

Liquor Licences in Northern Ireland – Quality Assurance of Administrative Data (QAAD)¹

Background

The Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 states that the Department for Communities must, as soon as reasonably practicable, publish a statement of each of the following at 31 December in the previous year:

- (a) the number of licences in force for premises of a kind mentioned in Article 5(1)(a) of the Licensing Order;
- (b) the number of licences in force for premises of a kind mentioned in Article 5(1)(b) of the Licensing Order;
- (c) the number of premises of a kind mentioned in Article 5(1)(a) of the Licensing Order in each district electoral area or, if the Department considers that it is feasible to reckon the number of such premises by reference to smaller areas, in each of those areas;
- (d) the trends which may be observed from the numbers referred to in paragraphs (a) to (c).

Premises under article 5(1)(a) are premises in which the business carried on under the licence is the business of selling intoxicating liquor by retail for consumption either in or off the premises i.e. public houses.

Premises under article 5(1)(b) are premises in which the business carried on under the licence is the business of selling intoxicating liquor by retail for consumption off the premises i.e. off-licences.

An official statistics bulletin produced in order to address this legislative directive was published for the first time on 30 June 2022. It is anticipated that the accompanying QAAD and Background Quality Report will continue to be developed over time.

¹ Date document last reviewed: 07/07/2026

Applying the Data Quality Assurance Toolkit to Liquor Licence statistics in NI

The UK Statistics Authority introduced QAAD guidance to help statistics producers review their quality assurance arrangements for the administrative data used to produce official statistics. The toolkit comprises:

- Quality Management actions;
- Quality Assurance Matrix;
- Risk/Profile Matrix.

The following report aims to apply the requirements of the UK Statistics Authority's Quality Assurance toolkit to the administrative data used by Department for Communities to produce liquor-licensing statistics for Northern Ireland. The aim is to provide reassurance and transparency regarding the quality of the data underpinning these statistics and to give users a better understanding of their reliability and accuracy.

The QAAD toolkit states that the critical judgement about the suitability of the administrative data for use in producing official statistics should be pragmatic and proportionate, made in the light of an evaluation of the likelihood of quality issues arising in the data that may affect the quality of the statistics, and of the nature of the public interest served by the statistics. The UK Statistics Authority recommend that the matrix below is used by producers of statistics to assess the risk profile of the statistics they produce that are derived from administrative sources. The resultant rating then determines the level of assurance required for each of the four stages in the Quality Assurance framework.

Risk of Data Quality Concerns

Level of Risk	Concern
Low risk	The data may have a low risk of data quality concerns in situations in which there is a clear agreement about what data will be provided, when, how, and by whom; when there is a good appreciation of the context in which the data are collected, and the producer accepts that the quality standards being applied meet the statistical needs.
Medium risk	The data may be regarded as having a medium risk of data quality concerns when high risk factors have been moderated through the use of safeguards for example, integrated financial audit and operational checks, and effective communication arrangements. It is also appropriate to consider the extent of the contribution of the administrative data to the official statistics, for example, in cases where the statistics are produced in combination with other data types, such as survey or census data.
High risk	The data may have a high risk of data quality issues when there are many different data collection bodies, intermediary data supplier bodies, and complex data collection processes with limited independent verification or oversight.

Public Interest Profile

Level of public interest profile	Data Quality Assurance
Low profile	Politically neutral subject; interest limited to niche user base, and limited media interest.
Medium profile	Wider user and media interest, with moderate economic and/or political sensitivity.
High profile	Economically important, reflected in market sensitivity; high political sensitivity, reflected by Select Committee hearings; substantial media coverage of policies and statistics; important public health issues; collection required by legislation.

Risk /Profile Matrix

Level of risk of quality concerns	Public interest profile Lower	Public interest profile Medium	Public interest profile Higher
Low	Statistics of lower quality concern and lower public interest [A1]	Statistics of low quality concern and medium public interest [A1/A2]	Statistics of low quality concern and higher public interest [A1/A2]
Medium	Statistics of medium quality concern and lower public interest [A1/A2]	Statistics of medium quality concern and medium public interest [A2]	Statistics of medium quality concern and higher public interest [A2/A3]
High	Statistics of higher quality concern and lower public interest [A1/A2/A3]	Statistics of higher quality concern and medium public interest [A3]	Statistics of higher quality concern and higher public interest [A3]

Note: A0 = No assurance; A1 = Basic assurance; A2 = Enhanced assurance; A3 = Comprehensive assurance

The associated risk/profile of the liquor licensing statistics produced by Analytics Division, is highlighted in the table below.

Risk Profile of Liquor Licensing Statistics when QAAD toolkit applied

Liquor licensing statistic	Data Quality concern	Public interest	Risk Profile rating
1. Off-licence statistics	Medium	Low	A2
2. Public house statistics	Medium	Low	A2

The reasoning behind the risk profile rating associated with each of the liquor licensing statistics is as follows:

1. Off-licence statistics

The data quality of off-licence statistics is considered to be of **medium** risk. There is a formal arrangement with the data producers detailing the data requirements. The data are sourced from annual returns from the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) to the Department for Communities. Each court provides information on the number of liquor licences held by off-licences that have been applied for via that particular court. The source administrative information is updated by staff in NICTS and may be subject to minor input errors. Analytics Division makes comparisons with returns for previous years as a further means of validating the data.

In terms of public interest, the public good represented by the statistics is that they inform the public of the number of liquor licences held by off-licences in Northern Ireland.

Members of the NI Assembly (MLAs), representatives of the alcohol industry, and representatives in the health-care sector will all have an interest in the statistics. Analytics Division are keen to get feedback from stakeholders and users of the data. This information will inform future development of the publication as well as this QAAD.

In terms of media coverage, it is anticipated that there may be some interest in the number of liquor licences held by public houses, particularly at the Local Government District (LGD) and the District Electoral Area (DEA) levels. As a consequence of this, reference may also be made to the number of liquor licences held by off-licences.

There was some increased media attention to liquor licences in 2026 following the [Department for Communities' response](#) to the Independent Review of the Liquor Licensing System in Northern Ireland including which recommendations would be accepted, partially accepted or rejected. However, increased coverage has been temporary and as a baseline media interest in this area is usually limited.

In consideration of the above, it is deemed that off-licence statistics are of **low** public interest. This will be kept under review so that any longer-term change in interest level can be reflected.

The overall risk profile rating attributed to the off-licence statistics is **A2 – Enhanced assurance**.

2. Public house statistics

The data quality of the statistics in relation to the number of liquor licences held by public houses is considered to be of **medium** risk. There is a formal arrangement with the data producers detailing the data requirements. The data are sourced from a database maintained by the NICTS. An extract from this database is sent to the Department for Communities. This exercise was carried out for the first time in January 2022. Each court provides information on the number of liquor licences held by public houses to a central team based in Belfast Law Courts. The source administrative information is keyed into an excel-based database by NICTS staff and so may be subject to minor input errors. There has also been evidence of a low number of duplicate and missing records. Analytics Division makes comparisons with returns for previous years as a further means of validating the data.

In terms of public interest, the public good represented by the statistics is that they inform the public of the number of liquor licences held by public houses in Northern Ireland. Members of the NI Assembly (MLAs), representatives of the alcohol industry, and representatives in the health-care sector will all have an interest in the statistics. Analytics Division are keen to get feedback from stakeholders and users of the data. This feedback will inform future development of the publication as well as this QAAD.

In terms of media coverage, it is anticipated that there may be some interest in the number of liquor licences held by public houses, particularly at the Local Government District (LGD) and the District Electoral Area (DEA) levels.

As already stated, there was a temporary increase in media interest in early 2026. The topic area, however, remains fairly niche and the normal level of media interest is limited.

In consideration of the above, it is deemed that public houses statistics are of **low** public interest, but again will be kept under review.

The overall risk profile rating attributed to the off-licence statistics is **A2 – Enhanced assurance**.

It should be noted that a licence to sell alcohol must be renewed when the licensing period expires. The current five-year licensing period ends on 30 September 2027. Consequently, it may be that in the renewal year there may be an undercount of licences held by public houses and off-licences due to delays in the renewal of a licence or in the updating of records.

Quality Assurance of Administrative Data (QAAD) Quality Assurance Matrix

Operational Context and administrative data collection

Data is sourced from the NICTS. Off-licences and public houses must hold a valid liquor licence in order to operate. An applicant can apply to any court in Northern Ireland for a liquor licence, irrespective of the address of the business premises. Liquor licences are granted on a 5-year basis. It is the responsibility of the liquor licence holder to apply for a renewal licence, and they have up to a maximum of one year after the expiration of a current licence to do so.

Each court provides the NICTS' Operational Policy Branch (OPB) based at Belfast Laganside Courts with data on the number of liquor licences held by off-licences and the number of, and address and postcode of, public houses that hold a liquor licence. The data represents the situation at 31 December for the year in question.

NICTS use a paper-based system for off-licence records and a database for public house records. In-house knowledge and expertise are relied upon in terms of the quality assurance and maintenance of these records.

Communication with Data Suppliers

Staff from Analytics Division met NICTS and discussed how the courts receive data, how they maintain it, how it is keyed into a central database, and how it is prepared for extraction and onward transfer to the Department for Communities. This engagement has resulted in improvements being made to the locational data for public houses. Further processes will be introduced, including revising the templates used for making data returns and incorporating cross-checks to these.

Quality Assurance Principles and checks with data suppliers

Data is collated by administrative staff within the NICTS. This is a manual exercise in relation to off-licences. The data is reviewed by staff before being sent to DfC. In respect of public houses, more detailed information including name of licensee, address of premises, address of licensee is sent to the OPB based at Belfast Laganside Courts. OPB staff key this data into a central database. This database is used to provide DfC with the address of the premises including its' postcode. DfC does not have access to names and addresses of licensees, just those of the licensed premises.

Producer's Quality Assurance Investigations and documentation

Analytics Division carry out a number of quality assurance checks on the data. For off-licences, comparisons across courts are made to ensure the range of values is as expected.

Analytics Division makes comparisons with returns for previous years as a further means of validating the data.

For data in relation to public houses, the number at LGD and DEA level are reviewed to ensure consistency across the range of values. Since data is reported at a few geographies, particular attention is given to the accuracy of the postcode. The format of the postcode is critical as it is used to ascertain the District Electoral Area, the multiple deprivation quintile, and the urban/rural classification of the public house. Comparisons are made across DEAs and any potential anomalies or inconsistencies are examined and where necessary requests for clarification from NICTS is requested. For example, apparent duplicate licences were identified in one particular DEA but when queried with the relevant courthouse it was found that one licence was relinquished during the reference year and then issued to another licensee later in the same year, meaning that at 31 December only the more recently issued license was active and should be counted in the total.