

# Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

## Statistics on Births in England and Wales

*(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 the Standards for Statistical Releases

Annex 3: Summary of the assessment process and user views

# 1 Summary of findings

## 1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 This is one of a series of reports<sup>1</sup> prepared under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*<sup>2</sup>. The Act requires all statistics currently designated as National Statistics to be assessed against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*<sup>3</sup>. The report covers the following birth statistics in England and Wales produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS):

### Statistical bulletins<sup>4</sup>

- *Births and Deaths in England and Wales*;
- *Births in England and Wales - cohort fertility*;
- *Births in England and Wales by characteristics of birth*;
- *Births in England and Wales by characteristics of mother*;
- *Births in England and Wales by parents' country of birth*; and
- *Baby Names in England and Wales*.

### Data tables<sup>5</sup>

- Birth summary tables, England and Wales;
- Parents' Country of Birth;
- Characteristics of Birth 1;
- Characteristics of Birth 2;
- Characteristics of Mother 1;
- Characteristics of Mother 2;
- Live births by area of usual residence;
- Cohort fertility;
- Further parental characteristics;
- Live births by socio-economic status of father.

1.1.2 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

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga\\_20070018\\_en.pdf](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga_20070018_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html>

<sup>4</sup>

[http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/taxonomy/search/index.html?newquery=\\*&nscl=Live+Births+and+Stillbirths&nscl-orig=Live+Births+and+Stillbirths&content-type=publicationContentTypes&sortDirection=DESCENDING&sortBy=pubdate](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/taxonomy/search/index.html?newquery=*&nscl=Live+Births+and+Stillbirths&nscl-orig=Live+Births+and+Stillbirths&content-type=publicationContentTypes&sortDirection=DESCENDING&sortBy=pubdate)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/taxonomy/search/index.html?content-type=Reference+table&nscl=Live+Births+and+Stillbirths&pubdateRangeType=allDates&sortBy=pubdate&sortDirection=DESCENDING&newquery=\\*&pageSize=50&applyFilters=true&nscl-orig=Live+Births+and+Stillbirths](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/taxonomy/search/index.html?content-type=Reference+table&nscl=Live+Births+and+Stillbirths&pubdateRangeType=allDates&sortBy=pubdate&sortDirection=DESCENDING&newquery=*&pageSize=50&applyFilters=true&nscl-orig=Live+Births+and+Stillbirths)

in this report. The Statistics Authority confirms that the statistics listed in paragraph 1.1.1 are designated as National Statistics, subject to ONS implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by January 2012.

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

### 1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

1.3.1 ONS makes available a wide range of birth statistics through a series of topic 'packages', accompanied by clearly written bulletins. The statistics are released at different points through the year as they become available.

1.3.2 Background information about the quality and reliability of the statistics is published in a helpful and comprehensive metadata document<sup>6</sup>, supported by Frequently Asked Questions and a Summary Quality Report<sup>7</sup>. ONS has published a revisions policy but doesn't make sufficiently clear the extent of change in revisions and corrections to birth statistics.

1.3.3 ONS has developed online interactive tools for *Baby Names* and births that are straightforward to use and examples of ways of making official statistics more accessible that can be applied in other settings.

### 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

<b>Requirement 1</b>	Ensure that revisions to statistics are accompanied by statements that set out the reason and extent of the changes made (para 3.7).
<b>Requirement 2</b>	Extend the background information to make clear the differences in methods between the UK countries and the reasons for these differences (para 3.12).
<b>Requirement 3</b>	Improve the releases so that: a) the commentary aids user interpretation of the statistics; b)

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<sup>6</sup> *Births Metadata and Births and Fertility: Frequently Asked Questions:*

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/health-and-life-events/index.html>

<sup>7</sup> *Births SQR:* <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/quality/quality-information/social-statistics/index.html>

signposting to the metadata is given, and c) users can easily identify and access the information relevant to their needs (para 3.22).

**Requirement 4**

Review the *Statement of Administrative Sources* to ensure that it covers all the elements of the *Code of Practice* (Para 3.31).



## 2 Subject of the assessment

2.1 Birth registration is a legal requirement under the *Births and Deaths Registration Act 1836*. The registration of births in England and Wales is carried out by the Local Registration Service, in partnership with the General Register Office<sup>8</sup> (GRO). Registrars record information – usually provided by the parent(s) – on the Registration Online (RON) system. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) became responsible for the production of birth statistics after its formation in 1996. The data from RON are transferred each night to ONS for compiling a national database.

2.2 Information routinely collected at birth registration includes: the date and place of birth of the child; the name and sex of the child; the mother's address of usual residence, and the country of birth of mother and of father. The *Population Statistics Act 1938* made provision for the collection of further confidential statistical information which is not entered into the birth register, including:

- date of birth of mother;
- date of birth of father (or second female parent);
- number of previous children by present and former husbands; and
- date of marriage or civil partnership.

Birthweight has been included in published statistics since 1990. The midwife or doctor in attendance at the birth records this information on the birth notification form. The NHS sends information from the notifications electronically to ONS, which then passes it to GRO for the registrars to link with the birth registration. Prior to the implementation of RON, registrars received the information directly. They then inputted the information into the electronic registration system and forwarded to GRO and ONS.

2.3 The birth statistics comprise both live births and stillbirths. Stillbirths have been required to be registered since 1927 under the *Births and Deaths Registration Act 1926*. The stillbirth certificate, including cause of death, duration of pregnancy and weight of foetus, is completed by the midwife or doctor and given to the informant (normally the parent) who then takes the information to the registrar.

2.4 The *Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (HFEA) 2008* enabled births that occurred as a result of fertility treatment to women in a same-sex relationship to be registered. The Act also allowed for two men in a same-sex relationship to apply to the court for a parental order to be officially registered as the parents post registration.

2.5 From 1837 until 1920 the Registrar General produced an annual report detailing the statistics on births, deaths and marriages in England and Wales. This changed in 1921 when a statistical review was published annually until 1973. The annual reference volume, *FM1 Birth Statistics*<sup>9</sup>, took over from the statistical review in 1974. In 1993 the first individual records outputs began

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/all-releases.html?definition=tcm%3A77-27420>

following the computerisation of the registration system and adoption of Model 204 (the database for storing birth registrations within ONS). Following a user consultation in 2010, ONS replaced the FM1 report with ten 'packages' of birth statistics, with five related statistical bulletins (see paragraph 1.1.1):

- *Birth summary tables*: including the number of live births and stillbirths, fertility rates, percentage of live births outside marriage/civil partnership, mean age of mother and percentage of live births to non-UK born mothers, and births counts and rates by age of mother and by local area.
- *Parents' country of birth*: includes births by country of birth of mother by local authority as well as total fertility rates for UK born and non-UK born women.
- *Characteristics of birth 1*: provides summary statistics on stillbirths; birthweight data for live and stillbirths by mother's area of usual residence and maternities, live births, and stillbirths in hospitals by area of occurrence.
- *Characteristics of birth 2*: provides live birth statistics by month and quarter of occurrence, and maternity figures for multiple births and by place of birth.
- *Characteristics of mother 1*: provides live birth, stillbirth and maternity statistics by age of mother, type of registration (within marriage/civil partnership, joint, sole), and mean age of mother by birth order<sup>10</sup>.
- *Characteristics of mother 2*: provides live birth statistics (numbers and rates) within and outside marriage/civil partnership.
- *Live births by area of usual residence*: provides summary data for live births for local authorities and health areas including figures by age of mother.
- *Further parental characteristics*: provides age-specific fertility rates for men, the mean age of father, and paternities within and outside marriage/civil partnership.
- *Live births by socio-economic status of father*: presents data on live births by National Statistics Socio-economic Classification of father as defined by occupation.
- *Cohort fertility*: presents data on fertility by year of birth of mother rather than the year of birth of child, including the average number of live-born children and the proportion of women remaining childless by year of birth.

2.6 ONS produces a further statistical release from the birth statistics dataset, *Baby names*, ranking the most popular boys' and girls' names each year.

2.7 The main users of birth statistics are local authorities (LAs) and government departments who use them for planning and policy development, for example:

- LAs use birth statistics to decide the number of school places in a given area;
- the demography unit at the Department for Work and Pensions uses detailed births statistics to feed into statistical models on pensions and benefits;
- the Department of Health uses the statistics to plan maternity services;

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<sup>10</sup> Birth order: the number assigned to a birth based on the number of previous live births and stillbirths occurring inside marriage to the mother

- ONS uses statistics on cohort fertility to inform the fertility assumptions underpinning its national population projections.

Other users include academics doing research into birth trends and characteristics; and lobbying and special interest groups, such as BirthChoice UK, to help women choose where they might like to give birth. The media also report on key trends in the statistics.

- 2.8 The Vital Statistics Output Branch (VSOB) in ONS produces most of the statistics, while researchers in ONS Population and Demography produce *Cohort Fertility* and its associated tables. The cost of producing the birth statistics is around £680,000, with IT costs accounting for around half of this. The estimated cost of *Baby Names* and its associated outputs is £13,000.

### 3 Assessment findings

#### 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.**

- 3.1 ONS has documented different types of uses and users of birth statistics within the births Summary Quality Report<sup>11</sup> (SQR). ONS's Health and Life Events, of which VSOB is a part, has published a strategy<sup>12</sup> for user engagement in which it sets out its approach and provides links to relevant documents, including user surveys and uses made of the various statistics. It also lists relevant user groups, including the Central and Local Information Partnership (CLIP) Population group for birth statistics.
- 3.2 VSOB has a dedicated customer service team that handles queries about life events statistics. The customer service team works closely with the statistics teams and collates feedback from users about the publications which informs the review of outputs each year.
- 3.3 ONS has sought users' views about birth statistics through online surveys, as well as through the ONS health and demography journals, *Health Statistics Quarterly*<sup>13</sup> and *Population Trends*<sup>14</sup>. ONS told us that it engages with users through regular meetings, conferences and workshops, such as with users in Maternity Statistics Information Exchange (part of the Health Statistics User Group). Users told us that they were satisfied with the team's response to queries but they were unaware of specific user consultations. We were told that CLIP has requested regular reports on ONS vital statistics at its meetings. We suggest that the vital events team seek more opportunities to meet users of birth statistics face to face.
- 3.4 ONS conducted a consultation regarding the future publication of the birth statistics. This led to the release of the statistics in topic packages at various times through the year, replacing the annual reference report, *FM1 Birth Statistics*<sup>15</sup>, in 2009. ONS published a consultation response document<sup>16</sup>. The document doesn't describe users' views but summarises the changes informed by the feedback.
- 3.5 ONS conducted a wide-ranging user consultation on its work programme<sup>17</sup> in December 2010. It used feedback from this to inform its business planning for the following financial year and published its response.

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<sup>11</sup> Births Summary quality report: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/quality/quality-information/social-statistics/index.html>

<sup>12</sup> User engagement strategy for Health and Life Events Division: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/user-engagement/index.html>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/all-releases.html?definition=tcm%3A77-21560>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/all-releases.html?definition=tcm%3A77-27989>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/all-releases.html?definition=tcm%3A77-27420>

<sup>16</sup> Outcome of birth statistics review: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/health-and-life-events/index.html>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/consultations/closed-consultations/2010/work-programme-consultation/index.html>

## Principle 2: Impartiality and objectivity

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

- 3.6 ONS publishes births statistics in an impartial and orderly manner. The statistics are available free of charge on ONS's website and via the National Statistics Publication Hub.
- 3.7 ONS has published its revisions policy<sup>18</sup> on its website. The provisional quarterly birth statistics include a general warning that figures will be revised when new data are available. The explanation does not make clear the extent of the likely changes. ONS has corrected errors when necessary and highlighted the amendments in covering statements at the front of releases, although the statements do not make clear the extent of the change. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should ensure that revisions to statistics are accompanied by statements that set out the reason and extent of the changes made<sup>19</sup> (Requirement 1).

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/revisions/corporate-statistical-policy/index.html>

<sup>19</sup> 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.**

- 3.8 No incidents of political pressures, abuses of trust or complaints relating to professional integrity, quality or standards were reported to or identified by the Assessment team.

## 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.**

- 3.9 A birth must be registered within 42 days of its occurrence, usually by one or both parents. The local registrar enters the information into the web-based RON system and the data are securely transferred to ONS each night. The RON system has built-in validation checks, to identify errors (for example in the address or postcode) at the point of registration. If any of the confidential data items are missing, an appropriate value is imputed by ONS. It also carries out further automated quality assurance checks.
- 3.10 *Births Metadata*<sup>20</sup> provides comprehensive information about the data and the compilation of the statistics, including the method of imputation. It also quantifies late registrations and missing values. ONS has published an SQR for birth statistics<sup>21</sup> and for *Baby Names*<sup>22</sup>. These reports provide a range of information about the accuracy, timeliness and relevance of the statistics
- 3.11 ONS has published general quality guidelines<sup>23</sup> including specific guidance on administrative sources. The VSOB team has developed and documented quality checks for the production of the birth statistics and follows up any issues with other organisations such as Wales-Connecting for Health and the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority on birthweight and same sex parental birth registrations. The statistics team is also working with GRO to extend the validation checks built into the RON system, including on parents' age.
- 3.12 ONS has regular meetings with the producers of corresponding statistics in the other countries of the UK. It uses robust demographic methods for producing its birth statistics that are largely consistent with those used in the rest of the UK and internationally. There are some differences in the statistics published in the UK countries; for example, ONS publishes birth statistics by year of occurrence, whereas the statistics for Scotland and Northern Ireland are published by year of registration. ONS publishes a UK and international comparison of birth statistics and two of the bulletins give links to the equivalent releases for Scotland and Northern Ireland, but ONS does not provide any information about the differences in methods used. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should extend the background information to make clear the differences in methods between the UK countries and the reasons for these differences<sup>24</sup> (Requirement 2). We suggest that ONS signpost users to the birth statistics in the other UK countries in each statistical bulletin.

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<sup>20</sup> Births Metadata: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/health-and-life-events/index.html>

<sup>21</sup> Summary quality report for births: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/quality/quality-information/social-statistics/index.html>

<sup>22</sup> Summary quality report for Baby names: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/quality/quality-information/social-statistics/index.html>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/quality/guidelines-for-measuring-statistical-quality/index.html>

<sup>24</sup> In relation to Principle 4, Practice 6 of the *Code of Practice*

## 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.**

- 3.13 ONS has set out its confidentiality policies<sup>25</sup> for births and deaths registrations. It has desk instructions for staff on the steps to take to protect confidentiality. ONS told us that the published aggregate statistics at national or regional level are not usually disclosive. It said that it would suppress the counts for live births for tabulations or ad hoc data requests if necessary to protect confidentiality. Stillbirth counts are also suppressed when too small, for example when disaggregated by parental age, and type of registration.
- 3.14 The ONS Microdata Release Panel must agree requests from approved researchers for access to record level data. The researchers must also sign data access agreements.
- 3.15 Users, including those within local government, told us that they find the disclosure control policy a barrier to accessing the data they need. We suggest that ONS review its disclosure control policy to explore the feasibility of providing more data for small area geographies.

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<sup>25</sup> [www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme\\_health/ConfidentialityBirth&Death.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_health/ConfidentialityBirth&Death.pdf)



## 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.**

- 3.16 The birth statistics are produced from information collected via administrative processes. The registration of births by local registrars was computerised in 1993. Before this the forms were received and processed by hand. GRO with ONS began to implement a web-based system in 2006 but encountered performance problems with half of the registrars reverting to the previous electronic system while the problem was being resolved. The new system (RON) was fully implemented by July 2009.
- 3.17 ONS advises GRO on the development of the RON system. A project is underway to determine the changes required to accommodate revisions to the *Population Statistics Act*. ONS told us that this presents an opportunity to improve the validation checks in RON, as well as the production of new data tables and analyses. It will no longer be necessary to estimate true birth order using data from the General Lifestyle Survey. ONS currently has to estimate 'true birth order' as information at registration under the legislation can only be collected about previous live births and stillbirths occurring in marriage.

## 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.**

- 3.18 VSOB has a high level business plan that describes the main outputs for which it is responsible, the resources available, as well as a more detailed work plan. ONS's management board monitors the outputs at its quarterly meetings.
- 3.19 The ONS database system, Model 204, has been in use since 1993 and holds other life events statistics such as the death and cancer registration records, as well as the live and still births. An internal review identified that the system no longer meets business needs, and ONS is currently considering a replacement system.
- 3.20 VSOB complies with ONS's organisational policies relating to staff recruitment, training and development.

## Principle 8: Frankness and accessibility

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

- 3.21 ONS gives information about quality in *Births Metadata* and the SQRs. It also explains the various statistical methods used. Further definitional information is given in the Excel workbooks and ONS has published a *Frequently Asked Questions* document. The *Cohort Fertility* package provides clear guidance to users on the interpretation of the statistics which the Assessment team considers an example of good practice.
- 3.22 ONS accompanies the birth statistics with commentary highlighting the main findings and illustrating key points using charts. However it gives little explanation of the reasons for the patterns in births and the titles for several of the Excel packages are unclear. During the course of this assessment ONS launched a new website. On the old website the births outputs - the statistical releases and accompanying background information - were all accessible from one web page. The new website currently presents each output on a separate page. As a result we found it much more difficult to locate the range of statistical material about births. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should improve the releases so that: a) the commentary aids user interpretation of the statistics; b) signposting to the metadata is given, and c) users can easily identify and access the information relevant to their needs<sup>26</sup> (Requirement 3). We suggest that in meeting this requirement ONS should consider the points detailed in annex 2.
- 3.23 The birth statistics data tables are in Excel format to support re-use and further analysis. Record-level data are available to approved researchers, and ONS produces more disaggregated tables on request, subject to disclosure control. We suggest that ONS make clear to users how they can apply for access to disaggregated or record-level births data.
- 3.24 The bulletins and table packages present statistics for England and Wales combined with a limited amount of information at local authority level. Several users from local and central government told us that they would prefer to have the statistics for England and for Wales presented to the same level of detail as is currently given for England and Wales combined, reflecting the devolved nature of policy responsibilities. We suggest that ONS review the contents of the statistical bulletins and table packages with a view to meeting user requirements in this area.

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<sup>26</sup> In relation to Principle 8, Practices 2 and 4 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.**

3.25 The requirements for this Protocol are covered elsewhere in this report.

## 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.**

- 3.26 ONS told us that it releases the birth statistics as soon as possible after the data have been quality assured for each year. It publishes provisional quarterly statistics three to four months after the availability of the complete dataset. By separating the reporting of the birth statistics into packages ONS brought forward the release of the first sets of information from December to July.
- 3.27 ONS announces the release of each output in advance through the National Statistics Publication Hub and publishes a timetable of releases for twelve months ahead.
- 3.28 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.
- 3.29 ONS publishes pre-release access lists alongside the statistical releases. There are between three and 23 recipients on each list, varying according to the particular topics. *Parents' country of birth* is the longest as it is released alongside related migration publications from the Home Office and Department for Work and Pensions.
- 3.30 The responsible statistician's name and contact information is given in each statistical bulletin.

### **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.**

- 3.31 ONS has published its *Statement of Administrative Sources*<sup>27</sup> which sets out the sources of information for the births statistics and the related products. However the Statement doesn't provide specific information in two areas required in the *Code of Practice*: on quality audits and procedures for taking account of the implications for official statistics when changes to administrative systems are contemplated. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should review its *Statement of Administrative Sources* to ensure that it covers all the elements of the *Code of Practice*<sup>28</sup> (Requirement 4).

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/the-national-statistics-standard/code-of-practice/statement-of-administrative-sources/index.html>

<sup>28</sup> 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 ONS birth 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.

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|---------------------|---|
| <b>Suggestion 1</b> | Seek more opportunities to meet users of birth statistics face to face (para 3.3).  |
| <b>Suggestion 2</b> | Signpost users to the birth statistics in the other UK countries in each statistical bulletin (para 3.12).  |
| <b>Suggestion 3</b> | Review the disclosure control policy to explore the feasibility of providing more data for small area geographies (para 3.15).  |
| <b>Suggestion 4</b> | Consider the points detailed in annex 2, in seeking to improve the statistical releases (para 3.22).  |
| <b>Suggestion 5</b> | Make clear to users how they can apply for access to disaggregated or record level births data (para 3.23).   |
| <b>Suggestion 6</b> | Review the contents of the statistical bulletins and table packages with a view to meeting user requirements for separate statistics for England and for Wales (para 3.24). |

## Annex 2: Compliance with Standards for Statistical Releases

A2.1 In October 2010, the Statistics Authority issued a statement on *Standards for Statistical Releases*<sup>29</sup>. Whilst this is not part of the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*, the Authority regards it as advice that will promote both understanding and compliance with the Code. In relation to the statistical releases associated with birth 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 The naming of some of the Excel packages does not give a clear indication of the contents, for example, *Characteristics of Birth 1* and *Characteristics of Birth 2*.

A2.4 The titles of the statistical bulletins give the coverage (England and Wales) of the statistics and the year to which the statistics relate. The releases don't state specifically that they are annual releases but do refer to annual data. The releases don't state that the statistics are compiled annually, although this is described in the summary quality report.

A2.5 All the releases use the standard logos, give the name of the publishing organisation and the details of the lead statistician. The releases give a brief outline of the content of the release, although for *Parents' Country of Birth* this is very brief and just repeats the title in a sentence. The opening paragraphs in each release do not state explicitly that the latest year presented is new and that no statistics have been revised.

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

A2.6 Each release has a paragraph that sets out the main findings. Charts and tables illustrate the main trends. The text is straightforward with the main technical terms explained in the text or a glossary. *Cohort Fertility* handles a technical subject in a clear way, but does not explain the meaning of 'cohort' early enough in the release. The text in each release focuses on the main trends and presents information on a number of the main demographic variables e.g. parental age, area, country of birth of parents, type of registration (jointly/married, sole etc), but the analysis rarely examines several variables at a time. *Parents Country of Birth* uses other statistical sources in examining variations in childbearing patterns for women born outside the UK compared with those born in the UK. ONS has developed an easy-to-use online comparison tool for *Baby Names*<sup>30</sup> and an interactive mapping tool for births<sup>31</sup> that could be applied in other settings.

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html>

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/HTMLDocs/dvc11/babyname.html>

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/HTMLDocs/dvc10/FertilityMap.html>



### **Use language that is impartial, objective and professionally sound**

A2.7 The text is impartial and is evidence-based. Descriptions of trends and changes over the period are sound.

### **Include information about the context and likely uses**

A2.8 The releases tend not to refer to the findings in other birth statistical releases. ONS extended the commentary in the summary release, *Births and Deaths in England and Wales 2010*, to set out the main trends for both births and deaths in line with new corporate guidance on commentary. The release also described the main users and uses of the statistics. Only a few of the birth statistical releases include additional contextual information; for example, *Parents' Country of Birth* relates variations in population data and birth rates by parental country of birth to migration patterns.

### **Include, or link to, appropriate metadata**

A2.9 *Births Metadata* gives detailed information about the collection (registration) process and issues relating to the quality of the data, however most of the releases fail to refer to it. Some of the releases do signpost users to the *Frequently Asked Questions* document. *Characteristics of birth* and *Cohort Fertility* give links to equivalent data for Scotland and Northern Ireland but the other releases omit these.

## Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A3.1 This assessment was conducted from March to September 2011.

A3.2 The Assessment team – Penny Babb and Jill Barelli – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of ONS in March. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 3 May. 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 21 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Local government	8
Central government	5
Academic	4
NHS	1
Private sector	1
International organisations	2

A3.5 Users were generally satisfied with the statistics. However there were some areas where users would like to receive more information or to have the statistics published in a more timely way, for example, at a lower level of geography or available in a way that enables user-defined geographies, and other information such as ethnicity. Several users said that they found it difficult to find the statistics that they wanted because of ONS's website or imprecise titles. Users were content with the team's response to queries but were unaware of other user consultations. Several users in central and local government expressed interest in having the birth statistics presented separately for England and for Wales, reflecting the devolved nature of the policy responsibilities.

### Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document



