to provide information on the quality of these statistics and to explain inconsistencies between the two sources, in response to a Requirement in Assessment Report 36 on Court Activity statistics.

²⁴ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/ns-standard/cop/compliance/annual/ad-fr.html>

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to ONS's *Marriages in England and Wales* and *Divorces in England and Wales*, 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.

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| Suggestion 1 | Consider the points detailed in Annex 2, in seeking to improve the statistical releases (para 3.3). |
| Suggestion 2 | Draw on the forthcoming article on comparisons with trends in related statistics of marriage, divorce and civil partnerships, when revising commentary in the releases (para 3.3). |
| Suggestion 3 | Provide information and guidance to assist users to analyse UK statistics on marriage and divorce, and explore the feasibility of providing data in formats that enable easy analysis at a UK level (para 3.5). |
| Suggestion 4 | Publish a plan for the project to reconcile differences between MoJ and ONS statistics on divorce (para 3.6). |

Annex 2: Compliance with Standards for Statistical Releases

A2.1 In October 2010, the Statistics Authority issued a statement on *Standards for Statistical Releases*²⁵. 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 observation of the Code. In relation to the statistical releases associated with these marriage and divorce statistics, this annex comments on compliance 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 Each release has an accurate title which identifies the year of the statistics. The published statistics are annual, and ONS releases additional quarterly statistics on its website but these are not referred to in the releases. The releases use standard ONS formats and include the name and contact details of the responsible statistician. Each release includes a list of the topics covered and a list of published tables is included in a separate metadata publication.

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

A2.4 The releases highlight the main findings and include long term time trends. The language is accessible and each release includes a glossary of terms. Both releases include some explanation of the trends. The commentary could be improved by including links to other statistics, for example trends in marriage compared to trends in civil partnership, and the impact on divorce statistics of changes in marriage rates. The metadata include information about changes in legislation but little discussion of the impact of these changes on the statistics. Greater use of illustrative tables and charts would aid interpretation of the statistics.

Use language that is impartial, objective and professionally sound

A2.5 The text in the releases is impartial. The commentary does not refer to the source tables, so it is not always easy to find the relevant published statistics. *Marriages in England and Wales* presents cohort analysis of proportions of people never marrying and time from marriage to divorce but does not adequately describe the assumptions made in these analyses. The reference tables include some explanation but this is not signposted in the release. The terms 'marriages' and 'weddings' are used without explanation of whether there is a definitional difference.

²⁵ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html>

Include information about the context and likely uses

- A2.6 Very little context is provided for changes in trends in these statistics. A summary quality report provides some information about the quality of the statistics, but no discussion about the implications of these quality issues in relation to the uses of the statistics. For example, no information is given about the implications of the exclusion of marriages of residents of England and Wales that take place in other countries.

Include, or link to, appropriate metadata

- A2.7 The releases include comprehensive information about the methods and definitions used within a metadata document and a summary quality report. Some commentary is included about UK statistics but this tends to be limited to comparison of the overall numbers rather than more disaggregated trends. ONS provides links to detailed marriage and divorce statistics for Scotland and Northern Ireland but these datasets present the statistics in inconsistent formats, which makes it time consuming to carry out comparisons across the UK.
- A2.8 The releases are accompanied by statistics in Excel spreadsheets. These spreadsheets include some metadata although they are not in a consistent format and the links between the releases and the spreadsheets are not clear.

Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

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

A3.2 The Assessment team – Celia Macintyre and Joe Cuddeford – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of ONS in January. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 11 April. The Assessment team subsequently met 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 seven responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

ONS	3
Academic	2
Other government departments	2

A3.5 Users reported that the statistics were comprehensive and met their needs well. One user was critical of the way that the statistics were disseminated, citing dissatisfaction with ONS's website and the inflexibility of the tables. Another user noted that while marriage and divorce statistics are related, there was a lack of cross-referencing in the releases – both to each other and to related statistics on family formation. Users that had contacted ONS with queries were happy with the service received.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

