Quality of Data Obtained from the Registration of Births, Stillbirths, Marriages, Civil Partnerships and Deaths

Data about births, stillbirths, marriages, civil partnerships and deaths are obtained from the administrative records of the registration of these events. This note describes what is done to ensure the quality of the data when they are collected. There are separate sections on making sure that:
- the correct numbers of events are registered – i.e. that there are no registrations of events that did not occur, that no event is registered twice, and that no event goes unregistered;
- no errors are made when an event is registered.

Making sure that the correct numbers of births, stillbirths and deaths are registered

Registrars must be satisfied that a birth, stillbirth or death has taken place before registering that event. For evidence of births, this would normally take the form of a card issued to the informant (usually the mother) by the hospital or midwife who was in attendance at the birth. For stillbirths, this would take the form of a Certificate of Stillbirth completed by a medical practitioner or midwife who certified the stillbirth and is normally given to the parents. For evidence of deaths, this would take the form of a Medical Certificate of Cause of Death completed by the medical practitioner who certified the death and is normally given to the deceased's family. The birth cards, Certificate of Stillbirth and the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death forms are retained by the registrar to avoid the possibility of events being registered again.

Registrars are asked to take all possible measures to ensure that no event escapes registration. Section 50 of the Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages (Scotland) Act 1965 gives the Registrar General the power to require persons in charge of hospitals, nursing homes or other such institutions to send a periodic list of the particulars of all births, still-births and deaths which take place in their institution to the registrar in their local registration district. Registrars monitor the lists of events provided by the various institutions in their districts to ensure that all the events listed are registered. They are also encouraged to build good relationships with local medical practitioners, midwives and funeral directors to help monitor life events in their area.

Births, stillbirths and deaths which occur in Scotland may be registered in any registration district in Scotland. If a registrar registers an event which has taken place in another district, the registrar ensures that the facts are notified to the registrar for the district of occurrence. This information is generally shared electronically wherever possible. (There are still a few manual registration offices who would need to use the postal service instead). The registrar in the district where the event occurred constantly checks for any such notifications and updates their lists accordingly.

If it becomes known that an event has occurred which has not been registered within the prescribed time (within 21 days of a birth or stillbirth occurring and within 8 days of a death occurring), registrars would send a set of 2 reminders (if the first doesn't result in registration) before reporting the unregistered event to the Registrar General. National Records of Scotland (NRS) Registration Process Branch would

then investigate and, in the unlikely scenario that the event has not been registered after 3 months, would consider whether it could be registered on the authority of the Registrar General with as much information as can be obtained.

Of course, it is not possible to guarantee that every single birth, stillbirth and death which occurs in Scotland will be registered, because there will be some events which are not known of by any authority. For example, if there were a murder, with the body disposed of and no other evidence of what had happened, then a death would have occurred but would not be registered.

Making sure that the correct numbers of marriages and civil partnerships are registered

There cannot be any legal marriages in Scotland of which the authorities are unaware. Briefly (e.g. leaving aside the administrative route for conversion of a civil partnership to a marriage), for a marriage to be a legal, the couple must first submit marriage notice forms to the Registrar of the district in which the marriage is to take place: normally, at least four weeks before the intended date of the marriage (if neither party has been married before), or six weeks beforehand (if either has been married before). This enables the Registrar to check that there is no legal impediment to the marriage, and prepare the Marriage Schedule, without which no marriage can proceed. Then, a marriage must be solemnised only by an authorised person (for a civil marriage, a Registrar or an Assistant Registrar; for a religious/belief marriage, someone who has been approved to do so under the relevant legislation). As Registrars know of all the proposed marriages in their areas, and will know if any do not take place (for whatever reason), a marriage cannot be legal and unregistered (or registered twice).

For similar reasons, a civil partnership cannot be legal and unregistered (or registered twice).

The quality of the record of each event

Most of the details that are recorded when an birth, stillbirth, marriage, civil partnership or deaths is registered are provided to the Registrar by one or more Informants (such as the parents of a baby, or a close relative of the deceased). In addition, the Registrar copies some information from the Medical Certificate of the Cause of Death (as completed by a doctor) or the Certificate of Stillbirth (as completed by a doctor or a midwife).

The Registrar goes through the relevant standard sequence of questions, in almost all cases keying each answer into the NRS Forward Electronic Register (FER) computer system as soon as it is given. The FER computer system checks for any apparent errors and omissions (e.g., fields which are blank, but should have been completed), and displays the appropriate error/warning messages. In some cases, the Registrar may be able to obtain the required information from NRS's existing records if the Informant cannot provide it or is unsure about it. For example, if someone registering the death of an elderly relative is unable to provide details of the relative's parents, the Registrar may be able to get them from NRS's records of the relative's birth and/or marriage (if relative was born and/or married in Scotland).

Once all the information has been recorded, any typing errors should be picked up when the Informant and the Registrar read through a printed copy of the details which will appear in the register (it may also be checked by a senior Registrar) before it is signed by both the Informant and the Registrar. At that stage, the record is locked - but corrections can be made later, if errors are discovered.

Subsequently, the record of each event is scrutinised by one of NRS's Examiners, who check the information that NRS knows from experience is most likely to contain errors. For example, the Examiners look out for mis-spellings and check that the parents' details have not been entered in the wrong places (e.g. mother's details in the section for the father, and vice versa). The Examiners may also draw to Registrars' attention cases where the information was not recorded in the normal way, and so contribute to the improving the quality of the data by encouraging the use of standard procedures and terminology. In addition, mistakes are sometimes spotted later, when Informants or, say, other family members look at their copies of the register entries.

National Records of Scotland has a target to increase the number of registration authorities for which at most 4% of events have a correction made after their records have been locked. Clearly, this implies that the error rate for each individual field must be much lower than 4%.

Of course, it is not possible to guarantee the accuracy of all the information that is recorded when an event is registered. For example, Registrars usually have to take on trust all the information about occupations that is given by the people who register events: unless they happen to know the people concerned, Registrars have no way of checking that the stated occupations are correct.