Please note: Steering Board papers are published to support openness and transparency. These papers may contain draft content and proposals that are subject to discussion, review and approval. Publication does not indicate endorsement, agreement, or adoption as policy.

---

iStandUK and Open Referral UK (ORUK) Issues and Opportunities September 2026.

revision	on	by	notes
1	03/09/2026	Paul Davidson, iStandUK	1st draft
2	04/09/2026	Paul D	Taking on feedback
3	05/10/2026	Paul D	Further feedback

About **1**
Background **1**
A Vision for Open Referral UK **2**
ORUK today **3**
Current Deployments **3**
The ORUK Standard **4**
The ORUK Validator 4
Content 5
Recommendations 5
Pilots 5
A playbook 5
Conformance Testing 5
Update the Standard 6
Tagging 6
Content 6
ORUK Engagement Team 6
Component Architecture 6

About

This is an iStandUK briefing to highlight issues and opportunities with the Open Referral UK data standard, and to recommend actions to achieve a vision.

Background

Open Referral UK is the open standard for interchanging information about local public and voluntary services, so that a resident, a GP, a social worker or a helpline can find the same accurate answer wherever they look.

The Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government passed the stewardship of the standard to iStandUK from April 2026.

iStandUK has examined the standard itself, the supporting material and tools, and each directory published against it, to look for issues that could block achieving an ambitious and impactful vision.

See iStandUK and Open Referral UK | iStand UK

A Vision for Open Referral UK

iStandUK are working to achieve

- councils and public sector bodies each publishing an ORUK feed
- in a way that can be aggregated for …
    - a locality / region / nation
    - a topic / audience
- of high-quality assured service information
- as a single-version-of-the-truth
- empowering many consumers such as
    - residents finding services that meet their needs
    - link workers making referrals
    - commissioners building capacity and resilience

Conversely, if the aim was simply to see individual councils publishing a ‘feed’ that was only consumed at their own channels, then there would be considerably less value in a common standard. It is the standard that powers the vision, allowing data to be blended and queried together, and driving innovation in a supplier market of conformant products and services.

The iStandUK visioning workshop in March 2026, considered the question

What better outcomes are achieved when we share high-quality, standards-based service information?

… and drew out themes of

- Better Service Discovery
- Coordinated Service Pathways for Better Citizen Journey
- Remove Geographical Boundaries & Inequity
- The Right Support at the Right Time
- Sustainable, Empowered & Effective VCFSE sector
- Reducing the Cost of Public Services
- Using Data & Analytics Effectively to Support Better Decision Making
- Evaluation of services driving accountability, improvements & trust
- Common UK Digital Data Architecture
- Enabled Innovation & Constructive Disruption

This vision will not come about organically; simply publishing a data standard is not enough. We will need to provide guidance and leadership to enable each participant to play their part, towards a joined up set of high quality service data.

MHCLG has asked us to support the adoption of ORUK across 100+ councils, as a tipping point where the rest will naturally follow. These local feeds will be the source of service information to their residents covering

- Social Care, Families, SEND Local Offer
- Housing Advice and Homelessness Prevention
- Public Health and Wellbeing
- Welfare Assistance and Crisis Support
- Social prescribing and community assets

ORUK today

Current Deployments

The Open Referral UK web site, provides a Directory of Deployed Feeds where public/voluntary sector organisations have registered their ORUK feed with the web site. We have examined the 12 feeds that have been submitted to and pass the existing compliance checks, and can summarise what we find as …

scope	No feed contains more than about a third of the fields that the standard provides.

quality	Some inconsistencies appear in service data, that could be discovered and fixed; there are examples where ● paid sessions are flagged as free ● postcodes are largely absent from venue addresses (this could be a genuine licensing constraint) ● email addresses and website addresses are broken
joins	The standard has features to 'tag' each Service with one or more 'Terms' so that Services of the same type can be queried and listed together. We find most feeds use their own local lists of terms to do the tagging, which will struggle to join-up and be listed / queried with other feeds. There is value in each feed having their own very local list of terms, but they should be complemented (or mapped) with a common set of terms to support joins across many feeds.
functionality	No feed implements all of the 'calls' defined in the standard. For example ● **Taxonomies.** The standard includes a 'call' to list the terms that have been used across a feed, to tag Services. This allows a Service Finder app to connect to any feed, and give a user a list of service types to choose from as a part of making a query. We have not found a feed that implements that 'call' which suggests that current feeds are only being used by web sites and apps that they have a direct relationship with, and therefore already know the tags being used.

Clearly, 12 deployments is some way from the 100+ target, so we have an opportunity to profile the leadership to bring forward guidance and support services to ensure that all feeds meet a minimum level for scope, quality, functionality and join-up-ability.

The ORUK Standard

The UK variant of Open Referral is derived from the international Open Referral standard which is at version 3.3.

For the UK, we support
- ORUK version 1.0
- ORUK version 3.0

… which are subsets of their international counterparts such that some fields have not been considered necessary for the UK versions.

The international version is therefore ahead of the UK variant which may contain features and fixes that would be useful.

We also find that some of the fields that have been removed from the UK version cause difficulty in representing some data such as

- opening hours
    - bank holidays
    - time limited services

Other standards that ORUK needs to co-exist with such as Open Active, Schema.org do have these features which will cause data to be lost if translated between these formats.

Similarly, this international standard makes extensive use of internal identifiers (as UUIDs) to link Services, Organisations, Venues and so on. However, these internal identifiers are unreliable as a way to reference information from external sources, or across aggregations. We would like to update the UK variant of the standard to comply with the UK Government standard for persistent identifiers.

UK Government currently lists ORUK as an endorsed standard; to

- Record and share information about public services in local authorities

This is an unhelpful title as it restricts it to Local Government, and it appears to limit the scope of content, to Local Government serves. That actual content of the page is more helpful in saying

- … local councils, government organisations and voluntary bodies

The ORUK Validator

The Open Referral UK web site, provides a Validator facility whereby the URL of the endpoint of any feed can be entered, and a report produced listing errors and warnings as to its conformance to the claimed standard. This gives confidence to publishers, and software suppliers, that their solutions comply with the data standard.

The validator checks that a feed meets the technical checks for fieldnames, datatypes and so on, but that does not necessarily mean that the feed is suitable to enable business benefits, in that

- some key data can be missing, although required fields are populated
- some key web methods can be missing, because the validator only warns on the absence of some web methods rather than reporting their absence as errors

The validator is an online feature , and therefore checks only the first 50 random service entries, so that the process completes in time to give a page of results to the web user.

Content

Councils typically collect, and assure, most of their Service Directory entries themselves, to cover

- their own services
- what they know about other partner public sector bodies
- VCSFE (Voluntary, Community, Faith, and Social Enterprise) sector.
    - which typically scales to 1000s of services

Despite these efforts, there are often

- gaps - local services from other agencies (say the NHS - find a pharmacy)
- duplication across councils - where neighboring councils are separately describing the same cross border service
- repetition - national level services (say the Samaritans hotline)

iStandUK recently ran a workshop where 60+ delegates came together to share their pain and frustrations in trying to incorporate these, so that their local residents can have one place to go to find out about the services that can support their needs.

Recommendations

Pilots

- Learn from the MHCLG funded pilots at
    - Greater Manchester
    - Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole

A playbook

- Plain guidance on what a good feed contains, what may lawfully be published, how to ‘tag’ and to what scheme(s); how to test before going live.

Conformance Testing

- Update the Validator or provide an additional tool to test for the application of the Playbook, not just compliance to the standard

Update the Standard

- Review features in the latest version of the international standard, and consult on those that have merit for the UK.

- Propose and consult on updates to the standard as
    - updates to version 3
    - a new version 4

- Re-assessment by the GDS Data Standards Authority to confirm that ORUK is the Government recommended standard for sharing service directories for all UK public bodies.

- Convene and run an ORUK community of interest to manage future updates to the standard transparently.

Tagging

- An agreed classification. Settle whether the sector standardises on a common taxonomy and/or on published mappings between local ones.
- Pilot how AI can support ‘auto-tagging’ and/or ‘auto-mapping’ to improve the quality of tags, and remove the manual burden of applying them. Share the learning so that it may be picked up by other organisations.

Content

- Work with owners of existing national scale Service Directories, to make them available in ORUK format. e.g.
    - OpenActive for Physical Activity
    - NHS for health services, e.g. Find a Dentist

ORUK Engagement Team

- Engagement and support staff. A small field team working directly alongside publishers, consumers, and suppliers.

Component Architecture

- A model of the technologies and capabilities needed. Propose a generic model of the recommended Capabilities necessary to achieve the iStandUK vision; and engage about which should be deployed locally, regionally, nationally.
- The model to illustrate the power of interoperability.
- Produce prototypes of some of the capabilities, to prove the standards and inspire the market

    - Service Finder
    - Auto Tagging
- Liaise with the Government Digital Service to achieve an architecture consistent with the rest of the public sector.