

DISCUSSION PAPER 5: THE OPTIONS?

The Criteria – Balancing Independence & Impact

Most of the existing bodies are funded publicly for example by government directly or through the ESRC and NSRC. The information they hold is not coordinated or easily accessed nor necessarily known beyond those who have been involved in their production. Discussion Note 4 lists some of the think tanks, professional bodies and others who gather, hold or need to access spatial data, both in the UK and internationally which are undertaking cognate and related types of work.

The examples referred to in the other Discussion Notes illustrates the potential partners and clients of an **NISS**. Given this, three points need to be made. First, the list does not contain any bodies that fully match the objectives for, and characteristics of, an **NISS** set out in this paper. In particular, virtually none of these bodies have a focus on spatial policy as their *raison d'être*. Second, this range of bodies provides a potentially useful scope for the **NISS** to co-operate with other bodies to carry out studies and to add weight to the dissemination and policy development activities related to its findings. Thirdly, over and above any new capacity that needs to be created there is a need for all decision-making bodies to have more explicit regard to spatial Implications assessments. This has been cogently argued elsewhere¹ but should not be taken as given to any discussion at the Roundtable.

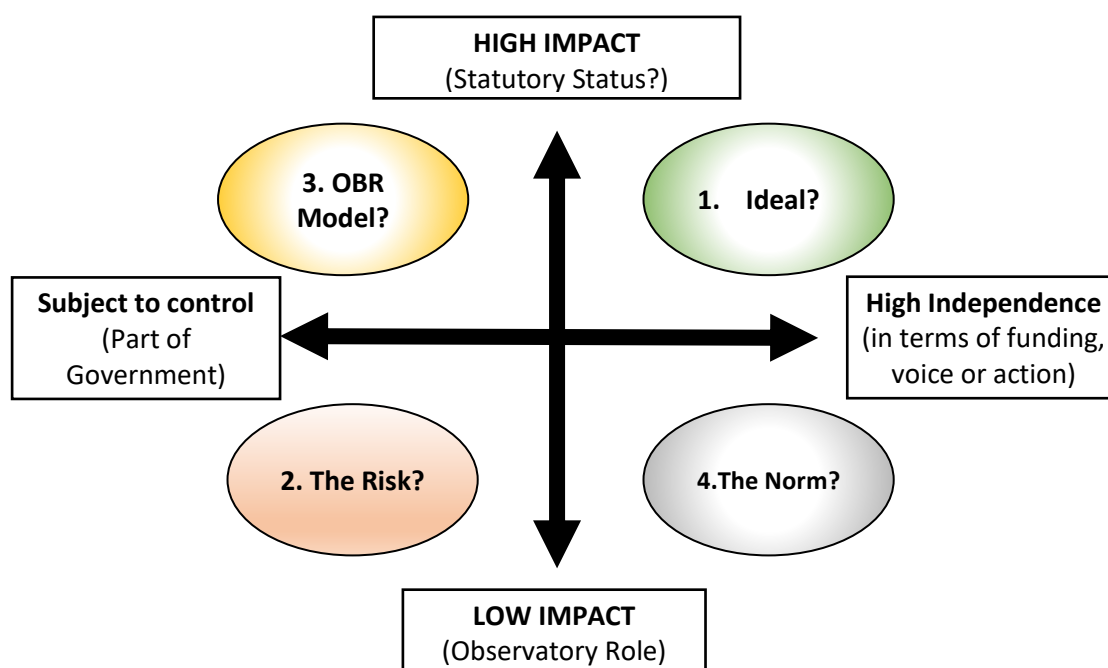
It can therefore be concluded that there is no lack of data per se but it is fragmented, partial, and underused. We need to start with coordination across what already exists. This requires a champion who will coordinate, facilitate and maximise its utility, and be able to also authoritatively interpret and act as an advocate. It needs political will to deliver change if spatially based evidence is to become embedded in policy-making.

Discussion Note 3 sets out the Guiding Principles for the development of rigorous place based evidence for public policy-making. At its heart is the need to '*speak truth to power....*' but more critically '*...and to be heard*'. Herein lies the challenge for all – 'to be independent and relevant'². This requires the ability and freedom to ask hard and where necessary inconvenient questions of data since data does not speak for itself. The truth is never naked but clothed by those who seek to own it.

A key question is whether high impact requires regulatory or statutory status. High impact means the ability to influence events and secure a considerable shift in policy. There are examples of non-statutory strategic processes which have had high impact. For example, the non-regulatory Regional Reports produced in Scotland that shaped public corporate policy. A similar role was played by the non-statutory Stage 1 Report in Merseyside. So how is high impact secured, if not by statute? It's a difficult and interesting question, but it may be as much about the product of well informed and well-connected actors, communicating within some form of respected institutional platform, with longevity (respected by key decision makers that is).

¹ C Swain, Improving spatial awareness in policy-making, *Town & Country Planning*, pp 474-478, Nov 2010

² This is an expression borrowed from the work of Professor Denise Lievesley



The Options

In the light of the information set out in the earlier Discussion Notes it is possible to consider a range of models for the development including:

- an official think tank like DATAR;
- an independent think tank akin to the Brookings Institute in the USA or the former Centre for Environmental Studies (CES) in the UK;
- an arm of Parliament;
- a co-production activity by research institutes;
- coproduction by network of strategic bodies
- some new body.

The Roundtable seeks to consider which of these approaches should be promoted individually or in combination. They all involve a trade-off. Ideally the result should be to have secured high-level collaborations within the policy-community leading to low-cost: high value outcomes, leading to sustainable CoVentures with enlightened academic and not-for-profit organisations.

It is therefore considered that the following should be borne in mind in any discussion:

- What is sought is a 'sea-change' in culture and behaviour and not a marginal adjustment;
- The opportunity costs from our current system are very high and the gains in better policy outcomes will be more than the budget required;
- Project-based funding in general tend to limit the level of independence, focus and longevity;
- The core resources needed to launch and operate are within the capacity of any government;
- It should maximise the use of existing expertise and not duplicate effort or re-invent wheels;
- It should serve a number of communities operating at this higher level enhancing the capacity and capability of all;
- Will it attract investment in such an independent body as it builds a track-record of sound, smart and practical recommendations to present to prospective stakeholders.