

Vital Statistics User Engagement Strategy

2022/23

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This document follows on from the initial Vital Statistics User Engagement Strategy for 2021/22 published in November 2022. This document sets out the current functions of the Branch, the outputs produced, current and potential users of those outputs and how the plans for user engagement tie in with the overall GSS Strategy [User engagement strategy for statistics – ensuring official statistics meet society’s needs](#)

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Introduction

Vital Statistics Unit (VSU) is part of the Vital Statistics & Administrative Research and Support Branch (VARs) in NISRA. The VSU produces statistics on births, stillbirths, deaths, marriages, civil partnerships, and adoptions from civil registration events which are registered with the General Register Office (GRO). Figures on divorces and civil partnership dissolutions are compiled from returns of 'Decrees made Absolute' supplied by the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service. Vital events data are produced on a weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual basis depending on user requirements.

Statistics which are produced from vital events registered in Northern Ireland are of a high quality and should have complete population coverage as it is a legal requirement to register all such events that occur in Northern Ireland. More information on the quality of the data can be found in the Background Quality Reports and Quality Assurance of Administrative Data (QAAD) documents available on the NISRA website (<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/births-deaths-and-marriages/vital-statistics-documentation>).

VSU produces a number of outputs that are widely used by a range of customers. The publication schedule is available on the [NISRA website](#).

Now, more than ever, the importance of engaging with users is evident, particularly with the growth in use of social media, information dissemination, and the potential for miscommunication. It is essential that current users understand the data that are being released (including appropriate uses and limitations thereof), and that potential users are made aware of the availability of data. It is also important that we, as producers, know that we are meeting the need of our customers.

In February 2021, the Government Statistical Service launched a strategy, fed into by the lead statisticians of the four nations of the UK, highlighting the need to engage with users and potential users of statistics to ensure that statistical products and services meet society's needs. It is a four-year strategy that sets out a plan of action for building a more meaningful and sustained dialogue between producers, users and potential users of statistics.

Vital Statistics User Engagement Strategy

The main GSS User Engagement Strategy¹ is split into 3 strands (as detailed below). The VSU approach to user engagement will, for consistency, mirror this approach and will set actions designed to meet the goals set out below.

Goal one: Collaboration

Collaborate across boundaries to offer a more coherent user experience.

The data produced by VSU are the result of input from a number of other data collectors and processors before it is analysis and published². Collaboration is key to ensure the quality and accuracy of the data, but also to ensure that the right data are communicated in the correct way. In addition, there are a wide range of users³ of our statistics and it is important that the correct messages are reaching them in a way that is easily accessible and comprehensible. The Code of Practice for Statistics encourages strategic and collaborative user engagement within and across organisations.

Collaboration is already a big part of NISRA and VSU. It is necessary to collaborate with other branches to ensure that information is accurate; there is social media coverage for publications, press releases are issued to the media and in responding to queries made through these channels. The vision is to expand the way that vital events data is both presented and disseminated to existing and potential users.

A new facility within NISRA is the Tech Lab, which will work with branches on projects involving data visualisation or the automation of routine tasks. VSU have worked and hope to work more with Tech Lab to enhance products in terms of data presentation and visualisation. One such recent project was the creation of a dashboard for the 2020 Baby Names outputs, published in 2021. The output from this project is a larger tool with interactive features to allow users some control over the data that is presented.

Direct contact with those who collect the data (such as GRO and the Coroner's Office) as well as with policy makers who use the data to inform decisions, action plans and policy development and other statistical agencies who use the data for additional outputs will create valuable feedback loops. It will allow for the identification of any unmet data needs as well as provide a way to work together to improve the quality of the data. This can be achieved through online user events such as commencing regular Vital Events Data User Group meetings, (the first of which was held on 10 November 2021) question and answer sessions, and potentially setting up expert groups to maintain 2-way communication with key users and suppliers in relation to topic-specific data.

¹ [GSS User Engagement Strategy For Statistics-Ensuring Official Statistics Meet Society's Need](#)

² Medical professionals, Register Offices, General Public, General Registrar Office etc.

³ Statisticians, Government departments, policy makers, media, academics, general public etc.

Collaboration is also a primary focus in terms of consistency across the UK. VSU will continue to collaborate with the other UK nations via (but not exclusively) the Mortality Theme Group, the Drug-related Deaths Theme Group and working group, the homeless deaths working group, and the Excess Winter Mortality Working Group to ensure NI is represented in decision making and that our users are considered in terms of data coverage/outputs. This can be evidenced through the inclusion of NI data or reference to NI outputs in GB publications (for example, [Alcohol specific deaths](#); [Deaths involving covid-19](#); and [Vital Statistics in the UK](#)), and consistency in the outputs produced across the UK by the individual statistical organisations such as Covid-19 deaths, suicides, and excess winter mortality, among others.

Likewise, it is important for NISRA to work collaboratively with the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in Ireland to determine how our outputs may be aligned whilst taking account of the different registration systems which operate in NI and the Republic of Ireland. VSU will collaborate with counterparts in CSO to investigate scope for consistency in terms of vital events data available through our respective PxStat table builders. The table builder for NISRA is still in testing phase.

Goal two: Capability

Build capability and equip producers of statistics with the practical skills and tools to deliver effective user engagement activities.

It is important that staff are confident in terms of activities relating to user engagement to allow this area to grow and to build efficient feedback mechanisms with users to continually revise and improve outputs. Capability can be built by looking at 3 areas:

Infrastructure

Ensuring VSU staff have access to all the relevant packages and equipment to allow the development and expansion of user engagement.

Training

Staff will require training on such software or equipment. To encourage this, Personal development priorities within performance plans will be set to allow for the creation of champions for particular areas relating to user engagement. There are a number of areas where this is possible such as: customer surveys; data visualisation using illustrator or other such programmes; review and maintenance of the VSU area of the NISRA website; and accessibility of documents and spreadsheets that are published. This will allow staff to develop their skills, increase their experience and improve user engagement overall for VSU

User Hub

A User Hub will be set up by GSS to facilitate producers of government statistics in improving their user engagement. The User hub will support departments to identify and build partnerships with organisations outside of government that have a mutual interest.

The User hub will help coordinate a programme of thematic user forums focusing on topic areas that span the remit of many different parts of the public sector. VSU will make use of this facility when it becomes available and to learn from the experiences of others.

NISRA has set up a User Engagement working group and held a number of User Engagement spotlight events so that producers in NISRA can hear about some examples of good practice. Vital Statistics will attend such events and endeavor to learn from these events and implement relevant good practices where possible.

Goal three: Culture

Strengthen our culture and ensure user engagement is always an ongoing and essential part of a statistics producer's role.

The role of user engagement in the production of statistics needs to be recognised in terms of the relevance of the information being produced and the quality of the outputs. Having suitable feedback mechanisms in place allows producers to take on board the views of the users and quickly identify what outputs are important and what is not being used, which will, in turn, allow for the prioritisation of key work areas.

To align with the three pillars of the Code of Practice for Statistics, producers of statistics must be clear that their role is not just to produce statistics, it is to ensure that the recipients of their statistics see them as trustworthy, of high quality and delivering value. Regularly engaging with a broad range of users will allow us to assess whether we have been successful.

The GSS User Engagement Strategy explains that Heads of Profession will drive a change in culture from the top down and ensure that it is embedded into the organisation's vision and aims. At a branch level, we can embed user engagement by making it a standard part of the process. For example, production manuals should have elements of user engagement built in; performance review objectives should include objectives relating to user engagement; and having an action plan to be reviewed on an annual basis will monitor the progress of the development of user engagement.

The next section outlines relevant actions designed to achieve the goals described above along with timescales. Progress against these goals will be reported on an annual basis.

2022-23 Action Plan

Action	Relevant Goal	Priority	Timescale
		1 Essential 2 Important 3 Good to have	
Collaboration with a number of organisations to investigate the potential of an output on homeless deaths in Northern Ireland based on death registration data.	Collaboration	1	To commence by summer 2022
Issue emails to mailing list on publication day for each output	Culture	1	Ongoing
Consultation on all outputs and customer experience using Citizen Space	Culture	1	Ongoing
Management of Tech Lab project on 100 years of Baby Names dashboard	Collaboration		To commence in spring 2023
Increased use of infographics and other mediums for disseminating data	Capability	2	Ongoing
100% Accessibility on all publications	Capability	1	Ongoing
Online User Group Meeting including presentations, Q&A, follow up feedback, Q&A document etc.	Collaboration, Capability	2	November 2022
Publish a quarterly Newsletter	Capability, Culture	2	Ongoing
Ongoing engagement with media	Culture, Collaboration	2	As required
User requested data – Including internal data base of requests and publication of all data produced in response to ad hoc requests so that all users have access.	Culture	2	Database to be established by Spring 2023
Recording keeping of requests for changes from users and how they were actioned	Culture	2	March 2023

Annex A

Progress of the 2021-2022 Action Plan

Table of actions and priorities

Action	Relevant Goal	Priority	Timescale	Progress
Establish and maintain a current mailing list	Collaboration	1	April 2021	Mailing updated by May 2021 and maintenance is ongoing
Issue emails to mailing list on publication day for each output	Culture	1	April 2021	Emails are issued each Friday to the mailing list giving information on releases from that week and any events or relevant news
Roll out of links requesting informal feedback in outputs	Culture	1	By end of 2021/22	All spreadsheets published now contain a cover page which include a link to the Vital Statistics customer survey and contact details for providing feedback
Consultation on all outputs and customer experience using Citizen Space	Culture	1	Winter 2021/22	A Vital Statistics customer survey was closed and analysed in November 2021. The questionnaire was then peer reviewed by the ONS Good Practice Team and redesigned before launching again in April 2022
Subscribe facility with all outputs	Culture	1	By end of 2021/22	Links have been included in all spreadsheets published to allow users to subscribe to the VS mailing list. News pages published to the NISRA website also include a subscribe function.

Management of Tech Lab project on Baby Names dashboard	Collaboration		May 2021	Project was completed and the search tool published in May 2021 Baby Names Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (nisra.gov.uk)
Increased use of social media – announcing publications, updated publication schedule (monthly/quarterly), notifications about any changes etc	Capability	1	Summer 2021	Social media used regularly to announce publications, inform users of changes to plans or outputs and to put out requests for input (e.g. invite to a general User Group to discuss outputs was issued via social media as well as other modes)
Increased use of infographics and other mediums for disseminating data	Capability, Collaboration	2	Begin Spring/Summer 2021	Infographics used where possible to summarise outputs for social media. Infographics have been developed for quarterly tables, drug deaths, alcohol deaths, baby names etc. Additionally, videos have been produced to promote to the Baby Names outputs, including collaborating with DoF Press Office on a video.
100% Accessibility on all publications	Capability	1	By end of 2021/22	All publications were checked and adjusted for accessibility by December 2021 with the release of Excess Winter Mortality being the last publication to be updated.
Online User Group Meeting including presentations, Q&A, follow up feedback, Q&A document etc.	Collaboration, Capability	2	Autumn 2021	A Vital Statistics User Group meeting took place in November 2021. Slides and

				<p>an Issues Raised document, including responses to the issues, were published on the NISRA website</p> <p>Vital Statistics User Group Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (nisra.gov.uk)</p>
Roll out publication of ODS version of data for all outputs where possible to achieve 3 stars for open data	Capability	2	By end of 2021/22	All outputs that include excel spreadsheet now also include ODS versions making them more accessible.
Publish a quarterly Newsletter	Capability, Culture	2	March 2021	<p>The first quarterly newsletter was published in January 2021</p> <p>Vital Statistics User Engagement Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (nisra.gov.uk)</p>
Individual publication reviews – focused customer feedback, pause and reflect, consideration of google analytics etc	Culture	2	Ongoing	<p>Google analytics are used regularly to monitor output usage. Users were also asked for feedback specifically on the Baby Names outputs in May 2021.</p> <p>Suicide expert group convened to feed into the Review of Suicide Statistics in NI and shape the outputs from it.</p>
Ongoing engagement with media	Culture, Collaboration	1	As required	Vital Statistics have liaised closely with DoF press office for advice on specific outputs and how best to inform the media
Twitter Q&A	Capability, collaboration	2		After assessing the suitability of a twitter Q&A in

				the context of Vital Statistics outputs and the current wider social situation it was concluded that it would not be the best approach for engagement for this work area.
Videos explaining data	Capability, culture	3	Ongoing	A video was released demonstrating the new search tool for NI Baby Names released in May 2021
Review of website - Layout/content/appearance/ease of use - User requested section - Data quality documents review - Interactive content (dashboards, R etc.) - Data visualisation/videos on web pages Collaboration with Tech Lab	Culture, capability, collaboration	2 1 2 2 3 2	Ongoing	The Vital Statistics area of the website was somewhat reviewed during 2021/22. Specifically a new tab was added for User Engagement so that customers can quickly see any current consultations/questionnaire running, find relevant engagement documents and details of any User Group meetings. Additional links were added to make it easier for User to access data more quickly. Background Quality Reports were published for each data source in summer 2021. Dashboards have been produced to present the weekly deaths data , additionally the newsletter was produced in R allowing an HTML version to be published. Ongoing items are the roll out of HTML reporting on other outputs, regular maintenance of the user

				requested section and increased use of innovative data visualization.
Make outputs available on new NISRA table builder	Collaboration	1	Early 2022	Vital Statistics Team worked with the NISRA Dissemination team on how best to include VS data on the PX Stat table builder. However, work on the table builder itself was still ongoing in the 2021/22 year.