

June 2026



Good Growth Starts with Good Growth Data Locally – The Cambridge Experience



Writing for Cambridge Ahead

Dame Kate Barker



The demand for good data about Mayoral or local authority areas is rising, as the policy focus on sub-national policy increases. Soon there will be a need to establish baseline data for the new authorities resulting from local government reorganisation. Key information will include the employment structure of these areas, and how it is changing. Therefore an urgent question is whether the available data can paint this picture reliably. The Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES) data is the only ONS

source for workplace employment, and carries unique weight in local planning. Yet work from Cambridge suggests it has significant weaknesses.

Greater Cambridge, with its significant life science sector, is frequently cited by politicians and think tanks as an important UK success story. In early June 2026, Housing Secretary Steve Reed announced the establishment of a new Development Corporation, commenting 'Greater Cambridge is a powerhouse for regional growth'. So it might be a surprise that there is considerable uncertainty about just how fast the jobs market around Cambridge has been growing, especially in knowledge intensive (KI) sectors.

Yet that is what this paper from the Centre for Business Research (CBR)¹ sets out to demonstrate. Good policy requires good data,

¹ Cosh, A., Caselli, Caselli, G and Hughes R (2026). *Analysis of ONS Employment Methods*;

but all too often data is used without proper consideration of its fitness to answer the relevant question; either because of its precise definition, or because the estimate is uncertain. This is not to be critical of the Office of National Statistics (ONS) – proper attention to ONS output reveals much commentary about data uncertainty. However, it can certainly be argued that ONS should look at what could be learned from different methods, such as those developed by CBR and maintained now for over a decade.

Their paper starts by setting out the different sources of employment and employee data, clarifying their definitions and sample sizes. This helpful comparison establishes that the BRES is really the only suitable source for workplace employment; described by ONS as the ‘official source of employee and employment estimates by detailed geography and industry’. These are accredited official statistics, which means they have

been assessed as meeting user needs, although ONS warns against using it to draw out trends – which is clearly an unmet user need.

Points made in their comparison of different employment measures for the Cambridge and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA) include:

- the 2021 Census should have been a useful checkpoint, but being conducted during Covid the place of work data in particular may be misleading;
 - while for the whole of the UK, and for the East of England, different surveys give reasonably similar results, this is less true at local areas. Even at the CPCA scale there are significant differences for both employment and employee-only totals.
 - Recent years have seen volatile differences between the measures.
-

Defying the ONS warning about the data not being suitable for time series – this paper looks at employment changes over time periods (which should lessen the comparison concern). The tables span 2014 to 2024/25, split into three periods. Notably BRES suggests stronger growth for the CPCA area than the place of residence measures, at least until the last three years or so. As small annual differences cumulate, this implies a notable rise in inward commuting.

The rest of the paper clearly suggests that BRES can be challenged on more than time series weakness. Taking the period since 2014, the CBR has developed a method of assessing employment and employment growth, focusing initially on the knowledge-intensive (KI) sectors in both corporate and non-corporate (research) organisations. While the CBR does not seek to measure total employment in Greater Cambridge (so looking at a smaller total) its strength is the

focus on locally-based firms and KI sectors; vital ingredients of the growth story.

This dataset is significant in indicating that the KI sectors employ more people than BRES reports, and have been growing even more rapidly. CBR has extended the analysis beyond the KI sectors, and found that both sector growth rates, and numbers of jobs added, vary significantly between the CBR and BRES data over their three time periods. Some of these big discrepancies remain when looking over the whole period, for example CBR has around 6,000 new jobs in health more than BRES, possibly as CBR is picking up more private health care.

What should we draw from this analysis? CBR rightly comment that BRES is the only ONS measure to use for employment/employees numbers in an area. But the analysis indicates shortcomings – a probable failure to pick up newly-formed organisations, and also a relatively small sample size

for any regional or local area. BRES samples 87,000 businesses across the UK, whereas in 2024/25 CBR had a database of 27,500 active businesses just for the CPCA. CBR's locally-developed approach is more sensitive to new businesses, and has a different and more granular approach to sector definitions. Its main weakness is that it is not able to distinguish fully between employment in Cambridge and employment elsewhere in the UK.

On this theme, the Office for Statistics Regulation recently led a session² discussing issues around sectoral and regional data. This highlighted the benefits of a range of approaches, including that developed by CBR, to understand fully the UK's sector and spatial strengths. Granular data is vital both for national industrial strategies, and for local plans.

BRES is the most relevant official source for those looking at trends in employment and planning for future capacity. But 'most relevant' may still not be good enough for planners' needs in a rapidly-changing business environment; especially given the warnings that it is not suitable for the time series work. A renewed focus on the economics of place requires data which picks up newer businesses, often important in KI sectors. In seeking to strengthen BRES, ONS could consider the merits of the CBR approach.

² Navigating Industry and Regional Classifications for sector and local economic analysis; ESCoE May 2026
