

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on NHS Hospital Activity

(produced by the Department of Health)

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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 NHS hospital activity statistics reported in the following National Statistics publications produced by the Department of Health (DH):

- *Imaging and Radiodiagnostic Activity*⁴ (*Imaging*);
- *NHS Inpatient Elective Admission Events*⁵ (*Elective Admissions*); and
- *NHS Cancelled Elective Operations Statistics*⁶ (*Cancelled Operations*).

1.1.2 The Act requires all statistics currently designated as National Statistics to be assessed against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*. The Act also allows departments to request an assessment of other official statistics in order for them to gain National Statistics status. The inclusion of *NHS Outpatient Referrals and Attendances*⁷ (*Outpatient Events*) is in response to such a request.

1.1.3 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 materiality⁸. 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.

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

1.2 Decision concerning designation as National Statistics

1.2.1 The Statistics Authority judges that the statistics covered by this report are readily accessible, produced according to sound methods and managed impartially and objectively in the public interest, subject to any points for action in this report. The Statistics Authority confirms that the statistics published in

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.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsStatistics/DH_129281

⁵ <http://transparency.dh.gov.uk/2012/02/24/nhs-inpatient-and-outpatient/>

⁶ <http://transparency.dh.gov.uk/2012/02/10/cancelled-elective-operations/>

⁷ <http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Statistics/Performanceandstatistics/HospitalActivityStatistics/index.htm>

⁸ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/guidance-about-assessment/criteria-for-deciding-upon-the-format-of-an-assessment-report.pdf>

Imaging, Elective Admissions and *Cancelled Operations* are designated as National Statistics, and has determined that the statistics published in *Outpatient Events* can be designated as a new National Statistics product, subject to DH implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by December 2012.

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

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

1.3.1 The statistics team engages effectively with users in DH and the NHS, but knows little about the wider user community for these statistics.

1.3.2 DH regularly reviews the collection arrangements for the data that are used to produce these statistics, ensuring that there is a clearly identified user requirement and that the burden on NHS organisations is minimised.

1.3.3 The releases are not straightforward to access and lack commentary and information about the quality of the statistics. DH provides some links to information about users and uses of the statistics, and the methods used to produce them, but this contains technical language which may be difficult for some users to understand.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that DH 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 Take steps to engage with the wider user community outside DH and the NHS, fully document the use made of these statistics and publish information about users' experiences of the statistics (para 3.1).

Requirement 2 Confirm that future changes to methods or classifications will be announced in advance and that improved information will be published about the impact of such changes on the statistics (para 3.2).

Requirement 3 Confirm that, in future, information about the nature and extent of revisions will be published at the same time as the statistics are released (para 3.3).

Requirement 4	Publish more information about the methods used to produce these statistics, and their quality, taking into account the use of the statistics. Present this information using language that is accessible (para 3.4).
Requirement 5	Signpost similar statistics for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in the releases (para 3.5).
Requirement 6	Review the arrangements for protecting confidential data and publish the findings (para 3.6).
Requirement 7	Improve the commentary in the releases so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics (para 3.7).
Requirement 8	Improve the accessibility of these statistics through the internet and ensure appropriate use of the National Statistics logo (para 3.8).
Requirement 9	Ensure that all releases are issued at 9:30am on the day of release (para 3.9).
Requirement 10	Publish records of those who have pre-release access to <i>Imaging</i> prior to release (para 3.10).

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 The statistics covered in this report are produced by the Knowledge and Intelligence branch of DH and cover various aspects of NHS hospital activity in England. The statistics include breakdowns by Strategic Health Authority (SHA) and NHS Trust.
- 2.2 *Imaging and Radiodiagnostic Activity (Imaging)* presents financial year statistics about numbers of imaging and radiodiagnostic examinations carried out for the NHS in England. Examples of examinations include MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) and CT (computerised tomography) scans and obstetric ultra-sound scans. DH has published *Imaging* since 1995 and the statistics are produced using data that NHS trusts submit annually on Central Return KH12⁹. European Union (EU) *Council Directive 97/43/Euratom*¹⁰ requires the collection of the statistics to monitor the health of the population, through the assessment of radiation dose from medical exposures. The Health Protection Agency¹¹ reports on this European requirement using the Imaging statistics.
- 2.3 *NHS Inpatient Elective Admission Events (Elective Admissions)* and *NHS Outpatient Referrals and Attendances (Outpatient Events)* present quarterly statistics. DH publishes the two sets of statistics at the same time, with a shared accompanying Statistical Press Notice¹². *Elective Admissions* presents statistics about numbers of decisions to admit patients, number of patients admitted and failures to attend. *Outpatient Events* presents statistics about numbers of referrals to consultant outpatient clinics, first and subsequent attendances, and failures to attend. *Elective Admissions* and *Outpatient Events* have been published every quarter since 2002. The *Elective Admissions* and *Outpatient Events* statistics are produced using data submitted by NHS trusts on the Quarterly Activity Return¹³ (QAR). DH and NHS organisations use the statistics to monitor hospital activity. DH also uses the statistics to inform NHS system reform.
- 2.4 *NHS Cancelled Elective Operations Statistics (Cancelled Operations)* presents quarterly statistics about the number of ‘last minute’¹⁴ cancelled elective operations for non-clinical reasons and, of those, the number subsequently re-admitted within 28 days. DH publishes *Cancelled Operations* together with a Statistical Press Notice. The *Cancelled Operations* statistics are produced using data submitted by NHS trusts every quarter on a separate Central Return – the Quarterly Monitoring Cancelled Operations Data Set¹⁵ (QMCO). The

⁹http://www.datadictionary.nhs.uk/data_dictionary/messages/central_return_forms/hospital_aggregated_statistics/kh12/kh12_1_fr.asp

¹⁰ <http://eur->

[lex.europa.eu/Result.do?T1=V3&T2=1997&T3=0043&RechType=RECH_naturel&Submit=Search](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/Result.do?T1=V3&T2=1997&T3=0043&RechType=RECH_naturel&Submit=Search)

¹¹ <http://www.hpa.org.uk/>

¹² <http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Statistics/Performancedataandstatistics/HospitalActivityStatistics/index.htm>

¹³ http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/@dh/@en/@ps/@sta/@perf/documents/digitalasset/dh_129774.doc

¹⁴ DH defines ‘last minute’ as being on the day the patient was due to arrive, after the patient has arrived in hospital or on the day of the operation or surgery.

¹⁵ [http://www.datadictionary.nhs.uk/data_dictionary/messages/central_return_data_sets/data_sets/quarterly_monitoring_cancelled_operations_data_set_\(qmco\)_fr.asp?shownav=1](http://www.datadictionary.nhs.uk/data_dictionary/messages/central_return_data_sets/data_sets/quarterly_monitoring_cancelled_operations_data_set_(qmco)_fr.asp?shownav=1)

statistics provide information which is used for monitoring NHS standards such as the cancelled operations guarantee¹⁶.

- 2.5 DH collects all the data for these statistics using Central Returns via its Unify2¹⁷ web portal. The Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC) administers the Review of Central Returns¹⁸ process that regularly reviews all information requirements which are collected as Central Returns, with a mandate to reduce the data collection burden on the NHS.
- 2.6 DH estimates that the annual cost of producing these statistics is approximately £66,000.

¹⁶ <http://www.nhs.uk/choiceinthenhs/rightsandpledges/waitingtimes/pages/guide%20to%20waiting%20times.aspx>

¹⁷ http://www.datadictionary.nhs.uk/web_site_content/navigation/central_return_data_sets_menu.asp

¹⁸ <http://www.ic.nhs.uk/services/the-review-of-central-returns-rocr>

3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 The statistics team engages with users in DH and the NHS through the Performance Information Review Group (PIRG), which includes representatives from the ten SHAs and which examines the statistics needed to monitor NHS performance. DH also engages with a wider user community through the Health Statistics User Group (HSUG), but it told us that it only attends occasionally when invited and that HSUG has not asked to discuss these statistics. The statistics team confirmed that it has little knowledge of the users of these statistics outside DH and the NHS. The focus of the information DH publishes about the users and uses of the NHS hospital activity statistics echoes this. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DH should take steps to engage with the wider user community outside DH and the NHS, fully document the use made of these statistics and publish information about users' experiences of the statistics¹⁹ (Requirement 1). We suggest that in meeting this requirement DH refer to the generic classes of use put forward in the Authority's Monitoring Brief, *The Use Made of Official Statistics*²⁰.
- 3.2 DH changed the methodology for collecting the data used to produce *Elective Admissions* and *Outpatient Events* in 2010. DH advised PIRG of the changes to the methodology in advance, but announced these changes publicly only at the time of release. DH did not quantify the impact of these changes for users. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DH should confirm that future changes to methods or classifications will be announced in advance and that improved information will be published about the impact of such changes on the statistics²¹ (Requirement 2).
- 3.3 DH does not publish information about the nature and extent of scheduled revisions to these statistics. The statistics team told us that it has drafted a new policy for the treatment of scheduled revisions to these statistics and that it plans to finalise and implement this policy in 2012. DH has confirmed that it will publish this policy once it is finalised. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DH should confirm that, in future, information about the nature and extent of revisions will be published at the same time as the statistics are released²² (Requirement 3).
- 3.4 DH provides some links to guidance documents and data collection instruments alongside the statistics. However, the primary purpose of these documents is to support data suppliers and DH uses technical language which may be difficult for users of the published statistics to understand. DH does not explain the methodology for producing the statistics beyond the data collection process and does not publish any information about the quality of the statistics. The headings and codes DH use to categorise the data in the Excel tables are not explained, for example, the speciality codes used in *Elective Admissions*. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DH should publish more information about the methods used to produce these statistics, and their quality, taking into account the use of the statistics. DH should present this

¹⁹ In relation to Principle 1, Practices 1, 2 and 5 of the *Code of Practice*

²⁰ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-briefs/monitoring-brief-6-2010---the-use-made-of-official-statistics.pdf>

²¹ In relation to Principle 2, Practice 4 of the *Code of Practice*

²² In relation to Principle 2, Practice 6 of the *Code of Practice*

- information using language that is accessible²³ (Requirement 4). We suggest that DH improve the metadata in the Excel tables for the releases to make the statistics more accessible to a non-specialist audience.
- 3.5 DH does not publish any information about the availability of related statistics in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, or internationally. DH told us that it has not explored the comparability of these statistics with those produced for other parts of the UK. The Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC) also publishes hospital activity statistics – for example, *Hospital Outpatient Activity, England*²⁴ presents information about failures to attend appointments. DH does not make clear the extent to which its statistics are comparable with those published by HSCIC. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DH should signpost similar statistics for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in the releases²⁵ (Requirement 5). We suggest that DH work with the other administrations in the UK to identify and document differences in the methods used to produce NHS hospital activity statistics. We also suggest that DH provide information about the comparability of its hospital activity statistics with those produced by HSCIC.
- 3.6 DH publishes these statistics based on aggregate data provided by suppliers – for example, counts of cancelled operations. DH does not have access to individual patient records, but it does publish tables of statistics which include some cells with small counts of events. The statistics team told us that it has assumed that there is no risk of disclosing information about individual patients from these statistics, but confirmed that there has not been a formal risk assessment. Whilst we consider that, due to the nature of the data, any risk of disclosure of personal information is probably low, as part of the designation as National Statistics, DH should review the arrangements for protecting confidential data and publish the findings²⁶ (Requirement 6).
- 3.7 DH presents commentary that is limited to a summary of key points, focusing on numbers for the latest period and comparisons with the previous period. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DH should improve the commentary in the releases so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics²⁷ (Requirement 7). We suggest that in meeting this requirement DH should consider the points detailed in annex 2.
- 3.8 The information that users can access is dependent on the route they take to find these statistics on DH's website. DH does not provide users accessing the DH statistics pages directly with a link to the summaries of the National Statistics presented on the 'Transparency' pages of its website. DH told us that it recognises that the statistics are not organised and linked effectively and that plans for its new website should resolve these issues. The current organisation of the releases also means that DH does not make appropriate use of the National Statistics logo. The Outpatient Events statistics are official statistics, but DH presents *Elective Admissions* and *Outpatient Events* together with the NS logo. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DH should improve

²³ In relation to Principle 4, Practices 1 and 2 and Principle 8, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

²⁴ <http://www.ic.nhs.uk/statistics-and-data-collections/hospital-care/outpatients>

²⁵ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 6 of the *Code of Practice*

²⁶ In relation to Principle 5, Practice 4 of the *Code of Practice*

²⁷ In relation to Principle 8, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

the accessibility of these statistics through the internet and ensure appropriate use of the National Statistics logo²⁸ (Requirement 8).

- 3.9 The *Code* requires National Statistics releases to be issued at 9:30am on the day of publication. DH's website systems do not enable releases to be held securely in readiness for release, which means that there is sometimes a delay beyond 9:30am. DH informed us that this matter is being reviewed as part of its web development programme. The statistics team could not confirm when it expects this issue to be resolved. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DH should ensure that all releases are issued at 9:30am on the day of release²⁹ (Requirement 9).
- 3.10 DH does not publish a record of those granted pre-release access to *Imaging*. DH told us that the need for access is under review and that a decision has yet to be made on whether to grant any pre-release access. If it decides to do so, as part of the designation as National Statistics, DH should publish records of those who have pre-release access to *Imaging* prior to release³⁰ (Requirement 10).

²⁸ In relation to Principle 8, Practice 4 of the *Code of Practice*

²⁹ In relation to Protocol 2, Practice 4 of the *Code of Practice*

³⁰ In relation to Protocol 2, Practice 7 of the *Code of Practice*

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to DH's NHS hospital activity 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 | Refer to the generic classes of use put forward in the Authority's Monitoring Brief, <i>The Use Made of Official Statistics</i> (para 3.1). |
| Suggestion 2 | Improve the metadata in the Excel tables for the releases to make the statistics more accessible to a non-specialist audience (para 3.4). |
| Suggestion 3 | Work with the other administrations in the UK to identify and document differences in the methods used to produce NHS hospital activity statistics (para 3.5). |
| Suggestion 4 | Provide information about the comparability of its hospital activity statistics with those produced by HSCIC (para 3.5). |
| Suggestion 5 | Consider the points detailed in annex 2, in seeking to improve the content of the statistical releases (para 3.7). |

Annex 2: Compliance with Standards for Statistical Releases

- A2.1 In October 2010, the Statistics Authority issued a statement on *Standards for Statistical Releases*³¹. 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 NHS hospital activity 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 of the releases has a title that reflects the subject and reference period of the statistics. The geographical coverage of the statistics is not included in the titles.
- A2.4 The releases do not make appropriate use of the National Statistics logo. The use of the logo is inconsistent and confusing. Accessing the statistics from the Publication Hub directs users to the 'Transparency' area of DH's website where the logo is clearly displayed alongside a summary of the key points from the release. A link is provided to the webpage presenting the statistics. However, the statistics webpage, which can also be accessed directly, does not carry the National Statistics logo. Also the use of the logo infers that the statistics in *Outpatient Events* are National Statistics; they are official statistics.
- A2.5 The name and contact details for the responsible statistician are included in each of the Excel data tables, but the releases do not display this information prominently.

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

- A2.6 The releases all include a summary of key points, focusing on numbers (for example – cancelled operations, X-Rays carried out, attendances at outpatient clinics) for the latest period and comparisons with the previous period. With the exception of *Imaging*, Statistical Press Notices are published alongside the releases which present the same key points. No further commentary is presented.
- A2.7 All the releases use technical terms and codes. Only a small number of these terms are defined for the user. DH provides some links to guidance documents, but these are primarily written for NHS professionals supplying the data and assume a working knowledge of NHS activity.

Use language that is impartial, objective and professionally sound

³¹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html>

A2.8 The text used in the releases is impartial and evidence-based. Non-sampling variability is not discussed in the text.

Include information about the context and likely uses

A2.9 The releases lack information about the policy or operational context in which the statistics have been collected and will be used. DH publishes guidance documents alongside the statistics that provide some information about key users, but DH has written these documents for data suppliers and we found the information about the uses of the statistics difficult to understand.

Include, or link to, appropriate metadata

A2.10 No information is provided about the quality of the statistics. DH provides links to guidance documents that present some helpful information about the data collected, but these documents are not written for the users of the statistics and there is no information about other aspects of the methodology.

A2.11 There is no mention of any official statistics published for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland nor how they compare to those in England.

A2.12 DH does not explain which statistics are subject to later revision and when they are likely to be revised.

Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A3.1 This assessment was conducted from March to June 2012.

A3.2 The Assessment team – Donna Livesey and Emma Bowditch – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of DH in March. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 11 April. The Assessment team subsequently met DH during May 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 four responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

NHS	2
Department of Health	1
Non-departmental public body	1

A3.5 Users were content that the published statistics meet their needs. The NHS users told us that they tend to use the provisional data for their SHA as they can access these directly from the reporting system before the NHS hospital activity statistics are published. However, they said that the statistics provide a helpful national picture. One user said that they have to defend their need for *Imaging* each time data requirements are reviewed. Users were generally satisfied with their engagement with the producers.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

