



## CASE STUDY

# OFFICE FOR NATIONAL STATISTICS ROLLS OUT ONLINE RESEARCHER ACCREDITATION SERVICE USING OUTREACH

Equiniti Toplevel has worked closely with the ONS to develop a secure, online digital service capable of processing and tracking researcher and project applications, booking training and SRS safe rooms and managing existing research projects.





The Office for National Statistics (ONS) used the Outreach platform to create its Researcher Accreditation Scheme (RAS) online service which enables researchers to gain accreditation, training and project approval. It is envisaged that the service will also support third-party data processors in accordance with the Digital Economy Act 2017 under UK Government legislation. RAS entered public beta in February 2020, and is now accessible to 380 organisations and 3,500 researchers.

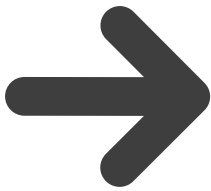
### ONS

ONS is the UK's largest independent producer of official statistics and is the national statistical institute. Responsible for the collection, analysis and dissemination of statistics about the UK's economy, society and population. ONS also provides access to secure de-identified unpublished data for statistical research that delivers a public good. Accredited or approved researchers working on accredited research, can access these data in the ONS Secure Research Service (SRS).

### THE RAS PROJECT

ONS initially sought a solution that would enable it to move from a paper-based application process with call centre support and some duplication in data entry to a secure online service. Two forms needed to be created together with complex approval processes. The researcher accreditation application form would capture individual details and information on the researcher's previous statistical research while the project accreditation application form would capture information on the researcher's organisation, the team working on the project and the datasets required, as well as project sponsors, ethical considerations, the intended outputs and publication intentions.

At the start of 2018, the ONS invited EQ Toplevel to demonstrate the capabilities of Outreach under its 48 Hour Challenge. This saw the rapid delivery of a fully working prototype, collaboratively built with ONS across two days at one of their offices, using the Outreach Open Design Studio. The Form Digitiser was used to demonstrate types of user input and build out screens and interfaces, while the Process Modeller showed how the approval processes could work. This involved routing forms and cases to specific parties at various points in the process, determining how long it could stay with them, and how timeouts and deadlines would be applied. For example, the accreditation form was channelled to the Researcher Support team then through two different levels of checking (by data provider/s and statistical support) before being returned to the Researcher Support team for final checks. Feedback loops can be included to enable questions to be submitted.



## A CHANGE OF PLAN

Following the 48 Hour Challenge, the produced prototype was then used to further enhance ONS's business case for moving forward with the building of the full digital service. ONS recognised that Outreach was an ideal fit for its requirements and committed to the solution in Q1 2018. They planned to take advantage of the low-code capabilities in Outreach to configure and test the solution in-house. However, further guidance on the Research powers under the Digital Economy Act (DEA), resulted in a more complex scope for RAS. As well as transitioning to an online service, ONS needed to scale up the service to support the accreditation processes involving other DEA data processors.

Following these changes, the ONS team realised it needed more assistance from EQ Toplevel. In addition to the case management, they needed to utilise Outreach's in-built booking functionality into the process to allow researchers to select and book a location and the day/time to undertake the SURE training course. It also needed to ensure it could access case data sets, as well as collate and pass project proposals to the Research Accreditation Panel. While the core functionality could be met using Outreach, the integration of these elements required some bespoke development.

The ONS team went back to EQ in March 2019, identified where it needed to focus resource and how this could be achieved using a co-located team. With both teams unified by the Agile approach, the project quickly ramped up, restructuring and revising the components needed to meet requirements, using Outreach's plug-in architecture to build reusable components.

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As a processor under the Digital Economy Act, we needed to support other data analytical platforms and accredit their researchers who would be using data on their platforms. Plus, we needed to make ONS data available for use on their platforms as well. Those requirements expanded the remit from the original 48 Hour Challenge, and we had to start thinking about how we could use Outreach components to fulfil all our obligations.

**Nick O'Donnell, Product Owner, SRS, ONS**

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While we were getting code delivered sprint by sprint, what we were missing was the testing, backward management, analysis and a coherent strategy. So, we increased the resource. The Equiniti Toplevel team, comprising a Delivery Manager, a Technical Lead, a Business Analyst, two Developers (one specialising in .NET code and one on Outreach configuration) and a Tester, then began working with us and were on site two days a week. That really paid off, so that within six months we had completed the GDS Alpha Service Assessment and had four private beta releases.

**Chris Harvey, Senior Delivery Manager, SRS, ONS**

**The new online version – the Researcher Accreditation Scheme (RAS) – was made available to 18 organisations and approximately 1,000 researchers in a private beta deployment.**

## OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES

Integration between all of the elements was the most pressing requirement both technically and in terms of the time taken to achieve this. Consequently, development needed to be streamlined to meet GDS service standards and this saw some hard decisions taken, such as the need to prioritise functionality over automation. This saw some of the procedures, such as change requests, designed to require manual approval by the Research Approval team, with the intention and flexibility to automate these at a later date.

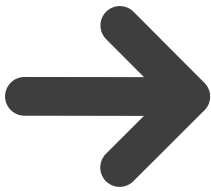
## THE BENEFITS

The new online version – the Researcher Accreditation Scheme (RAS) – was made available to 18 organisations and approximately 1,000 researchers in a private beta deployment. The service entered public beta in February 2020 and now accommodates more than 380 public and charitable organisations and is accessible to 3,500 researchers. Early feedback from researchers has been good. 18 out of 25 researchers who responded to a survey in March, said they thought the service was performing well. As a result of over 60 user testing sessions, the tracking of user journeys showed that most users found it easy to navigate the process.

The researchers will be able to use the online service to submit applications to request data held by ONS or the Northern Ireland Statistics and Regency Agency (NISRA). The expectation is that more data processors will come onboard as and when they gain accreditation under the Digital Economy Act (DEA). This will see the ONS then begin to administer applications on their behalf and provide access to their data services.

The ONS has already identified other elements it wishes to focus on into 2020-21. These include automating functionality, replacing a post-training survey with an Outreach-based assessment system and improving internal user functionality.





## THE FUTURE

Going forward, the ONS also stands to benefit from one of the main reasons it chose Outreach: its low code capabilities. During the project the team were able to reuse and repurpose functionality, saving them development costs. In the future, when changes need to be made, these can be carried out internally without the need to put in a change request to EQ Toplevel. The ONS can therefore manage the system independently and even host it themselves if they so choose.

Finally, the flexibility of the solution also promises future benefits. Outreach can read from, and write to, multiple sources and engines, enabling it to connect to internal databases and systems to work with data through various channels. Its legislative obligations could well help the ONS attract further external investment in the future, such as funding from the UK Research Institute or Admin Data Research Partnership. This means that as the service grows it is likely to help boost investment in the ONS.

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The shift from a paper to an online application process will allow the ONS to process researcher and project applications more effectively than previously possible. This will enable the existing small ONS support team, who provide online, telephone and email support as well as managing back-office processes, to operate far more efficiently. It will also free up time to provide support for research project activity. One of the motivations for developing the RAS was to improve the transparency of the accreditation processes. Researchers highlighted that they were unable to track their applications and we were very keen to address this. Researchers can now see live status updates on their applications and requests.

**Nick O'Donnell, Product Owner, SRS, ONS**

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Paper based processes are so resource intensive. In addition to the time it takes to process the forms by members of staff there's also the support mechanisms to consider. We needed to provide call centre staff to man a helpline, for instance. Bringing the accreditation service online has significantly reduced that, effectively creating a near self-service process.

**Chris Harvey, Senior Delivery Manager, SRS, ONS**

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The registration process can be completed in under an hour, but if the user needs more time they can pause the application. The backend processes involved in approving the application can again happen pretty quickly i.e. within a day. That's incredibly quick compared to the paper-based application which took around two weeks. As soon as the initial application is approved the user can book onto a training course which run around two or three times a month and then they're accredited.

**Chris Harvey, Senior Delivery Manager, SRS, ONS**

# THE RESULTS

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**01**

**48 Hour Challenge** used to help justify business case

**02**

**Reduced dependency** on paper-based processes and support

**03**

Migration of **18** organisations and **1,000** researchers (with future support for 380 organisations and 3,500 researchers)

**04**

Accreditation processing **time cut from two weeks to one day**

**05**

**Secure access** to DEA third-party data processors and their platforms as and when they are accredited

**06**

**Improved user experience** for existing and new applicants

**07**

**Successful delivery** of a private beta service in approximately eight months with a public beta service on track and delivered within 12 months



## **ONS** CASE STUDY

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