Number: WG32851

Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Welsh Government

Identification of Regional Areas for the National Development Framework

Executive Summary

A report by the School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University

Date of issue: August 2017

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.

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June 2017

CARDIFF UNIVERSITY
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Identification of Regional Areas for the National Development Framework

Summary

This research project aimed to test the appropriateness of the National Development Framework (NDF) to identify regions across Wales for the purpose of providing a) a context for national infrastructure, growth and projects and b) a framework for planning decisions and plan making within those regions, and to examine the potential alternatives.

The following four inter-related research objectives were identified:

1. Assess the appropriateness of the method developed to identify Strategic Planning Areas (SPA) in Wales for the identification of NDF regional boundaries and modify as appropriate.

2. Gain stakeholder input on the themes and data to be used in the identification of the NDF regional boundaries and the contemporary appropriateness of the Wales Spatial Plan (WSP) regions.

3. Apply the approach developed through Parts (1) and (2) to identify distinctive NDF regional areas within the context of the seven Well-being Goals of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

4. Explore the validity of the WSP regions in relation to the identified NDF regional boundaries.

Research findings note:

- The desire among a majority of stakeholders for a regional component within the NDF and the need to identify regions through an evidence-based approach, with particular emphasis based on functional connections.
- The need to consider the role of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 when developing regions for the NDF as well as wider institutional factors.
- The ways in which regional boundaries may differ depending on the importance placed on different characteristics.
- A recommendation for 4 regions to be included in the NDF, identified as North Wales, Central East Wales, South West Wales, and South East Wales.

Why this research was undertaken

The Planning (Wales) Act 2015 provides a statutory requirement for the Welsh Ministers to produce and keep up-to-date a National Development Framework (NDF). While no decisions have been made on what the NDF will consist of, its content or the range and scope of its policies, it could potentially fulfill a number of roles, including setting out the Welsh Government's land use priorities and providing a national land use framework for Strategic and Local Development Plans.

The Wales Spatial Plan (WSP), a predecessor addressing similar national and regional issues was developed in the early 2000s and last updated in 2008 in the context of national, long term planning. The WSP included a strong emphasis on sub-national areas within Wales and as such there will likely be debate about the role of regions within the NDF.

It is therefore prudent to investigate the potential and issues of regional coverage in the NDF in order to frame future consultation and policy exercises. The form of regional content also becomes important, varying from a strategic overview to more detailed regional coverage.

The role of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 must also be addressed in any development of the NDF. As such there was a need to understand how the definition and role of

regions within the NDF might address and work towards the achievement of the seven Well-being Goals.

Stakeholder perspectives

The research included an online survey of stakeholders. The survey assisted in defining the principles that were used to guide later data collection and analysis, and the conceptual considerations that informed the identification of possible regional areas.

A very clear majority of stakeholders supported the inclusion of regional areas in the National Development Framework. A clear majority also supported the identification of regional areas in the NDF for all parts of Wales rather than selectively for some parts of Wales.

The majority of stakeholders supported the identification of regional areas based on functional relationships between places. Stakeholders also recognised the importance of cultures and identities in defining regional areas. Stakeholders relayed mixed views on the role of administrative boundaries in defining regional areas. Physical features were not considered a sound basis for identifying regional areas. Stakeholders identified markets – particularly labour and housing markets – and accessibility and connectivity as the key functional relationships in defining regional areas.

The majority of participants expressed a preference for general and indicative boundaries to any regional areas identified in the National Development Framework. The majority also supported the possibility of places being located in more than one regional area. A similar proportion of stakeholders also supported the idea of regional areas extending into England where functionally appropriate.

Stakeholders identified a series of nuanced interpretations of what criteria could be used to define the content of the NDF in relation to regional areas. It is important for there to be clarity on what determines whether something is addressed as part of a regional area within the NDF.

Stakeholders generally saw the role of regional areas of the NDF as providing a framework for other tiers of plan-making – Strategic Development Plans and Local Development Plans - and for making decisions on Developments of National Significance. Stakeholders argued that there should be very close alignment between any regional areas identified in the NDF and Strategic Planning Areas identified for the preparation of Strategic Development Plans.

Stakeholders identified housing, retail and commercial development, landscape protection, waste, and environment as the highest rated 'very important' issues to be addressed for a regional area in the NDF. They also suggested that regions were informed by, but do not follow, the areas defined in the Wales Spatial Plan.

Defining a Region

Drawing on previous research and the comments received from the web consultation a list of potential datasets was developed and evaluated for suitability based on the objectives of the project and broadly attributed to each of the seven Well-being Goals. In total 54 indicators were selected across all of the Well-being Goals. Each indicator was subjectively weighted based on the survey and other considerations drawn from conversations with Welsh Government and amongst the research team.

A process of 'regionalization' was then conducted, a name for a class of statistical techniques for defining areas in a spatial data set which are (1) spatially contiguous, (2) internally similar as possible with respect to the data measured. This process was applied to cluster regions with similar

characteristics and themed under each Well-being Goal. The results were then mapped to identify regional areas depending on the Well-being Goal, highlighting the differences that can emerge in regional definition.

In order to determine the final singular proposed regional boundaries the results of each Well-being theme were combined and weighted (see Figure 1). Weightings were derived from the areas of importance noted by the web consultation participants and broader discussion within the research team.

In determining the final proposed boundaries additional factors were considered, particularly existing infrastructure networks (roads, rail, airports), commuting flow patterns, and existing institutional structures (such as City-Deals). Additionally the statutory nature of the NDF may require that regional boundaries align to existing Unitary Authority boundaries as well as the need to ensure balance between different sub-regional areas in the composition of regional areas for the purpose of equity. As such despite a general desire amongst stakeholders for regional boundaries to be indicative, Unitary Authorities have been categorised into the following proposed regions (Table 1):

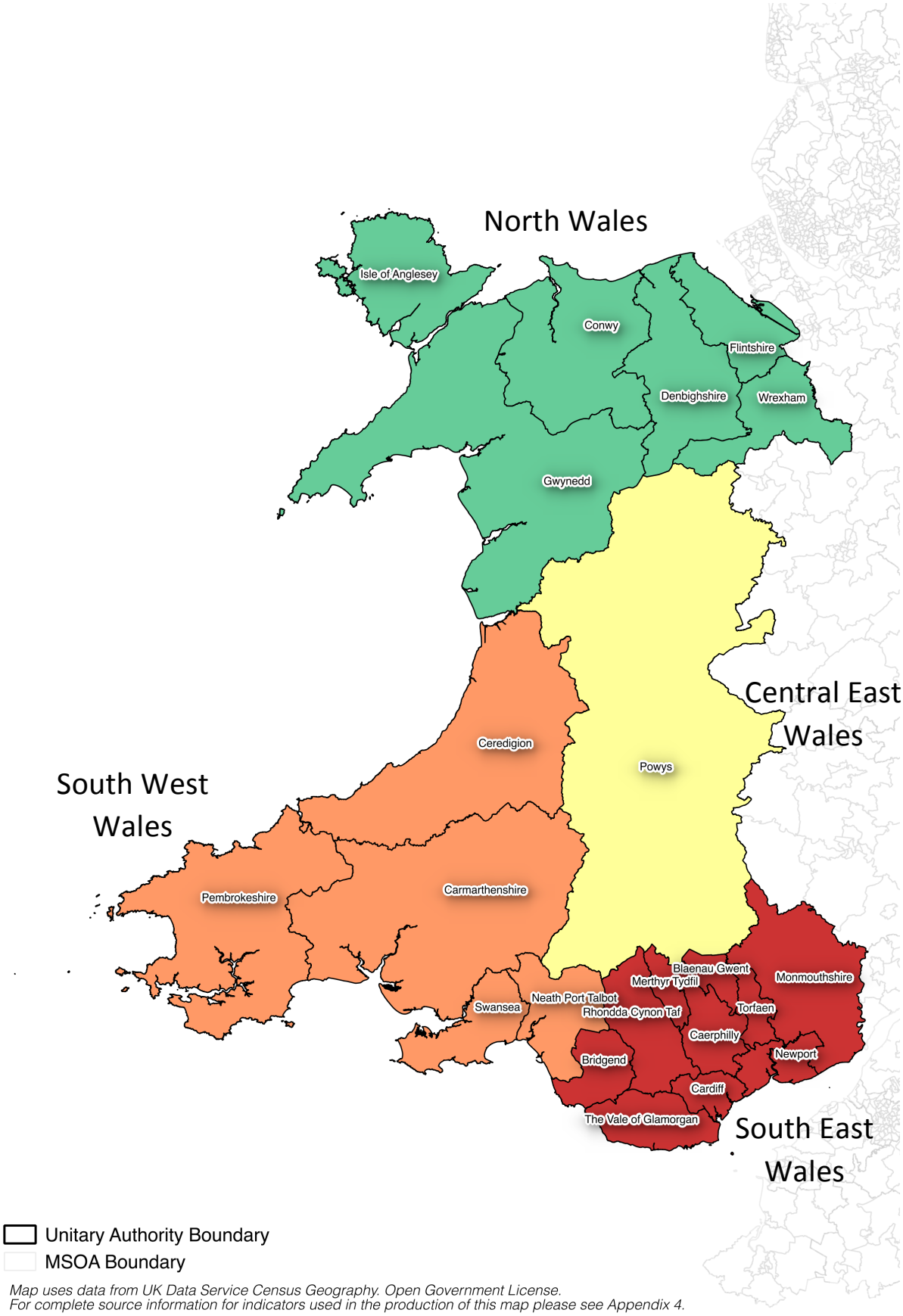
Table 1: Proposed regions by Unitary Authority

North Wales Isle of Anglesey Gwynedd Conwy Denbighshire Flintshire Wrexham	**Central East Wales** Powys
South West Wales Ceredigion Pembrokeshire Carmarthenshire Swansea Neath Port Talbot	**South East Wales** Bridgend The Vale of Glamorgan Cardiff Rhondda Cynon Taf Caerphilly Blaenau Gwent Torfaen Monmouthshire Newport Merthyr Tydfil

Relationship with the Wales Spatial Plan

The Wales Spatial Plan (WSP) identified six regions within Wales. It has been 13 years since it was first published in 2004 and subsequently revised in 2008. This research now suggests that larger regions in Wales are perhaps more appropriate as a result of broader transformations to the spatial structure of the country along with a range of institutional changes, such as the introduction of City-Deals, the opportunity to identify Strategic Planning Areas, and the White Paper on Local Government Reform. When sub-regions are however identified through the regionalization process, some similarities can be seen between the previous WSP boundaries and key sub-regional geographies noted in the research.

Figure 1: Proposed Regions for Inclusion in the National Development Framework



Map uses data from UK Data Service Census Geography. Open Government License.
For complete source information for indicators used in the production of this map please see Appendix 4.