



Ministry  
of Justice



# **Quality statement - Family court statistics**

Ministry of Justice

26 March 2020

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## Introduction

The Family Court Statistics Quarterly (FCSQ) bulletin is published in compliance with the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) quality strategy for statistics, which states that information should be provided as to how the bulletin meets user needs:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/ministry-of-justice-statistics-policy-and-procedures>

The MoJ aims to provide a high quality and transparent statistical service covering the whole of the justice system to promote understanding and trust. This statement sets out our policies for producing quality statistical outputs and the information we will provide to maintain our users' understanding and trust.

## Core Objectives

We aim to deliver a service in line with our four core objectives:

- Provision of data which are accessible, consistent and fully documented.
- Production of statistics which clearly communicate the story and meet users' needs.
- Provision of analysis which is timely and based on robust methodology.
- Building capacity, capability and engagement.

Trust in statistics is important as statistics are fundamental to good government, to the delivery of public services and to decision making in all sectors of society, Statistics provide the parliament and the public with a window on society and the economy, and on the work and performance of government.

Assessing the quality of statistics is not a one-off exercise. It must be done on a continuous basis. This document explains by what measures we will assess the quality of our statistics, what users can expect us to do, and the information we will provide to users to aid them in making their own assessment of the quality of the statistics we produce.

As required by the Code of Practice for Official Statistics<sup>1</sup> and in line with the Government Statistics Services Quality Strategy and associated guidance<sup>2</sup>, we will measure and report on our quality using a framework based around European Statistical Systems (ESS) Dimensions of Quality<sup>3</sup>.

Statistical quality in the MoJ is defined as meeting users' needs with particular reference to the **relevance, accuracy, timeliness, accessibility, comparability and coherence** of the statistics collected, analysed and reported.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/policy-store/government-statistical-service-gss-quality-strategy/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/policy-store/government-statistical-service-gss-quality-strategy/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-catalogues/-/KS-02-18-142>

## Principle 1: Relevance

Relevance is the degree to which the statistics meets the current and potential needs of users.

The family court statistics published can help to understand the volumes of different types of activity and changes in these volumes over time (e.g. the number of cases starting by case type, the number of children involved in orders given etc), to give a sense of the workload faced by the family courts, the number of children affected and so on. Information on how long different cases take to progress through the court system are provided, which can be used to inform the public as to how long a divorce application is likely to take or whether case progression is improving or declining.

These statistics strive to be relevant across a range of users, and the family court statistics team routinely seeks out feedback from both internal and external users to enhance what is published. When a change is requested, we work with analytical colleagues and data providers to explore what is possible and whether the data available is fit for this purpose before any change is made.

We have introduced new series where user needs are known and evidence gaps can be reliably filled, for example a split between paper and digital divorce petitions. These figures were published for the first time to address user needs and meet public demand for quantitative evidence on this topic. Potential users have expressed demand for these figures through direct requests under the Freedom of Information Act, Parliamentary Questions, public discourse and our own engagement with users.

## Principle 2: Accuracy and Reliability

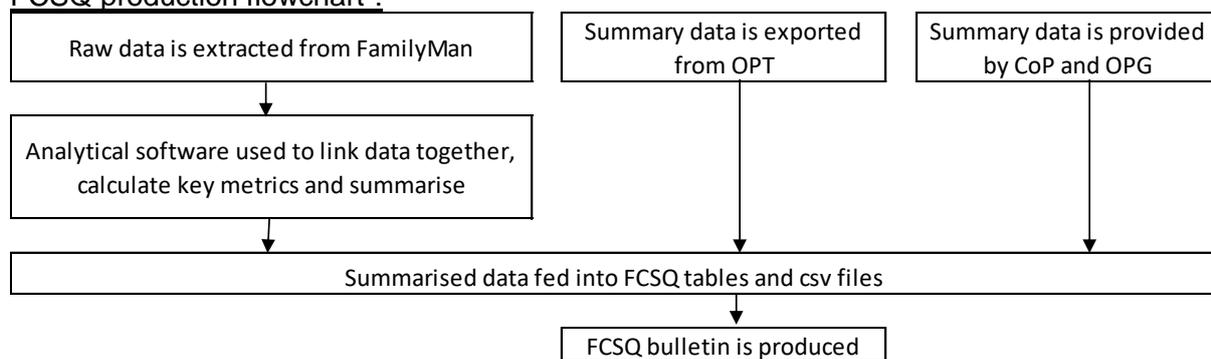
Accuracy is the closeness between an estimated result and the (unknown) true value.

Family court statistics are based on administrative data systems which have been established to facilitate the operational passage of a case through the court system.

Family court statistics are based on administrative datasets, usually set up to aid a case through the court system. We work with the owners of these datasets to understand how their systems work, how data is collected in these systems and how data is validated upon entry. We seek to understand how the data is used in an operational environment and how this may impact the statistics produced from these systems.

As data is extracted from these administrative systems and analysed to produce the published statistics, guidance from The Aqua Book<sup>4</sup> is used to ensure thorough quality assurance procedures are adhered to during the FCSQ production process:

### FCSQ production flowchart<sup>5</sup>:



Despite carrying out validation within the statistical processes following extraction, the data are subject to some inaccuracies inherent in any large-scale data recording system (e.g. mistyped data entries). However, the validation procedures detailed are felt to be proportionate in reliably minimising the impact that any errors may have on the published estimates.

### Quality assurance checks:

- Code used to extract and analyse data from FamilyMan has been double checked by an expert user of the system as well as other members of the Family Court Statistics team
- Summary data provided from external sources are sense checked against previous returns to ensure that the information provided is logical

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-aqua-book-guidance-on-producing-quality-analysis-for-government>

<sup>5</sup> OPT – One Performance Truth, HMCTS management information system, CoP – Court of Protection, OPG – Office of the Public Guardian

- We verify our data with timeseries available from unpublished management information held by Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service (HMCTS) where feasible and quality assurance checks are done within the team as the bulletin is developed
- Changes in system and procedures can lead to reporting discrepancies as courts may need time to adjust to new ways of working. When new practices are implemented, work is conducted alongside HMCTS to ensure that the data being received from each court is consistent and of acceptable quality before it is published.
- Once all publication products are ready, an analyst external to the Family Court Statistics team conducts a full set of quality assurance checks as set out in an established QA log, noting down any issues found to feed back to the team.
- Any subsequent corrections required prior to publication are actioned and if required any amendments required following publication are made – fully adhering to the departments revisions policy (see '[Revisions](#)').

Reliability is the closeness of early estimates to subsequent estimated values.

This publication and the data within it are published quarterly, with additional annual trends included in the publication released in March.

As FamilyMan is a live management information system, data extracted is correct at the time of extraction. Each quarter, full timeseries for tables reliant on this system are refreshed to account for any updates made after the point of extraction. As such, minor changes to more recent quarters are not unusual.

Further information concerning the way in which scheduled and unscheduled revisions are treated in the family court statistics publications can be found in the supporting guidance documentation available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-guide-to-family-court-statistics>

In accordance with the Code of Practice for Office Statistics, the MoJ is required to publish transparent guidance on its policy for revisions. A copy of this statement can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/ministry-of-justice-statistics-policy-and-procedures>

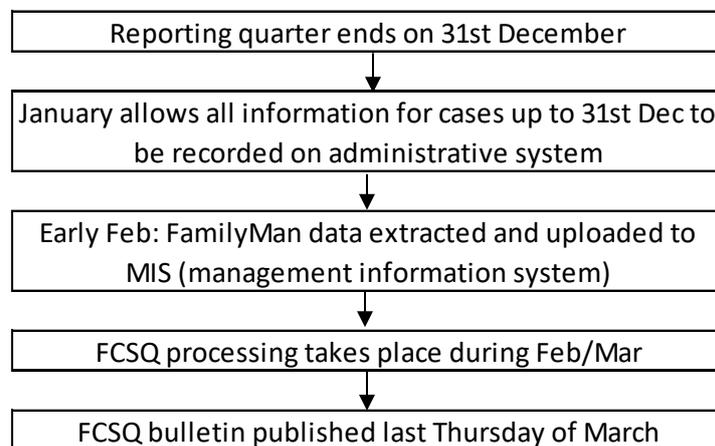
### Principle 3: Timeliness and Punctuality

Timeliness refers to the time gap between the publication date and the reference period for the statistics.

Each FCSQ release is published with a ‘time gap’ of around three months after the reference period. For example, statistics for October to December 2019 were published on 26 March 2020.

This ‘time gap’ is felt to be timely and allows us to strike a balance between the need to minimise the delay in releasing statistics and ensuring a robust and high-quality product. For example, the three-month gap allows for any late data returns, provides time for any amendments to initial monthly source data following validation and time for the analysis to be carried out, and a short period for the bulletin to be produced and quality assured as outlined above.

FCSQ process timeline (e.g. October to December bulletin):



Punctuality is the time lag between the actual and planned dates of publication for statistics.

Family Court statistics are published at quarterly intervals at 9:30am on a date which has been pre-announced 12-months in advance, in line with the GSS Code of Practice: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/announcements>

Any change to the pre-announced release date(s) would follow the approval of the Chief Statistician for the MoJ and we would explain clearly the reasons for the changes to users at the earliest opportunity.

## Principle 4: Accessibility and Clarity

Accessibility is the ease with which users can access the statistics and data.

The Family Court Statistics Quarterly release ensures that statistics regarding the family justice system caseloads are published together in a single quarterly series of National Statistical releases, available on the gov.uk official statistics calendar.

It comprises of both summary information, detailed data tables and 'open data' files to seek to address a range of users need alongside this technical guide document to aid users understanding.

Both this guide and each release includes contact details for the lead statistician and a team inbox for users to address any concerns. This inbox is routinely monitored and any queries are actioned as quickly as possible.

Published data tables are available in ODS (Open Document Spreadsheet) format as standard and low-level data which underpin all published data tools are available in csv format.

Justice Statistics Analytical Services is working towards ensuring compliance with the public sectors legal obligations to meet accessibility standards by September 2020.

Clarity refers to the quality and sufficiency of the commentary, illustrations, accompanying advice and technical details.

The commentary is written by professional statisticians and aims to be impartial, helping users put the figures into meaningful context. The bulletin is produced independently and figures are subject to strict pre-release access for essential individuals – no other access to statistics in their final form are made available prior to publication.

All technical terms, acronyms and definitions are explained in the bulletin itself (where appropriate), supporting footnotes in the published data tables and in the supporting guidance documentation.

All published data tools are supported by definitional and practical guidance to support users in making accurate and reliable use of the tool functionality.

## Principle 5: Comparability and Coherence

Comparability is the degree to which data can be compared over time, by region or another domain.

The administrative systems that underpin most of the family courts data are in operation across all criminal courts in England and Wales. The development and improvement of the underlying systems by HMCTS over time has and continues caused some discontinuities in series across the publication.

It is not possible to directly compare family court statistics to other jurisdictions and other countries family court systems. The statistics sourced from underlying administrative data reflect the family justice system processes and procedures that underpin it, as such any attempts to make comparison will not be on the same basis.

A variety of time series are used in the publication and largely related to the availability of reliable source data – where possible the longest time series is supplied. These changes in source data are flagged and caveated in ‘[Data sources](#)’ in the accompanying guide, as well as in the associated tables, charts and text where practicable, including notes of any variation in source and key events (e.g. policy changes) that may have affected a period.

As most of the time series are refreshed in full to pick up any historical changes, there may be minor changes made from quarter to quarter with the largest changes seen in the most recent quarters (usually 1-2 quarters before the most recent quarter). However, the trends seen in the data will not change as a result of the update.

Coherence is the degree to which the statistical processes that generate two or more outputs use the same concepts and harmonised methods.

From May 2019 HMCTS have published the latest management information<sup>6</sup> on the workload and timeliness for criminal, civil and family courts, and tribunals. This includes receipts, disposals, outstanding cases as well as estimates of timeliness.

These figures reflect the data held on the case management system, and hence have some definitional and timing differences from the official statistics. They are subject to the data quality issues associated with large administrative systems, including the late reporting of cases and regular updating of case details, which can lead to the figures for previous months’ being revised each publication. These revisions are generally small and do not usually change the overall picture of performance.

The official statistics provide a more comprehensive view of a range of statistics related to court systems, including HMCTS performance, putting the figures in context and analysing the key aspects. Users are advised to use the official statistics

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/hmcts-management-information>

for most purposes and to use the published management information only to understand the very latest high-level position.