

Review of ONS Priorities

GLA Intelligence Consultation Response

March 2017

This document provides the response of the Greater London Authority (GLA) to the consultation on the review of ONS priorities, February 2017¹.

Q1) Which, if any, of our priority change programmes are important to you?

- **Economic statistics (new statistics and improvements to existing outputs) YES**
- **Census (preparing an online census for 2021 and census collection via alternative data sources) YES**
- **Data collection transformation (moving from paper surveys to online and reducing the number of surveys we run) NO VIEW**
- **Social statistics enhancement (improvements to migration statistics, more data on fine geographies) YES**

Why are/aren't these programmes important to you?

All of these programmes help to inform GLA decision making and planning. However, much could be done to improve their usefulness still further. For instance, the ONS must do more to improve population estimates in areas that do not have good coverage in the administrative sources if this is to become a viable alternative to a more conventional census. Alongside this, it would be useful if the Census team could do more work on the characteristics as well as the age and sex estimates in developing alternative sources to ensure that multidimensional statistics needed by users can be produced to a sufficiently robust level.

Further, and as we have argued for a long while, ongoing development of regional economic statistics is of high concern to the GLA given the current paucity of timely data at this level. For instance, the ongoing work on real regional GVA is of high importance to the GLA as this will aid in our formulation of economic policy. We would further argue that a lack of regional economic data, and over a long enough time series, hinders national Government response to economic issues, as policy making is hindered by the lack of available data to highlight issues at a regional level.

What would you like them to achieve?

The GLA is keen to hear what plans are in place for the Census outputs. We had hoped to see a clearer explanation of how data might be made available and what plans there are to develop this detail by 2017.

¹<https://consultations.ons.gov.uk/communication-division/review-of-ons-priorities/>

Similarly, on social statistics, the GLA has long believed that we need a better understanding of the numbers and extent of those which migrate to London from abroad, before then migrating out of London. At present, it is not possible to identify this group from domestic migration data. The provision of estimates of migration by ethnicity or nationality would go some way towards closing this data gap.

Finally we would like further progress to be made on the regionalisation of national data in terms of real GVA, public sector finances, trade statistics etc, and in establishing longer time series on a more consistent basis. This would need properly resourced teams (e.g. WfJ and BRES). We feel this is of particular concern given the ongoing devolution process across the whole UK.

Q2) Which, if any, of our current priority issues are important to you?

- **City/regional data** YES
- **Crime**
- **Economic Statistics** YES
- **Health**
- **Life Events (births, marriages, deaths)**
- **Migration**
- **None of the above**

Why are these issues important to you?

With greater fiscal and political devolution, and the growing importance of City Mayors, city data is going to be of increasing importance. City data is also important for international comparisons between cities with for instance London submitting a number of city data from the ONS to the World Council on City Data an international organisation on city data with a growing number of member cities.

We would also like to highlight that the GLA has long running concerns about the quality and the detail of regional statistics, as well as the time lags currently involved in their production. The lack of a regional breakdown or a regional version of a broad number of UK-wide statistics has hindered analysis of London's economy both within the GLA and by the national government, which given the size of London's economy (representing over 20 per cent of the UK's total output) is detrimental to a detailed analysis and understanding of the UK's economy as a whole. Further, where this data is scarce but is also highly needed has led to considerable time and resources being applied to overcome these short comings. An example of this is the recent work by GLA Economics to calculate quarterly real GVA data for London. The GLA has raised these concerns in response to previous consultations by the ONS and the UK Statistical Authority, amongst others.

How can we change/improve what we are doing in these areas?

As the UK devolves more power to different regions/cities, there is an increasing argument to reverse the trend of cutting sample sizes/data collections, and provide the more finely-grained breakdown of the UK that is increasingly required for place-based policy making and analyses.

For cities, the ONS should address those issues faced by city authorities, in needing access to more disclosive datasets. Recent legislation (such as the Digital Economy Bill) has not yet gone far enough to improve this. The National Statistician has said that more could be done to help bodies like the GLA.

In particular we welcome the focus on local and regional statistics. The current provision of data at the regional level is sporadic and due to time delays may not provide an accurate picture of the current state of London's economy due to the provision of such lagged data. Given the size of London's economy with output (in 2015, the last year for which official statistics are available) at £378 billion, accounting for over 22 per cent of the UK's total output, the GLA feels that the timeliness and quality of economic statistics in London is of critical importance to the UK as well as to the GLA.

Moreover, we believe that improving the provision of local and regional data will improve the overall quality of all ONS statistics. That is, in order to provide robust local and regional data requires that the information sources used by ONS are built on robust sample sizes at the local and regional level (or alternative means of achieving such robust information at the local level are found). Such robust information will allow for the provision of improved data in all the other areas of the ONS's work; if we improve the building blocks of the data we use (i.e. better, more robust, local and regional data) then all data provision should be improved.

Are there any existing priority issues we should stop focussing on?

The GLA recognises the budgetary issues faced by all Government agencies including the ONS, however we feel that most areas in which it currently collects data are of use.

Is there anything else you would like us to focus on?

There are also three broad areas of concern that the GLA has in terms of the current focus of ONS work:

a. Local and regional data and longer time series:

The GLA feels that the quality of statistics available at the local and regional level (including 'city level data') is currently sorely lacking, with a number of issues being of particular concern. For instance, the lack of timely regional data has hampered our analysis of London's economy. An example of the issues this has raised is given by the lack of a timely estimate of regional Gross Value Added (GVA), which means that official estimates of the size of the output of London's economy can be up to nearly two years out of date. This lack of timely data was particularly troubling during the 2008/09 recession, where analysis of the regional impact of the recession was hindered by a lack of timely, relevant official regional statistics. Further, even if more timely English regional output data were to be made available the GLA feels that this would also need to be made available on a quarterly as well as on an annual basis in order to more fully understand the evolving nature of the regional economies of England. Quarterly output statistics are also published at the national level but are not currently available at the regional level (though these are known or could be calculated). This data should be produced and published.

A related issue is that of longer time series at the regional level. This is highlighted by the regional output series that currently starts in 1997 and thus limits analysis of London's post-recession economy by removing the ability to place it in its historical context. Issues related to limited long-run time series data on regional labour markets have also placed constraints on the GLA's analysis of London's labour market (an important consideration in many of the Mayor's strategies, such as the London Plan). The GLA believes that regional statistics suffer particularly badly from a lack of long-run time series, affecting analysis and policy formation at the London level.

There are other examples available, and the GLA believes that the provision of better quality and more timely local and regional data, together with longer-run time series of such data, would significantly improve both the ability to understand the London economy and to prepare and deliver policies and programmes for Londoners on a more timely and effective basis.

b. Statistics resources and public finance data:

The GLA believes that statistics for the economy would be improved by increasing the coverage of the services sector. Given the importance of this sector to the UK and London economies, increased detail in the data provided on services would greatly aid our understanding of the economy. For example, although regional goods imports and exports are available from official statistics, such official statistics are not available for regional services trade. Given the size of the service sector in London's economy relying on 'estimates' of London's regional services trade provides an, at best, partial view of London's economy. Similarly, the importance of the creative industries, a fast growing sector of the UK and London's economies, is currently obscured by official statistics that do a poor job of highlighting this sector. We would therefore argue that greater detail on this sector, and the services sector in general, should be provided in official statistics.

Again, improved regional statistics are likely to improve the quality of data available for UK national statistics, and an improved regional breakdown would aid in policy formation and discussion. Thus, in relation to public finances, a regional breakdown of current receipts displayed in tables PSA6B and PSA6C in the ONS Statistical Bulletin on Public Sector Finances, that outline revenue and expenditure by source, would be useful. For example, a regular periodical on the regional breakdown of current levels of spending and receipts would provide a valuable input into the debate around devolution and regional policy-making. Following the Scottish referendum and the proposed increased powers to the Scottish government, arguably, there is a stronger need for regional current spending and receipts data. Regional data on the nature and level of spending/receipts would increase transparency and encourage robust evidence-based policy.

The ONS also would benefit from a programme of work on the measurement of food security, in line with existing work already being undertaken in the rest of Europe. This will require statistical leadership and coordination between the ONS and OGDs/other parts of GSS.

c. Access to data and access to administrative data:

The GLA encourages the widest possible availability of publicly collected data. Any publication of currently unpublished data that increases the amount of regional economic data that is available would be welcomed. We would also welcome further discussion on the availability of existing administrative sources to meet data gaps, and whether the GLA can obtain access to them. Our current lack of access to certain data sources is an area of concern for the GLA. In particular, we currently do not have access to the Inter Departmental Business Register (IDBR) on the same basis as local authorities and government departments. This situation seems to be more a relic of past legislation (i.e. the GLA being a relatively new body) than any considered reasoning for the GLA to have less access to this data than other bodies. We would urge a review of the GLA's status as regards IDBR access as a matter of some urgency.

In addition, the GLA's access to micro data under special licence in other areas is also often more restrictive than the access provided to government departments. For example, the release of wellbeing data to central government departments had 'region of work' available as a variable – but this variable (very useful for our type of analysis – at the regional level) was not available in the special license version – requiring us to contact ONS to ask that the variables be added to the dataset – adding delay and, in our view unnecessary, complication to our work. These examples indicate how current data access limitations hinder GLA work and the GLA's ability to effectively support the implementation of the Mayor's priorities.

Q3) How much trust do you have in ONS statistics, analyses and advice?

- **Trust them greatly?**
- **Tend to trust the? YES**
- **Neither trust nor distrust them?**
- **Tend to distrust them?**
- **Trust them greatly?**

Additional comments?

Although we generally trust ONS statistics the GLA notes that a number of them are highly subject to revisions. This can cause significant issues if analysis and work has been undertaken using this data which is subsequently revised. While accepting that revisions are necessary to ensure accuracy in the data we would request that care was taken in them and likely revisions (especially if particularly large) are flagged to users well in advance.

Q4) How satisfied are you with the quality of ONS statistics, analyses and advice?

- **Very satisfied?**
- **Satisfied?**
- **Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied?**
- **Dissatisfied?**
- **Very dissatisfied?**

Please consider the extent to which they: meet your needs; are accurate; are timely; are clearly presented; are punctual; are easy to find; enable comparisons with other data; are complete.

While the statistics provided by the ONS are often of high quality these statistics are often also highly subject to haphazard and piecemeal revisions. These revisions can hinder accurate use and analysis of this work as indicated by the recent impact of revisions to the historic regional employment on GLA Economics employment projections work.

Further we would again highlight that the lack of regional level data limits the statistical service that the ONS provides not only to the GLA but also to national Government. This lack of regional data is further manifested in the less timely nature of these statistics than national data which leaves policy makers in the dark as to what is occurring at the regional level until well after the fact.

Q5) To what extent have ONS statistics, analyses and advice been in providing an evidence base for your decision making process and policy work over the last year?

- **Very helpful?**
- **Fairly helpful?**
- **Neither?**
- **Fairly unhelpful?**
- **Very unhelpful?**

Additional comments?

The GLA has found that the statistics available from the ONS, along with its analysis and advice to be of high value and use. As an example, over the last year GLA Economics has published an Economic Evidence Base for London 2016, and a back series for employment projections for London. This will help to inform the London Plan, TfL, and other partners. ONS data has been vital in helping us to provide the most comprehensive picture of London we can.

Q6) How satisfied are you with the way that ONS communicates with you?

- **Very satisfied?**
- **Satisfied?**
- **Neither?**
- **Dissatisfied?**
- **Very dissatisfied?**

Do we take the time to understand the needs of your organisation?

Do we give you the opportunity to influence our priorities and plans?

Do we work collaboratively with you? E.g. shared analyses

Do we seek and respond to your feedback?

Do we keep you informed about our work?

The GLA's communications with the ONS have been mixed. For example we have the ONS London presence who we find to be hugely helpful in obtaining data and with which we have a very good working relationship.

However, access to datasets going forward is a concern e.g. the IDBR/BRES etc. ONS generally could be more supportive of our data-sharing needs and limitations that we face as a regional government body. Currently, ONS treat all non-central government organisations with a single approach, despite us having very different data-usage needs.

In the past, ONS has also made sudden decisions to withdraw our access to certain datasets (APS), or withdraw the production of datasets altogether (ward level data). These have not been well-planned or communicated and seem to fail to take consequences for existing users into account. For instance, GLA was not aware of any communication of update to Workforce Jobs back series at June 2016 to reflect the incorporation of PAYE non-VAT businesses in IDBR. This meant that the 2016 employment projections were out-of-date at the time of publication because they had not been time to incorporate the change. There was no accompanying update to BRES, and this has not yet been completed. This means that the borough employee jobs back series is not on a consistent basis with the sector back series. It is not clear when updates to BRES will be completed.

ONS has also communicated through CLiP that there will be a re-calibration of BRES. A meeting with ONS statisticians has exposed that this process may lead to further revisions to the London sector jobs series. The responsible statistician has advised that resources might be devoted to modernisation work rather than the completion of integrated and consistent jobs series. This will cause GLA problems in handling questions around publication of the 2017 employment projections.

Q7) Overall, how satisfied are you with the performance of ONS

- **Very satisfied?**
- **Satisfied?**
- **Neither?**
- **Dissatisfied?**
- **Very dissatisfied?**

Please tell us where you think we are doing well.

Please tell us where you think we could do better.

It is important to ensure that ONS and official statistics generally, continue to have an authoritative voice in a world of increasingly competing data sources. Official statistics will become a smaller and smaller component of the range of data available to organisations/businesses/academics to inform decision making. ONS/GSS needs to work together more closely to make sure they continue to provide timely statistics on the most relevant issues, and that these continue to have sufficient authority.

Q8) Any other comments?

We would again like to reiterate the GLA's need for more access to better local data.

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