

Regional boundaries, co-ordination and government

There are around 100 regional administrative structures in Britain, according to new research by Brian Hogwood at the Department of Government, University of Strathclyde. The study examined the diversity of these regional structures of government, particularly the boundaries they use, and found that:

- f** The regional administrative structures in Britain do not form an integrated regional tier concerned with the running of each region, but are mostly concerned with the administration of particular functions for which some geographical subdivision is administratively convenient.

- f** No mechanism exists to co-ordinate all the regional activities of government. Co-ordination of some of the work of four departments (Environment, Transport, Trade and Industry, and Education and Employment) has been carried out through the Government Offices for the Regions since 1994, but even this does not cover the work of their agencies or quangos.

- f** There is wide variation in the numbers of regions used for different services and agencies, and in the boundaries, even within bodies reporting to the same department. Important new bodies set up since the Government Offices have used different boundaries and numbers of regions. The greatest variation occurs in the South-East of England.

- f** Existing patterns of administrative boundaries provide only limited guidance on either the number of regions for any proposed regional assemblies or their boundaries. Rather, they highlight choices which would have to be made.

- f** The researcher concludes that:
Choice of appropriate boundaries for regional assemblies would depend on the proposed functions of the assemblies and possible criteria other than current administrative boundaries. The current boundaries of the Government Offices are not necessarily appropriate for regional assemblies.

Interest in regions

Interest in the regional dimensions of government administration has been stimulated in the mid-1990s by:

- the establishment of Government Offices for the Regions in 1994;
- the impact of a wide range of other changes in the regional structure of government bodies, including privatisation, the establishment since 1988 of Next Steps agencies in government departments, with their own chief executives and delegated management, and reorganisations in health, training, education and environmental protection;
- local government reorganisation in the mid-1990s;
- the renewed debate about regional chambers or elected regional assemblies.

Function not territory

Regional structures in British public administration are primarily concerned not with the management of territory, but with the delivery of functions, often at a very detailed level. As a result, departments, agencies and public bodies may choose regional structures and boundaries which may differ from each other, even within the same department.

Some organisations are multi-functional, with more than one internal regional structure. Organisations in the same broad policy area may use similar 'building blocks', such as local government or police authorities, but put them together in regions in quite different ways.

What counts as a regional structure?

The word 'region' provides us with very little help in determining what should count as a regional structure, since it is used in a variety of ways, and many of the administrative sub-divisions use different terms to express the same concept.

Northern Ireland, Scotland, and to a lesser extent Wales, are often treated as separate systems, not simply as regions within a UK-wide structure. This trend of separating the administrative systems of Scotland and Wales has developed substantially over the last fifteen years.

Regions within England are therefore often at the second level of territorial subdivision, and there is no 'regional tier' in England, but a diversity of regions and types of structure.

Many organisations have several layers of geographical subdivision, and it may not be immediately obvious which should be treated as 'regional'. Administrative practice in Britain, and international comparison, show that there can also be a very wide range in the number of regions in a country.

Many regional organisations are not part of government but are associations which include non-governmental bodies. Regional structures vary in the extent to which they are sets of regional offices which are part of a single organisation or sets of individual bodies with their own corporate status.

The range of regional roles

Regional structures exist in every policy area. They operate to varying extents in all aspects of the policy process: alerting, advising, preselecting options or bids, implementing, resource allocating, inspecting, evaluating, imposing sanctions.

Regional structures vary in the extent to which they are self-contained or part of a chain of information, money and decision-making. There is a huge variation in the scale of operation of these regional structures, both in absolute scale and in terms of their significance within wider organisations or systems.

The history of regional planning

Britain has a 60-year history, with relatively limited success, of attempting to devise regional boundaries which will act as a standard and a basis for planning or co-ordination. Some of the regions in operation in the late 1980s were closer to those used in the early 1960s than to those that replaced them in the mid-1960s.

The Government Offices for the Regions

The boundaries of the Government Offices for the Regions that were established in April 1994 to include aspects of the work of the Departments of Environment, Transport, Trade and Industry, and Employment are the same as those previously used by the combined Environment/Transport offices, with the exception that Merseyside was made a separate region, creating ten regions within England. Only four of these Government Office regions are identical to the standard regions, which are still used for some planning guidance purposes.

The Government Offices do not include other government departments, which may have their own structures with different boundaries, nor do they include the agencies or non-departmental public bodies associated with the four participating departments, which again have separate regional structures with their own boundaries, even if they are dealing with policy functions related to the concerns of the Government Offices. Staff of the Government Offices continued in different offices in different locations except where there was already a common location.

The Senior Directors of the Government Offices are responsible to the Secretary of State for the Environment for the administration of the Single Regeneration Budget and to the respective ministers for Environment, Transport, Trade and Industry, and Employment for their programmes. The balance of work varies between regions.

While there has been some integration of personnel, staff and running costs are still allocated in some detail from the four departments and are not part of a fully integrated regional budget or staffing programme. In addition, the objective that the Offices should provide a single point of contact amounts only to acting as an enquiry point and has no significance in terms of co-ordination of decision-making at regional level.

The launch of the Government Offices has not led to standardisation of other bodies on their boundaries, as evidenced by the boundaries used by important regional structures established or redrawn after the Government Offices were set up. Even where bodies use Government Office boundaries as 'building blocks', they may put them together in widely different ways, leading to largely incompatible boundaries.

Other developments in regional structures

Privatisation and the regulation of privatised utilities have resulted in the establishment of systems of regional consumer bodies which largely reflect the structure of each industry at the time it was privatised. Each has its own different set of boundaries.

Major changes in policy on Employment and Training led to an important intermediary role for a regional structure to negotiate contracts with Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs). This is now part of the Government Offices for the Regions. By contrast, changes in the National Health Service have resulted in a completely different set of boundaries.

Local government has lost functions in education and waste management to national bodies which have regional structures. The formation of Next Steps agencies has given those agencies the managerial freedom to determine their own internal regional structure, or to abandon it.

Overall, regional structures are constantly changing, with local government reorganisation being only a minor influence.

The scale and scope of regional structures

The Government itself is unable to produce meaningful figures on the scale of regional structures, even within some individual departments. This research identified nearly 100 regional structures with executive functions, though the number depends on the definition being used.

All policy areas have more than a single structure and more than one set of regional boundaries. Agriculture has a particularly complex and numerous set of structures.

There is considerable variation in geographical coverage of regional structures operating in England, from UK, to GB, to England and Wales, to England only. Most regional structures use a smaller number of regions in England than the ten of the Government Offices. In terms of administrative practice there is no magic number or even band which is considered appropriate across regional structures.

Local authorities are the basic building blocks of most but not all regional structures, normally at county or former metropolitan level although sometimes at district level, but there are important exceptions, including the Legal Aid Board, the Social Security Benefits and Contributions Agencies, water consumer committees, and the Office of Electricity Regulation (OFFER).

The development of sub-regional structures

The research identified a set of structures operating in areas larger than those of top-tier elected local government, but smaller than Government Office or Standard Regions, including police authorities, Training and Enterprise Councils, Magistrates Court Committees, and Health Authorities. Each has its own set of boundaries. Government pressure is for a decrease on the number of units in each case.

Regional boundary compatibility

The overall finding is one of diversity rather than commonality in boundaries. No other regional structure uses all of the regions from either the Government Office regions or the standard regions. Even where regional structures have identical or similar numbers of regions, they may have widely differing boundaries.

Individual local authorities may therefore have to deal with bodies which combine their area in different ways, though many of these links will be functional and not have immediate implications for co-ordination. In a few cases their area may actually be cross-cut by a regional or sub-regional boundary.

Even organisations which have local authority representation do not operate to common boundaries, and organisations operating in the same policy area are likely to have different boundaries.

Local government reorganisation has only modest implications for regional structures. However, this is not always the case - for example, the linking of South Humberside unitaries with Lincolnshire for structure planning purposes does have implications for the boundary between Yorkshire and the East Midlands.

Some regions have more widely used boundaries than others. For example, a regional office based in the North-East is common, though with varying boundaries to the west. The main 'zone of uncertainty' is in the South and East of England, with London at its heart, where there is no common pattern in terms of numbers of regions for the area or use of boundaries. As a consequence, there is a variation between local authorities in the extent to which any given local authority can expect to be in the same region as any neighbouring authority.

Policy implications

The research reported here can be used to inform proposals for regional government or assemblies by drawing attention to issues raised by differing boundaries and number of regions. However, many other criteria can be used for delimiting regions other than current administrative practice.

Insofar as existing regional boundaries are a consideration, the choice of functions for regional governments or assemblies will affect which boundaries might be taken into account. Even taking this into account, existing patterns of administrative boundaries provide only limited guidance on either the *number* of regions or their *boundaries*. Rather, they highlight *choices* which would have to be made.

There are variations in different parts of the country in the ways in which existing structures provide guidance, with the problem being particularly acute in the South-East.

A consultation document from the Labour Party in 1995 proposed regional chambers with boundaries based on Government Office regions but with membership drawn from regional associations, many of which have different boundaries. This incompatibility will have to be resolved. In examining how it might be resolved consideration could be given to alternatives which do not match either the current Government Office or standard regions.

Labour's proposals suggest that second-stage elected assemblies might have different boundaries based on regional identity, but provide no mechanism for resolving this since only regional chambers could propose a move to the second stage. The problem would be further exacerbated if some regions were moving towards elected assemblies - to be based on regional identity - while neighbouring regions were to continue with (possibly overlapping) areas considered suitable for first stage regional chambers. This problem would be particularly acute in, but not confined to, London and the South-East.

A two-stage process with possibly different sets of boundaries for each stage would involve the double disruption of two rounds of restructuring for some organisations. The disruption would be greater if the determination of the boundaries was to be phased over time as each directly elected assembly was established. Even if the assemblies were to be established individually over a period of time, there would be an advantage in determining the complete set of boundaries for England as a whole, and considering whether in the interim regional chambers should move to the new set of boundaries.

There are many organisations using geographical areas between national and top-tier local authority, but they raise possibilities other than a single regional tier of government overlaying a single tier of local government, especially in the treatment of sub-regional structures.

Different patterns already exist within the United Kingdom. Given the varying workloads and issues within England, the possibility of different regional or local government arrangements for different parts of England could arise.

About the study

The research involved identifying regional structures of administration used by British government and the bodies through which it operates. Wherever possible, the boundaries of these were coded to a standard computer database of boundary segments, enabling the relationship to be identified of any set of regional boundaries to the new local government boundaries and to the boundaries of other regional structures. This was linked to a specially written map-drawing program to produce maps, examples of which are included in the full report. The research was conducted by Brian W. Hogwood, Professor of Politics in the Department of Government, University of Strathclyde.

Further information

The full report, **Mapping the regions: Boundaries, co-ordination and government**, is published by The Policy Press in association with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (price £11.95, ISBN 1 86134 030 3).

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