

## IMPROVING STATISTICS ON CITY REGIONS – evaluating the impacts

### What did we do?

In November 2014, then Chancellor George Osborne made a speech about the ‘Northern Powerhouse’ marking the beginning of a significant devolution of powers, funding and policy-making responsibility away from Whitehall to city-regions. It was clear that increasingly decisions around economic development, infrastructure, skills, health and welfare were going to be made at the city-region level. People would thus require greater understanding of economic, social, and cultural circumstances of individual city-region areas. Without such data, the potential to improve health and prosperity through devolution might not be realized fully. We used our role to accelerate the development of city-region statistics and data by co-covening alongside the Centre for Cities<sup>1</sup>, a roundtable event on 10 March 2016 on the topic of ‘Improving Policy-making with City-Region statistics’. We wanted to hear from users what their needs were around data and from producers what might be done to address these. We published a [note on the outcomes](#) of this roundtable.

### What progress has been made to improve statistics about city-regions?

ONS told us that the roundtable event and subsequent follow up events were useful and well timed as cities have become a policy priority. At the UK level, the Government has highlighted the role of local growth and the importance of ‘place’ in developing and delivering its industrial strategy<sup>2</sup>. Good data is essential to delivering the new strategy. The events helped to provide extra impetus and showed commitment and engagement.

Following the event there has been plenty of evidence of significant improvements in meeting users’ needs, but perhaps not in all priority areas.

There is valuable collaboration between ONS and the Centre for Cities. Centre for Cities itself is producing impressive analysis by linking ONS data with data from other sources. Economic and social analysis for cities is now yielding very interesting results. Some outcomes of the work accomplished by ONS and its partners following our roundtable include:

**Timeliness** - some city-regions statistics are now more-timely, for example:

- Gross Value Added estimates at the regional, sub-regional and city-region levels, which had been emerging nearly 2 years after the end of the reference year are now available in just under 12 months
- New regional short-term indicators will produce quarterly GDP for the English Regions when ONS introduces them later this year

The driver of the timeliness of economic statistics, like most statistics, is the availability of source data, often from large-scale surveys. Users of city-region

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.centreforcities.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/industrial-strategy>

statistics acknowledged that little could be done in the short term. However, the availability of HMRC data e.g. VAT data has the potential to improve timeliness of data in the future.

**Access to ‘raw’ data and to small-geography data** –there is better access to small geography data and more is to come in the pipeline with the best example being ONS’s flexible geographies project<sup>3</sup>.

**Gaps in data** - ONS has addressed gaps and continues to develop the offering with plenty in the pipeline. The development of statistics in this area is impressive.

**Capacity** – Concerns were raised that there was little capacity to conduct analysis in some of the new city-regions and a lack of awareness of what statistics are available. A very significant effort has been and is being made, with engagement initiated by ONS with for example Greater Manchester Combined Authority, the West Midlands Combined Authority and through Regional Economic Forums. Since the roundtable there has been growth in Local Authorities’ cities analysis using their own data. ‘Offices of Data Analytics’ have been created in a number of Local Authorities/ city regions.

**Access to existing government data**, both survey and administrative data, is important for research, evaluation and policymaking at the city-region level. Being able to access data in a format that allows the ‘linking’ of different data-sets would be ideal. There are some good examples of linking data for example the Centre for Cities collaborated with ONS and obtained extra data which helped look at city centres, in contrast with the rest of cities. In a separate piece of work<sup>4</sup> we have been investigating the UK statistical system’s ability to provide greater insight to users via linked data and will be reporting our initial findings in September.

### **Are further steps to improve these statistics expected?**

We have commended the progress to date that ONS has made and encouraged further investment in this important area.<sup>5</sup> While ONS’s progress on city-regions statistics is impressive, this has not been replicated across government. There are some good examples of initiatives such the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government’s work through the Cabinet Office’s What works? Network<sup>6</sup> Also, BEIS are working with Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs) on developing relevant data. But, anecdotally we were told that some departments are less willing to deal with local bodies. There is a reported guardedness by some departments around data sharing and significant barriers in getting access to data. The Secure Research Service<sup>7</sup> is trying to break down such barriers. We heard from some researchers trying to access HMRC’s Datalab facilities<sup>8</sup> who face considerable issues in accessing data. We have sent this evaluation review not just to ONS but copied to the Heads of Profession for Statistics of the other principal producers of statistics about city-regions to make them aware of the findings from this evaluation review.

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/census2021outputs/2021dataproducts/flexibledisseminationtool>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/systemic-review-outline-data-linkage/>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/City-Regions-Ed-Humpherson-to-Iain-Bell-and-Jonathan-Athow.pdf>

<sup>6</sup><http://www.whatworksgrowth.org/>

<sup>7</sup><https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/whatwedo/paidservices/virtualmicrodatalaboratoryvml>

<sup>8</sup><https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-revenue-customs/about/research>