



Background Quality Report:
“Children’s Social Care Statistics for Northern
Ireland”
and
“Quarterly Child Protection Statistics for Northern
Ireland”
Assessment by the author

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Date: August 2021

Summary:

The following Background Quality Report sets out the ways in which these Official Statistics releases produced by Community Information Branch comply with the pillars and principles contained in the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#). The Pillars are [Trustworthiness](#), [Quality](#) and [Value](#), and the meaning behind each pillar and their underlying statements are included.

Abbreviations:

CIB – Community Information Branch

DSF – Delegated Statutory Functions

DoH – Department of Health

IAD – Information Analysis Directorate

HSC – Health and Social Care

NISRA – Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

Trustworthiness

“Trustworthiness is a product of the people, systems and processes within organisations that enable and support the production of statistics and data.

Trustworthiness comes from the organisation that produces statistics and data being well led, well managed and open, and the people who work there being impartial and skilled in what they do.”

T1: Honesty and integrity

“People in organisations that release statistics should be truthful, impartial and independent, and meet consistent standards of behaviour that reflect the wider public good.”

Statisticians in Community Information Branch (CIB) produce, manage and disseminate statistics for the maximum benefit, in an impartial manner that is free of political or personal interests and they adhere to the values expressed in the code of practice that, additionally, align to those of the wider NISRA community.

T2: Independent decision making and leadership

“Organisations should assign a Chief Statistician/Head of Profession for Statistics who upholds and advocates the standards of the Code, strives to improve statistics and data for the public good, and challenges their inappropriate use.”

Community Information Branch sits within the Information Analysis Directorate (IAD), headed up by the Head of Profession for Statistics within Department of Health (DoH) NI. The Head of Profession is ultimately responsible for the statistics produced by the department and that it complies with the standards of the Code.

T3: Orderly release

“Organisations should commit to releasing their statistics in an open and transparent manner that promotes public confidence.”

The “Children’s Social Care Statistics” and “Quarterly Child Protection Statistics” are Official Statistics and preannounced on the [national statistical release calendar](#). In addition, the Department of Health [Statistical Release Calendar](#) provides twelve months advance notice of all Official Statistics releases, including the publications relevant to this document. In the majority of cases, the target publication deadlines are met. However, in the event of a change to a pre-announced release date, the new date is announced as soon as this is known.

The Minister, limited, relevant policy officials and the press office have 24 hours pre-release access to the reports prior to publication. A list of all officials receiving pre-release access is published alongside the reports.

T4: Transparent processes and management

“Organisations should have effective business processes and appropriate resources to support their statistical functions and be open about their plans, priorities and progress.”

The statistical information returns used to produce these publications are submitted quarterly/annually by Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts. Annual returns refer to the year ending 31 March. Submission deadlines are agreed with the HSC Board on an annual basis. Delayed submissions are usually due to a lack of resources or validation issues.

On receipt of the information returns, the statistics require approximately 4 weeks of working time for statistical staff to produce, plus a small amount of time for senior staff oversight in the case of quarterly “Child Protection and Referral Statistics”. In the case of the annual statistical bulletin, statistical staff require approximately 8 weeks of working time, plus a small amount of senior oversight to produce the statistics.

“Children’s Social Care Statistics” is always published within a year of the reference period. The “Quarterly Child Protection Statistics” are usually published within two months of the reference period to which the data relates.

T5: Professional capability

“People producing statistics should be appropriately skilled, trained and supported in their roles and professional development.”

All CIB staff go through a lengthy induction programme to ensure they are skilled and gain the appropriate knowledge of their role. NISRA corporate functions provide additional oversight, ensuring staff are fully trained on the relevant procedures, legislation and regulations as well as best practice methods.

T6: Data governance

“Organisations should look after people’s information securely and manage data in ways that are consistent with relevant legislation and serve the public good.”

Annual data governance training is mandatory for all staff to ensure data is managed in accordance to relevant legislation.

The statistical information returns used for these publications are predefined MS Excel templates which collect aggregate information and therefore do not include personal information. However, suppression is applied where appropriate.

Data are held on a network that is only accessible to the statisticians who need access. The [DOH Statistical Charter](#) contains a ‘Statement on Confidentiality and Security.’

Quality

“Quality means that statistics fit their intended uses, are based on appropriate data and methods, and are not materially misleading.

Quality requires skilled professional judgement about collecting, preparing, analysing and publishing statistics and data in ways that meet the needs of people who want to use the statistics.”

Q1: Suitable data sources

“Statistics should be based on the most appropriate data to meet intended uses. The impact of any data limitations for use should be assessed, minimised and explained.”

Information presented in “Children’s Social Care Statistics” and “Quarterly Child Protection Statistics” derives from the Children Order Statistical Returns and Delegated Statutory Functions (DSF) Returns provided by each of the five HSC Trusts in Northern Ireland to the HSC Board and data collected directly by CIB.

The Children Order Returns are aggregated statistical counts introduced in December 1998, relating to Child Protection, Looked After Children, Children in Need as well as Day Care provision for children under 12 years old. Breakdowns by age, gender, ethnicity and religion are provided where the data permits. A rationalisation of the data collection, has led to a gradual process of utilising the DSF returns over the children order returns. The purpose of this rationalisation is to ease the burden on data producers.

The data is held on administrative systems within the HSC Trusts (mainly SOS CARE and PARIS), however some returns do require manual input/manipulation. An extensive exercise was conducted to identify how to enhance the systems and remove reliance of manual input. Implementation of this work is expected to begin in 2023 with the rollout of the regional health system, Encompass.

Q2: Sound methods

“Producers of statistics and data should use the best available methods and recognised standards, and be open about their decisions.”

“Children’s Social Care Statistics” and “Quarterly Child Protection Statistics” contain key quality information in respect of the specific content of the statistical output. This information is provided in the definitions, notes to tables or notes to editors.

Q3: Assured quality

“Producers of statistics and data should explain clearly how they assure themselves that statistics and data are accurate, reliable, coherent and timely.”

The statistical information returns used in the production of these publications are a census of the cohort involved, and as such, coverage is inclusive of all children

involved. As a census rather than a survey, no estimates are produced, and issues of sampling error and confidence intervals are not relevant.

HSC Trusts are allowed several weeks to update relevant internal management information systems from which the Children Order/DSF returns are produced.

Where relevant, quality assurance checks are undertaken by information officers in both the HSC Trusts and HSC Board before the returns are forwarded to CIB. Once with CIB, statisticians check the returns for internal consistency. The external consistency of the returns will also be assessed, for example the relationship between child protection referrals, investigations and registrations. Historic trends within the data are also examined and where appropriate explanations sought from the HSC Trust in question.

Previous data are revised if necessary and appropriate. All revisions are conducted in line with the [Statement on Revisions and Errors](#) found in the DOH Statistics Charter.

Value

“Value means that the statistics and data are useful, easy to access, remain relevant, and support understanding of important issues.

Value includes improving existing statistics and creating new ones through discussion and collaboration with stakeholders, and being responsible and efficient in the collection, sharing and use of statistical information.”

V1: Relevance to users

“Users of statistics and data should be at the centre of statistical production; their needs should be understood, their views sought and acted on, and their use of statistics supported.”

Community Information Branch ensures that the “Children’s Social Care Statistics” and “Quarterly Child Protection Statistics” publications remain relevant to users in a number of ways; it has a close working relationship with stakeholders within the DoH, arm’s length bodies and with the producers of the returns, in addition feedback received through readership. This helps to shape the information collected and the overall content of these publications. In this way the needs of user communities are continuously monitored, and if appropriate and practical, acted upon.

Information from the publications are used by a wide variety of users for a range of purposes. The Northern Ireland Assembly devolved administration and the DoH (statutory users) use the information to support the formulation and evaluation of children social care policy, to benchmark performances within and between HSC Trusts in Northern Ireland, for Ministerial briefing and to respond to Private Office enquires and Parliamentary/Assembly questions.

Private companies may use these publications to monitor and target social care services for children (for example day care facilities), academics for research and other government Departments and Agencies to inform cross-cutting policy and strategy development.

V2: Accessibility

“Statistics and data should be equally available to all, not given to some people before others. They should be published at a sufficient level of detail and remain publicly available.”

The Minister, limited, relevant policy officials and the press office have 24 hours pre-release access to the reports prior to publication. A list of all officials receiving pre-release access is published alongside the reports.

The publication contains contact details for further information. Additional ad-hoc analysis, where appropriate, may be provided on request.

The publications are published in accordance to best practice for Accessibility.

V3: Clarity and insight

“Statistics and data should be presented clearly, explained meaningfully and provide authoritative insights that serve the public good.”

Guidance documents detailing the coverage, definitions, completion instructions and validations to enable HSC Trusts to complete the statistical information returns are included with the “Children’s Social Care Statistics” publication and links to definitions are included with the “Quarterly Child Protection Statistics”.

The statistical publications are available to download free of charge in PDF format from the [Department of Health website](#).

The statistical tables are also available to download in MS Excel format and some in CSV, suitable for further analysis.

All data published are comparable. Comparisons can be made over time and publications are available from quarter ending 31 March 2010 onwards for quarterly publications, and from 31 March 2002 for annual publications.

Inter country comparisons can be difficult as social care operates within differing legislative frameworks across the devolved administrations. However in recent publications, high level Child Protection and Looked After Children figures from each of the UK jurisdictions have been compared.

V4: Innovation and improvement

“Statistics producers should be creative and motivated to improve statistics and data, recognising the potential to harness technological advances for the development of all parts of the production and dissemination process.”

The DSF returns that these publications are based on, have historically been manual returns. The project “Children’s Return Project” was established in 2019 to assess the possibility of enhancing the HSC Trust administrative systems to enable more returns to be captured electronically without the need for manual counts or manipulations. Findings from this work will be implemented with the rollout of Encompass as new overarching HSC Trust administrative system for Northern Ireland.

V5: Efficiency and proportionality

“Statistics and data should be published in forms that enable their reuse. Producers should use existing data wherever possible and only ask for more where justified.”

Currently CIB do not have access to HSC Trust information systems therefore Information Officers working in HSC Trusts must provide CIB with the data requested. All of the information is submitted electronically.

The returns are also used for internal management information and regional commissioning monitoring, and would be produced whether requested by CIB or not.