Delivering the devolution revolution requires better data

Notes from a workshop organised in partnership with the ONS

14 October 2016

Purpose of the day

Centre for Cities and the ONS brought together a range of stakeholders to discuss how UK statistics need to adapt in order to respond to the devolution agenda. The increased focus on local policy-making means that decision-makers across the UK are demanding more and better data at the sub-national level.

By gathering users and producers of this data together the purpose of the event was to better inform all parties of the current and future data developments and demands, and to generate ideas for how to better meet the data needs of the devolution agenda in the future.

As well as a number of excellent presentations showcasing how ONS, cities and government departments are currently producing and using national, regional and big data, three main themes emerged from the day:

1. **Increasing demand from users' for sub-national statistics**

   - **More timely release of sub-national data:** In order to provide timely and relevant analysis, sub-national economic data is required relatively quickly. Currently, users are often frustrated with the timeliness of releases and would like to see this delay reduced. An example where the ONS are working to improve this is the production of quarterly gross domestic product (GDP) measures for the nine English regions, aiming for a first release in 2018. In addition, changes in practices at HMRC, who now receive monthly tax submissions from companies, will enable monthly releases of regional employment data. The first release is planned for early 2017.

   - **Flexible geographies:** The geographies relevant to devolution are varied and subject to change, therefore the geographical scale at which data is made available also needs to be flexible. Ideally users want to be able to easily create their own geographies, or choose from a wide range of set geographies which are regularly updated for the current policy/political context. The ONS is working to develop a method for producing regional economic data for more flexible, lower-level geographies. The aim is that

this will be available in the next two to three years, but is dependent on access to administrative data.

- **Longer historical datasets:** For robust trend analysis, historical data is required. Currently much sub-national data is not available for longer than a few years, and where it is available, due to changes in the data collection methodology, it is not consistent across years.

- **Improved access to data:** Large amounts of data exist but it is often within individual government departments. Gaining access can be time consuming and sometimes impossible. Ideally data would be available across government, and beyond, including easy data sharing between national and local government. The aim is that the Digital Economy Bill, currently going through Parliament, will help to address this.

- **Ability to link datasets:** The ability to link datasets would enable much more detailed and robust analysis. For example, employment data could be linked with healthcare data within a local area, providing useful information to local policy makers.

2. Challenges in meeting this demand

- **Security and privacy issues:** Datasets including personal information present significant privacy and security risks which must be addressed before the data can be used. This will slow progress on improving access to data and linking datasets.

- **Public benefit may not align with political focus:** It is important to stress the public benefits of better data and better information for decision making. There were some concerns raised that if local and national government priorities diverge it could be more challenging to secure data sharing between them.

- **Deciding what to prioritise:** With so many additional demands and requirements for data being generated by the devolution agenda, for data producers deciding which demands to prioritise will be difficult. Various users and producers will have differing incentives which, if not managed, will lead them to suggest investing time and funds in different priorities.

- **Ensuring appropriate use of data:** In a more devolved context and one in which local areas are combining 'official' data with big data it will be more difficult to ensure that data is used in an appropriate way that informs and improves local decision-making.

3. Strengthening links between users and producers of sub-national statistics

- There was agreement that increased collaboration between users and producers will be crucial to ensure that the data and devolution agendas evolve in mutually beneficial ways. Data producers will need to engage with each other and with users when deciding their priorities and users will need to collaborate with each other to share ideas and solutions to challenges.

- Innovation and data science will be crucial for finding solutions to the challenges faced. Providing sub-national statistics in the inter-linked and flexible way desired by users will require new approaches to data production, collection and sharing.

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