

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Conceptions

(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*.

Contents

Section 1: Summary of findings

Section 2: Subject of the assessment

Section 3: Assessment findings

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

Annex 2: Compliance with Standards for Statistical Releases

Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

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 the statistical release *Conceptions in England and Wales*⁴ and data tables *Vital Statistics: Population and Health Reference Tables: Quarterly Conceptions data*⁵ and *Quarterly Conceptions to Women under 18*⁶ produced by the Office for National Statistics.

1.1.2 Section 3 of this report 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 materiality⁷. The Assessment team nonetheless assessed compliance with all parts of the *Code of Practice*.

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 *Conceptions in England and Wales* are designated as National Statistics.

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

1.3.1 The statistical release *Conceptions in England and Wales 2010* is the first to be published following the review carried out by ONS of its conception statistics. The release contains improved commentary and information about trends in numbers of conceptions. The release also contains useful contextual information which highlights the implications for the statistics of legislative changes and general trends in the use of contraception.

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/conception-statistics--england-and-wales/2010/index.html>

⁵ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/all-releases.html?definition=tcm%3A77-210727>

⁶ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/all-releases.html?definition=tcm%3A77-27492>

⁷ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/guidance-about-assessment/criteria-for-deciding-upon-the-format-of-an-assessment-report.pdf>

1.3.2 ONS has published two additional documents on conception statistics which provide helpful information about the quality of the statistics and the methods used to produce them: the *Summary Quality Report for Conception Statistics*⁸ and *Conception statistics: Metadata*⁹.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

1.4.1 The report contains no requirements as the data quality and presentation of the statistics were regarded by the Assessment team as being of a high standard. The Assessment team identified suggestions which would improve the statistics and the service provided to users, but which are not formally required for their designation. These are listed at annex 1.

⁸ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/quality/quality-information/social-statistics/summary-quality-report-for-conception-statistics.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/health-and-life-events/conception-metadata.pdf>

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 Conception statistics combine information from registrations of births¹⁰ (both live and stillbirths¹¹) and notifications of legal abortions to estimate conceptions occurring to women who are usually resident in England and Wales.
- 2.2 The *Population (Statistics) Act 1938*¹² made provision for the collection of statistical information at birth registration. The information is not entered into the register and is used only for statistical purposes. This information includes:
- date of birth of the mother;
 - whether the child is born within marriage or a civil partnership¹³; and
 - number of births at this maternity if the baby is part of a multiple birth.
- 2.3 Information from the registration of births has been collected and stored electronically since 1963. Since 2006 a web-based registration online system (RON) has been used which has improved the timeliness of the stillbirth registrations and the quality of the data received; for example, the level of completeness for date of birth of the mother. Birth statistics have previously been assessed in *Assessment Report 137: Statistics on Births in England and Wales*¹⁴.
- 2.4 The Abortion Act 1967¹⁵ permits the termination of a pregnancy by a registered medical practitioner subject to certain conditions. The doctor taking responsibility for the procedure is required to notify the Chief Medical Officer of the abortion within 14 days of the termination. In April 2002, the responsibility for the processing of abortion notifications was transferred from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to the Department of Health (DH) which introduced a new system to process the abortion notification forms. DH sends abortions data to ONS using approved secure methods. Statistics on abortions are published separately; they have previously been assessed in *Assessment Report 176: Statistics on Abortion*¹⁶.
- 2.5 Prior to 2001, conception statistics were published by ONS in the annual reference volume *FM1 Birth Statistics*¹⁷ each December. From 2001 conception statistics were published as a supplement to *FM1* and from 2005 as a separate annual reference volume. Since 2001 ONS has also published provisional conception statistics in February or March each year in addition to final figures in December. ONS carried out a consultation on conception

¹⁰ The *Births and Deaths Registration Act 1836* formalised the requirement to register births within 42 days of the birth

¹¹ The registration of stillbirths has been a legal requirement since 1927

¹² <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/1-2/12/introduction>

¹³ Following the introduction of the *Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008* (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1990/37/contents>), conceptions within a civil partnership have been combined with those within marriage and conceptions to same-sex couples outside of a civil partnership have been combined with those outside marriage due to the small numbers involved

¹⁴ See Footnote 1

¹⁵ The *Abortion Act 1967*, as amended by the *Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990* made provision for the legalisation of abortion before the pregnancy reached 28 weeks

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1967/87/contents>

¹⁶ See Footnote 1

¹⁷ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/all-releases.html?definition=tcm%3A77-27420>

statistics in 2011 and, since 2012, has published conception statistics in one annual release *Conceptions in England and Wales*, 14 months after the end of the year to which the statistics refer. The change in timescales for producing final figures has been made possible for a number of reasons including: recent improvements in the accuracy of the provisional data; more timely quality checks on birth registrations; and daily receipt of birth registrations through RON.

2.6 ONS publishes provisional¹⁸ quarterly¹⁹ figures for conceptions in two separate releases:

- *Vital Statistics: Population and Health Reference Tables: Quarterly Conceptions data* which include quarterly and annual conception statistics by the age of the woman; and
- *Quarterly Conceptions to Women under 18* which include quarterly statistics on the number of conceptions to women under 18 by regions and local authority areas.

2.7 Conception statistics have a range of users and uses including:

- The Department for Education (DfE) uses teenage conception rates as one of a range of indicators to measure progress in reducing child poverty;
- DH monitors the rate of under 18 conceptions under the Public Health Outcomes Framework²⁰ 2013-2016 as part of the measures of health improvement. DH uses the numbers of conceptions at all ages as a marker for the success of policies on access to contraception (and other health services) ;
- Local authorities and NHS trusts use the statistics for allocating resources to maternity services and to monitor the effectiveness of programs aimed at reducing teenage pregnancy in their area; and
- Public Health Observatories use the statistics to assess the performance of health services in their areas on reducing teenage conceptions.

2.8 ONS told the Assessment team that it costs around £75,000 annually to produce conception statistics, although this is expected to decrease next year with the reduction in the number of outputs following the review (see para 2.5).

¹⁸ The quarterly figures are provisional until the annual dataset is finalised and then ONS finalise the quarterly numbers at the same time. The conception rates remain provisional until the population estimates used in the calculation of the rates are available

¹⁹ Quarterly figures are published in February, May, August and November

²⁰ http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_132358

3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 Conception statistics are produced by the Vital Statistics Outputs Branch within ONS which has a dedicated customer service team that deals regularly with users. ONS carried out a consultation on conception statistics in 2011 and asked users for their views on the proposed changes (from a provisional and final release to a single annual release as well as a new set of tables). The consultation was sent to a range of known users and included in *Population Trends*²¹ and *Health Statistics Quarterly*²². ONS published the consultation document, proposed tables and the outcome of the consultation²³, on its website and refers to the documents in the 2012 edition of *Conceptions in England and Wales*. The layout and content of this release has improved considerably since the user consultation and the Statistics Authority welcomes this.
- 3.2 ONS releases provisional quarterly statistics on conceptions by age of woman by country, and conceptions for women aged under 18 by local authorities, in response to user demand. DfE in particular uses the statistics to monitor progress on reducing child poverty and pays ONS for the production of the table. Final quarterly statistics are published at the same time as the annual release *Conceptions in England and Wales*. The quarterly tables are not accompanied by commentary as they are provided as additional tables to accompany the annual release. The *Quarterly Conceptions to Women under 18* table is also included in the suite of tables titled *Vital Statistics: Population and Health Reference Tables: Quarterly Conceptions data*. To avoid duplication, we suggest that ONS consider the user need for the duplicate publication of the *Quarterly Conceptions to Women under 18* table.
- 3.3 The statistical release states that statistics on conceptions do not include miscarriages or illegal abortions due to the lack of complete data sources. It would be helpful to provide users with further information about the available data, and to comment on the approximate number of miscarriages and illegal abortions, so that users can understand the completeness of the published conception statistics. We suggest that ONS investigate the feasibility of providing users with estimates of the numbers of miscarriages and comment on the availability of information on illegal abortions.

²¹ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/all-releases.html?definition=tcm%3A77-27989>

²² <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/all-releases.html?definition=tcm%3A77-21560>

²³ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/consultations/closed-consultations/2011/review-of-conception-statistics--user-consultation/index.html>

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to ONS's conception statistics, 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 user need for the duplicate publication of the *Quarterly Conceptions to Women under 18* table (para 3.2).

Suggestion 2 Investigate the feasibility of providing users with estimates of the numbers of miscarriages and comment on the availability of information on illegal abortions (para 3.3).

Annex 2: Compliance with Standards for Statistical Releases

A2.1 In October 2010, the Statistics Authority issued a statement on *Standards for Statistical Releases*²⁴. While 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*. In relation to the statistical releases associated with Conception Statistics, this annex comments on compliance with the statement on standards.

A2.2 In implementing any Suggestions of this report (at Annex 1) 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 statistical release (*Conceptions in England and Wales*) indicates the time period and coverage of the statistics. The introduction to the statistical release states that it presents annual statistics; the date of the next publication is included in the background notes.

A2.4 The quarterly tables (*Vital Statistics: Population and Health Reference Tables and Quarterly Conceptions to Women aged Under 18*) both indicate the time period and coverage of the statistics, but not the date of the next publication.

A2.5 The statistical release uses standard headings, formatting and logos.

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

A2.6 A summary section in the statistical release identifies the main messages in bullet points using straightforward language. The commentary in the rest of the release provides a good explanation of the recent changes in the number and rate of conceptions in the context of past trends. A range of charts, tables, and a map are used to illustrate comparisons over time and between areas.

Use language that is impartial, objective and professionally sound

A2.7 The language used in the release is impartial and objective. The descriptive statements are consistent with the statistics and professionally sound.

Include information about the context and likely uses

A2.8 The statistical release contains very useful information about the operational context in which the statistics have been collected, for example the impact on the statistics of the introduction of the *Abortion Act 1968* and the use of contraception. More detailed information about the different legislation relating to these statistics is included in *Conceptions statistics: Metadata*.

²⁴ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html>

- A2.9 The statistical release includes a section called 'Why do teenage conceptions matter?' which illustrates why these statistics are of particular interest to government. A section on users and uses of conception statistics illustrates clearly how the statistics are utilised.
- A2.10 The background notes to the statistical release includes comments on the quality of the statistics, for example the impact of a change to the method used to estimate the age of conception. A summary quality report provides more detailed quality information.

Include, or link to, appropriate metadata

- A2.11 The first page of the statistical release clearly lists the data sources used to compile the statistics and the methods used. More detailed information on methods is included in the summary quality report.
- A2.12 The statistical release contains commentary, charts, and a map comparing conceptions by regions and local authorities for England and Wales. The statistical release includes a link to equivalent figures for Scotland and explains why comparable conception figures are not available for Northern Ireland.
- A2.13 Notes provided alongside the provisional quarterly tables published in *Vital Statistics: Population and Health Reference Tables* explain why the figures are provisional and the size of the difference between the provisional and final figures.

Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A3.1 This assessment was conducted from October 2011 to April 2012.

A3.2 The Assessment team – Catherine Barham and Emily Gleeson – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of ONS in October. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 9 December. The Assessment team subsequently met ONS during January 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 5 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Suppliers	2
Local government	1
Devolved administrations	1
Academia	1

A3.5 Users generally found the statistics of good quality and the statistics team approachable and helpful. One user commented that they would like subject-specific pages on ONS's website to bring together statistical releases related to conception statistics as they found these difficult to find.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

