

Child Support Statistics Quality Review 2001

This is the first review to be completed under the National Statistics Social and Welfare theme.

Following consultation with users and an in-depth analysis of the processes involved in producing the statistics, it was felt that the statistics are of high quality and meet most of the requirements of users. A number of recommendations for improvements have nevertheless been agreed and will be acted upon.

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National Statistics are produced to high professional standards set out in the National Statistics Code of Practice. They undergo regular quality assurance reviews to ensure that they meet customer needs. They are produced free from any political interference.

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NATIONAL STATISTICS QUALITY REVIEWS

Background

The White Paper *Building Trust in Statistics* set out the framework for quality assuring National Statistics. A key component of the framework is:

“a programme of thorough reviews of key outputs, at least every five years, with the involvement of methodologists and outside expertise, as appropriate.”

This programme of quality reviews is an important way of ensuring that National Statistics and other official statistical outputs are fit for purpose and that we are continuing to improve the quality and value of these outputs.

Further advice and information on the review programme is available from the Review Programme Management Team.

Tel. 020 7533 6208/6298 or e-mail ns.quality.reviews.team.ldn@ons.gov.uk

Report to the National Statistician

Introduction

The Child Support Agency (CSA) Quarterly Statistical Summary (QSS) covers cases in Great Britain Its main purpose is to:

- give summary analyses which show the key features of the Child Support Agency (CSA) caseload and how it compares with earlier periods;
- provide a menu of the types of analysis which can be produced from the QSS data set.

The CSA was launched on 5th April 1993, as an executive agency of the Department of Social Security (DSS). The CSA was given the role of implementing the 1991 Child Support Act and subsequent legislation with the purpose of ensuring that parents who live apart both maintain their children whenever they can afford to do so. The agency is responsible for tracing non-resident parents, calculating how much they should pay and, if required, collecting and enforcing payments.

Child support is currently assessed by a formula, which takes into account certain amounts of exempt and/or protected income or housing costs and benefits in payment.

The CSA QSS is drawn from a 5% sample of all 'live' Child Support Agency cases which is extracted quarterly on the last calendar day of the appropriate month.

Scope of the review

The review aimed:

- to discover whether the outputs meet the requirements of users;
- to determine whether the methods employed are appropriate and in line with best practice; and
- to produce an action plan that addresses shortcomings in the outputs and potential improvements.

The review was overseen by a project board with much of the investigative work carried out by a review team. The project board's responsibilities were to:

- oversee and advise on the work programme for quality reviews of National Statistics produced by DSS;
- advise the review team on the emerging review findings;
- approve the review team's report; and
- prepare an annual report to the National Statistician with recommendations for a quality improvement programme based on the reviews.

The project board comprised:

- Fred Johnson, DSS (chair)
- Jason Bradbury, DSS
- Martin McGill, DSS
- Mike Noble, Oxford University
- Caroline Bustard, ONS (correspondence member)

The review team comprised:

- Katie Dodd, DSS
- Carol Jenkinson, DSS
- Judith Ridley, DSS

Their responsibilities were to:

- undertake an end-to-end scrutiny of the production process for the projects under review;
- highlight areas where improvements should be made or where further investigation is required;
- draw up an action plan for the project board's consideration; and
- contribute to the evaluation of completed questionnaires.

The review programme team at the Office for National Statistics were kept informed of progress and provided advice and guidance. Further detail on the review's organisation can be found in the Project Initiation Document (PID) at Annex A. (note that the review was set up to look at three projects concurrently: Income Support Statistics, Jobseeker's Allowance Statistics and Child Support Agency Statistics; the PID reflects this.)

Consultation on customers' needs

The user consultation was underpinned by a questionnaire that was sent to around 200 users of Jobseeker's Allowance, Income Support and Child Support Agency statistics. There were replies from 49; apart from DSS users these included:

- University of Edinburgh
- Lancashire County Council
- Employment Service
- National Council for One Parent Families
- University of York
- Department for Education and Employment
- Welfare Rights Service
- Scottish Executive
- Employment Service
- Derby City Council
- House of Commons
- Northern Ireland Department for Social Development
- Department of Health
- London School of Economics
- University of Glasgow
- University of Southampton
- Council of Mortgage Lenders

Six users who had expressed an interest in being interviewed were seen in person. The questionnaire sought opinion on:

- presentation;
- sufficiency of detail;
- accuracy;
- frequency and timeliness;
- accessibility; and
- user support.

Main findings

Sixty-two per cent of users felt that the statistics were well-presented and none felt they were poorly presented.

Forty-three per cent of users expressed a desire for **additional figures** not currently included.

Too little detail was complained of amongst 24% of users.

Nobody complained of too much detail.

Seventy-six per cent of users rated **accuracy** as either very or fairly reliable.

The explanation of **sampling error** was considered 'fairly easy' to understand by 33% of respondents, with 52% finding it 'very easy'. Ten per cent of respondents considered it 'not very easy', but nobody found it 'difficult'.

Thirty-three per cent of users had had difficulty **reconciling** the statistics with those from other sources.

Ten per cent of users required the statistics **monthly rather than quarterly**.

Timeliness was a concern for 19% of respondents. These respondents felt that the statistics were not published sufficiently soon after their reference date.

The most common means of receiving or accessing the statistics was paper (71%). Nineteen per cent received the statistics by email and 10% via either the internet or the DSS intranet.

Fifty-seven per cent of external users were aware that the statistics were available on the **internet**.

Thirty-three per cent of users needed to **cut and paste** the statistics into other documents.

While no users experienced 'great difficulty' obtaining answers to **queries**, 10% had had 'occasional difficulty'.

A complete listing of users' comments can be found at Annex C.

Methodology review

Examination of the production process involved detailed scrutiny of such issues as:

- the quality of incoming data and what was done to improve that quality;
- the cost-effectiveness of these improvements;
- the documentation available;
- whether there was back-up for key staff; and
- the robustness and timeliness of final figures.

The full process description can be found at Annex D.

Response to consultation and methodology review

User consultation and the review of methodology resulted in the following recommendations:

Short Term

Reduce the number of customers receiving hard copies of the QSS, thus improving timeliness and reducing cost.

Ensure that documentation is kept up to date and is reviewed regularly.

Establish a group of external users as an aid to communication (see *Future arrangements for consultation* below).

Long Term

Continue to negotiate with Affinity¹ to ensure that systemic undercounting is eliminated.

Review the content in the CSA QSS and include more figures based on the numbers of children involved in the caseload.

Ensure that customers know of the availability of district level statistics for CSA.

Improve the accuracy of data when new Data Warehouse² goes 'live', by extracting 100% of data.

Work towards improving timeliness.

Investigate the possibility of using fortnightly 100% Income Support scan to update non-resident parent benefit status.

1. The company responsible for the new Child Support Agency computer system.

2. An electronic data warehouse being developed by Affinity, to provide a single source of data encompassing all of the current systems within the Child Support Agency.

Future arrangements for consultation

The project board believed that there was a need for a group of external users with whom there was regular contact and who could rapidly be canvassed for views. Such a group would be useful for all departments in the Social and Welfare TWG in helping to improve the relevance of their data.

The main users of departmental data are the policy analysts within the departments, but there are others who will look at issues in a different way. Their needs can easily be met if good channels of communication are in place. The opportunity to explain the problems in data collection and the constraints within which government statistics operate would also be valuable.

Bringing 'outsiders' into the discussion may help us to understand the gaps in our information and, in some cases, fill gaps with information from other sources. The perspective of non-UK specialists in the field would improve our understanding of how best to move forward.

The Statistics User Council has been established for many years and supports subsidiary groups on Health, Transport, Finance, and so on. A conference or seminar might be sponsored jointly with the Council and a permanent user group set up as a result of such an event.

The Social and Welfare TWG will therefore approach the Council with a view to sponsoring a seminar on social and welfare statistics later this year, with the aims of:

- advertising what is available and highlighting its limitations;
- seeking views on gaps;
- finding out more about non-GSS data sources;
- helping us to firm up a coherent strategic plan; and
- forming a user group as an aid to communication.

Annex A

Project Initiation Document for the review of Income Support Statistics, Jobseeker's Allowance Statistics and Child Support Agency Statistics

Introduction

The government's 1999 White Paper "Building trust in statistics" included a commitment to assuring the quality of National Statistics and refers to a programme of thorough reviews of key outputs. The first "chunk" to be reviewed from the social and welfare theme comprises three DSS outputs: income support, jobseeker's allowance and child support statistics.

These outputs consist of quarterly statistics on the characteristics of either benefit claimants (in the case of income support and jobseeker's allowance) or customers of the Child Support Agency. Uses of the figures include policy formulation and costings, benefit expenditure and workload forecasting, and answering parliamentary questions and other ad hoc queries. They have a wide demand from both within government and beyond.

Aims of the review

The review aims:

- to discover whether the outputs meet the requirements of users;
- to determine whether the methods employed are appropriate and in line with best practice; and
- to produce an action plan that addresses shortcomings in the outputs and potential improvements.

Elements of the review

The review will involve a user consultation exercise and an examination of the processes involved in the production of the outputs.

The user consultation will be underpinned by a questionnaire that will be sent to known users of the statistics, both within and outside government. There will be follow-up interviews with a number of users. The questionnaire will ask users:

- how they use the statistics;
- how they rate the standard of presentation;
- whether there are additional statistics that they would like included;
- how they rate the reliability of the statistics, the clarity of explanations of the data's limitations, the ease with which they can obtain information from listed contacts, and the timeliness and frequency of publication; and
- their current, and their preferred, medium for receiving the publication.

Examination of the production process will involve detailed scrutiny of such issues as:

- the quality of incoming data and what is done to improve that quality;
- the cost-effectiveness of these improvements;
- the documentation available;
- whether there is back-up for key staff; and
- the robustness and timeliness of final figures.

It is hoped that this will identify a number of potential improvements or savings in the processes.

Organisation of people involved

The review will be overseen by a project board with much of the investigative work carried out by review teams. The terms of reference of the project board are as follows:

- Oversee and advise on the work programme for quality reviews of National Statistics produced by DSS.
- Approve the project teams' reports on reviewed outputs.
- Prepare an annual report to the National Statistician with recommendations for a quality improvement programme based on the reviews.

The project board will comprise:

- Fred Johnson, DSS (chair)
- Jason Bradbury, DSS
- Martin McGill, DSS
- Mike Noble, Oxford University
- Caroline Bustard, ONS (correspondence member)

Mike Noble will provide an impartial, non-DSS assessment of the quality of the processes involved.

The review team will comprise:

- Katie Dodd, DSS
- Carol Jenkinson, DSS
- Judith Ridley, DSS

Their responsibilities are as follows:

- Undertake an end-to-end scrutiny of the production process for the three projects under review.
- Highlight areas where improvements should be made or where further investigation is required.
- Draw up an action plan for the project board's consideration.
- Contribute to the evaluation of completed questionnaires.

The review programme team at the Office for National Statistics will be kept informed of progress and will provide advice and guidance.

Annex B

USER CONSULTATION - QUESTIONNAIRE

Questionnaire/interview results

Questionnaire responses

1. Which of the following statistics produced by ASD's Information Centre do you use (please tick):

| | |
|-----------------------|----|
| Income Support | 37 |
| Jobseeker's Allowance | 33 |
| Child Support Agency | 21 |

2. How do you rate the way the statistics are presented?

| | CSA |
|----------------------|-----|
| Well presented | 13 |
| Reasonably presented | 7 |
| Poorly presented | 0 |
| No opinion | 1 |

3. Are there any other figures that are not currently produced by the Information Centre that you would like to see produced in the future?

| | CSA |
|------------|-----|
| Yes | 9 |
| No | 5 |
| Don't know | 5 |

4. If yes to Q3, please specify below:

See "Further detailed comments" below.

5. Are there any areas where there is too little detail?

| | CSA |
|------------|-----|
| Yes | 5 |
| No | 9 |
| Don't know | 5 |

6. If yes to Q5, please specify below:

None.

7. Are there any areas where there is too much detail?

| | CSA |
|------------|-----|
| Yes | 0 |
| No | 18 |
| Don't know | 3 |

8. If yes to Q7, please specify below:

See "Further detailed comments" below.

9. How do you rate the reliability of the statistics?

| | CSA |
|---------------------|-----|
| Very reliable | 9 |
| Fairly reliable | 7 |
| Not very reliable | 2 |
| Not at all reliable | 0 |
| No opinion | 3 |

10. All IS/JSA/CSA statistics are accompanied by an explanation of the sampling error. How would you rate these explanations?

| | CSA |
|-----------------------------|-----|
| Very easy to understand | 11 |
| Fairly easy to understand | 7 |
| Not very easy to understand | 2 |
| Difficult to understand | 0 |
| Don't know | 1 |

11. Have you had any problems reconciling the statistics from the Information Centre with those from other sources?

| | CSA |
|-----|-----|
| Yes | 7 |
| No | 8 |

| | |
|------------|---|
| Don't know | 6 |
|------------|---|

12. If yes to Q11, please specify below:

See "Further detailed comments" below.

13. How frequently would you prefer the statistics to be available? (They are currently available quarterly.)

| | CSA |
|------------------------|-----|
| Monthly | 2 |
| Quarterly | 18 |
| Annually | 0 |
| Other (please specify) | 0 |
| No opinion | 1 |

14. How do you rate the timeliness of the statistics?

| | CSA |
|--|-----|
| They are published sufficiently soon after the date to which they relate | 13 |
| They are not published sufficiently soon after the date to which they relate | 4 |
| Don't know | 4 |

15. How do you receive or access the statistics?

| | CSA |
|------------------------|-----|
| Paper copy | 15 |
| Email | 4 |
| Internet | 0 |
| DSS intranet | 2 |
| Other (please specify) | 0 |

16. Were you aware that these statistics are available on the internet?

| | CSA |
|------------|-----|
| Yes | 12 |
| No | 8 |
| Don't know | 0 |

17. Do you need to cut and paste them into other documents?

| | CSA |
|------------|-----|
| Yes | 7 |
| No | 10 |
| Don't know | 3 |

18. How easily can you obtain answers to queries about the statistics from the contacts listed in the publication?

| | CSA |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Easily | 11 |
| With occasional difficulty | 2 |
| With great difficulty | 0 |
| Not tried | 7 |

19. Have you any other comments on the IS/JSA/CSA statistics provided by ASD's Information Centre?

See "Further detailed comments" below.

20. If you would you be interested in discussing further any of the issues raised by this questionnaire, please complete the following:

| <u>Name (and organisation if not DSS)</u> | <u>Telephone number</u> |
|---|-------------------------|
| | |

Annex C

User consultation – User comments

(plus Information Centre recommendations/responses in bold)

A number of users commented further on their desire for additional statistics or more detail, as well as their problems reconciling the figures with those from other sources; their comments can be found below (“Further detailed comments”). In summary, the Information Centre’s ability to respond to requests for more information is dependent upon whether additional data need collecting in order to generate the required statistics.

In the short term the inclusion of extra data fields in the IC’s extract taken from the Child Support Computer System is not feasible. However, in the long term, the new computer system and data warehouse¹ that is to be introduced in line with Child Support Reforms will certainly allow the collection of more comprehensive data by the IC.

Responses to user comments are included below (against the comments themselves).

Are there any other figures that are not currently produced by the Information Centre that you would like to see produced in the future?

Speed of payment broken down into individual methods of collection; method of collection split between new cases and current to identify take-up of preferred methods; average number of children per PWC (currently published in National Statistics); there is clearly large numbers of maintenance beneficiaries on the IS data set that do not appear on the CSA data, it may be an idea to flag this information in the CSA publication.

Possible data on people who have been assessed but did not get an assessment, i.e. suspended/closed cases.

Response: Analysis by method of collection can be done, but, lack of demand dictates that analysis of this kind is carried out on an ad hoc basis only. We will offer a standard monthly, or quarterly ad hoc service to customers on a regular basis to customers who require it. Information will be sent out without prompting.

The case for including tables giving a breakdown of those cases that are suspended in the QSS, in addition to removing them from ‘live and assessed’ cases, will need to be considered further, as it will obviously impact on all users’ perception of our definition of ‘live’ cases.

¹ An electronic data warehouse being developed by Affinity, to provide a single source of data encompassing all of the current systems within the Child Support Agency

Programs incorporating ‘Direct Data Exchange’ will assist the process.

A new section was included in August 2000 QSS that focuses on qualifying children. Average numbers will be considered for inclusion.

The CSA QSS includes only 'live' and assessed cases. Inclusion of closed and suspended cases could be included in future publications. This type of analysis however, is available immediately on an ad hoc basis.

Given the new corporate agenda it would be useful to see more contextual material from other benefits. i.e. the number of lone parents on Income Support.

Reponse: The new client-based approach is already catered for in the client group analysis publication Children and Families. The CSA QSS already includes benefit status of the PWC and NRP.

Table 3.2 currently gives ranges of payments to parents/persons with care grouped according to their main benefit income source. However, it would be useful if the figures could be used to calculate the mean and median received by each lone parent group. At present, you can identify modal groupings, but it is hard to see who receives above average payments, the proportion receiving nil payment, who will gain from imminent reforms etc.

Also, another table could attempt to break down persons with care into lone parent groups (divorced, separated, single, lone fathers). Also need a breakdown of length of time it takes to receive payments. Data by child rather than by parent. It is impossible to make comparisons with other countries, because we do not have routine information by child, e.g. amount of award. It may be easier to do this when the assessment formula changes. In the meantime, it would be useful to know how many children, of what ages, etc are due child support.

Response: We will consider including figures that show average payment as well as the number receiving above and below the average. The IC recognises the value of providing numbers by child, rather than, or in addition to, numbers by parent. We will consider all of these options, although it may prove to be impractical.

The suggestion of breaking down length of time to receive payments is not clear enough to take any action on. The length of time for receipt of payment from NRP to PWC is impossible to establish in direct pay cases. The length of time for payments received by the CSA from the NRP will be included in future publications, although it can be carried out on an ad hoc basis immediately.

There are guidelines in place, stipulating that monies received from an NRP by the CSA must be forwarded to a PWC within certain time limits. Therefore there would be no added value in including this analysis in the QSS.

It would be useful to have more percentages and counts adjacent as I'm always having to get the calculator out!

Response: We will do this.

It would be helpful to know more about the overall responsibility of NRPs for children (i.e. own children living with NRP and with the PWC; own children living with new partner; new partner's own children for whom NRP takes responsibility for).

Response: We will do this in response to ad hoc requests.

Have you had any problems reconciling the statistics from the Information Centre with those from other sources?

FMA reports on total caseload but cannot be reconciled to any statistics reported in QSS (based on samples): no information from FMS seems to be used which is puzzling.

Previously had problems reconciling to Child Support Computer System, because of the reliability of Child Support Computer System data. Difficulty due to the well-documented problems of reconciling local data produced by CSA with that taken from Child Support Computer System. Specific problem in reconciling Income Support and CSA data to get the total number of Income Support Lone Parents receiving maintenance – there are some Income Support Lone Parents in receipt that do not appear in the CSA data, thus the CSA statistics underestimate the figure.

A recent study carried out by ASD3 to determine Income Support Lone Parents receiving maintenance; found some discrepancies between Income Support and CSA due mainly to cases being on one system and not on the other; main problem was Income Support net cases – NRP pays direct to PWC.

Difficulty in comparing GHS numbers and proportions of lone parents. ONS figures are generally older. Also, large-scale surveys show other interesting facts i.e. only 30% of lone Parents get any maintenance (from DSS/PSI studies).

Response: Discrepancies between statistics from different sources are a perennial problem and there is little we can do to make our figures match those from elsewhere.

ASD2 (CSA statistics users)

Can we use the fortnightly 100% Income Support scan to update the non-resident parent benefit status?

Are we consulting the rest of ASD with respect to the content of CSA management information reports for which the Information Centre are taking over responsibility?

Why does the Information Centre change variable names? This can be confusing.

Can we use MIS to track people from their initial contact with CSA, where they don't get entered on to the system because they don't get assessed?

Could ASD2 receive CSA MIS data as opposed to reports.

Response: We could use the 100% fortnightly Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance scans to update non-resident parent benefit status. However, this is not under consideration at present, due to limited resources. The Information Centre changed all variable names to comply with data standards in client group analysis work. CSA MIS, as opposed to a limited amount of ad hoc management information, provided from data in the CSA QSS, is not included in this review. Any questions or suggestions regarding CSA MIS should be addressed to the relevant section.

Annex D

Summary of Headings

Identifying Material

Part A: Establishing requirements and changes to them

- A1 *User consultation*
- A2 *Data providers interests*
- A3 *Authority for production*

Part B: Designing and implementing the process and changes to it

- B1 *Concepts and definitions*
- B2 *Methodology*
- B3 *Completeness and fitness for purpose*
 - B3 a *Justification for current design*
 - B3 b *Considered options for change*
 - B3 c *Improvements*
- B4 *Key assumptions*
- B5 *Risk assessment and contingency planning*
- B6 *Implementation*

Part C: Operating the System

- C1 *Training and Instructions*
- C2 *Incoming data quality*
- C3 *Response (where applicable)*
- C4 *Outgoing data quality*
- C5 *Accuracy*
- C6 *Confidentiality*

Part D: Disseminating the results

- D1 *Availability of statistics*
- D2 *Pre-release arrangements*
- D3 *Metadata*

Part E: Re-establishing requirements... (links back to Part A)

- E1 *User satisfaction*
- E2 *Review*

Identifying Material

Title

Child Support Agency Quarterly Summary of Statistics

Brief Description:

The Child Support Agency was launched on 5th April 1993, as an executive agency of the Department of Social Security (DSS). The CSA was given the role of implementing the 1991 Child Support Act and subsequent legislation with the purpose of ensuring that parents who live apart both maintain their children whenever they can afford to do so. The Agency is responsible for tracing non-resident parents, calculating how much they should pay and, if required, collecting and enforcing payments.

The Child Support Agency Quarterly Summary of Statistics (QSS) is drawn from a 5% sample of child support cases in Great Britain, first introduced in November 1995. Earlier extracts were taken from the Child Support Computer System each quarter starting in October 1993 (1%), but redesigned in May 1995 to capture 1 in 20 of the live cases.

The data is extracted at the end of each quarter. The publication shows the characteristics of parents with care and non resident parent's.

The publication is designed to

- give summary analyses which show the key features of CSA cases and how they compare with earlier periods
- supply a basic summary of the main features of CSA cases
- provide a menu of the types of analysis which can be produced from the QSS data set.

Main purpose for which the information is required:

Analyses from QSS data are valuable components in benefit expenditure forecasts and policy formulation/evaluation, and are a key feature in Departmental responses to PQs and ad hoc requests. It is also a significant contributor to social research on poverty and social exclusion and answers external demand from academics and interest groups.

The data is regularly supplied to operational and social researchers, policy development and evaluation staff, benefit expenditure forecasters, analysts and economists within DSS.

Wider distribution is also made to academics, centres of higher and further education and established market research organisations and interest groups.

Department/section responsible:

DSS, Analytical Services Division

Report Compiled by:

Carol Jenkinson

PART A: Establishing requirements and changes to them

A1 User consultation

User requirements were initially developed through in-depth discussion and correspondence. Subsequent requirements are established via formal annual meetings with customers, regular informal contact with customers and from written feedback to the standard release. Agreed changes are written into the service level agreement.

Improvements have been continually made to CSA statistics through these channels, although through meetings of the Quality Review Team it has come to our attention that a large portion of customers are given no opportunity to give any feedback on the statistics available. A possible solution to this is to target a wider customer base occasionally for feedback and suggestions.

There is an increasing desire for local level data. Information at constituency level is now being provided on a regular basis internally and to others on request.

Review of the publication content could become more frequent and possible inclusion of external customers in the consultation process could add further value to the data.

A website has been established on the DSS Intranet. Publications and tables are made available on the site on the publication date. In addition contact details are provided. Latest CSA publications are also available on the Internet.

In response to customer consultation an electronic data warehouse (called the Repository) has been developed. It provides a single source of trusted data to the Division's analysts, economists and researchers.

Recommendations:

Future recommendations for consultation

- ***advertise what statistics are available and highlight it's limitations***
- ***look at targeting a wider customer base to include external customers, which may help us understand the gaps in our information***

Short term

- **reduce the number of customers receiving hard copies of the QSS,thus improving timeliness and reducing cost**
- **ensure that documentation is kept up to date and is regularly reviewed**

Long term

- **continue to negotiate with Affinity¹ to ensure that systemic undercounting is eliminated**
- **review the content in the CSA QSS and include more figures based on the numbers of children involved in the caseload**
- **ensure that customers know of the availability of district level statistics for the CSA statistics**
- **improve the accuracy of data when new Data Warehouse² goes 'live' by extracting 100% data**
- **work towards improving timeliness**

- **investigate the possibility of using fortnightly 100% Income Support scan to update non-resident parent benefit status**

A2 Data providers' interests

The CSA Strategic Assurance Team and CSA Policy are the main users of the data. The ASD Information Centre quarterly scan is given priority at quarter end. The scan is time consuming to run (currently 8 hours, where no back up to the system is possible), but there is no alternative source of data.

A3 Authority for production

Authority regarding collection of the data comes directly from government based on its requirements to formulate and evaluate policy and forecast benefit expenditure.

Annual customer contracts; meetings between the Division, Policy customers CSA Technical Architecture Group (TAG); Live Support Services (who are responsible for the writing and upkeep of the scans from the Child Support Computer System) and the Child Support Agency decide service levels and the continued acquisition of data for production of the QSS.

Part B: Designing and implementing the process and changes to it

B1 Concepts and definitions

Categorisations depend on the data held on the system, and these are driven mainly by operational requirements. Where possible definitions are harmonised, for example, in allocating cases to regions, information is produced by government office region rather than DSS administrative region.

¹ *The company responsible for the new Child Support Agency computer system.*

² *An electronic data warehouse being developed by Affinity, to provide a single source of data encompassing all of the current systems within the Child Support Agency.*

Within the QSS the definition of a 'live' case is where registration has started and the maintenance application form has been returned. Therefore, until a case is flagged up as closed on Child Support Computer System our analysis will include cases that are suspended. Ad hoc analysis will include the reason for suspension if required.

A change in definition would require a revised back series to be produced and would impact on a wide range of users who are familiar with our current definition. For example, figures are not just used by CSA internally, but also in responses to PQs and ad-hoc enquiries.

Within the Repository there is a data standard definition for common variables across benefits. The system contains a facility to trace and compare these variable names.

B2 Methodology

Process maps and instruction manuals have been developed and are maintained by the Child Support Analysis Team and are designed to minimise loss of knowledge should key members of staff move on.

B3 Completeness and fitness for purpose

The statistics are drawn from a 5% random sample, based on the national insurance number. A 5% sample is used because:

- (i) 5% allows sample numbers to be grossed up by an integer (20), thereby giving integer population figures;
- (ii) claimant sub-groups numbering 500 or more merit accurate measurement, and a 5% sample yielding estimates of 500 is deemed sufficiently accurate (having confidence intervals no wider than +/- 40%);
- (iii) run time on Child Support Computer System is lengthy (currently 8+ hours for 5%) and their backup system is not robust. Extracting 100% would be prohibitive, in terms of time and risk to the system; and
- (iv) easy merging with other 5% scans of benefit data available to the IC

The resulting sample size of around 65,000 provides comprehensive coverage.

There has been no evidence that these statistics have been used in inappropriate ways.

B3a Justification of current design

The current design is justified mainly because the required accuracy is achieved relatively cheaply given the means available to collect, process and publish the data.

An estimate of costs to produce the CSA QSS is as follows:

| | | |
|----------------------------------|---|-------------------------|
| 10 AO man days @ £10.46 per hour | = | £784.50 |
| 1 EO man day @ £14.46 per hour | = | £108.45 |
| 1 G7 man day @ £29.49 per hour | = | £221.18 |
| Total Cost | = | <u>£1,114.13</u> |

NB The above are based on an average of 7.5 hours per day.

The 5% sample can provide down to Parliamentary Constituency level (ie figures above the accuracy threshold of 500), which meets the requirements of its users.

B3b Considered options for change

After 2002 when the new IT system takes over from Child Support Computer System it is planned to extract 100% of data, in addition to increasing the number of data items extracted.

B3c Improvements

The process involved in analysis of child support data should be radically improved with the loading of the data on to ASSIST2, the generic system developed by ASD IC to support the branch core business. However systematic checking and validation of the rules and processing will be undertaken before the Repository (see below) is used as the sole tool for analysis

In order to support the Department's focus on client groups the CSA QSS publication has been reviewed, with more senior involvement in the checking of the output.

Presentation has also been revised to include a section on the numbers of children affected by child support.

Functions within ASSIST2 are being utilised to develop a tabling process that will be more user-friendly and flexible in response to customer needs. ASSIST2 Repository provides a single

source of trusted data for the Division's analysts, economists and researchers that is consistent with published data.

B4 Key assumptions

We assume that the allocation of national insurance numbers to the population is random and that the sample selection by national insurance number is, therefore, unbiased.

B5 Risk assessment and contingency planning

There is little risk to receipt of data from Child Support Computer System. When the new IT system goes live, sometime in 2002, only new cases are being input to the system, with current cases being added in phases. Plans are being made to protect ASD's data source during this interim period. Contingency plans include taking scans from both systems while Child Support Computer System is still running in order to validate data.

In the event of complete failure of both source systems as well as those of ASD, forecasts could be used for a limited period to project latest population sizes.

Training and methodology documentation is very comprehensive, and as such should be sufficient to enable staff experienced in software used in the IC to cover the business needs, should staff familiar with CSA data be absent for any length of time.

The loss of CSA data, therefore, is regarded as low risk.

Recommendations:

- ***ensure that time is set aside to keep documentation up to date and relevant.***
- ***ensure that the regular compressing of data and transferring of data to back-up tapes is maintained.***

B6 Implementation

Future changes in CSA data are presently in the negotiation stage, as we are required to provide Child Support Solutions and Affinity with detailed data requirements. This requirement will include many data items that are not currently included in the Child Support Computer System 5% scan. Detailed documentation and record descriptions of incoming data will be available on completion of negotiations.

Part C: Operating the system

C1 Training and instructions

An induction pack is available for staff new to the team. The pack includes: -

- a summary of the induction process
- inductee's general duties
- where the work of the section 'fits in'
- an overview of the sections, the branch and the division
- domestics
- health and safety
- security
- office services

In addition, comprehensive process maps and training manuals exist for CSA processing. Individual members of staff are also responsible for providing supporting documentation.

Training manuals are reviewed regularly and are largely effective; tasks can be carried out based purely on the documentation. Some more complex tasks require further guidance from the colleagues which may indicate a need for more detailed documentation.

A large part of the training is provided at the workstation by colleagues, IT training is supplied by ASD's computing section and is usually designed specifically to meet the needs of the individual or team.

The division's training and development section also provides a wide variety of training courses. These are regularly advertised in 'The DSS Weekly', the department's regular news bulletin.

In-house consultants provide training based on the ASSIST2 system, again specifically designed to meet the individuals or team's requirements.

Personal training needs are identified in Forward Job Plans and Personal Development Plans and are reviewed at least every 6 months.

Section training requirements are identified at weekly section meetings. Wider issues are discussed and taken forward at weekly Collation/Analysis Team meetings and as a result of annual 'awaydays'.

C2 Incoming data quality

Because there is no cleaning of CSA data after ASD receive it, apart from 'cleaning' PWC benefit status, validation checks are as outlined in the process description. There is no other data source, or any other means of validating the data.

C3 Response

The main body of data is received via an electronic scan of the Child Support Computer System.

C4 Outgoing data quality

Frequency counts and trend checks are conducted and comparisons are made with monthly caseload statistics to validate the outputs..

There is liaison with policy customers and other areas of ASD if querying trend changes. If discrepancies are discovered then checks are made against the live Child Support Computer System.

Numeric and trend checks are made on tables and charts created from the data and any disparities investigated.

In the event of the primary result not being considered credible the incoming data and processes would be revisited and data suppliers contacted and asked to investigate. If necessary the extracts would be run again.

C5 Accuracy

The main source of error is sampling error. Comparisons are made with the previous quarters' data and confidence intervals are published within the routine publication.

The CSA figures published at present are known to include a small systematic undercount of cases where either a full or interim maintenance assessment, is in place. This is due to several factors:

- the time it takes for a claim to be input onto the Child Support Computer System
- the time it takes to update records where a full maintenance assessment is now in place
- the time it takes to update records where a change in circumstance has led to a case being classed as an interim assessment, in the absence of updated information

If we were to allow for the systematic undercount in the QSS, there are two obvious options.

- 1) Gross up all figures using non-standard rating factors - it would not be a case of simply multiplying all cases with the same factor since there will be biases in the types of cases that take longer to be input to the system.
- 2) Include a table in the release quantifying the overall amount of the undercount, over time.

However, caseload figures produced in the CSA QSS seem to reflect accurately figures produced and forecast by the CSA. In addition to this 100% of cases will be used to produce the QSS, post implementation of child support reforms, therefore changing rating factors at this stage may not prove to be worthwhile.

The data warehouse that Affinity¹ is creating to hold all case details will be updated each evening, therefore creating a more up to date database. Although the new IT system is relatively untested, it is hoped that the data extracted will be much more up to date than those we get at present, and if not eliminating the problem of systematic undercount then at least reducing the occurrence.

Recommendations:

- ***during negotiations with Affinity check that undercounting will either be eliminated or reduced***

C6 Confidentiality

Information will not be released where there is a risk of an individual being identified from the data.

On receipt of the data and before general release, personal identifiers are encrypted or removed and postcodes truncated on Repository datasets provided to customers. The Repository itself is password-protected.

Electronic data are compressed and stored on back-up tape.

Documentation holding unpublished figures or data where individuals could be identified is kept in lockable cabinets.

CSA data contain a number of cases that are either nationally or locally sensitive. ASD receive all cases that meet our criteria including sensitive cases. Any flags showing sensitivity are removed before data is received by ASD.

Part D Disseminating the results

Statistics are available within 11 weeks of the quarter's end

Users can obtain further details by contacting the Department in writing as well as by 'phone, fax and e-mail.

On release date

- Tables are available on the DSS Intranet site.
- The full publication is available on the Internet.
- Data is made available in the Repository.
- Publications are distributed in hard copy format or portable document format (pdf) to customers

Less detailed publications and further electronic dissemination would enable quicker release of publications.

Recommendations:

- ***aim to reduce this number even further by publicising the availability of it on the Internet.***

D2 Pre-release arrangements

The completed publication is sent to reprographics two weeks before release date to allow time to produce and check printing and formatting.

One week prior to publication copies in pdf format are sent to CSA for comments to feed to briefing for senior officials and ministers.

Forty-eight hours prior to publication, ministers, press office, policy customers and senior economist and statistician colleagues in ASD receive a copy plus briefing if required.

D3 Metadata

Published statistics are accompanied by relevant background information. This includes the source of the data, a glossary of terms used, an explanation of the sampling method, and a table of confidence intervals.

The electronic data warehouse (Repository) includes a regularly updated metadata section.

Record descriptions in spreadsheet form are also available for users of the data.

Part E Review:

E1 User satisfaction

User satisfaction is assessed via annual meetings with main customers and other correspondence. Through discussion and consultation changes are implemented where appropriate and possible.

E2 Review

The need for more client group analysis in support of children and families policy development and greater investment in client group based work resulted in the re-organisation of business.

Subsequently, informal reviews of these statistics and methods have been ongoing.

Appendix 1 Process description and validation (validation checks typed in bold)

Receipt of data

We receive a 5% sample of all cases on the Child Support Computer System (Child Support Computer System) for Great Britain and 100% of data on Child Support Computer System for Northern Ireland.

The data are transferred directly from Child Support Computer System onto our system, two or three days after the end of the month.

This is the first step in validating data, when the number of bytes can be compared to the previous quarter.

Formatting raw data and extraction of record types

A series of twenty-six programs is run to format the raw data and extract the twenty-six separate record types. Each of the twenty-six record types contains information from front-end screens of the Child Support Computer System.

The record types are extracted in this way so that a) different areas of raw data may be accessed if needed; and b) data sets are of a convenient size; and c) validation.

This is the second step in validating the data. After each of the programs has run, the logs can be checked for errors and number of observations.

Reference the latest postcode file

There are a series of programs run here to produce grid references and regional data.

The record type data sets are merged with postcode information and a program run to create one merged data set.

Check SAS log for errors and check number of observations.

Derive cash compliance

Produce a new data set which includes a derived variable NEWCOMP. This formats the cash compliance levels for each case by checking the amounts received, against the amount charged within a quarter.

Check SAS log for numbers of observations and check that there are no open and live cases with a missing value for compliance.

Validate figures for Quarterly Summary of Statistics (QSS)

Run a series of programs that produce tables for QSS.

This quarter's figures can be then checked against last quarter's. At this stage a draft series of tables may be produced, which will give a good indication of whether or not the data are correct. Parent with care cleaned benefit status cannot be derived until Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance and Working Families Tax Credit data are available for the relevant months. The main validation checks are: number of cases, geographical location, ages of PWC and NRP and maintenance assessments. Numbers are not expected to fluctuate by more than a small percentage from one quarter to the next. The SAS log is checked for errors and number of observations are checked.

If validation checks at this point indicate that data are OK, then send off Northern Ireland data in CD format.

'Clean' Parent with Care benefit status

When Income Support, Family Credit and Jobseeker's Allowance data has been validated the data is transferred to a suitable server. The resulting data sets are merged with CSA data and the PWC benefit status is derived. Although benefit status is already on CSA data, it is more indicative of the situation at take-on and may be out of date.

The SAS log is checked for errors and the number of observations are checked after merging. A check is carried out to ensure that there aren't missing values in the derived variable NEWPBENP (benefit status).

Draft QSS

A draft version of the quarterly QSS is produced.

Check that figures match those produced before NEWPBWNP was derived, apart from tables 3.1, 3.2 and 3.12 as these include benefit status of the PWC. Check that all commentary corresponds with figures and that all graphs and charts are clear and accurate. Have the draft document checked by two grade 7 statisticians.

Produce QSS

Send disc with corrected document to printers. One week in advance of publication send QSS to CSA Strategic Assurance Team and CSA policy for comments to feed into briefing for senior officials and ministers. Two days in advance of publication send document in pdf format to policy customers, ministers and senior economists and statisticians in ASD. Place publications on Internet and Intranet.

Appendix 2 Processes involved in creating the Child Support Agency Quarterly Summary of

Diagram refers to November 2000 data, although the same processes are common to all monthly data.

