



Presentation to NSEUAC

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Origin of Better Statistics CIC (BSC)

- **2018** - Following a few years of concern about our National Business Statistics we formed the **Campaign for Better Business Statistics**.
- **2019** – Concentrated on aspects of estimating the so-called Gig economy. Meetings with Professor Sir Charles Bean, Richard Heys (ONS), first public meeting at NLC. Conducted [Foundation Survey](#).
- **2020** – Lockdown interrupted progress on Business Survey plans. Instead we took interest in:
 - [Business Impact of Covid Survey](#)
 - [Escoe report](#)
 - [Consultation on inflation indices by ONS / Treasury](#)

Changed the name to **Campaign for Better Statistics**

Better Statistics CIC

Formed February 2021

The purpose of Better Statistics CIC is to campaign for more reliable statistics, whether produced by private companies or by public bodies. By 'better statistics' we mean more trustworthy, useful to more people, of good quality and readily accessible. BSC also benefits from occasional advice from members of the Better Statistics Advisory Group as described on the next chart.

To achieve our aims, we promote public awareness of, and interest in, the production of accurate and relevant statistics and we believe we contribute best through:

- 1. Educating people as to the value of reliable statistics, via discussion, debate and engagement**
- 2. Encouraging people to participate in appropriate surveys, which of itself can improve the potential reliability of the data.**
- 3. Challenging poorly prepared or presented published statistics**

Directors – Tony Dent, Phyllis Macfarlane, Iain MacKay

Better Statistics Advisory Group Members:

- [Simon Briscoe](#): Simon is a director of data science start-up [t-tab](#). Among various contributions to our public life he was an adviser to parliament's Public Administration Committee and a trustee of FullFact.
- [Sir Vince Cable](#): Vince was the Business, Innovation and Skills Secretary in the coalition government, now retired from politics he retains an active interest in business and economic affairs.
- [Sir John Curtice](#): John is Professor of Politics at the University of Strathclyde and Senior Research Fellow at the National Centre for Social Research; he is also chief commentator on What UK Thinks.
- [Leon Gunning](#): Leon is Go-to-market Manager at Vodafone following from a period as Insights Manager at Giff-Gaff.
- [Ms. Vicky Pryce](#): Vicky is Chief Economic Adviser and a board member at the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR). Vicky has previously held senior positions in business and the Civil service. #e.
- [Adam Williams](#): Adam is founder and Managing Director of DBS Data, an original sponsor of Better Statistics CIC.

Main BSC Activities 2021 / 2022

- Public Meetings:
 - [Launch Event](#) – November 2021
 - [Inflation Seminar](#) – May 2022
 - [Growth Event](#) – November 2022
- Primary Interactions with Official Statistics
 - Early involvement with [user engagement](#)
 - Correspondence with [Covid-19 infection survey team](#)
 - Correspondence with [Office for Statistical Regulation](#)
- Other activities
 - Concerns with various aspects of [Population Statistics](#)

My purpose today

- Primarily it is to assist NSEUAC with objective C.

helping UKSA, ONS and the UK statistical system to improve user engagement

- I propose to do that by commenting on the minutes of the meetings of the committee over the past year to identify any areas that Better Statistics believe offered potential opportunities for improving user engagement.
- In doing so I am aware that it is *'early days'* for committee members but I am also conscious that the need for a *'user'* committee was originally identified by PACAC in 2019.

NSEUAC Meetings - Main Contributors

- National Statistician – first meeting.
- Guest Speakers – Various (3 to date, I am the 4th).
- Integrated Data Service – Alison Pritchard
- Engagement Strategy & Website Development – Owen Brace
- Inclusive Data Taskforce (IDTF) - Liz McKeown / Lara Phelan (?)
- Office for Statistical Regulation – Anna Price

National Statistician – Minutes of March 2022 (I).

Professor Sir Ian Diamond presented a paper on his observations for statistical priorities.

- Statistics would continue to be produced to the highest standards whilst also transforming access to data and statistics to improve the user experience.
- Work would take place to provide faster real time indicators on a variety of issues as well as improving the accuracy and relevance of data.
- Business surveys were being radically transformed with thought given to minimising user burden.
- Inclusive data was critical to make sure every citizen had a voice.
- Qualitative data was important when thinking about inclusivity.

The paper presented by Sir Ian is not available to review, but the above are the minutes. My primary question is - how did Sir Ian expect the committee to assist these priorities?

National Statistician – Minutes of March 2022 (II).

The following points were raised in discussion:

1. one role of the committee was to consider inclusivity by identifying user groups and potential users that hadn't been identified before
2. the faster economic indicators work by the ONS was impressive, but data moved quickly, and care needed to be taken not to over respond to short-term random fluctuations
3. unknown unknowns were an important consideration when considering potential users
4. prioritisation of questions was important
5. questions from the public needed to be answered as well as government questions
6. the ONS had a role to play as an international organisation in collaboration and comparability of data and work was taking place with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development around international standards for comparable data.

Please forgive me if I consider these comments to be banal. But I suspect that is more a feature of the nature of the minutes rather than, possibly, the actual discussions.

NSEUAC Meetings – Guest Speakers

Comments on the three speakers to date (based upon the minutes):

- 1) Anna Powell-Smith from the Centre for Public Data made some important observations, but I am a little surprised that she did not take the opportunity to explain her desire for any act of parliament to include a definition of one or more key performance measures to determine the success of the legislation.
- 2) Roger Halliday from Research Data Scotland (RDS) is not an obvious representative of the user community and his presence had suggested more questions than answers! Can users in Scotland access data from other nations within the UK and vice versa?
- 3) Paul Johnson of the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) represents a major consumer of both survey and administrative data and highlighted a number of concerns with accessing relevant data. (*Better Statistics comment further on this below, in reference to the integrated data service*).

BSC wonder if it would be more appropriate for the committee to focus on topics rather than 'representatives' of groups.

NSEUAC Meetings – Integrated Data Service

NSEUAC has received more than one briefing on this subject and we accept that the committee is right to take a major interest in this development. Nevertheless, the system is some way from being ready and, presently, it is difficult to see how the committee is able to influence the development

We understand that access to the system is to be determined in the same way as the ***Secure Research Service*** and we consider this to be unnecessarily restrictive, inhibiting innovation because:

- a) Analysts are required to specify their objective in exploring the data and to get their application approved – a process that has become less onerous than it was but it remains unnecessarily time consuming.
- b) Accessing data solely through the secure service restricts the analyst to only using ‘authorised’ software which may obscure insights exposed through more innovative software.

We note that it is intended to refer the IDS to the Ethics committee for consideration in respect of GDPR, a move we find surprising; there are many ways to ensure that the data will be anonymised and persons working within the IDS should take proper responsibility for ensuring that is achieved. If there were to be a breach by any company or individual, then why cannot such result in a fine as is presently the case with other breaches of GDPR rules - or even prison, if the breach is truly serious.

It should be noted that for a number of years now the US Census bureau (the US equivalent of the ONS) has enabled anonymised data to be downloaded from the web for ANYONE to explore as they wish. Why can't we do the same?

Website Matters (Minutes of March & October 2022)

At the first meeting Owen Brace presented a paper about data dissemination across the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Government Statistical Service (GSS) focussing on the importance of making data, statistics and analysis available to a wider range of users.

In a second paper presented at the October meeting Owen presented progress on website transformation.

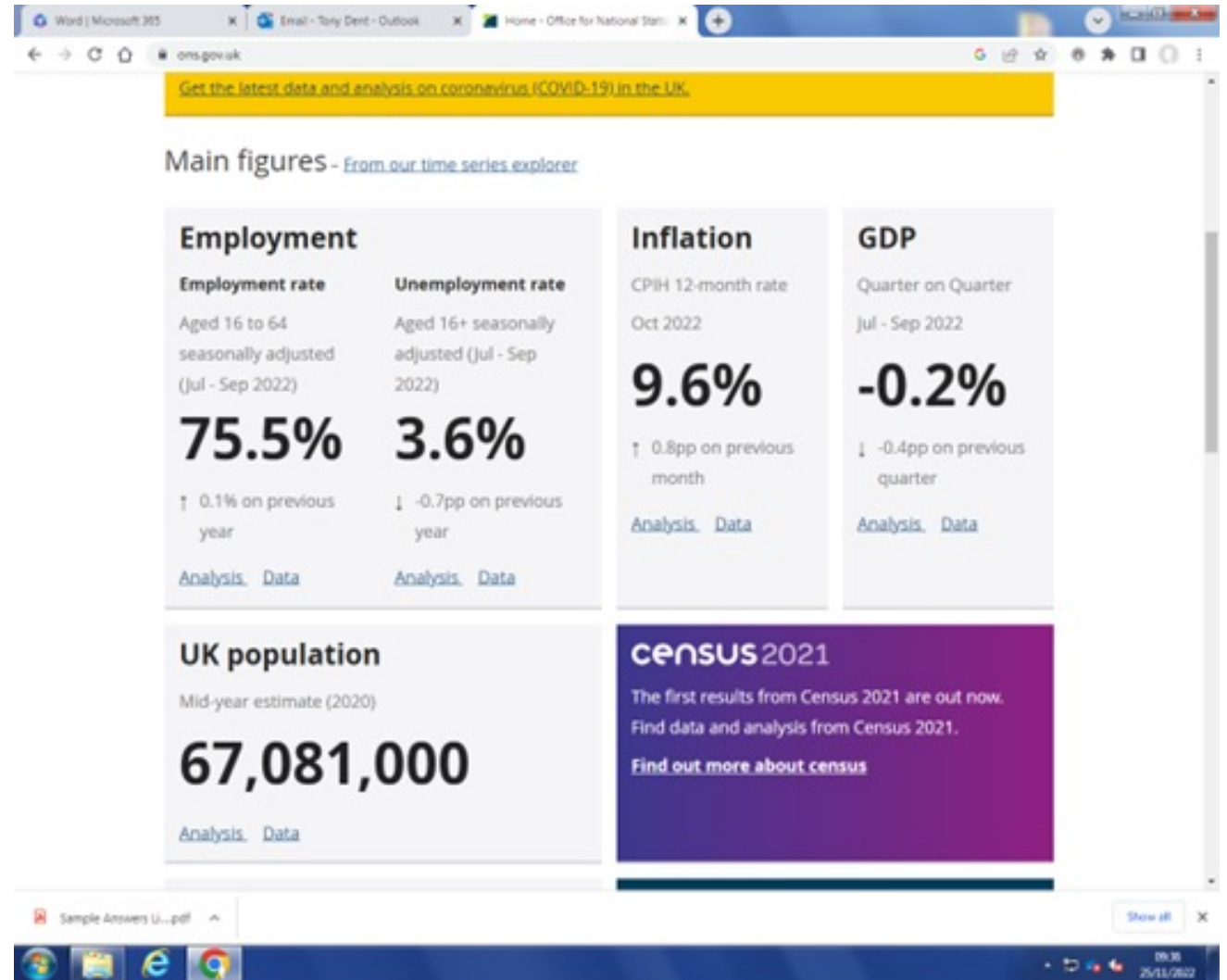
As far as can be discerned from the minutes this second paper was primarily concerned with the ONS site rather than the main UKSA site or the various other sites associated with the UKSA - ESCoE, OSR site, digitalblog.ons, style.ons, datasciencecampus.ons and the analysis function site.

BSC are confused as to the value of having so many sites, particularly given the duplication of information across the various .ons domains. There are 9 sites in all, including a 'fast track' site devoted to recruitment of staff to the GSS which partly duplicates the analysis function site.

Website Transformation Dashboards (I)

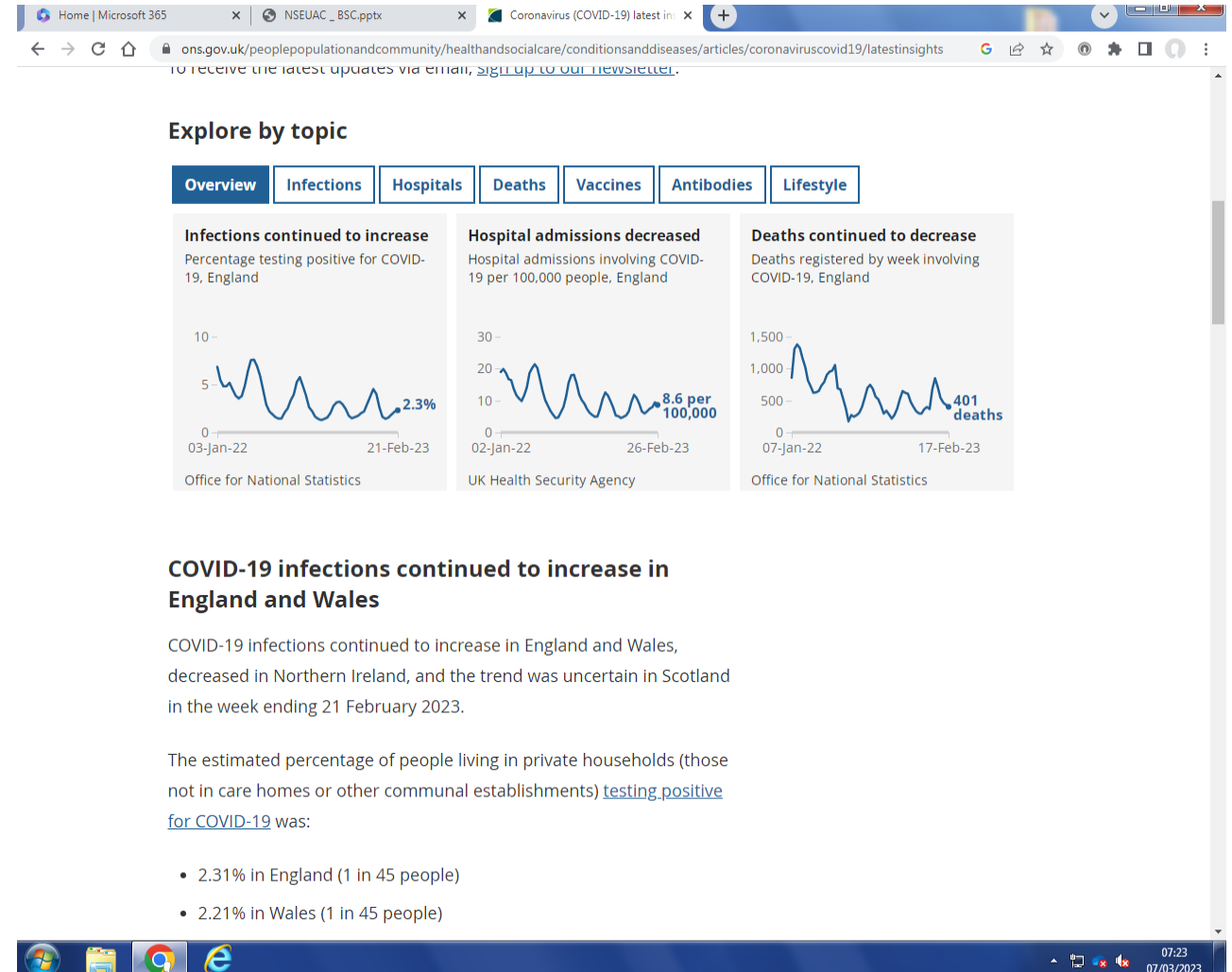
The picture to the right is a screen shot of the main dashboard as at a date of last November – the current (January) figure for CPIH inflation is 8.8%.

BSC do not consider this dashboard to be helpful at the time when the Bank of England and the Treasury actually use CPI as the usual inflation measure.



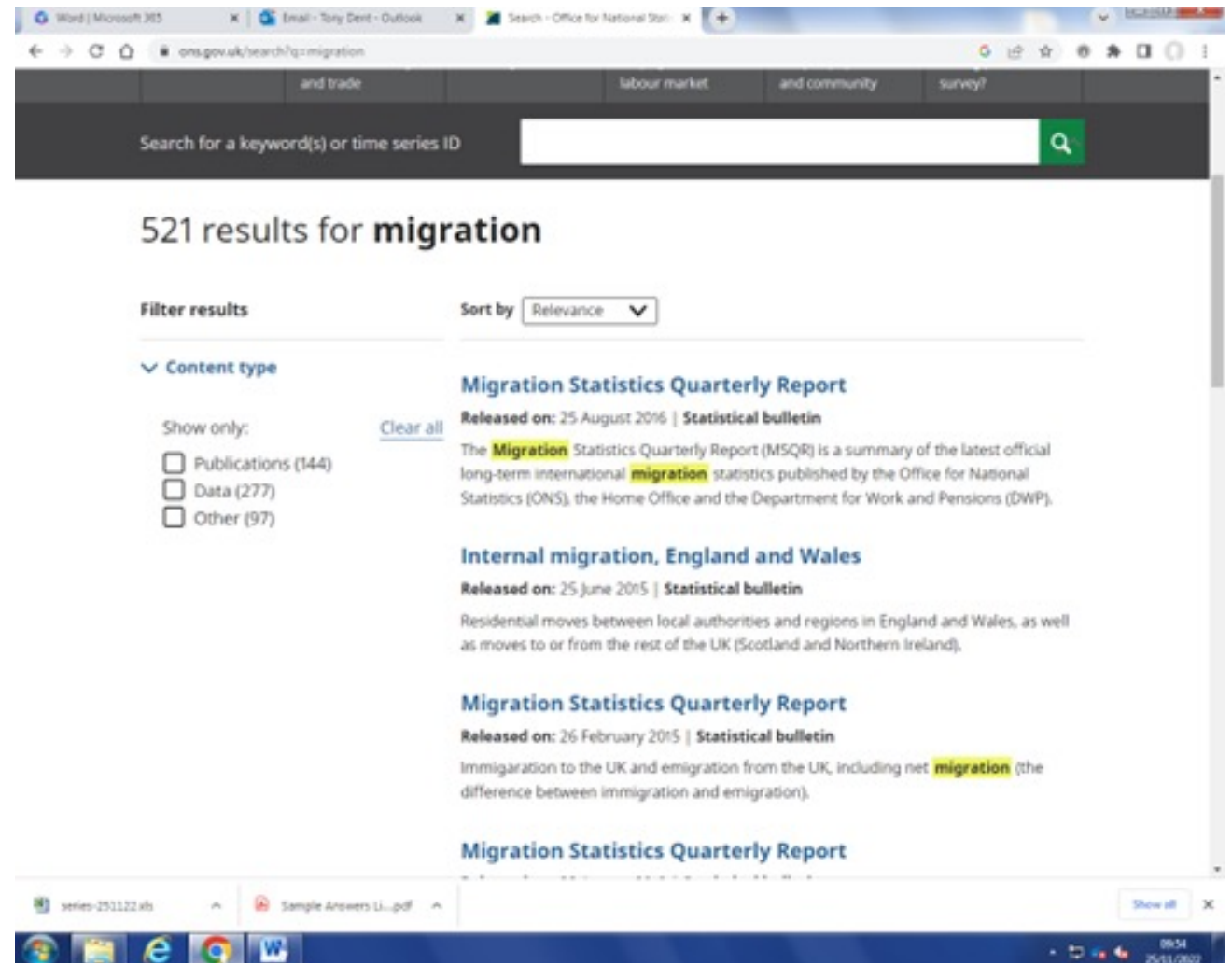
Website Transformation Dashboards (II)

Why does the dashboard on the right not use the same form of statistic (% of population) for both the infection rate and the rate of admission to hospital? That would facilitate better understanding of the relationship.



Website Transformation?

Despite all the recent work there has been no effort to improve the search function. Last November I was seeking more information on the migration data with results as indicated on the right!

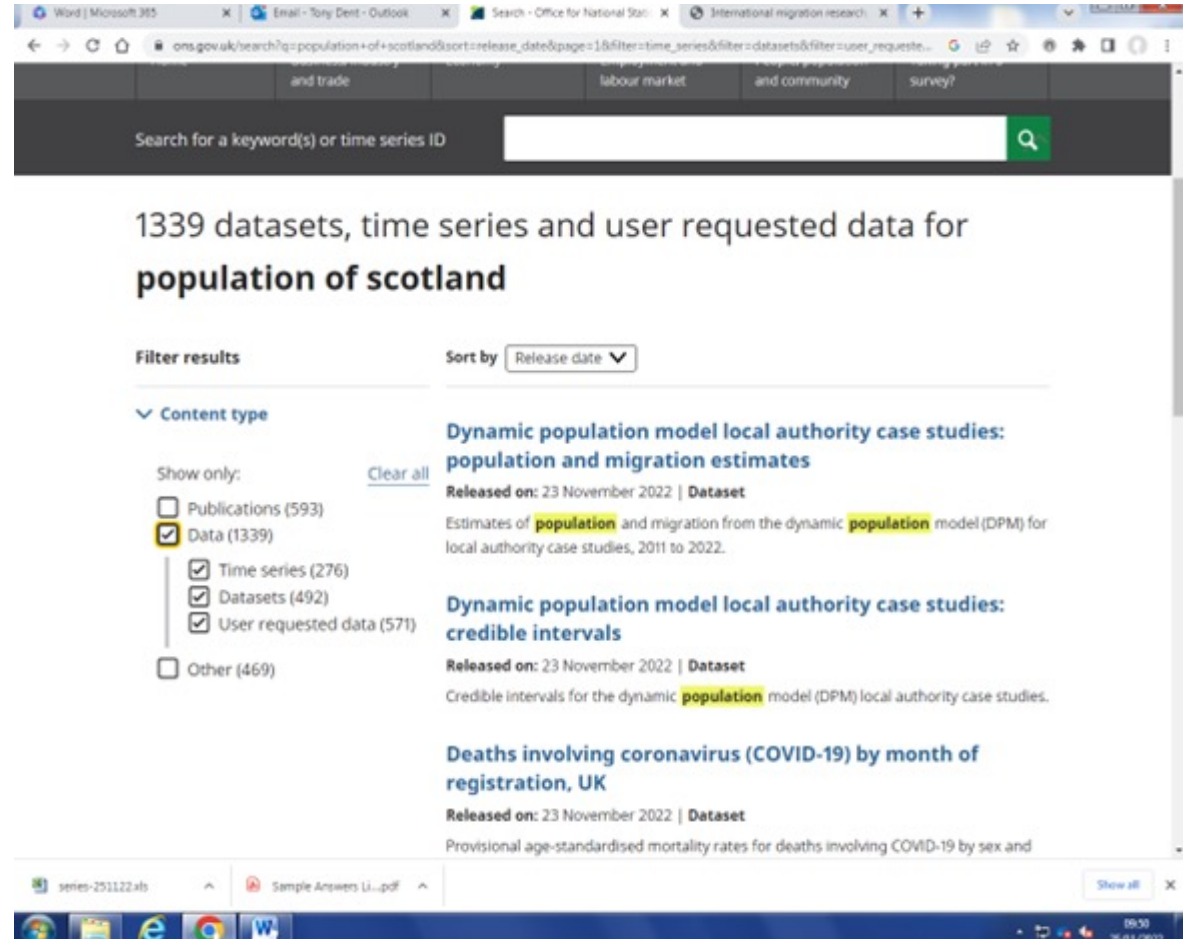


Website Transformation?

Last November I was also interested to compare the figure for the UK population of 67.081,000 (as given on the main dashboard) with the figure available from data at the time of the 2021 census for England and Wales:

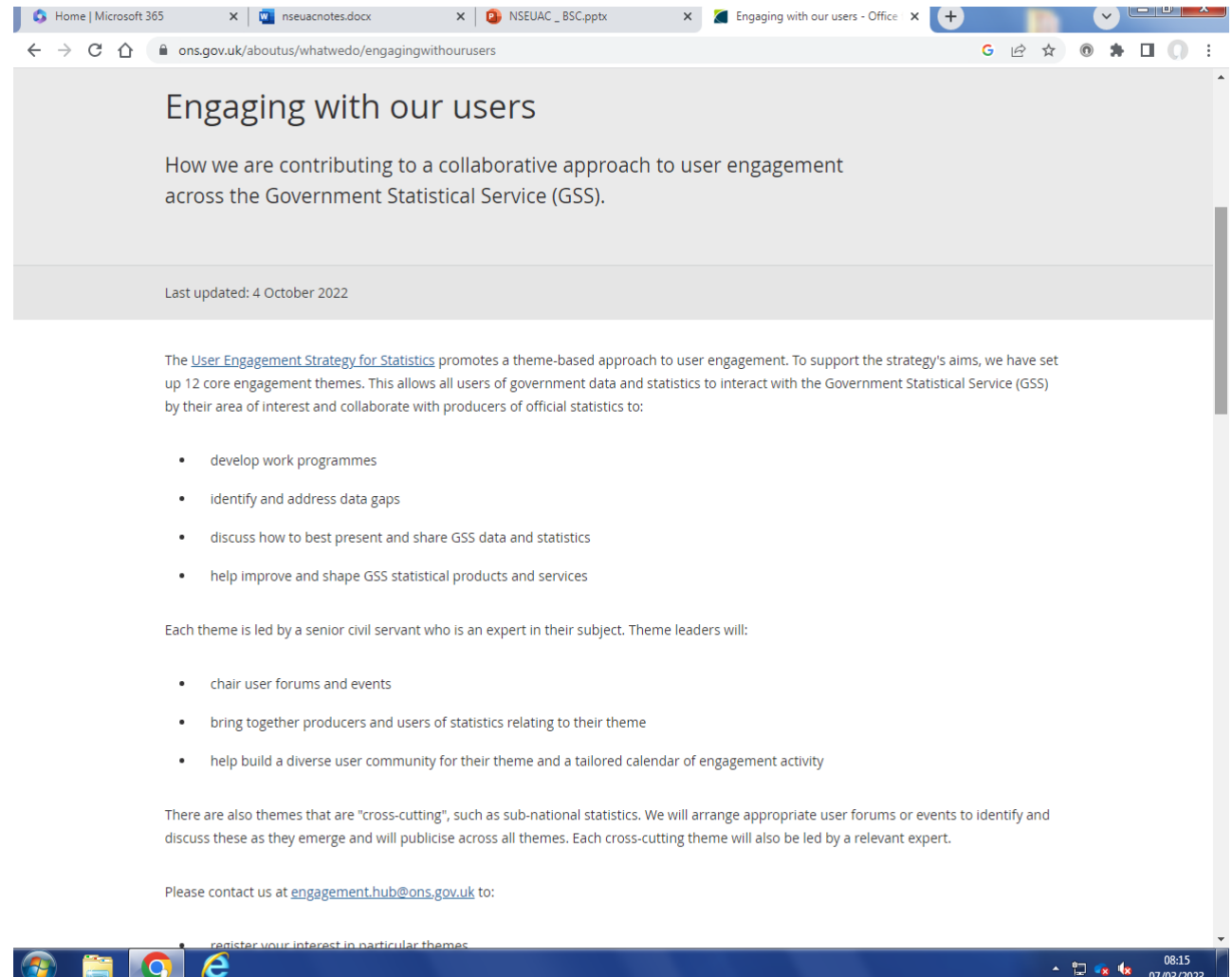
On Census Day, 21 March 2021, the size of the usual resident population in England and Wales was 59,597,300 (56,489,800 in England and 3,107,500 in Wales); this was the largest population ever recorded through a census in England and Wales.

The searches for the population of Scotland failed to assist me to complete my enquiry.



User Engagement Strategy (I)

At the July meeting Owen Brace provided an overview of the approach to theme-based user engagement and this was subsequently announced on the ONS website on 4th October 2022 as shown on this screenshot.



User Engagement Strategy (II)

The strategy referred to on the previous ONS web page is as described on the right. This was produced in February 2021 and the subsequent conversations with me, Mike Hughes and Paul Allin that took place throughout 2021 had not had any influence on that strategy.

Nor indeed had we succeeded in having any real influence on the formation of this committee.

Home | Microsoft 365 | Email - Tony Dent - Outlook | User engagement strategy for st: x

analysisfunction.civilservice.gov.uk/policy-store/user-engagement-strategy-for-statistics-ensuring-official-statistics-meet-societys-need/

Government Analysis Function > Guidance hub > User engagement strategy for statistics – ensuring official statistics meet society's needs

User engagement strategy for statistics – ensuring official statistics meet society's needs

Publication date: 11 February 2021

Owner: Good Practice Team

Who this is for: Producers of official statistics

Type: Strategy

Contact: GSSHelp@statistics.gov.uk

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Table of contents

- 1. [Summary](#)
- 2. [Foreword](#)
- 3. [What we want to achieve](#)
- 4. [Why user engagement is important](#)
- 5. [Our vision](#)
- 6. [Goal one: Collaboration](#)
- 7. [Goal two: Capability](#)
- 8. [Goal three: Culture](#)
- 9. [Monitoring and measuring success](#)
- 10. [Background information and glossary](#)
- 11. [Delivery plan](#)

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Related

- [User engagement guidance](#)
Guidance hub
- [GSS user engagement case studies](#)
- [Improving user engagement for official statistics](#)
Guidance hub

09/03/2023 10:31

Inclusive Data Taskforce (IDTF) and Inclusive Data.

Please excuse my desire to conflate two separate contributions in this way. I do so because I feel that there would be benefit in the UKSA treating them as two sides of the same coin.

With regard to the Taskforce itself we have no comments, it is clearly an important initiative but as with other activities within UKSA one wonders about duplication of activities with other groups (e.g. localism).

Encouraging users of all kinds to encourage participation in surveys helps to ensure that the results are more representative and therefore more reliable. BSC believe that the UKSA should use advertising to encourage participation in surveys and link such participation more directly with the value of results.

Office for Statistics Regulation

As stated on slide 5, BSC had significant dealings with the OSR last year including correspondence with Ms. Anna Price. That correspondence resulted from BSC's dis-satisfaction with some details of the Covid-19 Infection Survey and the manner in which it had been reviewed by the OSR. As a result the OSR have commissioned Professor Patrick Sturges to investigate the matter and we wait for his report.

Meanwhile the minute of the discussion following Ms. Price's report last December stated: *"Members discussed whether the use of official statistics was improving. OSR casework had increased in recent years, indicating that more people were aware of the OSR and where to go to highlight concerns, which therefore enhanced trustworthiness and people challenging misuse of statistics."*

BSC are less sure that such a positive spin can be placed upon the increased workload of the OSR. It is possible that the increased volume of statistics produced by the ONS are increasing the work load of the OSR, particularly because there appears to be a lack of effective quality control for some elements of the work.

Summary

- IDS (SRS) should provide users with easier access to anonymised individual data records provided users register to abide by the code of practice. Almost all potential users are registered with the ICO and already committed to ensuring lawful processing, fines should serve as an additional incentive for ensuring the maintenance of privacy.
- Quick gains for user engagement can be achieved by rationalising the website estate and providing a more effective search function.
- The NSEUAC could benefit from more informative minutes and one or two genuine user representatives.
- The OSR needs more resources to do its job properly.
- UKSA should advertise the benefits to society of participation in research to provide more accurate data for decisions - *your country needs YOU!*

Other Observations

- UKSA often uses third party contracts as a reason for not releasing information to users, especially when requests are made under the freedom of information act. For example it was claimed by the CIS team that information BSC sought was the intellectual property of IQVIA and they were therefore unable to provide it - this was inaccurate. Presently DEFRA is using a similar excuse for not enabling Professor Ian Plewis of University of Manchester to access 3 of their agricultural surveys on the SRS.
- The minutes of the December meeting noted that *“Members agreed that papers for the National Statistician’s Expert User Advisory Committee (NSEUAC) would be published on the UK Statistics Authority Website going forward.”* That has still to be implemented as have other suggestions such as the July note that: *“All members to suggest a user engagement issue of concern. Secretariat to collate into a document for the December NSEUAC meeting”*.
- More attention should be paid to the potential for bias created by increasing use of web-based surveys rather than face to face data collection.
- The [complaints](#) policy states that “summary of ONS complaints and outcomes will be published in the [UK Statistics Authority Annual Report](#).” It isn’t.
- Finally, during my investigation of migration last November I also reviewed the [mid-year estimates](#) to find that it specified the Q3 2022 UK population figure was estimated at 67,658,000 – almost 600,000 persons more than stated on the dashboard as shown on chart 13. It would be interesting to understand the origin of the discrepancy and which is the official figure.

Conclusion – User Engagement

It is difficult to understand what the role of NSEUAC is from a review of the minutes. In particular, how does it represent users? That was a core role we had envisaged when ‘engaging’ with the ONS throughout 2021 and, we believe, it was the role envisaged by PACAC in 2019.

Of course there has been no public notification of the existence of this committee, the naming of which indicates that the committee belongs to the National Statistician and not to users.

Beyond that there remains the ambiguity introduced by the word ‘expert’ - is the committee *‘for experts’* or *‘of experts’*?

To quote from an email I received on 6th November 2021:

*“Looks like a strategy to divide and conquer - and keep control. They control who is on the groups and what they discuss, and deal with the “coordination”. Nothing about **independent secretariat, meetings in public, any formal role of presenting papers, links to the board, etc**”*

How are users with problems expected to contact this committee? Do we believe there are no serious problems? Even if that were the case, the committee should offer better representation of user interests than it presently does, including a means for users to communicate directly with it.