CASE STUDY
LANCASTER UNIVERSITY FUTURE PLACES CENTRE

Lancaster University

The Future Places Centre: Using data and analysis to reshape Future Places

CACI | DO AMAZING THINGS WITH DATA

Highlights

- Acorn and wellbeing data at postcode level
- Benchmarking and impact measurement
- Robust, current geodemographic insight
- Revealing local characteristics and opportunities
- An objective grounding for wide-ranging research

About Lancaster University Future Places Centre

A top 15 university in the three major UK league tables, Lancaster is highly ranked in international league tables such as the QS World Rankings. It's also a leader in research.

The Future Places Centre (FPC) builds on Lancaster University's pioneering projects on pervasive computing, the Internet of Things (the IoT) and the natural environment, on 'futures thinking' and data science. Funded by the EPSRC (Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council) the FPC works to create a portfolio of applied research endeavours that help the University and the communities it serves better understand the places in which they exist. FPC's partners in the north-west region include local government and public health organisations, transport and housing groups, technology service providers and a wildlife charity.

The FPC has defined three themes to focus its work. The natural environment addresses the ecology of the local area and how the public relates to it. The built environment supports regional development plans, including infrastructure and sustainability. Healthy living explores how places shape the people's way of living and influence the health of the local community.

The need for data

Creating an objective benchmark

Professor Richard Harper is Co-Director of the Institute for Social Futures at Lancaster University. He explains: “We need research data to help energise the change agenda in the North West for space and place. We want data both for measurement and to help us reimagine the environment and community and see things differently. It’s a broad remit.”

Senior Research Associate and Data scientist Jan Hollinshead had used CACI data in previous commercial roles. She approached CACI to talk about how the data might be applied in the context of academic research. “We’re looking at how to segment the human population, so profiling data for the community seemed really relevant. We decided to take the CACI data for a year, to see whether it delivered value for our projects.”

Using objective data to challenge assumptions

Richard says, "We've used the data as a resource that brings together sociodemographic information to categorise the communities around Morecambe Bay. Because our project is about making changes over a five-year period, it provides an essential baseline measure.

"We've also used it to challenge assumptions about the characteristics and economy of towns and sociodemographic groups around the Bay. This can help us focus more effectively and objectively on the most pressing issues and opportunities to investigate.

"An example is that many people perceive Morecambe as a decaying Victorian town, but in some parts and in some respects, it could be considered well-to-do in many of its suburbs. Lancaster, meanwhile, could be seen as more economically disadvantaged in some areas and some dimensions. With this objective data, we can help the local council to identify their benchmark starting point before developing or investing in community initiatives."

Acorn helps the Future Places Centre team to understand the demographics of residents and communities in focus project areas, so they can attract a diverse range of people to those areas.

Applying the data in practice to improve regional and community initiatives

"Our programmes are funded to invest in research and to use it collaboratively with partners to get the best value from it. We're sharing insight from CACI's data with the local councils, as well as charitable projects."

Jan adds, "A good example is Blueprint for Recovery - large postcode lottery project dealing with loneliness and isolation post-Covid. By sharing our benchmark analyses of demographics of different towns, they can focus their services and outreach in the places where there's most need, as well as having a baseline to measure the impact of their work. Clustering attitudinal information helps us to work out how people feel about things like social isolation and going outdoors."

"We're also using it to inform our partners about attitudes and access to digital in the Bay. Working with our partners, we developed a digitally mediated walking trail around Lancaster – CACI's data helped us know the kinds of people we were trying to reach. It showed that there was a need for a non-digital, paper leaflet as well."

The benefits and potential

Sharing accessible insight with more partners

"This data is colouring in what we know about the local population. It means we can define things better and more sharply," says Jan. "It's easy to talk about data in spreadsheets, but that doesn't mean anything until people see it related to places they know on a map. That's a big plus for us, with our remit to share the data widely with a range of audiences."

Richard agrees. "CACI's data is workable and tractable – we can visualise it powerfully and link it with digital maps. For instance, we've showed in pie charts that for people in Morecambe, ill health is often linked to being older, whereas in Barrow, more young people are unhealthy, which indicates different causes and circumstances."

"Another advantage is that we can show that the data is objective, because it's from a professional third party. A lot of our partners may have been using their own data, which doesn't always give them the full context or range."

The FPC has extended its agreement for the Acorn data for the entire five-year duration of the Future Places project. There's potential to work with more partners in the charity and public sectors, sharing valuable insight about the communities they serve.

"The CACI data gives us direct insight, but it also usefully highlights what isn't there and where we need to build up more data and research. It's an important anchor," Richard concludes.

CACI's data is an objective third party resource that gives clear socio-demographic profiling linked to maps – it's an invaluable tool for us and our partners in the Future Places Centre. It's a trusted baseline that helps us see where we need to create more specialised research for particular project requirements. Overall, it's helping us identify issues and opportunities that will make our region healthier and more sustainable over the coming five years.

Professor Richard Harper, Co-Director
of the Institute for Social Futures at Lancaster University

To find out more about how CACI can help you support your organisation, please get in touch:

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