

Obsolescence of BIC Codes and Transition to *Thema* BIC's Operational FAQs

This set of FAQs is designed to assist with the transition to *Thema* ahead of the BIC Standard Subject Categories (BSSC) scheme (aka: "BIC Codes") being made obsolete at the end of February 2024. This document is concerned with the operational aspects of the transition process. For more information regarding the specifics of subject classification using *Thema* please refer to the documentation held on [EDItEUR's website](#) and/or our [2 BIC Bites](#) (#14 and #15) on the topic.

Can't find the question you're looking for? Please [contact us](#).

1. What do you mean by obsolescence?

By obsolescence in this context, we mean that the BSSC scheme is being made obsolete, and by "obsolete" we mean that it will not be recognised as officially in use anymore, and neither will it be regarded as best practice to use it: The scheme has been replaced by something newer and more fit for purpose i.e., *Thema*.

Additionally, at the end of February 2024 the following changes will take place:

- Removal from the BIC website of all BSSC scheme documentation and data files
- Cessation of all BIC support regarding any BSSC scheme queries
- Removal of all references to BIC Codes from PDEA scheme (in favour of *Thema*)
- Removal of EDItEUR's online browser for the BIC schemes
- Deprecation of BIC Codes within ONIX

The February 2024 deadline – some seven years after BIC endorsed *Thema* as the preferred scheme for the UK trade – is intended to provide sufficient notice to the industry and allow stakeholders time to make the necessary changes to their systems and workflows.

2. Will BIC Codes still "work"?

Depends entirely on what you mean by 'work.' To some degree, they already don't work. The hierarchy of Codes is decreasingly 'fit for purpose', and there are retailers that already largely ignore BIC Codes (in favour of *Thema*). After February 2024, publishers may still be able to classify books using BIC Codes, but won't be able to access documentation, and the decline in value of BIC Codes in the metadata will accelerate. More and more retailers will ignore them.

3. Will ONIX ignore BIC Codes if they are included?

No. ONIX will discourage publishers from including BIC Codes through deprecation of the relevant ONIX codes (and will encourage *Thema* instead), but ONIX will not prevent inclusion of BIC Codes.

4. Do I need to remove all BIC Codes from my ONIX file by February 2024?

No, there is no benefit in removing BIC Codes that have already been applied and you should continue to include them in update records where BIC has previously been provided to recipients. Inclusion of BIC Codes will not invalidate ONIX data. However, you will not need to assign BIC to new records in future (liaise with your recipients before February 2024 to ensure they will be ready for this change). Note also that your system vendor may remove the facility to include BIC Codes in ONIX files at some point in the future.

5. What if one or more of my customers doesn't use *Thema*?

Most publishers have customers who don't use *Thema* – e.g., many customers in the US. *Thema* is not universal. But if those customers use BIC Codes or any other scheme, they should be encouraged to begin to use *Thema*. It's a better scheme, still simple to use but more expressive, more internationally-relevant, and – unlike the BIC Codes scheme – under active development. And it's very broadly accepted already.

6. My publishing and/or retailing system doesn't have a field for *Thema* – what should I do?

Contact your system vendor ASAP. Most of them can handle *Thema*, even if that's not the case for the version you are using right now.

7. What version of *Thema* should I use?

The latest right now is version 1.5. But *Thema* is under active development, and it has a roughly biennial update cycle – 1.6 is expected during 2024. However, don't wait until version 1.6 is available – none of the work you do with 1.5 will be wasted, as each version of *Thema* is backward compatible with the earlier versions.

8. With new versions of *Thema* released about every two years, do I need to re-classify my whole backlist each time? And what if my trading partners don't use the most recent version?

In order to ensure the scheme keeps pace with changes in the market, *Thema* releases new versions once every couple of years, but each new version so far has been backward compatible with previous versions (this was not always the case with the BIC Codes scheme). So, migrating to a new version of *Thema* is generally very straightforward, particularly for publishers. Existing *Thema* codes on backlist titles do not need to be modified when a new version is released, though publishers are encouraged to re-assess at least the most valuable fraction of their active backlist and their frontlist to see if a newly added code might be more appropriate.

Upgrading is easiest if downstream trading partners upgrade to a new version first. But publishers can upgrade even if one or two of their downstream partners do not.

9. What will happen if I don't use *Thema* after February 2024?

Right now, if publishers only supply BIC Codes, some retailers are already unable to classify their book by subject. This will simply get worse after February 2024. Publishers may find that titles are less well merchandised and promoted, books will suffer loss of valuable discoverability options, titles or websites will be associated with outdated terminology, and retailers will be unable to categorise books in important new areas of publishing. Publishers may be viewed as not a very good source of information about their own titles by some of their data partners, as they will be using an obsolete subject scheme.

10. If I'm not using *Thema* now, how difficult will it be for me to start using it?

For current users of the BIC Codes scheme, it's usually fairly straightforward. At its simplest, *Thema* works a lot like the BIC Codes scheme, and could even be viewed as 'a modern version of the BIC scheme'. But *Thema* then adds further levels of sophistication for those who want it. Most off-the-shelf metadata management solutions can support *Thema*, and existing BIC Codes can be mapped to basic *Thema* codes to get you started. Then manually review the codes for your frontlist – and the valuable parts of your backlist – to ensure your books are as well described as they can be.

11. Should I prioritise my backlist or my frontlist when considering how to migrate to Thema codes?

Prioritise your frontlist by-hand classification using *Thema*. Use a mapping (e.g., the free BIC Codes to *Thema* mapping – see EDItEUR link below) to assign *Thema* codes to your backlist. Then once this is done, consider whether by-hand revision of books in the most valuable fraction of your active backlist is worthwhile.

12. Can I still use Thema and BIC Codes together?

Yes, but the relevance of the BIC Codes is already waning, and they will become increasingly irrelevant after February 2024. Very soon, it won't be worth using both. And the whole point of moving to *Thema* is to adopt a subject scheme that is broadly used, across many countries, rather than using a scheme that is essentially UK-only.

13. I'm a Thema-ready publisher – what if my distributor and/or data aggregator can't accept Thema codes?

Encourage them now to adopt *Thema*. This is why two years' notice of the obsoleting of BIC Codes was given. Let your trading partners know you are using *Thema* and that it is your preferred subject classification scheme. Ensure your data aggregator is *Thema* ready.

14. I'm a Thema-ready retailer but not all publishers are sending Thema information – what should I do?

Encourage them now to adopt *Thema*. This is why two years' notice of the obsoleting of BIC Codes was given. Let your trade partners know you are using *Thema* and it is your preferred subject classification scheme. Ensure your data aggregator is *Thema* ready.

15. I'm a retailer currently using BIC Codes, but looking to use Thema codes, yet my system isn't Thema ready – what should I do?

Contact your retailing system vendor now. At least some of them can handle *Thema*, even if that's not the case for the version you are using right now.

16. I'm a small independent retailer – what if I'm happy to continue using the BIC Codes scheme? Can I continue without switching to Thema?

After February 2024, many publishers will not supply BIC Codes for new records, so migrating to *Thema* is strongly recommended. It may be possible to continue with BIC Codes internally by using a mapping from *Thema*, but by doing so you would be literally discarding the additional detail and value, designed specifically to facilitate the discoverability of books, that *Thema* provides.

17. I'm completely new to Thema – where can I go for more information?

There is an executive briefing describing the *Thema* scheme, two BIC Bites, extensive EDItEUR documentation and a series of BIC Brunch *Thema* Sessions. Then, for some people, there are detailed training courses... But one of the benefits of *Thema* is that it will feel very familiar to existing users of BIC Codes.

- Executive briefing – [PDF](#)
- BIC Bite for publishers – [PDF](#)
- BIC Bite for retailers – [PDF](#)
- Take a look at the online multilingual Thema code browser – <https://ns.editeur.org/thema>
- Further EDItEUR documentation – <https://www.editeur.org/151/Thema/#Documentation>

In 2022 BIC launched a new webinar series: “BIC Brunches: The *Thema* Sessions” with EDItEUR. The first of these sessions have been recorded and can now be viewed on BIC's YouTube channel via the [“Thema Sessions” playlist](#). These *Thema* BIC Brunch sessions will



continue, and the list of recordings will be added to throughout the transition period to February 2024.

At time of writing (February 2023), 7 sessions cover the following topics include:

- Adult Fiction
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
- Children, Teenage and Educational Material
- Non-Fiction Popular
- Academic Titles
- Comic Books, Graphic Novels, and Manga
- A Guided Tour of What's New in Thema version 1.5

18. If I use BIC Codes, will data aggregators still map to *Thema* after February 2024, or will there be a transitional period?

The period we are in now i.e., between the first announcement in February 2022 and the actual obsolescence of the codes in February 2024, *is* the transitional period. Whether individual data aggregators will continue to make any use of BIC Codes after the 2024 deadline cannot be predicted, but there are large data recipients who *already ignore* any supplied BIC Codes, and others will join them. Mappings from BIC Codes to *Thema* and vice versa are available, but it is important to remember that mappings cannot *add* value, only retain as much precision as possible. Mappings from a larger scheme (such as *Thema*) to a smaller scheme (such as BIC Codes) can generate good outcomes, but no mapping from BIC Codes will be able to take full advantage of the enhanced, extended, and updated values available in *Thema*. Mapping from BIC Codes to *Thema* is not a sustainable long term solution. The best data aggregators will be working with *Thema* directly.

19. Can any changes to BIC Codes be made – in particular with regards to outdated, or what are now regarded as unacceptable, subject headings or descriptions?

No. The development of the BIC Codes scheme has been officially and permanently frozen since February 2017. In fact, there have been no updates made to the BIC Codes scheme since November 2010, so the scheme is now over 12 years 'out of date'. Given its age, we acknowledge and have sympathy with the fact that some terminology used within this now out of date scheme is no longer considered socially acceptable. However, given that the scheme is permanently frozen and is being deprecated in favour of *Thema*, and that BIC has recommended the UK book trade transitions to *Thema* since 2017, our position to make no changes to any of the BIC Codes will not alter. The use of outdated terminology in the BIC Codes scheme is one of the many reasons we have recommended *Thema* as the alternative scheme.

Furthermore, even if BIC *were* to make any changes to terms or descriptions within the BIC Codes scheme, it is unlikely that any changes would filter through and be adopted across the rest of the metadata supply chain ahead of the February 2024 obsolescence date. *Thema* is up to date, under continuous review, and is responsive to change and recommendations. As such, it is the best place to introduce and maintain more socially acceptable terms and descriptions.

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