

Statistics on
Enrolments at
Schools and in
Funded Pre-School
Education in
Northern Ireland

*Department of
Education,
Northern Ireland*

Statistics on Enrolments at Schools and in Funded Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland

June 2009

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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 UK Statistics Authority's overall objective is to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. The Statistics Authority is also required to promote and safeguard the quality and comprehensiveness of official statistics, and good practice in relation to official statistics.

The Statistics Authority has two main functions:

1. oversight of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) – the executive office of the Authority
2. independent scrutiny (monitoring and assessment) of all official statistics produced in the UK

Contact us

Tel: 0845 604 1857

Email: authority.enquiries@statistics.gsi.gov.uk

Website: www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk

UK Statistics Authority
Statistics House
Myddelton Street
London EC1R 1UW

ASSESSMENT AND DESIGNATION

Under the provisions of the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007, the UK Statistics Authority has a statutory function to assess sets of statistics against the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, with a view to determining whether it is appropriate for the statistics to be designated, or to retain their designation, as National Statistics.

Designation as National Statistics means that the statistics are deemed to be compliant with the Code of Practice. Whilst the Code is wide-ranging, designation may be broadly interpreted to mean that: the statistics meet identified user needs; are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and are well explained.

Assessment reports will not normally comment further, for example on the validity of the statistics as a social or economic measure; though reports may point to such questions if the Authority believes that further research would be desirable.

Designation as National Statistics will sometimes be granted in cases where some changes still need to be made to meet fully the requirements of the Code, on condition that steps are taken by the producer body, within a stated timeframe, to address the weaknesses. This is to avoid public confusion and does not reduce the obligation to comply with the Code.

Designation is granted on the basis of the information provided to the Statistics Authority, primarily by the organisation that produces the statistics. The information includes a range of factual evidence and also assurances by senior statisticians in the producer organisation. The views of users are also sought. Should further information come to light subsequently which changes the Authority's analysis, the Assessment report may be withdrawn and revised as necessary.

Once designated as National Statistics, it is a statutory requirement on the producer organisation to ensure that the set of statistics continues to be produced in compliance with the Code of Practice.

1 Introduction

1.1 This is one of a series of reports prepared under the provisions of Section 14 of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*¹. The report covers statistics on

- Enrolments at Grant-Aided Primary and Post-Primary Schools: Basic Statistics; and
- Enrolments at Schools and in Funded Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland

produced by the Department of Education, Northern Ireland (DENI). These statistics contain information about children, schools and providers of funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland. DENI regards the primary use of these statistics as providing a picture of the school population in Northern Ireland for use by policy makers within the Department, including their use in determining the funding of schools. The full statistics² are released in February of each year; a more limited set of 'basic' statistics³ is published in the preceding December. More detailed annual statistics on schools and pupils are available, as Excel spreadsheets, on the DENI website⁴. This assessment covers the publications mentioned above. The statistics also provide input to a DENI biennial Compendium of Northern Ireland Education Statistics⁵.

1.2 The initial set of statistics selected for assessment included: statistics produced by the Office for National Statistics, Whitehall departments, the Devolved Administrations, and an Arms Length Body; statistics from a variety of sources; different types of product; and different types of series. The breadth of the selection was to learn as much as possible from the early assessments and contribute both to our longer term planning and to our development of the process. The Statistics Authority will be inviting comments on both the process for assessment and the presentation of reports with a view to further development of the arrangements in the coming months. The forward programme of Assessments is at <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/programme-of-assessment/index.html> and further information on the principles and procedures for assessment is at <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/principles---procedures/index.html>.

¹ http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pga/ukpga_20070018_en.pdf

² http://www.deni.gov.uk/february_press_release_2-2.pdf

³ http://www.deni.gov.uk/enrolments_at_grant_aided_primary_and_post_primary_schools_2008_09_basic_statistics.pdf

⁴ http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg/32-statistics_and_research_statistics_on_education_pg/32_statistics_and_research_numbersofschoolsandpupils_pg.htm

⁵ http://www.deni.gov.uk/compendium_07.pdf

1.3 The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

Section 2 Summary of findings – highlighting the strengths and weaknesses in relation to the Code of Practice and including the Authority’s recommendation in relation to designation as National Statistics.

Section 3 Subject of the assessment – an overview of the statistics and their history.

Section 4 Detailed assessment - providing more details about the assessment of compliance against the Code’s Principles, Practices and Protocols.

Annex 1 Suggestions for improvement

Annex 2 Summary of the assessment process and users’ views.

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.

2 Summary of findings

2.1 Recommendation for designation as National Statistics

2.1.1 The annual statistics on Enrolments at Schools and in Funded Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland are confirmed as National Statistics, subject to DENI making some specific enhancements listed at section 2.4 below and reporting them to the Authority by December 2009.

2.2 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

2.2.1 The assessment identified compliance with most aspects of the Code of Practice. The main users' needs are met and these users are engaged throughout the production process. Statistics are disseminated openly. There is less evidence of consultation with other users or potential users; this issue also was raised in a 2005 National Statistics Quality Review.

2.2.2 All regular statistical reports, and detailed time series, are available currently on the DENI website. In line with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, these will be available via the National Statistics Publication Hub from December 2009.

2.2.3 DENI seeks to manage the burden on data suppliers, making use of data from an existing schools management information system and using some electronic submission of data. More extensive use of administrative data and electronic submission is under development. The Assessment team considers data quality management to be of a good standard.

2.2.4 The statistics contain helpful summaries, tables, and graphs. The inclusion of additional metadata and commentary, to aid interpretation, would be helpful. Interpretation would also be aided by the publication of further information on the quality of the statistics, including sources of error and bias.

2.3 Detailed recommendations

2.3.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that DENI could strengthen its compliance with the Code. Those which the Assessment team considers essential to enable re-designation as National Statistics are listed in section 2.4 below. Other suggestions, which would improve the statistics and the service provided to users, but which are not central to their designation, are listed at annex 1.

2.4 Requirements for re-designation as National Statistics

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|----------------------|--|
| Requirement 1 | Prepare and publish on the DENI website documentation on the needs of users and the uses of the statistics (para 4.4) |
| Requirement 2 | Publish all enrolment statistics via the Publication Hub (para 4.7) |
| Requirement 3 | Publish a revisions policy on the DENI website (para 4.9) |
| Requirement 4 | Publish a list of people given pre-release access on the DENI website (para 4.11) |
| Requirement 5 | Publish details of arrangements for confidentiality protection on the DENI website (para 4.17) |
| Requirement 6 | Publish the cost of the burden on suppliers, on the DENI website, annually (para 4.19) |
| Requirement 7 | Future statistics on NI enrolments to be accompanied by further commentary, and information on the policy and operational context, in order to enhance users' interpretation of the statistics (para 4.23) |
| Requirement 8 | Develop a data management strategy for archiving enrolment statistics in accordance with relevant public records legislation (4.25) |
| Requirement 9 | Publish a Statement of Administrative Sources, once central guidance becomes available (4.31) |

3 Subject of the assessment

- 3.1 The assessed statistics are produced from data collected via the compulsory Northern Ireland School Census. The School Census is an annual snapshot of pupil and school level data for each pre-school centre, nursery, special, primary, post-primary, hospital and independent school in Northern Ireland. The School Census data are used to inform DENI policy and procedures, particularly school funding, as well as to inform the NI Education and Library Boards (ELBs) of detailed information useful to them in conducting their business and in their auditing processes. The School Census is held at the end of the first full working week in October.
- 3.2 The School Census, which is undertaken on an academic year basis, has been taken for many years. There have been no major discontinuities in the published statistics during the period since 1986/87, the earliest year in which the data was held in computerised form.
- 3.3 Data for primary, special and post-primary schools are collected at pupil level. Returns are made electronically from the schools' information management system (SIMS). Data for children in nursery schools, hospital schools, independent schools and voluntary and pre-school centres are collected via an aggregated paper return.
- 3.4 Two statistical press releases are issued to publicise the statistics derived from the School Census. The first, in December, contains basic enrolment figures. The main press release, published in February, contains a more detailed breakdown of the statistics. Additionally a series of detailed tables for Northern Ireland, ELBs and schools are published on the Statistics & Research part of the DENI website. Data collected and statistics published relate mainly to pupil characteristics such as year group, religion, ethnicity, special needs and free school meals entitlement.
- 3.5 The statistical process is managed by one Deputy Principal Statistician with one Assistant Statistician dedicated to the School Census on a permanent basis and with one other Assistant Statistician dedicated to the data cleaning exercise for a period of two to three months each year. There is further administrative support from three clerical staff for the period of the data collection and validation exercise.
- 3.6 The last major review of the enrolment statistics took place, as part of a National Statistics Quality Review of School Statistics in Northern Ireland, in 2005. The review considered the format and timing of the main statistical press release.

3.7 The development of an 'eSchools' data warehouse system is currently underway. The proposed system will link schools' data systems with those of the ELBs in order to improve the validation of data at source, hence reducing the reporting burden for schools. Additional benefits envisaged include the linking of previously separate databases, reducing the need for schools to make separate returns on the same data to different parts of the NI education sector.

4 Detailed assessment

Principle 1: Meeting user needs

The production, management and dissemination of official statistics should meet the requirements of informed decision-making by government, public services, business, researchers and the public.

- 4.1 The NI enrolment statistics are produced with the primary purpose of providing a picture of the school population in Northern Ireland for use by policy makers, in addition to their being used in determining the funding of schools. As such, the primary users of the statistics are within DENI, for example those units dealing with school finance, school improvement, programme delivery support, special education etc, along with other 'internal' users within the Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency (NISRA) and at an operational level by the NI Education and Library Boards.
- 4.2 DENI has processes in place to engage with the main users of its enrolment statistics. Some improvements to the timing and content of the statistics have resulted from user feedback. Some users noted that they have good relationships with the producer.
- 4.3 Although engagement takes place with the internal users, the Assessment team saw less evidence than it would hope to see of effective wider engagement with users (and potential users) such as academics, commentators, and the press, to investigate the extent to which DENI can meet their needs.
- 4.4 There is a shortage of systematic documentation of user needs, the responses to such needs and the outcomes of these responses. Documentation outlining DENI's actions and priorities with regard to users would help to ensure a transparent dialogue between DENI and its users. Documentation on the needs of users and the uses of the statistics should be published on the website as part of the re-designation as National Statistics⁶ (Requirement 1).
- 4.5 Although an action plan was published in 2006 in response to the 2005 National Statistics Quality Review of NI Education Statistics, the Assessment team did not see published evidence of a comprehensive response to the review, including the outcomes that resulted.

⁶ In relation to Principle 1 Practice 2 of the Code of Practice

Principle 2: Impartiality and objectivity

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

- 4.6 Statistics are published in an orderly and timely manner. The statistics, and any additional analysis, are free-of-charge though DENI reserves the right to charge for substantial additional work.
- 4.7 The statistics are not currently published via the National Statistics Publication Hub (although there are plans to do so within 2009). As part of the re-designation as National Statistics, enrolment statistics, along with a timetable of future publications, should be made available via the National Statistics Publication Hub⁷ (Requirement 2).
- 4.8 Although DENI currently has no published policy on ensuring impartiality and objectivity, the Assessment team saw no evidence of reporting bias or any complaints from users regarding the impartiality of the statistics.
- 4.9 Although internal policies exist for dealing with minor and major revisions, these have not been published. There have been no major revisions to the statistics in recent years. As part of the re-designation as National Statistics, a revisions policy should be published on the DENI website⁸ (Requirement 3).

⁷ In relation to Protocol 1 Practice 3 of the Code of Practice

⁸ In relation to Principle 2 Practice 6 of the Code of Practice

Principle 3: Integrity

At all stages in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics, the public interest should prevail over organisational, political or personal interests.

- 4.10 No evidence was found of any problems with, nor user complaints received about, the integrity of the enrolment statistics. Similarly, no evidence was found of DENI's statisticians being subjected to political pressure or abusing the trust placed in them.
- 4.11 Pre-release access to the statistics is provided to some officials and Ministers – as provided for in the Pre-Release Access to Official Statistics Order (Northern Ireland) 2009. As part of the re-designation as National Statistics, and to ensure full compliance with the Order, a list of those persons given pre-release access should be published on the DENI website⁹ (Requirement 4).

⁹ In relation to Protocol 2 Practice 7 of the Code of Practice

Principle 4: Sound methods and assured quality

Statistical methods should be consistent with scientific principles and internationally recognised best practices, and be fully documented. Quality should be monitored and assured taking account of internationally agreed practices.

- 4.12 Overall, the statistics meet the quality requirements of the main users. There is some consultation with main users and suppliers about the quality of, and improvements to, the statistics, although no formal quality guidelines are published currently. The compilation of the statistics appears to be sound. Detailed time series are available on the DENI website.
- 4.13 Validation of data appears to be quite thorough with further enhancements planned via the new 'eSchools' data warehouse system, although DENI recognises that extra resources might be required. Standard definitions, where they exist, are used.
- 4.14 Efforts are made to ensure comparability within the UK, standard classifications being used where possible. DENI recognised that there will, however, be some differences from corresponding data for Great Britain. The statistics are not currently accompanied by indicators of their quality, sources of error and/or bias, or of their comparability.
- 4.15 While detailed process documents are available internally, there is little published documentation about the processes of data collection, or the production of the enrolment statistics, although work is underway in this respect.

Principle 5: Confidentiality

Private information about individual persons (including bodies corporate) compiled in the production of official statistics is confidential, and should be used for statistical purposes only.

- 4.16 DENI appears to take confidentiality seriously. There is no evidence of any leak or inadvertent disclosure. Procedures are in place for suppressing the disclosure of potentially confidential figures both within the collection of data from schools and within published tables.
- 4.17 No published details of confidentiality arrangements exist though a statement of compliance is under development. As part of the re-designation as National Statistics, details of the arrangements for confidentiality protection should be published on the DENI website¹⁰ (Requirement 5).

¹⁰ In relation to Principle 5 Practice 3 of the Code of Practice

Principle 6: Proportionate burden

The cost burden on data suppliers should not be excessive and should be assessed relative to the benefits arising from the use of the statistics.

- 4.18 The statistics are collected largely from an administrative system used for the management of schools and calculation of schools' funding, suppliers being provided with comprehensive guidelines for provision of the data. For some educational units, data are still supplied using a paper-based method although the development of the 'eSchools' data warehouse system will increase the use of electronic approaches.
- 4.19. The costs and benefits of new statistical requirements are considered, and consideration given to possible alternative sources. Although there was little evidence of excessive burden on suppliers, details of the burden costs on suppliers are not currently published. As part of the re-designation as National Statistics, DENI should publish annually the cost of the burden on suppliers¹¹ (Requirement 6).

¹¹ In relation to Principle 6 Practice 1 of the Code of Practice

Principle 7: Resources

The resources made available for statistical activities should be sufficient to meet the requirements of this Code and should be used efficiently and effectively.

- 4.20 No evidence was found of complaints about the quality of the resultant statistics. Clear recruitment guidelines and competence frameworks are in place.
- 4.21 Although there was evidence of consideration of the resources available and monitoring their use against budgets, it would be useful for DENI to clarify the procedures used to allocate resources, and monitor their application, according to users' priorities.

Principle 8: Frankness and accessibility

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

- 4.22 The contents of the regular statistical releases have been adjusted over time to meet the needs of the main users and most users with whom we had contact were satisfied with the content and format of these releases. All of the regular releases and the related detailed tables are available on the DENI website, with the intention of publishing these via the National Statistics Publication Hub from December 2009.
- 4.23 Although the main statistical releases are accompanied by summaries of the main figures and a range of graphs and tables, there is little supporting commentary or metadata. As part of the re-designation as National Statistics, DENI should ensure that future statistics on NI enrolments be accompanied by further commentary, and information on the policy and operational context, in order to enhance users' interpretation of the statistics¹² (Requirement 7).
- 4.24 While Excel files are available from the Statistics and Research part of the DENI website, the availability of data tables in other formats within the publication, for example downloadable Excel files, would encourage analysis and re-use.
- 4.25 DENI's enrolment statistics are not currently deposited in a national archive, such as the UK Data Archive. As part of the re-designation as National Statistics, DENI should develop a data management strategy for archiving its data in accordance with relevant public records legislation¹³ (Requirement 8).

¹² In relation to Principle 8 Practice 2 of the Code of Practice

¹³ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 7 of the Code of Practice

Protocol 1: User engagement

Effective user engagement is fundamental both to trust in statistics and securing maximum public value. This Protocol draws together the relevant practices set out elsewhere in the Code and expands on the requirements in relation to consultation.

- 4.26 Engagement mechanisms are in place with DENI's main internal users although, as noted earlier, engagement with a wider user base would help to exploit the statistics and to ensure that the statistics meet users' needs.
- 4.27 Evidence shows that consultation, at least with primary users, does take place. However, user consultation is not documented in the systematic way required by the Code.

Protocol 2: Release practices

Statistical reports should be released into the public domain in an orderly manner that promotes public confidence and gives equal access to all, subject to relevant legislation.

- 4.28 Observations and requirements relating to publication via the National Statistics Publication Hub and compliance with the relevant Pre-release Access Order have already been noted under Principles 2 and 3.
- 4.29 No evidence was found of inadvertent releases or unclear boundaries between statistical and policy statements.

Protocol 3: The use of administrative sources for statistical purposes

Administrative sources should be fully exploited for statistical purposes, subject to adherence to appropriate safeguards.

- 4.30 DENI has made serious efforts to use administrative data for the purposes of its enrolment statistics and these efforts continue - with the objective of reducing the supplier burden.
- 4.31 DENI should publish a Statement of Administrative Sources, once central guidance becomes available, as part of the re-designation as National Statistics¹⁴ (Requirement 9).

¹⁴ In relation to Protocol 3 Practice 5 of the Code of Practice

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to DENI's statistical outputs, in the interest of the public good. These are not formally required for re-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 | Engage with a wider range of users to explore the extent to which DENI has the capacity to meet more needs from the existing system (para 4.3) |
| Suggestion 2 | Publish responses to any future reviews of the statistics, including action plans and the subsequent outcomes that result (para 4.5) |
| Suggestion 3 | Publish quality guidelines on the website (para 4.12) |
| Suggestion 4 | Publish alongside enrolments statistics clear indicators of their quality, sources of error and/or bias, and comparability (para 4.14) |
| Suggestion 5 | Publish material relating to the methodology for collecting data, and for processing these data into enrolments statistics (para 4.15) |
| Suggestion 6 | Publish details of the procedures used to allocate resources, and to monitor their application (para 4.21) |
| Suggestion 7 | Ensure that the main enrolment statistics are available in re-useable forms, for example downloadable Excel files, to encourage analysis and re-use (para 4.24) |

Annex 2: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A2.1 This assessment was conducted from March to May 2009.

A2.2 The Assessment team met representatives of DENI at an initial meeting in DENI's Belfast office in 1 April 2009. Some background information was provided by DENI during April 2009, and Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 6 and 7 May 2009. The Assessment team subsequently met with DENI on 29 May 2009, to confirm and clarify the written evidence provided, at DENI's office in Bangor, Northern Ireland.

Summary of users contacted, and issues raised

A2.3 As part of the assessment, questionnaires were sent to more than 50 users, suppliers and other interested parties. Following reminders and a number of follow-up telephone calls, the Assessment team received 8 responses, grouped as follows:

Government departments	5
NDPBs	1
DENI funded organisation	1
Schools	1

A2.4 The majority of users were satisfied with the enrolment statistics from DENI and with the level of engagement between the producer and themselves. There were no strong criticisms and one user commented that the service was excellent, the producer being approachable and helpful. A potential user commented that, to be useful to them, the statistics would need to be more detailed and easier to find. The only school that responded raised some issues about technical difficulties that had been experienced with the system and said that the producer did not have a good understanding of what was required of schools.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document.

http://www.deni.gov.uk/february_press_release_2-2.pdf

http://www.deni.gov.uk/enrolments_at_grant_aided_primary_and_post_primary_schools_2008_09_basic_statistics.pdf

