



Association for Geographic Information

AGI response to the Consultation Document ‘Independence for Statistics’

Relevance to the AGI.

The AGI’s mission is to ‘maximise the use of geographic information, GI, for the benefit of the citizen, good governance and commerce’. GI certainly covers a much wider scope than Government Statistics. Nevertheless those outputs of the Government Statistical Service which contain some element of geographic referencing are an extremely important subset of UK sources of GI. Any proposals which have major implications for the management and development of Government Statistics is therefore of importance to the AGI.

AGI response.

The key area of concern to the AGI is the implication of the document for the future quality and availability of the outputs produced from the whole of the Government Statistical Service and not just the ONS. The new arrangements being proposed focus very heavily on the changes as they will affect the ONS, in particular the proposed new ‘Independent Governing Board’ which presumably will replace at some stage the Statistics Commission.

AGI values the GI outputs produced by ONS, not least Census data, and has been an enthusiastic supporter of the development of a geographic dimension to data presentation for Neighbourhood Statistics, also of the innovative developments for data visualisation carried out by ONS. However in many cases these provide very persuasive examples of how the wealth of statistical GI in the UK comes from a variety of sources across Government. DCLG and DEFRA are obvious examples, of housing and Land Use data and Environmental data respectively. But they are by no means the only examples and the AGI would like to see continuing wider developments of spatial data sources from, for example the health, education and social service domains.

The document recognises the existence and importance of the wider Government Statistical Service but the implications of the proposals seem far from clear and contain what appear to be some inconsistencies with the stated aims of the document. The scope of the statistics to be covered by the Board appears to depend heavily on which data sets are branded as ‘National Statistics’. It therefore seems anomalous, in the context of the stated aim of independence, that the critical decision of what is within this scope is decided by Ministers (para 4.15 of the document). Surely this decision should be the responsibility of the Board.

The AGI is also very concerned to see adequate recognition given to the role of Local Government in the provision of statistical information, for example the wealth of local area statistics collected for statutory returns as part of performance monitoring. Statistics at community and neighbourhood level, which show the local variation in need and service provision are an important aspect of the growing need for spatial data sources. Any consideration of improvements in the confidence and quality of statistics should not overlook this area.

The document explicitly invites views on the case for including provisions for increased data access in the planned legislation. The AGI considers that the arguments in favour of more data access, within the proper constraints of data protection, are very strong. This is particularly the case for achieving the potential benefits from better spatial analysis, combining data sets with mapping. The document, paras 4.25 and 4.26, includes persuasive reasons why data sharing should be facilitated. The AGI believes that these arguments will be strengthened by the development of a GI Strategy for the UK, currently being prepared by the GI Panel which reports to DCLG Ministers. There is a particular need for more clarity in regulation and for information sharing protocols in order to overcome inconsistencies of interpretation.

Summary

In summary, the AGI's response to the consultation document is :-

- 1 To welcome any developments, including legislation which strengthens the quality and availability of Government Statistics with particular reference to statistics with a geographic dimension.
- 2 Any legislation should include provision for the National Statistician and the Board to have a duty to ensure the satisfactory standards, and agree funding priorities, for all National Statistics.
- 3 The Board, not Ministers, should decide what is within the scope of National Statistics.
- 4 To support very strongly the case for more open use of administrative data, within the proper constraints of data protection.

AGI
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