



Improving policymaking with city-region statistics

Notes from a workshop with the UK Statistics Authority

10 March 2016

Purpose of the meeting

To help improve the production and use of city-region statistics as greater powers and funding are devolved to mayors, Centre for Cities and the UK Statistics Authority organised a workshop for city practitioners, academics and data users and producers of official statistics to explore how they can best work together to identify potential priorities for further work.

Context

George Osborne's 'Northern Powerhouse' speech in November 2014 marked the beginning of a dramatic devolution of powers, funding and policymaking responsibility away from Whitehall to city-regions, such as Greater Manchester, Sheffield and the West Midlands.

As more and more decisions around economic development, infrastructure, skills, health and welfare are made at the city-region level, so greater understanding of the particular economic, social, and cultural circumstances of individual city-region areas is needed. To improve the quality of policymaking and outcomes, accurate and timely data at the appropriate spatial level will become ever more important. If such data are not available, policy design and evaluation at the city-region level will fail to fulfil the potential to improve health and prosperity that devolution offers.

Data issues raised by city-region data users

The meeting heard from experienced 'super' users of data from the Greater London Authority, New Economy in Manchester and the North East Local Economic Partnership (NELEP), who raised issues including:

- **Timeliness** – Sub-national data are often released after national data, which can create difficulties; for example, during the downturn of 2009, the latest regional gross value added (GVA) data – measuring the value of goods and services produced in an area – was for 2007, reducing the ability of local politicians and stakeholders to understand the issue and begin to develop appropriate policy

responses. There was recognition that some time lags are inevitable to permit quality assurance, but a clear desire to minimise these.

- **Access to 'raw' data** – Users wanted access to data to enable more customised analysis and there was a plea that as well as appropriate geographic breakdowns, users also needed data that would permit analysis by age, gender or other characteristics.
- **Access to data already collected** – Access to existing government data, both survey and administrative data, is important for research, evaluation and policymaking at the city-region level. Requests were made in particular for access to the Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR) held by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) data and Gross Value Added (GVA) data. Being able to access data in a format that allows the 'linking' of different data-sets would be ideal.
- **Access to small-geography data** – There was a request to ensure consistency over time in the definitions of local geographies for which data are released– using existing Census output areas seemed to be the preferred solution. This can allow analysts to respond to other administrative boundary changes they encounter.
- **Gaps in data** – Requests were made for better understanding of the services side of the economy – in particular looking at the finance sector; for data on regional shares of exports, for regional data on tax revenues, regional data on prices, and data to help understanding of local labour markets. The point was made – and accepted – that better understanding of what is happening at a local level will also be of value in terms of understanding the national position.
- **Capacity** – There was recognition that for many city-regions who were not represented at the meeting, there may be issues around limited capacity, with people potentially not even aware of the data available to them at present.

Thoughts from data producers

The meeting included representatives of a number of Government bodies who produce and use official statistics: the ONS, HMRC, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and Her Majesty's Treasury (HMT). They acknowledged that the needs expressed by the City Regions were not all being met at present, largely due to resource trade-offs and said the meeting was timely in that new developments were underway (in ONS and HMRC in particular). The new developments include:

- **New resources** – financial and staffing – likely to become available for this agenda, in part linked to the Bean Review of Economic Statistics.¹
- **Three ONS-fellows taking up post** – these are distinguished experts who will help ONS explore key issues in measuring and analysing developments in the UK economy –and two of them – Diane Coyle and Nicholas Oulton – have particular interest in regional data issues and are likely to drive rapid improvements.
- **Improvements in the working of and availability of data loaded onto ONS's virtual micro-data laboratory (VML)²** which is a good source of data for city-region analysts.
- **Progress made on opening up administrative data** which provides larger samples of data at low cost e.g., VAT which will be particularly useful for city-region analysts.

1 More information on the review is available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-uk-economic-statistics-final-report/press-notice-take-economic-statistics-back-to-the-future-says-charlie-bean>

2 The VML is ONS's facility for providing secure access to sensitive detailed data. Access is available to 'Approved Researchers' working on defined and approved non-commercial projects, that serve the public good

The Producers said it would never be possible to meet all requests even with additional resources and there was considerable discussion about how best to work with users to come up with an agreed prioritised list to work on, as well as some discussion about how to deploy any new staffing resource focused on improving regional data analysis. The producers expressed openness to continued engagement with the users around the table and other super-users and said they were likely to also hold a Public Policy Forum event in the Autumn.

Next Steps

Those present at the meeting agreed to set up a mechanism for consultation and develop a clear set of realistic priorities for further work. Centre for Cities will take this forward over the summer and working with city-region users, ONS and the UK Statistics Authority.

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About the UK Statistics Authority

The UK Statistics Authority is an independent body at arm's length from government, which reports directly to the UK Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 established the Authority with the statutory objective of “promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good”.

The public good includes:

- informing the public about social and economic matters;
- assisting in the development and evaluation of public policy; and
- regulating quality and publicly challenging the misuse of statistics.

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