Content Design Insights

**Background**

The Office for Statistics Regulation, and UKSA are increasingly promoting the importance of how we communicate messages in statistical publications well to users. Consideration of content design is embedded within professional skills expected of statisticians, eg the ‘Value’ pillar from the code of practice states we should ‘communicate effectively with the widest possible audience [whilst presenting information] in a clear, unambiguous way that supports and promotes use by all types of users’.

As part of moving statistical publications onto the Education Explore Statistics (EES) platform publication teams have had to re-consider design and content of their publications to fit into the new system. DfE have been at the forefront of changing how users consume their statistics through the development of our new EES platform. Publication content now migrated to the EES platform has varied in terms of length and style. The Central Statistics Support Unit (CSSU) in DfE wanted to continue to improve best practice, develop guidance and support greater consistency in how publications are presented and how well narrative is communicated through the new platform.

CSSU set up content design scrums so statisticians could seek feedback from volunteers within the wider statistical community less/unfamiliar with their publication around content design. The scrums use best practice guidance in the form of a checker put together specially for use in both the scrums and also for teams to embed into their project cycles to continuous review and reflect on potential improvements. This checker is located within the EES guidance area and continues to be kept updated as best practice evolves.

**Insights from scrums**

The scrums were initially trialled in DISD (Dec 2020-March 2021 Phase 1), before being offered across DISD and trialled beyond DISD in DfE (March-July 2021 Phase 2) and then became a standard offer across the department from Sep 2021. Insight gleaned has always been ploughed back into scrums and the best practice guidance checker. **However, although publication leads will become more familiar with the scrums and checker as we continue to offer this across the department, we are aware that senior leaders who sign off publications also need to be as aware.**  Therefore, we have highlighted some of the common issues to be aware of below and would also encourage all to consider attending one or more of the scrums.

We have run lots of scrums and these are common issues listed below which particularly challenge teams, **how can publication leads make sure really good practice is embedded at the point of signoff?**

* Firstly, one of the key lessons out of the scrums is that content design is more of an art form than science – with exposure/modelling helping to develop skills beyond the tick box checker. CSSU offer the opportunity of volunteering to participate in scrums. We also have a video of a scum in the content design section in the EES guidance area, to support teams in experiencing and thinking through content design.
* Another area of consideration is awareness around use and users of statistics. Specifically, awareness and use of EES and Gov.UK analytics, and knowledge around user types (beyond internal customers) and why people interact with the statistics. Understanding users and their needs will help best shape your release and content.

The following are listed as questions, but are areas which particularly come through which prompt change/thought…

* What’s the story? – why may numbers be higher, lower, the same and why does this matter? What are your key lines for the publication – are these then picked up or even better lifted and used by the media? Is the most important story in the summary? Are you highlighting changes over the most relevant timeframe ie not just defaulting to the last year?
* Are the headline figures those others would pick out? Are there new or different trends/stories coming out of this year to highlight etc? Can you understand the scale of change – is it obvious what this tells you/that this is important - how? Eg 29% x in England – is this high/low, how does this compare with previously?
* Accessibility: Length (sentences, summary, titles, subtitles, table labels…[table names]) are you focussed on the key points?; Text Font (bold, italics).
* Is terminology clear enough…not just to familiar readers but those less familiar with the subject area?
* Do sections aid navigation? Do they work well against what people are looking for (EES analytics)? How long are people spending on the publication? How does this reflect against the section lengths/length of the publication?
* Your title and supporting information, does this assist navigation?
  + Look at your Gov.UK supporting information, are you making best use of your up to 181 characters, is the information front loaded with key words people may search/key to your publication near the start, to help maximise hits and maximise users finding the statistics through search engines?
  + What does your title/supporting information mean to unfamiliar users? Is the title best fit for purpose?
  + What are users journeys to and from your statistics? Are people going to the right publication/link first time? If not, are you cross-linking/signposting relevant publications and does this make sense (user based not necessarily what we may first think of)?
* Is your title/opening text and supportive information clear on geography eg England only.
* How easy is it to lift out charts/graphs and ensure these make sense? Are you using active titles? Are the footnotes at the right level versus information in the methodology? Are you being consistent throughout your publication eg are specific colour hues consistent in their meaning eg year 10 pupils etc, are labels consistent. Are colour tints chosen clear? What messages are you are trying to convey across the publication and where makes sense to use visual elements. Be clear when designing visual elements what the message is you are wanting to show this time in the publication, and consider chart type and orientation.
* Consistency (% versus number use, section running orders, table/chart tabs, totals)
* Are users easily able to locate the right table first time? Are you using release pages for presentation tables where the main features can also be described in sentences, and using featured tables functionality for reference tables? Have you tested how easy it is to make tables from your data using the table builder? [Good structure and labelling of data can make it much easier]
* Within pre release rules get someone less familiar with your publication to proof read (focussing on content/readability rather than fact checking), has content design been scrutinised/signed off as part of pre publication checks?
* Finally, is your team aware of and using the content design best practice checker? Is this being embedded within project cycles to

consider and reflect on elements throughout?

**Further information**

To discuss any of the above or for further information about future scrums, please contact Heather Brown.