Quality and Methodology Information

General details

Title of output: Divorces in England and Wales
Designation: National Statistics
Geographic Coverage: England and Wales
Date of last SQR or QMI*: February 2014
Contact details: vsob@ons.gsi.gov.uk

Executive summary

We are responsible for publishing demographic statistics on divorces taking place in England and Wales. The statistics are published by sex, age and marital status at the time of marriage, duration of marriage, age at divorce, the number and ages of children involved, and the grounds for divorce.

Divorces taking place in England and Wales are recorded by the courts onto the HM Courts and Tribunals Service's (HMCTS) FamilyMan case management system and sent to us electronically for the production and analysis of statistics.

Our divorce statistics do not include:

- married couples who separate, but do not divorce
- divorces taking place overseas to individuals who married in England and Wales


Every year, a series of data tables are published on our website with an accompanying statistical bulletin, presenting the latest year’s figures and historical data where possible. The tables show the latest year’s figures with some also showing historical data for comparison. Divorces metadata is also available, providing further information on data quality, legislation and procedures relating to divorces.

This document contains the following sections:

- Output quality
- About the output
- How the output is created
- Validation and quality assurance
- Coherence and comparability
- Concepts and definitions
- Other information, relating to quality trade-offs and user needs
- Sources for further information or advice

*Quality and Methodology Information (QMI) reports replaced Summary Quality Reports (SQR) from April 2011
Output quality

This document provides a range of information that describes the quality of the data and details any points that should be noted when using the output.

We have developed Guidelines for Measuring Statistical Quality based on the 5 European Statistical System (ESS) Quality Dimensions. This document addresses these quality dimensions and other important quality characteristics, which are:

- relevance
- timeliness and punctuality
- accuracy
- coherence and comparability
- output quality trade-offs
- assessment of user needs and perceptions
- accessibility and clarity

About the output

Relevance
(The degree to which statistical outputs meet users’ needs.)

Our divorce statistics do not take into account married couples who separate, but do not divorce.

We use marriage, divorce and civil partnership statistics to:

- report on social and demographic trends
- perform further analyses, for example comparing trends in divorce with civil partnership dissolutions, and estimating the proportion of marriages which end in divorce

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) is one of the main users of divorce statistics and is responsible for policy and legislation on divorces. We analyse and publish demographic information collected by HMCTS and MoJ relies on these analyses to inform policy decisions, financial decisions and workload decisions.

In 2014, David Cameron brought all relationship support policy under the remit of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). At the same time, he also made every government department accountable for the impact of their policies on the family. DWP is investing £20 million on relationship support to ensure family stability and to reduce the risk of relationship breakdown. To measure the success of this work, statistics on marriage, civil partnership and divorce will need to be monitored over time.

DWP uses divorce data to feed into dynamic simulation models covering pension-age populations to model pensioner incomes, as well as entitlement to state pensions and pension-age benefits. This involves modelling whole life courses, including the formation of partnerships (marriage, civil partnership and cohabitation) and dissolution of the same partnerships. The projections used rely on the associated historic data.

Organisations, such as Eurostat, use our divorce statistics for comparison purposes and organisations in the voluntary sector may use our divorce statistics to support campaigns. These organisations often pass on our divorce statistics to their own users.

Lawyers, solicitors and those involved in family law use divorce data to comment on trends in case law and predict likely future trends in legal business. Academics and researchers use divorce data for research into family change, and assessing the implications on care, housing and finances in later life. The media also has a high level of interest in divorces, especially the recent trend for older people to divorce.

We do not produce divorce statistics by area of residence. This is because divorce data provided to us by the courts does not contain information on the area of residence of the parties. Information on the location of the court is available from the Ministry of Justice in Family Court Statistics Quarterly, but this is not a good indicator of where the parties lived either before or after separation, as the 2 parties may choose the court they wish to use and courts are not evenly spread around England and Wales.
**Timeliness and punctuality**

(Timeliness refers to the lapse of time between publication and the period to which the data refer. Punctuality refers to the gap between planned and actual publication dates.)

The annual release of divorce statistics is announced via the GOV.UK release calendar at least 4 weeks in advance. Figures are usually published 12 to 13 months after the end of the data year.

Prior to 2010, final divorce statistics were published alongside final marriage statistics in the Annual Reference Volume FM2. The concluding volume of FM2 was published in March 2010 (2007 divorces data). From January 2010 onwards (2008 divorces data), the publication of final data has taken place 12 to 13 months after the end of the data year.

There have been 2 occasions when the divorces release has been delayed. The release of 2013 statistics was delayed to enable new and revised population estimates by marital status to be used in the calculation of divorce rates, and because changing to the receipt of electronic data required more time to be spent on detailed quality assurance.

During quality assurance work in 2008 we identified a shortfall of records between ONS and MoJ 2007 divorce figures for some courts. Further investigation identified that duplicates existed in both datasets. Both organisations began the task of removing these duplicates and consequently divorce statistics for 2003 to 2007 were revised on 28 January 2010. These revised figures were published alongside final summary divorce figures for 2008.

Although this first release of 2008 divorces was later than the usual publication date at the time (August), the release provided final summary data rather than provisional data previously published at this point.

For more details on related releases, the GOV.UK release calendar is available online and provides 12 months’ advance notice of release dates. In the unlikely event of a change to the pre-announced release schedule, we will notify you of the change and the reasons for the change will be explained, as set out in the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

**How the output is created**

From 2013 onwards, divorce data have been extracted from HM Courts and Tribunals Service’s (HMCTS) FamilyMan case management system and sent to us electronically on a monthly basis. Prior to the 2013 data year, divorce statistics for England and Wales were derived from data provided on the D105 form used to record decree absolutes. These paper forms were sent to us by the courts.

Divorces taking place in Scotland and Northern Ireland are recorded by the courts in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Scottish Government and Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) quality assure and produce regular statistics for their own countries. We quality assure divorce statistics for England and Wales and also coordinate and publish statistics for the whole of the UK with breakdowns for each constituent country.

Annual divorce figures for England and Wales are released once a year on our website in a number of detailed tables. Previously, divorce data were published in the Annual Reference Volume Annual Series FM2, however the final volume of FM2 was produced in March 2010 and it has now been discontinued. Divorce statistics are now published once a year as final figures in a number of detailed tables.

The majority of figures released in the divorce tables are counts and are easily taken from the datasets, however some information used in the tables is not part of the basic data supplied. This information is:

- age at divorce, which is derived from age at marriage as given in the marriage entry; as this is the age at the last birthday, 6 months is added to obtain an estimate of the age at marriage, which is then added to the duration of marriage (calculated as the difference between the date of divorce and the date of marriage, in months and years) - from this an estimated age (at last birthday) at the date of divorce is derived
- dependent children - under the age of 16
- age of child at petition is derived from date of birth of child and date of petition
duration of marriage to decree absolute is derived from date of marriage and date of decree absolute

Divorce rates are published for England and Wales (combined). The rate is the number of people divorcing per thousand married males and females (population estimates by marital status).

**Validation and quality assurance**

**Accuracy**
(The degree of closeness between an estimate and the true value.)

The information on the divorce form is supplied by the petitioner and respondent in fulfilling the legal requirements for filing a petition. Since the information is required for a legal process it may be presumed that the quality of the data is good, especially as the petitioner has to swear under oath (an affidavit) that the information supplied is correct. There is no routine independent statistical verification of the data, but editing checks are carried out to detect clerical, coding and keying errors.

We conduct quality assurance tasks throughout the year on the dataset in preparation for the release of annual figures. These checks pick up courts where records may be missing. Checks are carried out to look for inconsistencies within the dataset to ensure there are minimal internal errors. During the quality assurance of the annual dataset, further checks are carried out on the data, including frequency checks and comparisons with previous year’s data as well as checks for duplicates.

Some extra variables are derived following checks of all existing variables. These include age at divorce, dependent children (under 16), age of child at petition and duration of marriage.

Revisions of divorce statistics do not occur frequently, but sometimes it is necessary to revise the statistics following improvements made to the data collection and quality assurance methods. In January 2010 we released revised divorce statistics for 2003 to 2007 following the identification of duplicates in the dataset. Duplicates were identified as a result of discrepancy work investigating the differences which existed between MOJ and our divorce statistics. MoJ also revised their figures back to 2003.

Further quality work was carried out later in 2010 in preparation for an exercise to compare our divorce records with MoJ systems to try to work out the remaining differences. This work alerted us to the fact there were still duplicates within the divorce datasets. It was later determined that the original duplicate check carried out on the datasets had not been sufficient.

New duplicate checks were introduced onto the system and all duplicate checks were run on data back to 2003. In February 2011, when 2009 data were published, we revised divorce data back to 2003 again. A statement about the differences which existed between MoJ and our divorce figures was published on the ONS website.

We recently completed a consultation surrounding the population estimates by marital status. This resulted in a change in the methodology used to produce the estimates for England and Wales, for the years 2002 onwards. The new method involves using the marital status distribution from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and applying this to published population estimates (by 5-year age group and sex) for England and Wales. Annex B in the consultation response document provides more information on the new methodology. Population estimates by marital status for the years 2002 to 2010 were revised and published in July 2015 alongside new population estimates by marital status for the years 2011 to 2014. As a result of the change in the methodology revised divorce rates for England and Wales back to 2002 were published in November 2015.

The court system in England and Wales records all divorces taking place in England and Wales, regardless of usual residence of the 2 parties. The marriage may take place anywhere but it must be legally recognised in the UK and 1 of the parties must have a permanent home in England and Wales. It is possible that some people who are usually resident in England and Wales may undertake divorce proceedings in another country, so are not included in the divorce statistics for England and Wales. Similarly, some people who are overseas residents may divorce in England and Wales. Although there are estimates for marriages abroad (using data from the International Passenger Survey on intention of travel to get married), there is no such equivalent for divorces abroad. It is likely that the numbers of divorces taking place abroad are low (as divorce is not open to those without a connection to another country), so the exclusion of such divorces will not impact the main uses of the data.
**Coherence and comparability**

(Coherence is the degree to which data that are derived from different sources or methods, but refer to the same topic, are similar. Comparability is the degree to which data can be compared over time and domain for example, geographic level.)

Methods and classifications for divorce statistics have remained relatively unchanged for many years and time series data are available on a comparable basis back to 1858 in some tables. It is not possible for some tables to include more historic data because not all data are available electronically to reprocess.

The format and content of the data tables were reviewed for the 2009 data outputs, which led to an improved layout of tables in easily accessible workbooks with tables showing historical data where appropriate. A summary of the [outcomes of the review](#) is available on our website.

Comparability between countries within the UK is possible for divorces as they are recognised across the UK. We quality assure divorce data for England and Wales and also coordinate and publish statistics for the whole of the UK, with breakdowns for each constituent country. Although both Scottish Government and NISRA publish regular statistics for their own countries, by collating all the data together it allows our users to easily compare data for each country.

We provide divorce data to Eurostat each year to allow them to compare divorce figures across different European countries.

Comparability is maximised by the following:

- divorces statistics published by ONS, Scottish Government and NISRA are all produced using date of decree
- the figures on divorces published by ONS, Scottish Government and NISRA are compiled from returns of “Decrees made Absolute” supplied by the courts and include nullities of marriage. This is also the case for many countries internationally, including New Zealand and Australia

MoJ also publish a summary of divorce figures as part of their [Family Court Statistics Quarterly](#). MoJ analyses divorce data electronically through the HMCTS FamilyMan system.

The number of divorces indicated by ONS and MoJ statistics, while similar, do not match exactly. For example, in 2013 our total divorce figure was 114,720, compared with the MoJ figure of 115,176, a difference of 456 (0.4%). From the 2013 data year we have compiled divorce statistics from electronic extracts of divorces taken directly from the FamilyMan system used by the courts. This has helped to minimise the difference between the 2 sets of statistics, however some differences remain because we do not count precisely the same cases. For example:

- our divorce figures include annulments while MoJ figures do not; the number of annulments in 2013 published by MoJ was 365
- since 2007 divorce figures published by MoJ have included dissolutions of civil partnerships, which are not included in our figures; the number of civil partnership dissolutions in 2013 published by ourselves was 974, further information [civil partnerships and civil partnership dissolutions](#) can be found on our website

Using figures which are as comparable as possible (totals including annulments and civil partnership dissolutions), would result in figures of 115,694 and 115,541 being reported by us and MOJ respectively, a difference of only 153 (0.1%).

Prior to the 2013 data year, some other differences also existed from the way data were collected and processed. These include:

- differences in the number of late divorce records excluded from both MoJ and our annual datasets
- differences in the process to remove duplicate records
- differences between the number of records entered onto the FamilyMan system and the number of paper records received by us from courts

In June 2012, together with MoJ we published a joint [statement on differences](#) between these figures that existed at the time and worked closely together to reconcile the 2 sets of statistics as far as possible.
Comparisons of divorce data with survey data containing estimates of the numbers of divorcees in England and Wales are possible, however, these figures are not directly comparable as surveys estimate the current number of divorcees rather than the number of divorces that took place during a particular year.

**Concepts and definitions**

(Concepts and definitions describe the legislation governing the output and a description of the classifications used in the output.)

The Matrimonial Causes Act 1857 was an Act of Parliament passed by the UK government. The Act reformed the law on divorce, moving litigation from the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical courts to the civil courts and widening the availability of divorce.

The Divorce Reform Act 1969 came into effect in England and Wales on 1 January 1971. The Act, subsequently consolidated in the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973, made it possible for the first time for divorce to be petitioned for on the couple’s separation. This legislative change resulted in a large increase in the number of divorces during the 1970s. The Act attempted to remove the concepts of the guilty party and the matrimonial offence by introducing a single ground for divorce – the irretrievable breakdown of marriage. Such a breakdown can be established by the petitioner proving 1 or more of 5 facts; the first 3 – adultery, unreasonable behaviour, and desertion – are the former matrimonial offences. The 2 separation criteria, which allow divorce either by mutual consent or on the application of the petitioner alone, were introduced for the first time by the Act, and so have no analogues among the grounds for divorce under former legislation.

The Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act 1984 came into effect in England and Wales on 12 October 1984. The Act made 2 changes, the first replaced the discretionary time bar (minimum time interval between the date of marriage and being able to file a petition for divorce) of 3 years by an absolute time bar of one year. No petition can now be filed within the first year of marriage. The second change meant the Act no longer required courts to try to place the divorced spouses in the financial position they would have enjoyed, had the marriage not broken down.

There are no classifications used in the compilation of our divorce statistics.

**Other information**

**Output quality trade-offs**

(Trade-offs are the extent to which different dimensions of quality are balanced against each other.)

Prior to the 2013 data year, when divorce records began to be received electronically, each year a certain number of divorces were not included in the published figures. This was because the decree absolute paper forms were received later than the date on which the annual dataset was taken. A table published in the divorces metadata document shows the difference between the number of divorces stored on our database and the number included in our publications each year. Although this means some divorces were not included in the statistics, it was a necessary compromise needed to publish timely data. The electronic receipt of data now means that we receive all divorces in a year in time for the annual publication.

**Assessment of user needs and perceptions**

(The processes for finding out about uses and users, and their views on the statistical products.)

We ask for feedback from users with the inclusion of a standard statement in the background notes of all statistical bulletins on divorces, “We would welcome feedback on the content, format and relevance of this release”.

Feedback is also requested with all e-mails sent by customer service teams within Vital Statistics Output Branch. The standard wording is:

“We welcome feedback on the content, format and relevance of the data provided. Please provide any feedback and state whether you would like your contact details to be added to our list of users. All known users will be invited to participate in any consultations that are run.”

Feedback is also received through our regular attendance at user group meetings and conferences.

A consultation for understanding user requirements for marriage, divorce and civil partnership statistics following the introduction of marriages of same sex couples was published on our website.
in October 2013. A summary of the responses to the consultation and future plans are available to download. Information provided has been used to help us review our marriage, divorce and civil partnership statistics to meet user needs as much as possible.

**Sources for further information or advice**

**Accessibility and clarity**

(Readability is the ease with which users are able to access the data, also reflecting the format in which the data are available and the availability of supporting information. Clarity refers to the quality and sufficiency of the release details, illustrations and accompanying advice.)

Our recommended format for accessible content is a combination of HTML webpages for narrative, charts and graphs, with data being provided in usable formats such as CSV and Excel. Our website also offers users the option to download the narrative in PDF format. In some instances other software may be used, or may be available on request. Available formats for content published on our website, but not produced by us, or referenced on our website but stored elsewhere, may vary. For further information please contact vsob@ons.gsi.gov.uk.

For information regarding conditions of access to data:

- terms and conditions (for data on the website)
- copyright and reuse of published data
- pre-release access (including conditions of access)
- accessibility

Special extracts and tabulations of divorce data for England and Wales are available to order (subject to legal frameworks, disclosure control, resources and agreements of costs, where appropriate). Such enquiries should be made to:

Vital Statistics Outputs Branch
Office for National Statistics
Segensworth Road
Titchfield
Fareham
Hampshire
PO15 5RR
Tel: +44 (0)1329 444 110
E-mail: vsob@ons.gsi.gov.uk

The [ONS charging policy](#) is available on our website. In line with the [ONS approach to open data](#), all [ad hoc data requests](#) will be published onto the website.

We welcome feedback on the content, format and relevance of this release. Please send feedback to the postal or email address above, and it is possible to follow us on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#).

**Useful Links**

Data on [divorces in England and Wales](#) are available on our website. [Divorces metadata](#) provides further information on data quality, legislation and procedures relating to divorces.

Annual divorce figures for the UK and constituent countries can be found in the [Population and Health Reference tables](#). [Scottish Government](#) provides divorce statistics for Scotland. [Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#) provides divorce statistics for Northern Ireland.

[Family Court Statistics Quarterly](#) divorce statistics are also available from the Ministry of Justice.

Further statistics on [marriages, civil partnership formations and dissolutions](#) are available on our website. Data on [families and households](#) and [population estimates by marital status](#), which provide the estimated population by age group, sex and marital status (single, married, civil partnered, divorced, and widowed) for England and Wales, are also available on our website.