

OSR symposium on regional economic growth, October 5th 2026

Introduction

This event was organised by Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR). It aligns with OSR's goal to ensure that statistics serve the public good. In the context of growing interest in the UK in devolving economic decision-making to lower administrative levels, the availability of statistics and data to inform policy makers is becoming more important.

There have been improvements in the official statistics covering regional economic activity in recent years. This suite of official statistics has been increasingly supplemented by initiatives to develop and make use of alternative data sets. All these statistics and data sets have merits and also limitations, and the key is to consider how best to combine them to provide comprehensive and useful insights.

Ed Humpherson of OSR introduced the symposium by setting out the intention to explore the issues thrown up by this growing policy demand, and the range of statistics and data available to support policymakers at all levels. He pointed out that, while the event would feature a range of excellent speakers, he had been struck by all the potential presenters he had *not* been able to fit into the agenda, including The Productivity Institute Data Lab; PWC Good Growth Barometer; Citi-REDI at the University of Birmingham; the Centre of Tax Studies; developments in economic statistics at the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Ireland governments; and the Smart Data Foundry.

In framing the symposium, two definitional issues are key. The first is that the terms 'regional', 'sub-regional' and 'local' recurred throughout. They have specific meanings: regional means, in technical terms, ITL1 – that is, the nations of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and the regions of England. 'Sub-regional' and 'local' are used interchangeably, to mean levels of administrative and economic geography below this level, including cities, local authorities, and combined authority areas.

The second is that the terms 'official statistics', 'alternative data' and 'non-official data' were also used during the symposium. 'Official statistics' refer to statistics produced in line with the Code of Practice for Statistics by government entities – primarily produced by the Office for National Statistics, but also including statistics produced by the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Ireland governments, and other government departments. 'Alternative data' and 'non-official data' refers to datasets produced by other, non-governmental organisations. 'Alternative data' refers more specifically to sources that do not typically form part of official statistics on economic growth, including webscraping and administrative datasets on patents and other factors – although it is probably fair to say that 'alternative data' does not have a particularly fixed meaning (the ONS, for example, produces 'alternative data', in particular through its faster economic indicators).

Why this matters: The Oxford-Cambridge example

The symposium opened with a presentation from **Matthew Bullock** (Cambridge Ahead) and **Andy Williams** (Oxford-Cambridge Supercluster) focused on why this issue matters.

Matthew set out the Cambridge approach, involving a suite of tools: a bottom-up corporate dataset on employment and turnover; agglomeration and spatial analysis; and the role of projections (as opposed to forecasts). There was a strong interdisciplinary angle: the analysis combines the economic expertise of the Centre for Business Research in Cambridge's Judge Business School, and the spatial expertise of the Cambridge Futures Group in the university's Department of Architecture.

Matthew emphasised the limitations of disaggregating top-down national datasets, which led to Cambridge's development of a bottom-up approach. This is particularly important in considering forecasts of future growth and their impact on local planning assumptions and decisions.

Andy then brought out how these tools provided him with the ability to see clusters eg on life sciences. This insight enabled the Oxford-Cambridge Supercluster to engage with national policymakers, on the back of media interest in the Oxford-Cambridge corridor.

The session highlighted the importance of understanding agglomeration and spatial patterns – to see where companies are clustering; and how this understanding has great utility for local planners and policymakers.

Quality and conceptual opportunities and challenges

Rebecca Riley, Executive Director of the Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence (ESCoE), presented on the opportunities and challenges facing sub-regional economic statistics. The session was chaired by **Liz McKeown** of ONS.

Rebecca started with the 2016 Bean Review of economic statistics. This review set out a range of opportunities to improve regional and sub-regional economic statistics, including more timely Gross Value Added (GVA) estimates; flexible geographies; subnational prices; and greater use of VAT and other non-survey data sources.

Progress has been made on many of these issues. This progress includes work by ESCoE on regional GDP, supplemented by experimental nowcasting of regional GDP; a framework for understanding inter-regional trade (a crucial building block of understanding regional output); and travel to work area (TTWA) analysis.

Nevertheless, challenges remain in producing high quality and useful regional economic statistics. There is a fundamental conceptual challenge: what is a meaningful unit of economic analysis? This may not be the same as an administrative or geographic unit of analysis: an integrated economy may sit within or overlap administrative boundaries. This conceptual challenge is compounded by

the distinction between where people work and where they live: given this difference, where should output be allocated on a sub-regional basis? And there are measurement challenges too, including the apportionment of national businesses' activities to sub-regional units, and the measurement error that can be amplified at smaller geographies.

Rebecca closed by suggesting three crucial ways forward:

- The importance of communicating uncertainty clearly at lower levels of geography
- The need to consider what constitutes appropriate use of sub-regional statistics, given the risk of placing too much weight on measures that have inherent uncertainties
- The role of triangulation – that is, gathering and confronting measurements from different sources to generate a richer picture of economic activity

Alternative data sets

This session, chaired by **Darren Morgan** of ESCoE, focused on alternative datasets.

Stuart McIntyre, of the University of Strathclyde and ESCoE, introduced nowcasting of regional GDP. The starting point of this work is a long-standing information gap: GDP data for regions has in the past been published with long time lags. But the user need is for timely understanding.

The solution is to deploy modelling, drawing on observed information and modelling likely outturn figures on that basis. The data inputs include annual regional output; quarterly national output; regional data releases; and more timely indicators. Stuart highlighted how this approach can help nowcast regional quarterly figures that would otherwise not be available for some time. He emphasised that this approach is a complement to national-level statistics. As he said, “the models extended the usefulness of official observations”. So the nowcast modelling is not an alternative to official statistics, but a supplement to them. A blended approach is key – and modelling can extract a useful signal from the noise of multiple datasets.

Anna Valero of LSE explored how to use alternative data sets to understand emerging sectors and technologies, and where related economic activity is happening. Traditional datasets vary in granularity and do not capture emerging sectors/technologies. This calls for a blend of approaches.

In considering what datasets to draw on, a range of dataset characteristics must be considered, including international comparability; timeliness; what variables are available – including geographic information; and access to microdata. Anna illustrated this by looking at clean technologies, which are not well represented in Standard Industrial Classifications (though the 2026 SIC revisions are an improvement). She showed how patent data (which can be geolocated, and are very granular at the technology level) can identify the Revealed Technological Advantage of a sector. This analysis, supplemented by data from The Data City, helps identify places with emerging technological specialisms.

The key, therefore, is to combine datasets, both official statistics and alternative data, to create meaningful and insightful pictures of industries and technologies.

Paul Swinney of The Data City explained the role of The Data City's tools in understanding the shifting economy.

Paul emphasised that The Data City's outputs augment the work of ONS, rather than replace it. He showed how the cutting edge of the economy is "everywhere but in the data". He then explained how The Data City's webscraping tool, which analyses website text at individual company levels supplemented by machine learning, can identify emerging sectors quickly and flexibly.

The Data City tool can also provide flexible geographies – the geographical boundaries are not fixed but can be adapted according to the user need. He gave the example of the sectoral weight of activity in the Belfast area compared to the rest of Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

Capability

This session, chaired by **Rob Kent-Smith** of the Office for Statistics Regulation, looked at the crucial role of building capability for undertaking and interpreting analysis at the sub-regional level.

Rob Cave of ONS introduced the work of ONS Local. ONS local provides the bridge between local areas and the official statistics system, connecting local users with data, analysis and capability support. Rob pointed out that different areas have different analytical needs and capabilities. He also highlighted that from the local area perspective, national data provision can appear silo-ed, with different datasets being owned and produced by different Government departments. ONS Local aims to evade the limitations of the silos by providing local areas with seamless access to statistics. **Jim Hawkins** of ONS then illustrated what ONS can do through the example of Gross Disposable Household Income (GDHI). GDHI is a national official statistic, but it can be disaggregated to provide key insights at the local area. Jim illustrated this using the example of GDHI in areas that surround the new Elizabeth Line in east London. This analysis made use of flexible geographies – building up the analysis from the smallest unit area (Lower Super Output Area) to provide fresh insight into the impact of the new line on GDHI. Rob closed by emphasising that ONS Local is keen to engage widely.

Victoria Sutherland of the What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth presented on building capability in regional data use. She said that data is key to local policy making – both in understanding patterns of local economic activity, and also in evaluating the impact of policy choices at the local level. But to make success of this requires significant capability in the local decision-making institutions. This starts, Victoria argued, with data that meets their needs, in terms of coverage, geography and timeliness. This must be combined with the requisite skills and capabilities, including not just data analysis skills, but also an understanding of the dataset characteristics, and the context in which the data are to be used. She

emphasised the importance of structures in helping local areas make appropriate use of data. A key theme throughout her presentation was the need for local areas to understand the limitations of data, particularly data that are collected at a national level. She closed by referring to the role played by bodies like the Mayoral Data Council.

Closing reflections

This session was chaired by **Dame Kate Barker**. The panellists were **Hannah Finselbach** of ONS, **Matthew Bullock** and **Ed Humpherson**.

The panellists agreed that, while a wide range of issues had been covered in the symposium, a consensus seemed to emerge. The key elements of this consensus were:

- There is not one single dataset that is likely to provide a comprehensive answer to the question “what is a local area’s economy like?”. Instead, local areas and national decision makers alike need to combine different datasets to provide a richer picture, including both official and non-official datasets.
- In undertaking this combination, it is important to understand the limitations of each dataset – and a recurring theme throughout the morning was the need to do more to convey these limitations and uncertainties to users.
- There is also a need to recognise a trade-off: between statistics that allow comparisons between areas, which requires a consistent national framework; and more bespoke local data that allows local decision makers to understand and set policy for their area.
- Providing insight at the sub-regional/local level requires flexible geographies, a range of datasets – and local institutions with the capability to make use of the data. And it is important to recognise the role that can be played by different specialisms – not just economic analysis, including analysis emerging from academic institutions, but also spatial and agglomeration analysis. This is particularly important because spatial planning decisions are among the most significant decisions that local decision makers must make.

Next steps

Ed Humpherson closed the symposium by repeating his thanks for everyone’s contribution, and his regret at the range of organisations that it was not possible to include in the formal agenda.

He proposed two follow-ups:

1. Although this symposium focused on the sub-regional level, there are also important issues surrounding understanding economic growth at the regional ITL1 level. A follow up event could focus on this level.
2. There are questions to be explored further: the appropriate way to blend and triangulate alternative datasets; communicating uncertainty; and the appropriate balance of nationally consistent and locally specific statistics and data. A follow up round table, with fewer presentations and more debate, could usefully discuss these issues.