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Health and Social Care – Open Referral UK

Purpose of this paper

This summary paper updates the Steering Board on opportunities and progress relating to the adoption of Open Referral UK across health and social care. The sector represents a significant opportunity for ORUK, with increasing interest from NHS England, integrated care systems and local authorities in improving how service information is published, shared and consumed.

This paper provides a high level summary of the current position, highlights key developments around standards and NHS engagement, and sets out proposed next steps for consideration by the Board.

Strategic Context

Health is “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO). Health and care are devolved across the UK. In England, the NHS is nationally governed and locally commissioned through integrated care boards (ICBs). Adult social care is delivered by local authorities under the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC); children’s social care by local authorities under the Department for Education.

People’s needs routinely cross between NHS services commissioned by ICBs, social care provided or commissioned by local authorities, and community services such as exercise programmes and community groups. Open Referral UK (ORUK) shares details of available services with the people who need them and with the professionals who signpost, refer or socially prescribe.

	NHS (ICBs and NHS England)	Local authorities

Health care services	NHS Directory of Service being replaced by a FHIR R4-based model; an ORUK version is not currently a priority	No standard in common use
Social care and community services	ORUK is the recommended Government Open Standard; NHS adoption is limited	ORUK is the recommended Government Open Standard

Current position

- **Information standard.** The Local Government Association is working with NHS England, on behalf of DHSC, to bring ORUK forward through the Data Alliance Partnership Board (DAPB) as an information standard under section 250 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012. NHS organisations, including ICBs, NHS England and DHSC, would then be required by law to conform to it. As a first step, DAPB has agreed to list ORUK in the Standards Directory as a wider government standard for consideration and reference, with approval expected when DAPB confirms its minutes in December. Meanwhile, NHS England will signpost ORUK through its assurance routes, including digital spend controls and data governance.
- **NHS service directories.** NHS England is replacing the Directory of Service used by NHS 111 with a FHIR R4-based model; an ORUK interface would follow only once the new APIs are published. Existing Directory of Service and Organisation Data Service APIs can identify community pharmacies, walk-in centres and general practices, but they are not ORUK feeds and the data take skill to interpret.
- **NHS App.** The NHS App team is keen to consume ORUK data from local places so that users can discover local services through the app, which is used by 57% of the eligible population in England (aged 13+).
- **Local adoption.** Lancashire & South Cumbria began using ORUK data for social prescribing before priorities shifted to patient record sharing; its mental health and community trusts now want to do more. NHS England's prevention work is also exploring ORUK, including Essex County Council's use in children's services. A workshop which iStandUK held in August 2026 to ascertain what national datasets councils want to receive in a more consistent format exposed strong demand for reliable well structured data on NHS services.

Next steps

- DAPB approval of the Standards Directory listing in December, as a step towards publication as a section 250 information standard.
- Case studies from ORUK users outside the North West to support the Standards Directory page.