Early Life Cohort (ELC): frequently asked questions

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This document may be updated as further questions are received. Interested stakeholders and prospective applicants are strongly advised to opt-in to updates by completing the web form here or by emailing earlylifecohort@esrc.ukri.org

Why is a new Early Life Cohort needed? And why now?

Children born in the 2020s will represent a unique cohort of individuals born at a time of pervasive pandemic-induced changes to everyday life and the first generation to be born into a post-Brexit UK. No existing UK cohort is therefore equipped to address the scientific and policy questions that will inform and enhance strategies to promote the future life chances of this cohort, within an ever-changing global context.

The proposed infrastructure is based on a key recommendation of the 2017 Longitudinal Studies Strategic Review, led by an independent international expert panel and informed by a consultation that received responses from more than 700 stakeholders. The Review considered the continuing scientific need for longitudinal research resources and recommended that ESRC commission a new birth cohort representative of the changing characteristics of the new-born population in the UK.

Scoping a new birth cohort was also identified as a priority in the ESRC Delivery Plan 2019 and the UKRI Infrastructure's *Opportunities to Grow Our Capability* report.

What is meant by early life?

Previous scoping, expert advice and consideration of available sampling frames has shown that the Early Life Cohort must begin recruitment after birth. The Early Life Cohort Feasibility Study Full Call Specification provides more information about the reasons for this.

What will the main-stage Early Life Cohort achieve?

The aims and pursued outcomes of the main-stage Early Life Cohort study will be developed through a comprehensive development exercise, informed by the Feasibility Study and (it is expected) aligned to the UKRI infrastructure investment process. This will include fully considering the strategic objectives and outcomes of the main-stage Early Life Cohort study.

However, previous scoping and expert advice has brought ESRC to the point where we understand the main-stage study is likely to:

1. **Continue the world-leading series of UK birth cohort studies stretching back to the late 1940s** and enable the experiences and outcomes of children born in the current era to be compared with those of preceding generations. This would fill a significant gap in the data landscape and provide unique scientific policy-relevant insights.
2. **Capture the impact of key societal challenges** and the interplay with individual-societal factors on a new generation of children and their families in different sub-groups, including those which are traditionally under-represented in studies of this kind and/or are harder to reach.
3. **Generate representative data for innovative scientific and policy relevant research** to tackle major societal and policy challenges for future generations of UK children and families capturing information on a variety of important topics such as: (a) income, (b) employment, (c) health, (d) education and skills, (e) access to housing, (f) public services, (g) family structure, (h) environmental contexts and changes, (j) ethnicity, spatial, intergenerational and other inequalities, (i) challenges faced by hard to reach groups.
4. **Provide a multifaceted resource for scientists** from a range of disciplines, to address a wide range of research questions, including questions as yet unforeseen to inform future public services provision. This data would help inform scientists and policy makers on the key factors affecting children growing up in the UK, and how these enhance or challenge developmental trajectories, long-term life chances and future outcomes compared to previous generations.
5. **Result in world-leading science** on children's developmental trajectories that can capitalise on an array of new and diverse forms of data potentially including: whole genome sequencing, microbiome data, measures of cognition and socio-emotional development, consumer data, environmental and activity data from wearables and administrative data, to name but a few.
6. **Drive innovation and growth** in longitudinal cohort studies and develop the extensive and unique datasets needed to enable future generations of data scientists in performing world-leading science.
7. **Develop skills and expertise in advanced quantitative analysis**, programming and other technical skills. The Landscape Analysis for UKRI Infrastructure's *Opportunities to Grow Our Capability* report identified data infrastructures as "key players helping mobilise talent across the world, enriching the pool of technical skills, training the next generation of researchers and stimulating the mobility of leaders and in doing this they contribute to accelerate advances in research and technology". Without a new early life cohort, an important opportunity could be missed to develop a future generation of skilled social and cross-disciplinary trained data scientists
8. **Bolster the national and international competitiveness of the UK** in knowledge generation and evidence-based policy decision making.

A new Early Life Cohort study would align with existing and future longitudinal studies and potentially embed sub-studies within it, such as following children born to participants of existing longitudinal studies, to enable better cross-study comparisons.

What is the difference between the Feasibility and Main-Stage studies?

The Feasibility Study develops and tests approaches and innovations which could be employed in the main-stage study. It is envisaged that, subject to the experience of the first wave, the Feasibility Study will include multiple waves of data collection to test recruitment and retention, and that it could continue to operate alongside the main-stage study.

While the creation of a substantial data set of value to research is an objective of the Feasibility Study, compared to the main-stage study its data collection will be on a smaller scale.

What activity has been undertaken to date to support the Feasibility Study?

ESRC commissioned a range of studies and reports under the UK Population Lab programme, which inform the rationale, purpose and parameters of a Feasibility Study. The reports available so far can be found here.

ESRC has engaged the statistical agencies about a suitable sampling frame. Further information on the latter is included in the Early Life Cohort Feasibility Study Full Call Specification.

How will a new Early Life Cohort help understand and mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 crisis?

Longitudinal studies are particularly powerful for understanding the profound, lasting and diverse effects of events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The Feasibility Study could be useful in capturing some of the shorter-term effects of the pandemic. The main-stage Early Life Cohort study will allow us to understand what are expected to be the pandemic's profound longer-term effects.

The COVID-19 pandemic may also necessitate novel approaches to data collection, such as alternatives to face-to-face fieldwork. The Feasibility Study could potentially play a leading role in developing and testing such approaches.

Will the Early Life Cohort include the devolved nations of the UK?

Yes. Sampling and data collection in each of the UK's devolved nations will be tested at Feasibility Study stage. It is expected that the main-stage Early Life Cohort would oversample the devolved nations, informed by the outputs of the Feasibility Study, to create a data infrastructure that is representative of a UK-wide population of births.

Are there plans in place in case face-to-face fieldwork can't occur?

ESRC has undertaken planning for this contingency. Further planning will be undertaken with the Science and Delivery Leadership Team, recognising that there may be further, unknown developments in the COVID-19 pandemic before April 2021.

The Full Call Specification provides further information about contingency planning and data collection through non-face to face modes.

Regardless of co-funding arrangements, we will seek to harmonise purpose and outputs to the greatest possible extent.

How does the ESRC-funded Early Life Cohort Feasibility Study fit in with the Department for Education's Children of the 2020s study?

ESRC has had positive and productive engagement with DfE. The two cohorts are proceeding as separate projects, but ESRC will continue to work with DfE to ensure that both studies are aligned and complementary as far as possible.

Will the Early Life Cohort be funded in partnership with other funders?

The Feasibility Study call was not issued in partnership with other funders.

It is possible that the main-stage ELC will be commissioned in partnership with other funders. We are continuing to engage within and outside UKRI regarding future partnerships and alignment between planned studies.

We will strongly encourage teams leading both the feasibility and main stages to align to other studies to the greatest possible extent.

What thought has been given to international elements?

ESRC is aware that the UK's cohort data is widely used internationally and there are many benefits to international collaboration and harmonisation. ESRC welcomes proposals that include international considerations and collaboration, provided the proposal meets the eligibility criteria.

It is expected that a similar approach will be pursued with the main-stage study, and opportunities for collaboration and prospective harmonisation will be fully explored as part of the main-stage's development.

What contact has ESRC had with the UK statistical agencies?

ESRC has had productive conversations with colleagues from across the UK statistical system. In addition, we submitted a framework committee to the National Statistician's Data Ethics Committee (NSDEC). This paper is published alongside this call, and it is expected that the formal meeting minute will be published in Autumn 2020.

Further information on the sampling frames in England and Wales is included as an appendix to the Early Life Cohort Feasibility Study Full Call Specification.

ESRC will hand over all relevant resources to the successful applicants, brief them on previous engagement, and facilitate introductions.

What is the anticipated role of third sector and public sector co-investigators and partners in a consortium carrying out the Feasibility Study?

The call specification contains further information about the essential expertise that must be present on the leadership team. This is not tied to any particular type of organisation. Third sector and public sector co-investigators may be included in line with normal ESRC policy. Proposals must also set out plans for wider engagement during the development phase, including with stakeholders from beyond academia.

Can a person be in more than one bid at a time? For instance, could a survey organisation submit a proposal with multiple teams? How will competitive tendering be handled afterwards?

Individuals with specialised expertise may be included in multiple bids. This should be disclosed to such bids' lead applicants.

Individuals from a survey organisation would be required to recuse themselves from involvement in tendering.