



NILS-RSU

NORTHERN IRELAND LONGITUDINAL STUDY
RESEARCH SUPPORT UNIT

Consultation on a NILS Strategy and Forward Plan Summary report

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1. Methodology

Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study (NILS) users and other stakeholders were consulted about the future of the NILS Research Support Unit (NILS-RSU) and the wider development of the NILS over the next five years. The consultation was carried out by NILS-RSU using Citizen Space, online cloud-based consultation software.

The consultation was interested in gathering ideas and suggestions and therefore used open questions to solicit opinions. It consisted of 10 questions and sought views in the following four activity areas:

- NILS development – potential future data linkages
- Research support – what support is provided to NILS users and how
- Research impact – increasing the academic, policy and public use profile of the NILS
- Future access to NILS and other UK Longitudinal Studies

Guidance was provided in the online form and the [NILS Ten Year Anniversary Booklet](#), the [Ten Years of the NILS Paper](#) and the [NILS-RSU website](#) were suggested as useful information guides.

The consultation time was relatively short due to expected external timetables. The online consultation ran from 8th June to 30th June 2017.

In total, 23* responses were received from a range of stakeholders, including NILS users, a NILS Funding representative, NISRA and the Director of NILS-RSU. The majority of responses were from users based at Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, as well as a researcher from an English University and another from a University in the USA.

Views from the consultation will be used to inform the NILS-RSU funding bid to the ESRC in the summer/autumn of 2017 and a strategic plan for wider developments that will be brought before the NILS Steering Group later in 2017. This will help to build on the success of the NILS and inform future data acquisition, subject to the legal gateways, funding and resources being in place.

This document provides a summary of responses to the consultation.

*includes 14 responses from NILS Users that were pooled together into one response on behalf of the NILS User Group

2. NILS Development

In terms of NILS development, the consultation sought views on potential future data linkages to the NILS and on the future of the NILS.

2.1 Data Linkages

Responses considered extending the time series of the NILS with additional Census data. The 2021 Census data was deemed an essential linkage for the future development of the NILS. This would result in a 40 year plus longitudinal dataset which would regularly be updated with vital events data and Health Card Registration data. Around a third of respondents commented that the linkage of historic Censuses (pre 1981) to the NILS would be desirable if individuals could be linked over time and NILS members could be followed over the life course. Standalone earlier NILS datasets would be of limited interest.

Respondents acknowledged the research value that additional linkages would add to the NILS. They considered extending the width of the data by adding additional administrative data linkages. In terms of additional future data linkages, secondary care data (admissions/discharge from hospital/palliative care referrals) was most in demand and was deemed an essential linkage by over half of respondents. Highly desired linkages also included education data (both primary and tertiary level) from the Department of Education and welfare/benefits/income data from the Department for Communities. Other data linkages that respondents deemed as being desirable were household survey data, such as the Labour Force Survey. Crime data, divorce data, work address data, consumer surveys data and Electoral Register data were other data linkages that were mentioned. One respondent commented that links to area types measured in a comparable way over time would prove useful.

2.2 Future of the NILS

The majority of respondents commented that an additional link to the 2021 Census, thus providing a 40 year plus longitudinal dataset which would regularly be updated, would provide even more value to the NILS. Comments were also made on the uncertain future of the traditional population Census in the UK after 2021 and thus the future need for the NILS to be able to incorporate data from any alternative approach to enumerating the population, likely to be administrative data based. Responses also highlighted a huge demand for the NILS to provide full coverage of the Northern Ireland population.

One respondent stressed that the full potential of the NILS has yet to be exploited due to the sheer volume of information it contains and that with a few additional linkages the power of the data could be greatly enhanced. Another commented that a scoping exercise to capture other datasets held within NI could prove useful to determine whether there would be opportunities to make new distinct linkage projects or more long-term associations between

the datasets. A suggestion was also made to look at other longitudinal datasets to see how NILS could be made more sustainable and attractive for use by all stakeholders.

Consideration would have to be given to the potential effect that any future data sharing legislation might have for the NILS.

3. Research Support

In terms of research support, the consultation sought views on the current service provided by the NILS Research Support Unit (RSU), areas for service/support improvement and on how the NILS user base could be increased.

3.1 Current Service

Overall, feedback on the current service provided by the NILS-RSU was very positive from all respondents. Comments were made on the good attitude and knowledge of staff and the efficient and helpful service provided. Several respondents commented that they valued the quick turnaround time in the checking and provision of intermediate and final outputs, the project application phase and the provision of data.

Some respondents highlighted areas for improvement. Opportunities for increasing promotional activity, both via RSU and researchers, was the most commonly expressed suggestion for an area of improvement. Others stated that they would welcome more regular Research Approvals Group meetings and the re-organisation and provision of up-to-date supporting material and documentation for researchers in the shared directory for the NILS and ADRN.

3.2 Service Development

There were mixed responses regarding the future provision of synthetic data. The majority of respondents stated that they felt synthetic data should be a priority and would benefit both researchers in generating code outside of the secure environment and NILS-RSU staff in having less outputs to clear. A suggestion was made that synthetic data may also help to encourage more remote working from people outside Northern Ireland.

However, one respondent commented that they were uncertain of the value of synthetic data. From their experience they find that they need to visit the secure environment and have access to a complete project dataset in order to plan and implement analysis, thus synthetic data would only have limited utility in terms of developing analysis code. They also suggested that a key objective should be the provision of a wider range of data thus increasing the usage of the secure environment.

One international researcher who relies on the remote code facility, whereby researchers can send in code for NILS-RSU staff to run on their behalf, indicated his concerns with this process. The researcher commented that they found the process 'a bit bulky' and that they have experience in using a more sophisticated remote desktop system which allows a more efficient output clearing process.

In terms of online resources, a respondent indicated that some MSc/PhD students struggle with the concept of linked files and data structures and that exemplar files would be a useful addition to the NILS-RSU website.

One user stated that the provision of entrance cards for the new building would be welcomed.

3.3 Increase NILS User Base

Various groups of people were highlighted as key to increasing the NILS user base. These included undergraduate and postgraduate students, policy makers, those working in the government and voluntary sectors and international researchers.

It was suggested that there should be greater engagement with policy makers. One respondent showed concern at the lack of awareness of the NILS from a Department of Health representative at the NILS impact workshop in 2015. Suggestions to increase the user base among government departments included identifying and communicating where NILS research is relevant to government targets and commitments outlined in the Programme for Government and facilitating appropriate meetings and events with policy makers.

A respondent commented that among the government/voluntary sector, there may be a shortage of skilled resource to undertake meaningful quantitative research using the NILS and that, if possible, formal links and collaborative projects should be established with academic institutions so that skilled researchers can be employed to undertake research that can have societal and academic impact. Another respondent noted the challenges of limited capacity and strong financial constraints that this approach may have but suggested that identifying a resource in the NILS to support a user from the government/voluntary sector could be a suitable option to help expand the non-academic user base.

Another suggestion to increase the user base within the government sector was to increase the availability of data for Distinct Linkage Projects.

It was noted that the NILS is a great resource for migration research and one that could be used more fully if it were made aware to international researchers, in particular the international demographic community. It was suggested that Brexit is likely to have a considerable impact on border communities and hence there is likely to be research interest in this area. This could be exploited from a NILS perspective, with opportunity for targeting NILS promotional events at potential users from the Republic of Ireland.

The pooled response from users indicated that all felt that increased access to synthetic data would widen the geographical base of NILS Users. Again it was recommended that access to

synthetic data and hence remote analysis could increase the attractiveness of the NILS for users, particularly in the rest of the UK and in the Republic of Ireland.

4. Research Impact

In terms of research impact, the consultation sought views on the impact of the NILS to date, how the impact of the NILS could be improved and how value-for-money can be demonstrated.

4.1 Impact of the NILS

Academic impact and Policy impact were the two main themes arising in terms of the impact of the NILS to date.

On the whole, academic impact was seen as the main area of impact achieved for the NILS. Comments were made on the numerous project outputs, such as publications and conference presentations, which have been completed over the past decade and the valuable insight that these have provided. Reference was also made to the large NILS user base and the number of NILS projects and the positive impact the NILS has had in terms of enhancing the quantitative skills base of these users and the employment opportunities and qualifications that have been achieved as a result.

Policy impact was another main focus. It was stated that the NILS continues to provide a valuable insight on a diverse range of subjects such as mental health, impact of care-giving, mortality and internal migration. Notably, a project assessing breast screening uptake in Northern Ireland and the Grief Study, were mentioned as successful Distinct Linkage projects that have contributed to policy planning in Northern Ireland.

It was also noted that there has been valuable impact in terms of Infrastructure in that the development of the NILS has been vital for the development of work through the Honest Broker Service and the Administrative Data Research Centre Northern Ireland where the processes, procedures and governance arrangements have been followed.

NILS users also commented on the additional impact that the NILS has made in terms of promoting joint working between data-custodians, academia and the public sector and in laying the foundation for administrative data linkage.

4.2 Impact Improvement

Engagement and promotion were the key areas identified to improve the impact of NILS in terms of public, community, research and policy impact.

In terms of engagement, a respondent recommended that by having all the appropriate people on a research team at the outset, more impact could be achieved. Ideas for further engagement included the need to increase the scope of the NILS user base and to develop a wider NILS audience. Suggestions to achieve this, and hence increase the research impact of the NILS, included the organisation of targeted workshops where NILS users could disseminate their research to a varied audience from academia and the government and voluntary sectors. However, the difficulty in attracting appropriate attendees to such a workshop was acknowledged.

A number of respondents indicated that policy impact improvements could be made through increased liaison with relevant government officials to ensure research questions, and hence outputs, are policy relevant. This would be in addition to further enhancing links that are already present with policy makers such as the Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series which provides a forum to present and disseminate academic research findings on issues that are relevant to governance in Northern Ireland. It was also suggested that more concise policy related outputs that meet the needs of policy makers could be encouraged, in particular in relation to the Programme for Government. It was suggested by one respondent that an Impact Officer might be a useful addition to the NILS team.

Greater collaboration and communication with other services and third sector organisations to target specific research topics was also suggested.

Ideas for further promotion to increase public and community impact included using social media and the NILS-RSU website to better disseminate outputs. A suggestion was to make relevant research outputs immediately accessible from the NILS-RSU homepage. Public engagement and communications were noted as key areas that may require a specialised role combined with that of an Impact Officer.

4.3 Role of Key Groups

A number of key groups were identified as being fundamental to the achievement of higher impact of the NILS.

It was suggested that researchers with expertise in different subject areas should be responsible for initiating innovative and impactful NILS research projects. The production of policy briefs, papers and attendance at conferences were also noted to contribute to NILS impact levels. Expanding the geographical scope of the NILS through the increased involvement of international researchers and participation in international collaborative projects was recommended. In terms of UK-level impact a respondent suggested that researcher collaboration with colleagues from different parts of the UK on UK-wide longitudinal study projects would have more impact.

For RSU, areas to consider to improve the impact of the NILS were the production of publically available research output briefs, further promotional activities and facilitating the use of the NILS by RSU staff to carry out research.

It was suggested that funders and data providers could act as advocates for the NILS along with their counterpart UK bodies and act as intermediaries with possible policy users of NILS findings. In terms of funders, the importance of researchers receiving enough funding to cover academic time for writing papers was noted. The responsibility of data suppliers to promote the NILS as a research resource among their networks was also commented on.

General comments suggested that dissemination strategies should be enhanced to highlight the impact of NILS. It was proposed that a dedicated series of research events with local policy makers could enable the results of NILS-based analysis to be better integrated into shaping local policy decisions. The establishment of an impact group to develop a programme of activity in this area was also suggested.

4.4 Demonstrating Value-For-Money

This question had the lowest number of responses indicating an acknowledgement of the difficulty of demonstrating value-for-money.

A range of areas were suggested to demonstrate value-for-money. In financial terms it was suggested that the following should be assessed:

- the cost collectively and for single projects
- the output of RSU support staff against costs
- the money brought back in for each pound invested

In non-financial terms it was suggested that the following should be assessed:

- the number of funded projects
- collaboration with organisations
- the number of publications in academic journals
- the number of years of employment provided
- the number of PhD/Masters Qualifications gained
- whether it is used to inform an aspect of government policy or a methodological improvement by NISRA or other UK statistical agency.

- that the NILS tells us something about society that no other resource does
- that the NILS is a readymade data resource (and infrastructure) that is cheaper than survey-based longitudinal/cohort studies and that does not suffer from the same problems of attrition.

5. Future Access

In terms of future access, the consultation sought views on how access to the NILS, other UK Longitudinal Studies and microdata should develop over the next five years.

5.1 NILS and other UK Longitudinal Studies

It was suggested that by incorporating additional data such as ADRC-NI data in the NILS the breadth of the NILS data could be enhanced and the user base could be increased. NILS Users felt that making UK wide datasets/analysis available in the RSU secure environment would be essential to the future of the NILS. They also felt that the timelines for applications and data access could be improved and acknowledged the time taken to generate UK-wide projects as a concern.

It was recommended that integration of NILS with other UK longitudinal studies would offer a range of new research possibilities. A funding representative stated that they would support any opportunities for cross-study working. It was also stated that harmonisation of the UK longitudinal studies would make UK-wide analyses easier and also widen the user base. It was acknowledged that there are limits to harmonising procedures, processes and documentation and it should be done in such a way that does not cause duplication of work.

One respondent stated that they would like to see the provision of a secure research pod in Ulster University in Derry or Coleraine to facilitate easier use of the NILS for researchers not based in Belfast. An international researcher also requested a more efficient remote access system not involving numerous output clearances.