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Evelyn Collins, CBE
Chief Executive
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cc. Sue Gray, Permanent Secretary, DoF

Sent via E-mail

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NISRA COVID-19 STATISTICS & RESEARCH RELATING TO SECTION 75 GROUPS

Dear Evelyn,

Many thanks for your letter to me of 11th June.

Firstly, NISRA was happy to work in partnership with your office to develop the recent signposting guidance for Section 75 data. We are committed to enhancing the availability of such data for users and believe this guidance will contribute to that aim.

We share your view about the importance of equality-disaggregated data to understand the impact of the COVID 19 and we are committed to publishing as much data and statistics relating to the current pandemic as we can. The need for timely and high quality data has never been so much in need and NISRA statisticians across government have been stepping up to deliver many new outputs at speed to actively help users make sense of the situation. We have gathered the main outputs here on a single entry page if you have not seen: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/ni-summary-statistics/coronavirus-19-statistics>

In terms of your plea to increase collection of relevant Northern Ireland specific disaggregated equality data to inform decision making in relation to COVID-19, I agree that this is of utmost importance and there is more to do to ensure that data and analyses are readily available to demonstrate the impact on different groups in society. NISRA does indeed plan to develop this evidence base and where data are collected specifically for statistical purposes this is already happening. However, gaps remain in administrative data systems and NISRA supports your position in encouraging Departments and public authorities to collect data across the full range of equality grounds.

One of the priority areas of analysis for us over recent months has been in terms of registered deaths. NISRA is well-served in terms of analysis of probable/possible COVID-19 deaths by Age

and Sex. You will be aware of our first monthly inequalities bulletin which issued last week containing standardised comparisons across areas and sub-populations:

<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/COVID-19%20Deaths%20Bulletin%201%20March-31%20May%202020.pdf>

Similarly, DoH published its inequalities bulletin on the same day, illustrating differential infection and hospital admission rates across populations and geographies. <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/Coronavirus-related-health-inequalities-report.pdf>

In terms of further plans to analyse deaths based on the death certificate, we are constrained by the variables collected at the point of death registration (age, sex and marital status -

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/death-registration-form-GRO73.pdf>) and

there are no current plans to enhance the data collected which would likely require legislation.

Place of birth (country) was also analysed in the new monthly bulletin, although this obviously does not equate with 'ethnicity'.

More helpfully if not as timely, NISRA holds the Northern Ireland Mortality Study (NIMS) longitudinal dataset which goes back over ten years and can be linked to other administrative data to pick up life events and personal characteristics. These data are made available in a secure setting to researchers from both from academia and government, and as part of the Economic & Social Research Council investments in longitudinal data and administrative data linkage, we anticipate many new research avenues being explored relating to the various aspects of the pandemic in the next few years.

More specifically, the Administrative Data Research Centre in Northern Ireland, in which NISRA is a partner ([ADR UK Initiative](#)), is planning to work with a national consortium of BAME researchers and organisations to understand COVID-19's disproportionate impact on different ethnic groups. This work is in its infancy but is of a high priority. Although NISRA holds ethnicity details for the population as at 2011 in the Census record, given the elapsed time, the post-2011 immigration and the comparatively small numbers of COVID-19 deaths in Northern Ireland, the methodology used by ONS (imputing ethnicity from the last Census) will not work for us here. In short, we plan to address this gap.

In addition, in the development of further research project proposals for the imminent next round of the ADR initiative, we will put together a plan looking at COVID-19 deaths in terms of wider inequalities including the remaining Section 75 groups – those with/without dependents, religion, disability/underlying conditions, as well as deprivation more generally.

The deaths data are within my bailiwick as Registrar General, and I have outlined my commitment to further analysing these data in the coming months and years, including through linking with other administrative datasets. NISRA colleagues in departments are similarly working with policymakers to determine how various aspects of this pandemic have affected different groups including Section 75 populations. The ADR will be offered as a vehicle to carry out relevant research across all departments

and policy areas, however, it will not answer all potential questions and your points are well-made in that gaps still exist in the availability of Section 75 data at source. Many administrative systems do not collect ethnicity or sexual orientation, and few if any collect political opinion. These are not within NISRA's gift, however, although statisticians in departments are mindful of these gaps and do encourage the addition of relevant variables when systems are being designed/re-designed. Having equality characteristics captured within the administrative systems would no doubt have been helpful in identifying early on any differential impacts of COVID 19 on protected groups.

As a step in the right direction, as you are aware, the 2021 Census will collect population-level data on sexual orientation for the first time next year.

In summary, NISRA continuously encourages the collection and analysis of data through a Section 75 lens and in the coming months will set out a series of research projects relating to COVID-19 inequalities. I will share that research plan with you in due course.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to mention that the Finance Minister will be approached to take the next Official Statistics Order through the NI Assembly in the coming year, and that a number of organisations are keen to be included as producers of official statistics in this next round. The pandemic has highlighted the need for trustworthy, high quality and valuable statistics as a public good and the importance to users of the 'kitemark' of official statistics in determining reliable sources within the myriad of information 'out there'. I would commend the Equality Commission to avail of this opportunity to have at your disposal the badge of official statistics for relevant outputs (for your determination). I don't see the next opportunity to join the official statistics community in this way arising for a number of years.

Yours sincerely,

Personal Data

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