
NATIONAL CITIZEN SERVICE: A GEOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

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Project Report
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University**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RESEARCH PROJECT

This research project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC - ES/L009315/1). The three year project examined the state's motivations behind, the voluntary sector's engagement with, and young people's experiences of, National Citizen Service.

National Citizen Service (NCS) is a UK government funded voluntary scheme for 15-17 year olds in England and Northern Ireland delivered through a range of social enterprises, charities and private sector partnerships. Since 2011, over 300,000 young people have completed NCS - a short-term programme with two residential experiences and 30 hours of a social action project (further details on page 6).

Using NCS as a case-study, and positioning this new scheme within the historical context of youth citizenship development, this research project addresses timely and policy-relevant debates on the state and civil society, and contributes to academic debates on youth citizenship, volunteering and informal education.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The project addressed the following research questions:

- What have been the objectives and spatial formations of youth citizenship training schemes in Britain over the last thirty years and how do these compare to NCS?
- How does the NCS programme seek to engage young people at the local, national, and global scale?
- What have been the motivations and experiences of youth service providers and volunteers delivering NCS since 2011?
- What have been the motivations, experiences and outcomes for young people participating in NCS since 2011?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RESEARCH METHODS

The project employed a mixed methodology using quantitative and qualitative research methods. There were eight components of original fieldwork, conducted between November 2014 and March 2016:

1. Archival research of UK government citizenship discourses post-WW2
2. Policy analysis of recent UK white papers on youth and project themes
3. 8 semi-structured interviews with key 'architects' of NCS
4. 23 semi-structured interviews with current and former Regional Delivery Providers (2011-15)
5. An online survey with 407 NCS graduates (2011-15)
6. 30 semi-structured interviews with a sample of NCS graduates
7. A four week ethnography of one NCS cohort in one region in Summer 2015
8. A participatory animated whiteboard-video project written and directed by young people from the ethnographic research, produced by a professional animation company (available at www.geographiesofyouthcitizenship.com)

For full details of the methodology, please see publications (p21)



Voice Over

Everyone gave everything they had to get things done in time and took responsibility for the project. We are all very proud of what we have achieved together. We couldn't have done it without such great teamwork. We've created amazing memories that will last a lifetime.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SUMMARISED KEY FINDINGS

GEOGRAPHY MATTERS

- Devolution shapes the geographies of NCS provision
- There are regional disparities in the NCS experience
- There are benefits and challenges of regional NCS contracts

SCALES OF YOUTH CITIZENSHIP

- NCS graduates primarily understood citizenship as volunteering, with more emphasis on responsibilities than rights
- The NCS curriculum is focused on local active citizenship rather than national, European, global or multi-scaled citizenship formations

EXPERIENCES AND ENGAGEMENTS

- NCS graduates are largely positive about their NCS experience
- These experiences are shaped by local geographies and 'social mix'
- There are hidden costs to social action projects

CASE-STUDY CONTEXT: NCS

National Citizen Service has been described as the **“fastest growing youth movement of its kind in the world”** (David Cameron, 2016). Launched in 2011, NCS is a short-term voluntary scheme for **15-17 year olds** in **England and Northern Ireland**. Over **300,000 young people** have completed the NCS programme, comprised of three distinctive phases over 3-4 weeks during summer.¹

Phase One is a **residential experience** usually held at an outdoor activity centre to create bonds between young people. Phase Two is a second residential, usually hosted in University Halls of Residence. Activities here are focused on **skills development for the future** through a series of workshops and group tasks. For both residential experiences, young people are in large ‘waves’ (c. 100 people) from the same region, but activities are completed within smaller teams of young people from the same village or town. For the final phase of the programme, young people return to their home communities to design and complete a **social action project**, for example fundraising, campaigning or renovation projects. The programme ends with a graduation ceremony to celebrate their NCS journey.

NCS is a unique voluntary youth programme because it was created, driven and funded by the **UK Government**. It employs a top-down **regional delivery model** overseen by the **NCS Trust**, with provider contracts awarded through a tendering process (mapped in Appendix 1: 2013-4 and Appendix 2: 2014-8). A **wide range of providers** have been involved in NCS delivery including private sector partnerships, businesses, social enterprises and voluntary sector charities. Participants pay £50 to join an NCS programme, with bursaries available for low-income groups.

The roots of NCS can be traced back to as early as 2005, with various **‘architects’** involved in the early design, development and pilot process. These ideas were cemented ahead of the **2010 General Election** when NCS was a key component of David Cameron’s ‘Big Society’ agenda. As part of successive governments, NCS has received **£297 million pounds** of investment. Looking forward, £1.26 billion has been committed to NCS delivery (2016-21) with a target of 360,000 young people completing NCS annually by 2020-21 (60% of the target population of 16 year olds).²

NCS is subject to programme **evaluation**, initially by NatCen and currently by Ipsos MORI.³ The NCS Trust also reports to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (previously the Cabinet Office and Department for Education), as well as the National Audit Office. In April 2017, National Citizen Service received a Royal Charter following the NCS Bill (House of Lords).

1 Shorter versions of the NCS programme are available in Summer and Autumn

2 National Audit Office Report, January 2017

3 Official Impact and Evaluation Reports available here: <http://www.ncsyes.co.uk/about-us>

KEY FINDINGS

The project's key findings and evidence from data analysis can be summarised under the following headings:

1. NCS Identity and Devolution
2. Regional Geographies of NCS
3. Benefits and Challenges of Contracts and Tenders
4. Citizenship and NCS
5. Scales of Youth Citizenship: Brexit and Beyond
6. Young People's Expectations and Experiences
7. Local Geographies and 'Social Mix'
8. Hidden Costs of Social Action

Each of the headings includes relevant recommendations for key stakeholders.

Further arguments and discussion are presented in published outputs (p21).

1.

NCS IDENTITY AND DEVOLUTION

Our research data-set highlights that NCS has an ‘identity crisis’ in the way different policymakers and stakeholders understand its aims and objectives. Our policy analysis reveals that this landscape has shifted since the ‘birth’ of NCS with a number of competing claims around: social cohesion; active citizenship; social action; youth volunteering; education; wellbeing and mental health; community engagement; social mixing; transitions to adulthood; political participation; tackling youth unemployment; character; entrepreneurship; and life-skills. These mixed messages create confusion in the youth sector and beyond about what NCS is.

Recommendation 1.0: A clear sense of NCS’ identity and policy links will be essential for its future development and impact.

Furthermore, our research found that the different youth policy landscapes across the UK and devolution have directly shaped the provision, reach and scope of NCS.

NCS was launched in England in 2011, and later expanded to Northern Ireland after a pilot and programme consultation. An NCS pilot took place in Wales, but the scheme was not adopted by Welsh Government. NCS does not operate in Scotland. We found that these limits to the expansion of NCS across the UK were shaped by early relationships to Westminster and David Cameron’s Big Society agenda. There are also a number of other youth programmes in Wales and Scotland.

There is therefore a tension between the name of the programme and the geographies of NCS’ reach in England and Northern Ireland.

Recommendation 1.1: Any future approaches by UK Government or NCS Trust to administrations in Wales and Scotland will need to show sensitivity to unique characteristics i.e. Welsh language provision.

2.

REGIONAL GEOGRAPHIES OF NCS

NCS operates via a regional delivery model, with regional delivery providers (RDPs) either directly delivering NCS programmes or working with a range of local delivery providers (LDPs) to sub-contract and deliver NCS on the ground. Our research revealed that this mixed geography of service provision is creating some regional disparities in the NCS experience, with a 'postcode lottery' for young people. Overall, geography matters in relation to the exact programme young people receive and there are two core areas where this has the biggest impact on the NCS experience:

— i) Phase Two's Activities

The second residential with workshops and group tasks designed to improve skills for the future varies based on each RDP. Although one would expect some variations in programme specifics due to local dynamics, there was a lack of consistency in activities and core messages. For example, some participants expressed frustrations at missing out on 'Big P' political education content i.e. debates or meeting MPs (see also Section 4) that other RDPs delivered.

Recommendation 2.0: A review of Phase Two to ensure consistency across Regional Delivery Providers, including scope for citizenship education and political literacy (see also Section 4).

— ii) Youth-Led Social Action

The extent to which social action projects are youth-led is also shaped by the regional geographies of NCS. Whilst some RDPs encourage young people to design their own projects based on young people's passions or interests, other RDPs pre-design social action projects for young people to choose from and deliver. Around half of our survey respondents designed their project with their team, whereas 28% indicated it was a combination of their provider and their team, and 16% indicated it was their provider alone. We recognise challenges in terms of preparation, insurance and risk assessments for social action projects with short lead times, however the extent to which some providers arrange social action projects limits the 'buy in' young people have as participants.

2.

Recommendation 2.1: NCS Trust should prioritise youth-led social action in future commissioning rounds and support Regional Delivery Providers with these logistics.

A final observation on the regional geographies of NCS is that interview data with current and former RDPs from outside of central and south-east England revealed they are on the fringes of the NCS 'buzz'. National NCS events and meetings with the NCS Trust were reported to be London centric and this presented time and cost challenges for providers and young people.

Recommendation 2.2: Some future decentralisation away from London as the 'hub' of NCS activity, to benefit both delivery providers and young people.



3.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF CONTRACTS AND TENDERS

Our research identified two 'types' of organisation that successfully bid for NCS contracts in the two key commissioning rounds. First, those who felt NCS chimed with their existing aims and mission; and second, those who extended or 'stretched' their business model to compete. Many of the organisations and charities indicated that NCS was their first experience of working to such a delivery model and that their contract had provided them with valuable experience, despite some challenges. These challenges include recruiting participants, delivering locally-based social action projects, and achieving 'social mix' (see Section 7), and were most acute for RDPs in rural regions.

Recommendation 3.0: The establishment of a 'rural working group' at NCS Trust tasked with further exploring and supporting the work of rural-based Regional Delivery Providers.

This research project found that the range of organisations involved in NCS delivery at regional and local levels has facilitated new working relationships. Interviewees spoke of how these partnerships had subsequently benefitted the wider operations of their organisations and activities beyond NCS. Some concerns were expressed by several providers regarding the onerous reporting and overly bureaucratic systems in relation to contracts and delivering the programme. This is particularly true for those organisations who are involved in large scale delivery as a sub-contractor in multiple regions. Likewise, there were concerns about the extent of the financial risk attached to the programme and the payments-by-results system that would make it difficult for small charities and businesses to get involved on their own.

Recommendation 3.1: To continually monitor the experiences of Regional and Local Delivery Providers in future evaluations and encourage closer working relationships between different types of organisation through NCS delivery.

4.

CITIZENSHIP AND NCS

Our research uncovered that citizenship within NCS infrastructure, its curriculum and 'on-the-ground' is often equated with volunteering. Our survey data from graduates revealed that 86% of respondents felt they learnt what it means to be a citizen on NCS. However, within our qualitative research, understandings of what citizenship meant were almost exclusively about the responsibilities of young citizens to volunteer. Citizenship was often used by NCS staff and graduates as a synonym for 'social action', or 'community'. Other parts of our data-set support this finding that citizenship within NCS is ambiguous and, at times, weakly linked to forms of political participation and the wider relationship between rights and responsibilities.

The above finding is, in part, shaped by the state's wider political ideology and the contemporary climate surrounding social action more broadly. Our research locates NCS within wider shifts whereby the UK government have 'coupled' citizenship and adulthood together as dual goals for young people to reach successfully. In trying to create a unified (yet one-off) experience through NCS, we believe the state has sought to create a shared emotional 'buzz' around a series of (voluntary-based) activities that will then 'spill over' into everyday behaviours commensurate with the ideological construction of a 'good' citizen - one who volunteers regularly.

We are not critiquing youth volunteering or social action per se, with the benefits of this activity widely reported. However, we are highlighting that the model of NCS and its promotion of a particular 'brand' of youth citizenship centred on social action as the number one tenant of being a 'good' citizen (rather than say, voting or democratic participation) tells a story about the state's vision and priorities, encouraging a type of citizen that performs 'safe' and compliant acts of (youth) citizenship.

Recommendation 4.0: Citizenship education and political literacy should be embedded within Phase Two of the NCS curriculum (see also Section 2).

5.

SCALES OF YOUTH CITIZENSHIP: BREXIT AND BEYOND

As previous sections have hinted, the climax of the NCS programme is the social action project. Our research found that this model locates the real arena for active citizenship in young people's own local towns, cities and villages – as part of a wider national collective. This framework – coupled with the varied content of Phase Two (See Section 2) – has resulted in little awareness by NCS providers or amongst participants about how their activities at the local scale are connected to global issues, politics or challenges. Our data indicates that NCS graduates are aware that they are part of a bigger, national movement, beyond their local team. However, our data-set revealed that other 'scales' of youth citizenship – such as European and global citizenship formations – have been relegated.

We found a weak relationship between NCS and the International Citizen Service (ICS), a scheme with a shared genealogy but a separate organisation. Indeed, there was only one reference to ICS in the whole of our data-set from either providers or young people. This dual approach with two organisations has created a scenario whereby a global outlook is a 'bolted-on' additional extra or alternative to NCS, rather than part and parcel of what it means to be a citizen. Overall, ideas of multi-scaled identities are marginalised within the NCS framework.

We believe that NCS is – like many institutions in civil society during the past year – struggling to grapple with ideas about national identity, belonging, and citizenship. In light of Brexit and subsequent political debates, there is a pressing need for NCS to reconsider its scales of youth citizenship.

Recommendation 5.0: A review of the long-term relationship between NCS and ICS. In the meantime, a short-term campaign to increase awareness amongst young people of the two schemes and potential transitions between them.

Recommendation 5.1: UK Government and NCS Trust should revisit the aims and objectives of NCS in relation to citizenship, identity and belonging in post-Brexit Britain (see also Recommendation 4.0).

6.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

Young people in our research project were overwhelmingly positive about their NCS experience, based on narratives of fun, friendship and futures. The survey data revealed clear benefits to their participation:

- 96% of respondents would recommend NCS to other teenagers
- 91% of respondents were proud of their achievements on NCS
- 90% of respondents felt more confident as a result of NCS
- 89% of respondents had developed new skills on NCS
- 89% of respondents felt they had made a difference through social action
- 80% of respondents would like to do more social action

These findings were echoed in our qualitative interviews with young people. However, our research also found contrasts between the expectations of young people and their experiences of NCS. Indeed, Section 2 detailed how regional geographies of NCS shape young people's experiences on the ground. Furthermore, participants often discussed how their lived experiences of NCS differed at times from the national or local adverts they had seen or heard before registering.

Recommendation 6.0: Local and national marketing campaigns should be regularly reviewed to ensure that content reflects the NCS programme offer.

A key area of contention nationally across our interview data was the opportunity (or not) to reside in University Halls during Phase Two, with a real demand for experiences associated with independence, such as cooking.

6.

Recommendation 6.1: Increased efforts to ensure the consistency of Phase Two in relation to University Halls of Residence or similar activities in alternative accommodation.

Young people's experiences were also largely shaped by staffing - in both positive and negative contexts. Our research found that a key challenge for future NCS provision is related to the ability to staff the programme effectively with quality trained staff as the scheme expands. Furthermore, opportunities for young people to maintain appropriate relationships with staff and mentors after the NCS programme is very limited, in some cases creating challenges for young people to secure references for employment and further education.



Recommendation 6.2: NCS Trust and RDPs to continue to invest in staffing and training. Stronger links with NCS alumni could be maintained through a secure online portal where character references/attendance certificates could be accessed by graduates.

Furthermore, young people's experiences were shaped by local geographies and 'social mix' (Section 7) and hidden costs of social action (Section 8).

7.

LOCAL GEOGRAPHIES AND 'SOCIAL MIX'

Our research found that place-based dynamics are important in shaping NCS experiences for young people, despite the early emphasis on residential-based activities. The immediate geographies of young people's neighbourhoods and friendships play a key role in shaping their engagements with NCS, both in the residential waves and during Phase Three. The ethnographic fieldwork highlighted the importance of pre-existing friendships and relationships between participants. In some cases, these existing connections between young people in the same 'wave' enhanced the NCS experience. In other cases however, where friendships or relationships between young people at school or college had broken down prior to NCS, this created tensions. Our research found that NCS does not exist in a 'bubble' that is detached in both time and space from the rest of young people's lives.

Recommendation 7.0: An awareness of these local geographies of friendship and schools within NCS staff training.

The above research finding also challenges the way that NCS is framed in relation to 'meeting new people' and its policy connections to social cohesion and building bridges between different communities. Our wider research has critically questioned the role placed on certain social groups and individuals to be better citizens and more engaged neighbours.

Whilst 97% of our survey respondents did make new friends during Phase One, young people still engage in mostly local networks rather than cross-regional or national events. This contrasts some early policy documents that suggested NCS would achieve social cohesion by mixing from different geographical locations. Despite this limited geographical reach or distance travelled, the actual local and regional infrastructure of NCS does strengthen a local sense of place and create encounters between young people from different backgrounds who often live in the same estate, neighbourhood or street. This 'social mix' of NCS is engineered as RDPs are tasked with representing local authority demographics (see also Section 3). Our research found that young people's encounters with 'difference' are therefore shaped by the unique dynamics of local areas. Many research participants discussed meeting local young people that were 'different' from them during NCS. However, this difference was expressed by young people in relation to meeting different personalities and not 'judging' others, rather than any explicit reference to

7.

the type of social identities or different backgrounds they had encountered. Overall, 'meeting new people' was the third most popular motivation to complete NCS for our survey respondents (after 'excitement' and 'CV/future job prospects') and 89% of respondents had stayed in touch with people they met on NCS.

Recommendation 7.1: To create more opportunities for cross-regional or national NCS events to extend young people's networks and encounters beyond the local / regional scale and specific place-based geographies

8.

HIDDEN COSTS OF SOCIAL ACTION

Our research revealed that a key component of the NCS experience is fundraising. This is either through social action projects that aim to fundraise for local charities, or fundraising activities required to support and deliver the social action project itself.

The money raised for charity by NCS participants is noteworthy, with inspirational achievements by young people. However, our interview and ethnographic data highlights there should be more sensitivity as to who shoulders the burden of donations, sponsorship and resources. Not all young people and families have the resource(s), time and/or opportunity to contribute in ways that are often assumed by NCS, for example completing sponsorship forms or supporting bake sales.

Furthermore, there were other hidden costs of social action in relation to costs. Whilst the £50 cost of NCS is well covered through participation bursaries for low-income groups, participants were not always aware when signing-up to NCS about travel times and costs. From our survey findings, most young people (40%) travelled between 15-30 minutes to their social action project. However, around 10% were travelling between 45 minutes to an hour each way. These issues were most acute in rural areas. Public buses were the most common mode of transport (35%), with 30% of NCS participants reliant on parental transport. This raises further questions about the 'hidden' costs of social action projects. A small number of providers in our research project offered transportation, but this was not universal.

Recommendation 8.0: To investigate the provision of free or reduced cost local bus travel for NCS participants during their social action project.

Recommendation 8.1: To offer small social action project bursaries for participants who already receive the £50 waiver for the participation fee.

CONCLUSIONS

GEOGRAPHY MATTERS

- Devolution shapes the geographies of NCS provision
- There are regional disparities in the NCS experience
- There are benefits and challenges of regional NCS contracts

SCALES OF YOUTH CITIZENSHIP

- NCS graduates primarily understood citizenship as volunteering, with more emphasis on responsibilities than rights
- The NCS curriculum is focused on local active citizenship rather than national, European, global or multi-scaled citizenship formations

EXPERIENCES AND ENGAGEMENTS

- NCS graduates are largely positive about their NCS experience
- These experiences are shaped by local geographies and 'social mix'
- There are hidden costs to social action projects

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1.0: A clear sense of NCS' identity and policy links will be essential for its future development and impact.

Recommendation 1.1: Any future approaches by UK Government or NCS Trust to administrations in Wales and Scotland will need to show sensitivity to unique characteristics i.e. Welsh language provision.

Recommendation 2.0: A review of Phase Two to ensure consistency across Regional Delivery Providers, including scope for citizenship education and political literacy (see also Section 4).

Recommendation 2.1: NCS Trust should prioritise youth-led social action in future commissioning rounds and support Regional Delivery Providers with these logistics.

Recommendation 2.2: Some future decentralisation away from London as the 'hub' of NCS activity, to benefit both delivery providers and young people.

Recommendation 3.0: The establishment of a 'rural working group' at NCS Trust tasked with further exploring and supporting the work of rural-based Regional Delivery Providers.

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Recommendation 4.0: Citizenship education and political literacy should be embedded within Phase Two of the NCS curriculum (see also Section 2).

Recommendation 5.0: A review of the long-term relationship between NCS and ICS. In the meantime, a short-term campaign to increase awareness amongst young people of the two schemes and potential transitions between them.

Recommendation 5.1: UK Government and NCS Trust should revisit the aims and objectives of NCS in relation to citizenship, identity and belonging in post-Brexit Britain (see also Recommendation 4.0).

Recommendation 6.0: Local and national marketing campaigns should be regularly reviewed to ensure that content reflects the NCS programme offer.

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Recommendation 6.2: NCS Trust and RDPs to continue to invest in staffing and training. Stronger links with NCS alumni could be maintained through a secure online portal where character references/attendance certificates could be accessed by graduates.

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Recommendation 7.1: To create more opportunities for cross-regional or national NCS events to extend young people's networks and encounters beyond the local / regional scale and specific place-based geographies

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Recommendation 8.1: To offer small social action project bursaries for participants who already receive the £50 waiver for the participation fee.

Interim findings have been presented to the NCS Trust Senior Management Team, Cabinet Office and relevant MPs.

Written evidence from this project was submitted to the Public Bill Committee on the NCS Bill, which can be viewed here.¹

If you would like tailored briefing papers or policy recommendations for your organisation, please contact the research team.

¹ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmpublic/NationalCitizenService/memo/NCSB02.pdf>

PUBLICATIONS

PUBLISHED TO DATE:

Mills, S. and Waite, C. (2017) Brands of Youth Citizenship and the Politics of Scale: National Citizen Service in the United Kingdom, *Political Geography* 56 (1): 66-76 [Available open access as a free to download pdf]

Mills, S. (2016) What is the National Citizen Service? *The Conversation*, May 2016

Kallio, K. P. and Mills, S. (2016) (eds) *Politics, Citizenship and Rights*, Vol. 7 of Skelton, T. (ed.) *Geographies of Children and Young People*. Singapore: Springer

Mills, S. and Duckett, J. (2016) 'Representing, reproducing and re-configuring the nation: geographies of youth citizenship and devolution' in Kallio, K. P and Mills, S. *Politics, Citizenship and Rights*, Vol. 7 of Skelton, T. (ed.) *Geographies of Children and Young People* Singapore: Springer.

Electronic or hard-copies of publications are available on request via the contact details on p25.

JOURNAL ARTICLES IN PROGRESS:

Mills, S. and Waite, C. (submitted) From Big Society to Shared Society? Geographies of social cohesion and encounter in the UK's National Citizen Service.

Mills, S. and Waite, C. (to be submitted November 2017) State shadows: National Citizen Service and the delivery of youth work in an age of austerity

Mills, S. and Waite, C. (to be submitted January 2018) A 'rite of passage' or 'microwaving adulthood'? National Citizen Service in England and Northern Ireland.

As further project outputs are published, links will be available via www.geographiesofyouthcitizenship.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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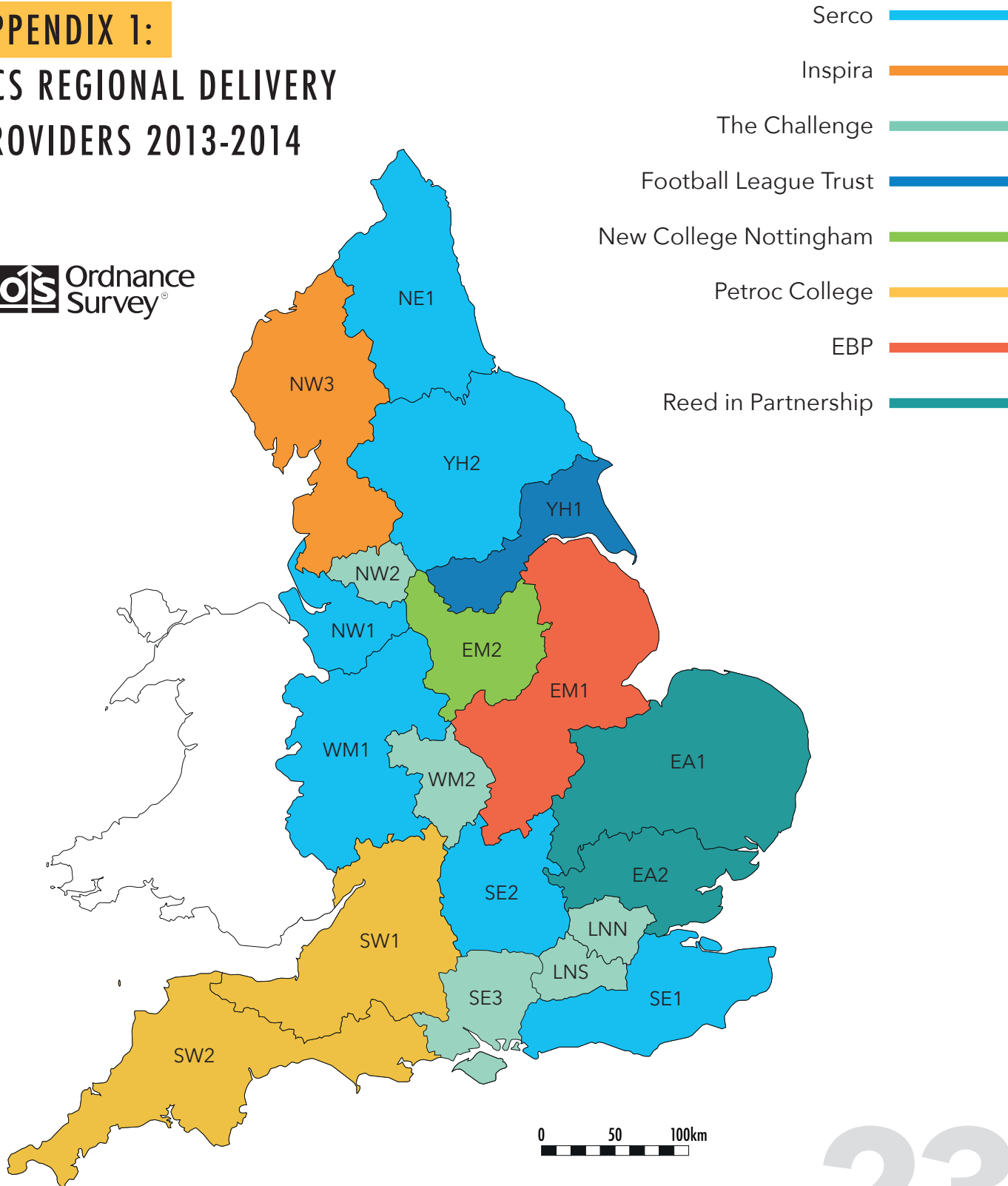
Special thanks to Professor Sarah L. Holloway, Loughborough University who acted as Dr Sarah Mills' mentor on this ESRC award.

Finally, thank you to Eden Videos, Jo Porter and a dozen eggs for technical and creative support.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1:

NCS REGIONAL DELIVERY PROVIDERS 2013-2014



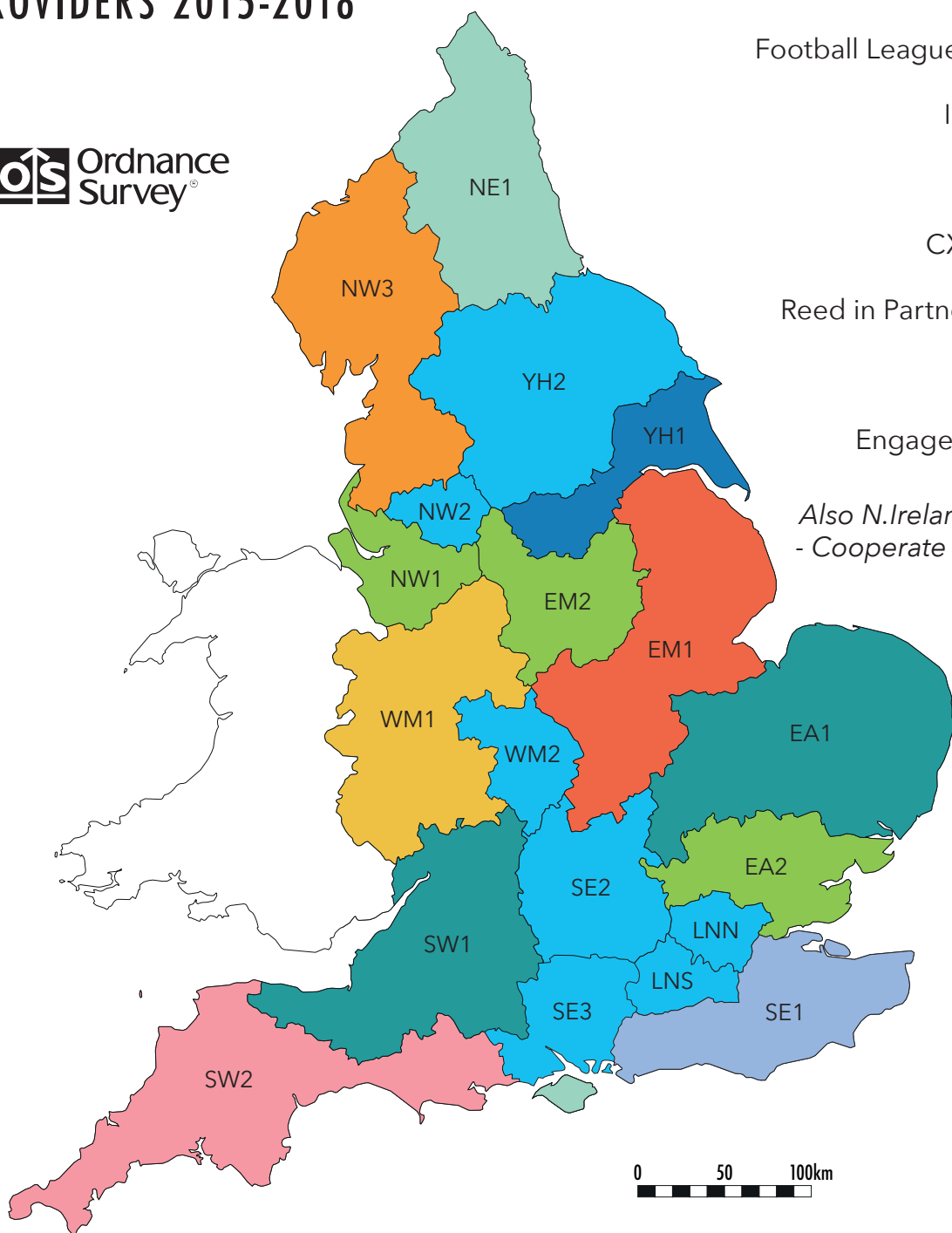
APPENDIX

APPENDIX 2:

NCS REGIONAL DELIVERY PROVIDERS 2015-2018



- Vinspired / NYA █
- Inspira █
- The Challenge █
- Football League Trust █
- Ingeus █
- PPDG █
- CXK Ltd █
- Reed in Partnership █
- EBP █
- Engage 4 Life █



*Also N.Ireland (NI1)
- Cooperate Ireland*

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Please get in touch with any comments or questions. We would be happy to discuss opportunities for further briefing papers or presentations for your team/organisation.

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