



A National Institute for Spatial Studies

Draft Proposition

The UK faces a radically changing future, which requires difficult choices. All parts of the nation will be affected. All face a Common Future in which they will play a different role. None should be excluded or left to sink under the tidal wave of change. It is critical that the policies that the nation chooses are sensitive to the likely impacts on each community, and this applies equally to choices on industry, housing, infrastructure, the environment or agriculture (i.e their spatial implications).

Today, in a world of alternative truths, big data and social media, confidence in public policy has been shaken to its foundations. The information revolution we are experiencing challenges the traditional practices of evidence-based policy making. More than ever, public policy needs to be underpinned by sound place-based and place-sensitive evidence, but currently such a resource does not exist. New, more systematic mechanisms are required to secure national policy, based on reasoned justification and not asserted propositions.

We need to establish new institutional capacity with the principal aim of better informing public debate in order to promote the development of effective place-based policy, through rigorous independent analysis and informed debate about the place-based needs and spatial impacts of public policy decision making.

The Common Futures Network has therefore prepared a Prospectus (*Towards a Common Future* - <https://urbandynamicslab.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/interim-prospectus-low-res.pdf>) for ensuring that a New Agenda for England and the UK is to the benefit of all - from rural areas to our great cities. It also forms a starting point for establishing a basis for the development of a longer-term *National Development Framework* for the nation. Importantly this takes into account the implications for cross-border collaboration within the UK and beyond.

This Framework needs to be underpinned by an evidence base which is fit-for-purpose. Current tools are inadequate for the job. They tend to be short-term, trend based, and inconsistent. Most importantly, they are generally insensitive to their spatial implications and impacts on specific communities – whether at the neighbourhood, city or region scale. Evidence for policy making cannot be based solely on trends since the past is no simple guide to the future. Evidence has to be longer term than any election cycle. It must be spatial. It must be carefully constructed as it will inevitably shape policy discussion as well as serving it.

The Common Futures Network has therefore proposed that future national policy discussion should be set within an agreed understanding of the present and possible future State of the Nation. This proposition has been mirrored in the call of the Industrial Strategy Commission for the independent monitoring through an **Office of Strategic Economic Management** (*Final Report of the Commission* page 92 November 2017 - <http://bit.ly/2gQy9RB>). For this to have the necessary legitimacy and status it needs to have a level of independence and longer-term institutional footing, perhaps equivalent to the role of the OBR and ONS in their respective areas of working.

This Paper and its allied *Discussion Notes*, therefore, set out a proposition for creating such an independent observatory. The CFN would like to thank the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) and the Royal Institution of Great Britain (RI) for allowing us to draw upon their 2008 joint unpublished paper which explored similar issues. These issues are even more valid and urgent today in view of the changing national context.

For convenience, this Discussion Paper uses the name **National Institute for Spatial Studies (NISS)** for the potential observatory. There are many other equally useful possible names depending on the final form and status that it takes. The final name will depend on the outcome of consultations.

What would its purpose be?

No place in the UK should be left out in our thinking, research, debate or policy. However the way we think about space in the UK is myopic, obscure and at times blind. For a clear vision of the future of the country we need new perspectives and new lenses. The suggested objective of an **NISS** would be:

... to generate debate, information and options concerning spatial futures to inform national and sub-national policy-making, and to use the information gathered to press for cross-sectoral action to achieve better and fairer spatial outcomes

An **NISS** would be independent of thought, inclusive in debate and informed in recommendation. It would seek to bridge the gaps between informed research testing /experimentation, political and operational decision making and the concerns of communities.

It should act as a focal point for the development of fundamental research questions about spatial futures and, in real- or cyber-space the major stake-holders who populate that sector and identify and seeks sponsors for specific future research needs, and to be a centre for the co-ordination, curation and dissemination of research.

Not all activities need to be research-based. An important applied role assisting governments would be to evaluate policy options in terms of their place-based impacts, and provide insights into the spatial impacts of sectoral policies. It could also assist in the design and running of multidisciplinary meetings aimed at exploring policy levers for reducing spatial imbalance or reconciling policies that have been found to have unintended spatial outcomes.

The Discussion Papers

The background to proposition put forward in this short paper is set out in five Discussion Notes which accompany it. These are:

Note 1: *Why Change is needed*

Note 2: *Changing the way we see things*

Note 3: *The Guiding Principles & Agenda*

Note 4: *Existing Capacity*

Note 5: *The Options*

The Next Steps

This paper and the Notes that accompany it are being used, initially, to act as background material for a focused meeting of key stakeholders. Alongside this, approaches are being made to other central individuals and bodies seeking views and potential collaboration.

The results of this work will then be brought to the wider Common Futures Network and other stakeholders for discussion and to establish the way ahead.