

Shining a light on the population: Finding new ways to release the value of the 2021 Census

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Abstract

The 2021 census has enormous value for providing a snapshot of the population at a point in time. Meeting the wide-ranging user needs is challenging, requiring a range of products to ensure the results are accessible. Given we have a 10-year census cycle in England and Wales, we are presented with an opportunity to re-invent, and revolutionise the way we disseminate and communicate our census results. For 2021 census outputs, we have harnessed new technologies to widen our reach and increase the use of population statistics.

To improve the access to our census data, we have made sure that user need is at the forefront of everything we do. We have developed a range of personas as a way of identifying the types of people who access our data, ranging from Expert Users, through Policy Influencers to citizen users. Recognising that each group of users have varying levels of interest and technical capability, we have specified thoughtful products to service their needs. We have created:

- visual, storytelling products that distil key facts for the user
- on-line games using statistics where we challenge users to understand facts about their local areas
- data visualisation products that allow users to build a profile for their area and visualise that data on a map
- products that allow users to just ‘get the data’ for consumption in other systems

In a unique innovation for official statistics, the ‘create a custom dataset’ tool provides automatic statistical disclosure control in real-time to protect the identity of individuals. The product allows the release of data that passes disclosure rules, suppressing other areas where the risk of identification is high. This approach has allowed us to release billions of anonymised census statistics far more quickly than ever before.

This novel approach has attracted international interest, and we have collaborated with other UK statistical agencies to co-develop and host systems that build on our core capabilities and learnings.