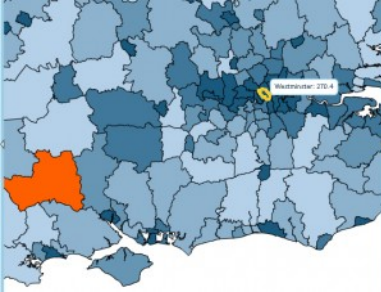


The best data is free data

Thu, Oct 29, 2009 | Posted by [Tamsin Hemingray](#)

I'm currently researching some data for a budgeting and savings planning calculator for one of our clients, and during the course of my research, I've been struck once again by the wealth of free data that is available to every citizen in the UK at the click of a few links.



As digital marketers I'm sure none of us need to be told about the power that intelligently analysed and appropriately presented data hold. After all, where would our businesses be without web [analytics](#)? But did you know that there are huge, shimmering pools of astoundingly robust and statistically accurate data sitting on government servers just waiting for intelligent minds to dive in? And all for free?

Here are my two top sources of free, public data - so why not hold your nose and take the plunge?

[Office for National Statistics](#)

This is a great starting point for finding out if the government is collecting the kind of information you are looking for. The ONS publishes data from most of the Government departments and various related bodies, committees and associations. There are lots of publications here - from hard data tables (which can be exported to .xls format very easily) to snappily-written press releases summarising key trends and information soundbites. Want to know how much people in the UK are earning - and what impact the recession has had on those earning? [The information is here](#). Interested in what people are spending their hard-earned cash on? [That's here too](#). Interested in the most popular first names in the UK? [Click here](#).

The trick is to work out how to find what on earth it is you're looking for. The site's navigation leaves a little to be desired! If you have a bit of time and are not 100% certain what you're looking for I recommend using the left hand drop-down menu to browse by theme. If you get lost, or you're just in a rush, here's my top tip: [ring them up and ask them](#). The ONS operates a brilliant telephone enquiries service, and the people who answer can help you find what you're looking for in just a few clicks. Their number is: **+44 (0) 845 601 3034**. They can get you to the exact table of information in the exact PDF that you need. Another top tip - once you've found that table in the PDF, just click on it to download a .xls version of the data.

[Home Office/ Research, Development and Statistics \(RDS\)](#)

The Home office is the Government department which conducts the monumental British Crime Survey (and a number of related crime surveys as well as all the immigration and criminal justice related surveys that the Government regularly conducts). The BCS data is now updated quarterly and really is an

incredibly rich source of information down to a local borough level of just what kinds of dodgy things are going on in your neighbourhood. It's published by the Home Office directly so you won't find it on the ONS site.

The [Crime Mapping Tool](#) provides a really easy to understand visualisation of criminal activity across the country. Results can also be displayed in charts or data tables. As part of the [Power of Information Taskforce project](#), the Home Office is now publishing all data tables as they are available on a single page: www.homeoffice.gov.uk/data. If you can't find what you need, the [Freedom of Information Act means that you can email or telephone the Home Office's public inquiries team](#) and they must respond to your request within 20 working days. (I've tried this - and they do.)

And if you need someone to hold your hand and help you make sense of it all - or to help you fuse public data with your own to create a really useful new piece of functionality for your digital users - you know where to come. Just take a look at [the Household Economy Calculator we built for Cornhill](#) as part of an engagement and awareness campaign this time last year. This used national earning data from the ONS to help people calculate the hard cash value of all the little jobs they do in and around the home. The user-friendly way of presenting the data really captured people's imaginations. [One 'mummy blogger' commented on a post that another mum had written about the calculator](#): 'I have done the calculator and am wondering why I am not driving a Bentley rather than a Nissan Micra given the contribution I make to the household economy!'

Food for thought? Give us a shout if you want to talk about it some more.

IMAGE: Detail from the [Home Office's crime mapping tool](#)