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9 June 2006

Independence for statistics

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the Independence for statistics. The following response is on behalf of the Tackling Disadvantage Group in the Department for Communities and Local Government.

Neighbourhood Statistics

The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit has had a close working relationship with ONS through Neighbourhood Statistics (NeSS) which has been a joint programme of work since 2001. NeSS was established in response to the SEU's report Policy Action Team 18: Better Information (2000), which recognised the critical role of access to statistics for small areas. Small area data enables areas to have a better understanding of neighbourhoods which will help them develop strategies and local policies tailored to areas in need. NeSS should provide timely, relevant and a comprehensive set of statistics, indicators and analyses that describe the characteristics of a neighbourhood consistently over space and time. The key target audience for NeSS are regeneration professionals to help them plan and monitor the effectiveness of neighbourhood renewal policies.

The relationship the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit has had with the ONS on NeSS has been a unique relationship and has required a close working relationship to ensure NeSS meets the policy needs of central and regional Government and of locally based regeneration professionals. Though NeSS has completed its developmental phase and is now a fully operational service, there is an ongoing need to ensure that NeSS is responsive to policy making and policy priorities. There is a risk that an Independent ONS will mark a more distant relationship with Departments which may risk the policy relevance of the data produced. Within the new accountability and reporting structures it is not clear how ONS will respond to the needs of Government policy effectively and what measures would be in place if for example ONS stopped an important area of work due to resource constraints. There is a real danger that an implication of being 'independent from Government' will increase the likelihood that ONS will not effectively meet Government policy needs. There may be a need to set up a separate agreement with ONS on NeSS to ensure the unique relationship NRU and ONS have had on NeSS is not compromised by a new Independent status.

It is important that the investment that has been made to date is not lost by an Independent ONS and that NeSS continues to deliver up-to-date information about deprived neighbourhoods. Timeliness of data has been a key issue within NeSS. Though ONS are aware of this and have taken steps to ensure data is made publicly

available as quickly as possible there is still much work to be done. There are many examples where data is many years out of date on NeSS but is available elsewhere and is up to date. ONS should ensure that the move towards independence tackles this head on and that the quest for quality does not unduly compromise the timeliness. There is a key risk that if data is not up to date that it will not be used and it will not meet the policy need. This will not reflect the needs of modern Government and society.

High level objectives (as set out in para 4.17) should consider the role that ONS has had in championing small area statistics and that this should continue. They should also consider the focus on supporting *local* policies as NeSS has done. There is also a need to consider the need of *users* of statistics within these high level objectives. ONS should have a process within its governance structures to ensure user needs are well represented. NeSS particularly has done some excellent work with users which will have resulted in a significant re-design of the website which will be shortly launched.

Since the launch of NeSS, the availability of small area statistics has increased substantially. This increase has not only occurred at the national level but also we are seeing an increase in the availability of local information systems. These systems are varied but many mirror the statistics held by NeSS and indeed use the data drawn from NeSS. It is important that ONS has a role in supporting these local information systems through quality standards and common data definitions. ONS should also support the interoperability of data systems – both at the national and local level.

This is of particular relevant when considering Local Area Agreements and the forthcoming Local Government White Paper which is likely to encourage an increased use and availability of small area data to enable better local intelligence.

Data Sharing

DCLG have working on developing the Government's strategy on data sharing across the public sector through the MISC 31 Cabinet Office committee. Extending balanced and proportionate access to administrative data brings significant benefits for the better planning and targeting of resource to support the delivery of services to deprived areas and disadvantaged people. Where there are legal barriers preventing this, we would support the investigation of measures to address this. DCLG are working with MISC31 to identify such issues and we would welcome analysis by ONS of where the specific legal barriers are.

We therefore support increased data access and sharing across central government, as well as access and sharing of data held in local information systems. From the point of view of continuing to develop our understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of social exclusion, access to a wide range of data sources is important, as is locating at the local level where exclusion problems are occurring. Access will have to be balanced with concerns about privacy issues and our interest is not in identifying individual cases but in understanding the issues and identifying concentrations of disadvantage as well as the need to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of services.

Yours faithfully,

Angela Ruotolo