

South West of England Regional Development Agency
Response to “Independence for statistics: A consultation document”

The Economics and Evidence team of the South West of England Regional Development Agency welcome this opportunity to respond to the consultation on ONS independence. We support the proposal for independence and believe that the suggestions put forward on how this should happen are broadly sensible.

Over recent years, there has been increasing emphasis on the use of robust evidence to support policy decision, implementation and evaluation. There has also been increased devolution to the regions and local authorities of policy setting and delivery at a range of geographical levels for which data are limited – including regions, city regions, neighbourhoods, rural areas, etc.

In order to implement regional and local policy, robust and timely statistical data at a low geographical level, and at new geographical classifications when introduced, are essential. While we acknowledge that ONS’ (and other government departments’) delivery of suitable data has become considerably better in recent years, there is still significant room for improvement. In particular, we need more timely GVA data down to at least NUTS3 and supporting price deflators in order to assess real trends. As such, we welcome any move by Government that will increase the flexibility and efficiency of production of regional and sub-regional statistics. We look forward to continuing to work closely with ONS in the future to improve its delivery at regional and local levels.

There are, however, a number of concerns regarding the implementation of ONS independence that we wish to raise.

- Due to the importance of regional and sub-regional economic statistics to the work of the RDAs, we hope that any move to change governance of the ONS will be made with the minimum of disruption of statistics production and the development of increased statistical coverage
- In March 2004, the recommendations of Christopher Allsopp’s Review of Statistic for Economic Policy Making were published. The ONS have committed to accept the recommendations, particularly those on improved regional GVA, location of an ONS (or GSS) presence in each English Region, and a more transparent and inclusive decision making process on regional and local statistical provision. We are interested in hearing how an independent ONS will take forward the Allsopp agenda, particularly as some of these recommendations appear to have declined in priority and appear to be at risk of being delayed or indeed cut. We would be very disappointed should independence for ONS result in implementation of Allsopp’s recommendations being lost or delayed in any way.
- Section 4.7 commits to “keeping statisticians close to data suppliers and customers, giving them better understanding of their data”. It is anticipated that Allsopp’s regional presences would in part fulfil this role. While the RDAs have offered to *part* fund the regional presences, there currently appears to be some question over ONS’ commitment to provide funding for the regional presences in future years. This stance is certainly in contradiction to this statement.
- We hope that independence for ONS will result in better communication with stakeholders. While communication may have improved in recent years, there are still some issues.
- Section 4.30 discusses the composition of the ONS board. It is important that the board has sufficient representation of regional and, perhaps, sub-regional stakeholders in order to both recognise and understand regional needs, as well as the breadth of statistical themes, all of which are likely to be important at a local level.

- We welcome improved data sharing among government departments to reduce administrative burden on businesses and individuals, and hope that better linked data will result in more informative and powerful analysis at a regional and local level. Following from this, we would also welcome improved access to local level statistics as seen in other countries. While we fully understand that access to potentially confidential data must be controlled, we believe that the benefits obtained from allowing regions access to this information often outweighs the risks, particularly when such risks could be practically minimised through user training and application of disclosure penalties. Access to confidential employment and business information through Annual Business Inquiry data published on Nomis is essential to our analysis of the South West economy, even down to project level, and we would welcome and respect any access to other economic information at this level or below.
- Our understanding is that issues around any delays in ONS' implementation of the Allsopp recommendations discussed above are at least in part related to insufficient budgets within the relevant ONS departments. We would like to be reassured that additional resources for significant new statistical demands would indeed be forthcoming in the future and that ONS' funding will increase in line with any increase in responsibilities. The consultation document states that an independent ONS should have increased flexibility but that cost savings would also be expected through increased efficiency. While we agree with this in principle, we would not want ONS funding to be so restrictive that the Board be rendered "inflexible", especially if this was to the detriment of our legitimate aspirations for better evidence to promote better policy and better delivery.

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