# Geodemographics Knowledge Base

# Geodemographics Blog

**Heather Savory: Holding back public sector efficiency and business innovation - OS Licensing**

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Public sector data from the Ordnance Survey (OS) ([click here](http://www.geodemographics.org.uk/datasources#mrs-item-3695) for more information) is a high quality and essential national resource which underpins a multitude of activities, fostering both social benefit and economic growth.

The Open Data User Group (ODUG) ([click here](http://www.geodemographics.org.uk/opendata#mrs-item-13116) for more information) continues to push forward evidence that OS’s restrictive licencing and outdated business model is a fundamental barrier to maximising the beneficial use of publicly owned data in Great Britain.

While the OS has opened up some Open Data (with government funding) the level of detail in these datasets is inadequate to support many digital products and services. For example the Environment Agency will open up its flood data very soon. OS Open Data will only enable an analysis which says ‘the average depth of flooding in a postcode area will be x.x m’. Not much help when adjacent streets will be flooded and dry. Where exactly will the sandbags be needed?

The government also funds the OS Public Sector Mapping Agreement (PSMA) ([click here](http://www.geodemographics.org.uk/opendata#mrs-item-13076) for more information) –whose title naively implies to the layperson that public sector organisations can use national mapping data as they wish. Not so. Under the PSMA bodies releasing crucially important datasets are restricted if the data is deemed by OS to be ‘derived data’ – in simple terms data referenced by or linked to a co-ordinate which might have been provided by OS – so practically all datasets. This mechanism is used to protect OS’s outdated business model and allows them to micro-manage the market in which they and their commercial partners ‘compete’.

Currently, Local Authorities have to seek an individual exemption from OS for each and every dataset they wish to release. A recent project, funded by the Release of Data Fund ([click here](http://www.geodemographics.org.uk/opendata#mrs-item-13086) for more information), evidences the burden of this in stark relief. The project encourages the delivery of three sets of local data, each to an agreed schema, to show how national views of local data can quickly and easily be pulled together as Open Data. We selected three public data themes, on a demand-led basis: Public Toilets, basic Planning Information and Local Licensed Premises data. Sadly, many participating authorities cannot even release the location of their public loos, because they each need an individual derived-data exemption from the OS. So we can know how many loos there are – but not where they are. This is ludicrous!

Since 2012 ODUG has asked OS to streamline their derived data licensing restrictions. If one authority is granted an exemption for particular type of data – then why not all authorities? Why does OS want to process over 300 requests for the same thing in different localities? It is inefficient, for them and for the public sector as a whole.

But what we really need is for the government to push OS to open up most of, or all of its data and remove the restrictions it places on open competition. OS and its commercial partners should use their talent and resources to add value developing and delivering products and services in an open and fair market, not hold public service efficiency and innovation back through a licensing regime rife with complexity, contradiction and ambiguity. OS should focus on the science where it is a world-leading organisation, compete on a level playing field where it can add value and let the UK data sector roll forth unfettered.

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For further information on ODUG and the available datasets click [here](http://www.geodemographics.org.uk/opendata#mrs-item-13096). Their blog can be accessed by clicking [here](http://www.geodemographics.org.uk/opendata#mrs-item-13106).

Heather Savory is Chair of the Open Data User Group and will be presenting at our ‘Harnessing Open Data’ seminar on Wednesday 5th November – click [*here*](https://www.mrs.org.uk/event/course/2436) for further details.