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Open Referral UK

Governance Model for the UK Profile

A summary of the international Open Referral governance and a proposed, equivalent governance model for the Open Referral UK (ORUK) profile - designed for open community contribution and compatible with the UK Open Standards Principles and the EU CAMSS assessment criteria.

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1. Introduction and purpose

Open Referral UK (ORUK) is a UK profile of the international Open Referral standard, defined by the Human Services Data Specification (HSDS). A profile applies restrictions to the international standard - and may, in future, add extensions - so that the standard fits UK needs while remaining conformant to the parent specification.

At present ORUK is governed primarily through the international Open Referral process, supplemented by a UK Cross-Government Steering Group convened by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). As adoption grows across local government, health, education and the voluntary sector, the UK needs a governance model of its own: one that can sustain open community engagement and contribution, while also satisfying the expectations placed on a UK government open standard.

This document has two parts. First, it summarises how the international Open Referral specification is governed. Second, it proposes an equivalent governance model for the UK profile. The proposed model is designed so that it is compatible with the UK Open Standards Principles and meets the EU CAMSS assessment criteria (the Common Assessment Method for Standards and Specifications, aligned with Regulation (EU) No 1025/2012), which the UK selection process itself uses to appraise candidate standards.

Key requirement: the governance of the UK profile must be compatible with the UK Open Standards Principles and meet the EU CAMSS assessment criteria. Section 6 maps the proposed model against both, criterion by criterion.

2. Summary of the international Open Referral governance

The international governance arrangements were approved in spring 2024 and are published as the Open Referral "Specification Governance". The key features are summarised below.

2.1 What Open Referral is

Open Referral is an unincorporated, international community of practice that maintains free, open-source resources for stakeholders worldwide. Its core technical product is the Human Services Data Standard (HSDS): a data-exchange format for publishing machine-readable information about health, human and social services. HSDS is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 (CC BY-SA 4.0), and anyone may propose changes through the project's GitHub queue or Community Forum.

2.2 Roles and bodies

The international model distributes responsibility across a small number of clearly defined roles:

Role	Responsibility
Lead Organizer	The founder and lead organiser (Greg Bloom) designs and facilitates activities, manages the community network, represents Open Referral externally, raises funding, and designates the technical steward for each development cycle.
Fiscal Sponsor	Aspiration (a US 501(c)(3) non-profit) receives and administers Open Referral's intellectual property and financial assets in a restricted fund, under the direction of the Lead Organizer, and provides mentorship.
Technical Steward	Codifies changes to HSDS: maintains the GitHub repositories, co-develops and manages the technical backlog, and co-facilitates technical meetings. Currently the Open Data Services Co-operative. Reports to the Lead Organizer.
Technical Committee	A standing group that assesses and prioritises all proposed changes. It advises the Lead Organizer and Fiscal Sponsor on governance and issues binding recommendations to the Technical Steward on the specification. Members have a track record of contribution and uphold Open Referral's mission, values and principles. Governed by a published Technical Committee Charter.
Core Team	The technical and institutional leadership at the 'global' level. Sets the agenda for public discussion, oversees accountable administration of funding, and makes the final decision in the rare event the community cannot reach rough consensus.

2.3 How change happens

Change is open to anyone and is driven by rough consensus - "most support and nobody objects". The process runs roughly as follows:

1. Anyone submits input through the GitHub issue queue, the Community Forum, or occasional community Assemblies.
2. The Technical Steward receives and synthesises input from across channels for review by the Technical Committee.
3. The Technical Committee proposes specific changes; those that reach rough consensus are acknowledged in the Forum and advanced to the Technical Steward.
4. The Technical Steward produces a fully specified version-upgrade proposal and issues it for a Request for Comment (RFC) period (typically about two weeks).
5. Additional input is gathered; further Technical Committee meetings may be called to seek consensus where needed.
6. Where consensus genuinely cannot be reached, which the project notes has almost never happened, the Core Leadership may take a direct decision, documenting the disagreement, the reasons, and the criteria for future re-evaluation.

7. On achieving community consent, the Technical Steward implements the change in machine- and human-readable formats with guidance documentation.

2.4 Versioning and release management

HSDS uses Semantic Versioning (MAJOR.MINOR.PATCH). Each version is maintained as a branch in the specification repository, in one of two states: development (a '-dev' suffix; unstable and experimental) or live (released and stable, with only documentation changes permitted).

- **MAJOR:** changes that are not backwards-compatible.
- **MINOR:** new features or functionality, added in a backwards-compatible way.
- **PATCH:** backwards-compatible bug-fixes. A patch can be approved by a lighter-weight route: the steward notifies the community and, absent objection within one week, releases it.

A deprecation policy governs the removal of terms: a term scheduled for removal is first deprecated in the next MINOR release (validation tools issue warnings) and only renamed or removed in the following MAJOR release (validation tools then issue errors).

2.5 Governance of documentation

Documentation is split into normative content (the prescriptive parts of HSDS), which is part of the specification and follows the same versioning and revision process, and informative content (descriptive guidance), which may be updated at any time without triggering a version change.

3. Current Open Referral UK arrangements

ORUK today sits inside the international governance process, with a UK overlay provided by central government and, as of April 2026, with a new UK host:

Recent change - new host and IP transfer (April 2026). In a transition that began in November 2025 and completed on 1 April 2026, ORUK passed to the stewardship of iStandUK. MHCLG transferred all relevant intellectual property including the key OpenReferralUK GitHub repositories, the UK validator, the UK directory of feeds and the UK website to iStandUK. iStandUK is a local public services data-standards programme hosted within Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council (its accountable body), with its own governing board, and it now stewards ORUK alongside the related SAVVI standard to give councils a single point of expertise and aligned governance. iStandUK intends to develop the tooling and services further and has invited contributions from the global Open Referral community.

- **A conformant, independently-governed profile.** ORUK is a profile of HSDS - conformant with the parent specification, but governed independently by UK bodies rather than by the international specification governance process. The UK community maintains liaison and representation on Open Referral's Technical Committee so that UK-relevant changes can be proposed upstream, but adoption decisions for the UK profile rest with UK governance.

- **A Cross-Government Steering Group.** The Open Referral UK Steering Group, convened by MHCLG under its published Terms of Reference, encourages collaboration between local government and other sectors. As of September 2026 its members include MHCLG, NHS standards, the Central Digital and Data Office, the Local Government Association, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council, the Department for Work and Pensions, Greater Manchester Combined Authority, NHS England North West and Scottish Government. Meeting minutes are published. With day-to-day stewardship now held by iStandUK, this cross-government group remains the natural basis for continued strategic oversight.
- **Versioning via the profile mechanism.** A profile restricts what the parent standard requires and may, in future, add UK-specific extensions (see Section 1). ORUK v1 (2021) added UK extensions; successful extensions were folded into international v3.0 (June 2022). A UK profile of v3.0 was published in 2023. The profile mechanism lets the UK choose if and when to adopt later international versions (e.g. 3.1, 3.1.1).
- **An indicative release cadence.** As a general guide: one backwards-compatible minor release per year, and one major release roughly every five years - balanced against demand and the capacity to do the work.
- **Supporting tooling and licensing.** The UK validator, feed directory and dashboard are intended to support v1, v3 and future versions indefinitely. ORUK content is released under CC BY-SA 4.0.

With the host now settled at iStandUK, what remains missing is an explicit, documented UK governance model that defines who decides what, by what process, and how that process satisfies UK government open-standards expectations. That is what Section 5 proposes.

4. Requirements the UK governance must satisfy

4.1 The UK Open Standards Principles

The Cabinet Office Open Standards Principles set out how Government selects and implements open standards for software interoperability, data and document formats. They define an open standard as one developed through collaboration between all interested parties, with a transparent and published decision-making process reviewed by subject-matter experts, and a transparent feedback and ratification process. Such standards must also be well-documented and free to use, mature, market-supported, and released under an irrevocable royalty-free licence compatible with both open-source and proprietary implementations.

Seven principles govern selection and implementation:

1. Open standards must meet user needs.
2. Open standards must give suppliers equal access to government contracts.

3. Open standards must support flexibility and change.
4. Open standards must support sustainable cost.
5. Select open standards using well-informed decisions.
6. Select open standards using fair and transparent processes.
7. Specify and implement open standards using fair and transparent processes.

Notably, the Principles explicitly recognise the concept of a “standards-based profile” - a subset or combination of standards with a specific scope that still conforms to the related compulsory standards. ORUK is exactly such a profile, which makes the Principles directly applicable.

4.2 The EU CAMSS assessment criteria

The UK selection process appraises candidate standards using the European Common Assessment Method for Standards and Specifications (CAMSS). CAMSS is a neutral method whose aim is interoperability and the avoidance of vendor lock-in. Its Multi-Stakeholder Platform (MSP) scenario is in full compliance with the Annex II criteria of Regulation (EU) No 1025/2012 for the identification of ICT technical specifications. Those criteria fall into two groups.

Process criteria (how the specification is developed by the organisation):

- **Openness:** developed on the basis of open decision-making accessible to all interested parties.
- **Consensus:** a collaborative, consensus-based process that does not favour any particular stakeholder.
- **Transparency:** discussions and decisions are archived and identified; activities are publicly announced; balanced participation is sought; and comments receive consideration and response.

Specification criteria (the qualities of the specification itself):

- **Maintenance:** ongoing support and maintenance are guaranteed over a long period.
- **Availability:** publicly available for implementation and use on reasonable terms (free or for a reasonable fee).
- **Intellectual property (FRAND/royalty-free):** essential IP is licensed on fair, reasonable and non-discriminatory terms, or royalty-free.
- **Relevance:** effective and relevant, responding to market needs and regulatory requirements.
- **Neutrality and stability:** performance-oriented where possible, not market-distorting, and based on advanced scientific and technological development.
- **Quality:** sufficient detail to permit competing interoperable implementations, with no hidden or privately controlled interfaces.

5. Proposed governance model for Open Referral UK

The proposed model mirrors the international structure - a clear separation between strategic stewardship, technical decision-making, codification, and open community contribution - but adapts it to a UK public-sector context and makes the openness, transparency and sustainability commitments explicit so that the Open Standards Principles and CAMSS criteria are met by design.

5.1 Design goals

- Remain a conformant profile of HSDS, contributing UK improvements upstream wherever they have international value, while governing the UK profile independently of HSDS/Open Referral International.
- Keep contribution genuinely open to anyone: councils, the NHS, the voluntary and community sector, suppliers, academics and citizens.
- Make decisions by documented rough consensus, with a clear, accountable escalation route.
- Publish everything by default - proposals, minutes, decisions, roadmaps and rationale.
- Secure long-term maintenance and sustainable funding through a named custodian and host.
- Use a royalty-free, openly licensed specification compatible with open-source and proprietary tools alike.

5.2 Bodies and roles

Five bodies, plus the open community, will govern the UK profile. Each has a direct counterpart in the international model (see the mapping in Section 6.1).

Body / role	Purpose and responsibilities
Open Referral UK Steering Group (strategic oversight)	Builds on the existing Open Referral UK Steering Group (convened by MHCLG). Sets strategic direction, owns the published Terms of Reference, secures and oversees sustainable funding, and is accountable for value for money. Acts as the final, documented decision-maker where the community cannot reach consensus. Membership spans central government, local government, health, the devolved administrations, suppliers, and the community and voluntary sector, balanced across all stakeholder groups so that no single interest - including local government's original role in establishing the standard - dominates decision-making: every stakeholder group has a voice through Steering Group membership. (UK counterpart of the international Core Team / institutional leadership.)

ORUK Technical Working Group (technical decision-making)	An open-membership standing group that triages, prioritises and reaches rough consensus on proposed changes to the UK profile, and recommends them for release. Operates under a published charter. Maintains liaison with, and representation on, the international Technical Committee so UK needs flow upstream and international changes are assessed for UK adoption. (UK counterpart of the international Technical Committee.)
Technical Steward (codification)	A named, funded technical body that codifies agreed changes: maintains the profile, schema, GitHub repositories, validator, feed directory, dashboard and documentation; manages the backlog; and works 'in the open'. (UK counterpart of the international Technical Steward.)
Secretariat (transparency and administration)	Provided by the host/MHCLG. Runs the change log and issue queue, publishes announcements, agendas, minutes and decision records, manages the RFC/consultation process, and maintains the feedback-and-response log. Exists specifically to satisfy the transparency duties in Principle 6 and the CAMSS transparency criterion.
Custodian / host organisation (stewardship of assets)	This role is now filled by iStandUK, hosted within Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council (its accountable body) and overseen by its own governing board. Following the April 2026 transfer, iStandUK holds the ORUK intellectual property received from MHCLG, maintains the GitHub repositories, validator, feed directory and website, and guarantees long-term maintenance and continuity. (UK counterpart of the international Fiscal Sponsor.)
The community (open contribution)	Anyone may raise issues and propose changes through the GitHub queue, the shared Community Forum and periodic community assemblies. No membership or fee is required to contribute.

Mapping to the current arrangement: from April 2026 iStandUK (within Tameside Council) fulfils the Custodian/host role and, having received the IP and tooling from MHCLG, currently also provides the Technical Steward function (the iStandUK Technical Team) and the Secretariat function (the iStandUK Technical Team, supported by iStandUK Communications). The Steering Group role continues through the Open Referral UK Steering Group (convened by MHCLG). Formalising which body provides each function, and confirming sustainable funding, is part of agreeing this model.

5.3 Change and decision-making process

The UK process follows the international rough-consensus model, with a UK consultation step and an explicit, accountable escalation route:

1. Propose: anyone raises an issue or change proposal via GitHub, the Forum, or an open meeting of interested parties.
2. Triage: the Technical Steward synthesises input and maintains a public backlog for the Technical Working Group.

3. Deliberate: the Technical Working Group assesses proposals and seeks rough consensus; UK-relevant items that should flow upstream are referred to the international Technical Committee.
4. Consult: the Steward issues a fully specified proposal for a public Request for Comment / consultation period (recommended minimum four weeks, longer for MAJOR changes), with all comments logged and answered.
5. Decide: on rough consensus the change is accepted. Where consensus cannot be reached, the Steering Group takes a documented decision recording the disagreement, the reasons, and the criteria for re-evaluation.
6. Prove through a reference implementation
6. Ratify: the Steering Group confirms releases that affect cross-government adoption, funding, or any compulsory-standard status, and records any exemptions.
7. Implement and publish: the Steward releases the change in machine- and human-readable form with guidance, updates the validator and tooling, and publishes the decision record.

5.4 Relationship to international governance

The UK profile is conformant with HSDS but governed independently: adopting any international change is a UK decision, taken through UK governance, not an automatic consequence of an international release. The Technical Working Group and the international Technical Committee maintain a two-way relationship: UK extensions of broad value are proposed upstream for inclusion in HSDS (as happened between ORUK v1 and international v3.0), while international releases are assessed for UK adoption through the profile mechanism. This preserves conformance, avoids divergence, and lets the UK adopt change at a controlled pace.

5.5 Versioning and release management

ORUK continues to use Semantic Versioning and the development/live branch model, aligned to the international scheme. The indicative cadence of roughly one minor release per year and one major release every five years is retained, demand and capacity permitting, and the international deprecation policy (deprecate at MINOR, remove at MAJOR) is adopted so that data publishers get predictable, backwards-compatible evolution and long-term tool support.

Changes that have no semantic impact may be issued as a PATCH.

The version of ORUK is not tied to the version of HSDS that the ORUK profile is based on; they are independently versioned but following the same approach (semantic versioning).

5.6 Transparency and openness commitments

To satisfy Principle 6 and the CAMSS openness, consensus and transparency criteria, the model commits to: open participation with no barrier to contribution; published agendas, minutes and decision records; public announcement of new development cycles; a documented

feedback-and-response process; and archived, identifiable records of technical discussion and the reasons for decisions.

5.7 Intellectual property, licensing and sustainability

The specification and documentation remain under CC BY-SA 4.0 — an irrevocable, royalty-free, open licence compatible with the Open Government Licence and with both open-source and proprietary implementations — and any extensions or variations are published under the same licence for others to reuse. The custodian and a funded steward together secure the long-term maintenance and sustainable cost the Principles and CAMSS require.

6. Compliance mapping

6.1 International roles mapped to proposed UK equivalents

International role	Proposed UK equivalent	Notes
Core Team / Lead Organizer	Open Referral UK Steering Group (chaired via MHCLG)	Strategic direction, funding oversight, final escalation decision.
Technical Committee	ORUK Technical Working Group	Open standing group; keeps representation on the international committee.
Technical Steward	ORUK Technical Steward	Codifies changes; maintains schema, repos, validator, directory, dashboard.
Fiscal Sponsor (Aspiration)	iStandUK (hosted within Tameside Council)	Holds the ORUK IP transferred from MHCLG in April 2026; guarantees continuity, maintenance and tooling.
Community Forum / GitHub / Assemblies	Shared Forum, GitHub queue, UK assemblies	Open contribution retained; UK reuses the shared community channels.
(implicit support function)	Secretariat	Made explicit in the UK model to guarantee transparency duties.

6.2 Mapping to the UK Open Standards Principles

#	Principle	How the proposed model meets it
1	Meet user needs	Open contribution from councils, NHS, education, DWP and the voluntary sector keeps the profile anchored to real service-data needs; user needs start the change process.
2	Equal supplier access	A royalty-free CC BY-SA 4.0 licence, open documentation, a public validator and no brand/product dependency let any supplier implement the profile and compete for contracts.
3	Flexibility and change	Semantic Versioning, the profile mechanism and a backwards-compatible deprecation policy let the standard evolve without breaking existing implementations or APIs.
4	Sustainable cost	A named custodian plus a funded steward guarantee maintenance; reuse of shared international tooling and a common standard reduce duplication and avoid lock-in.
5	Well-informed decisions	The Technical Working Group provides expert appraisal; alignment with HSDS ensures national and international interoperability; decisions are evidence-based and recorded.
6	Fair and transparent selection	Open forums and GitHub, published minutes, public announcements and a documented feedback-and-response process — run by the Secretariat — deliver the required transparency.
7	Fair and transparent implementation	Published profile, roadmap and decision records; extensions released under the same open licence; exemptions documented by the Steering Group.

6.3 Mapping to the EU CAMSS criteria (Regulation (EU) No 1025/2012, Annex II)

CAMSS / Annex II criteri	How the proposed model meets it
Openness	Decision-making is open to all interested parties; anyone may contribute via GitHub, the Forum and assemblies with no fee or membership barrier.
Consensus	Changes proceed by documented rough consensus in the Technical Working Group; no stakeholder is favoured; escalation is the rare, recorded exception.

Transparency	The Secretariat archives and identifies technical discussion and decisions, announces development cycles publicly, seeks balanced participation, and logs responses to comments.
Maintenance	A custodian and funded steward guarantee long-term support; tooling is committed to support current and future versions indefinitely.
Availability	The profile and documentation are publicly available and free to use, with a public validator and reference data model.
IPR (FRAND / royalty-free)	Released under the irrevocable, royalty-free CC BY-SA 4.0 licence; all extensions published under the same terms.
Relevance	Cross-sector membership and a user-need-driven backlog keep the profile effective and responsive to UK regulatory and service needs.
Neutrality and stability	Performance/data-oriented and vendor-neutral; the branch model and deprecation policy provide stability and avoid market distortion.
Quality	Normative specification, schema and conformance/validation tooling give sufficient detail for competing, interoperable implementations, with no hidden interfaces.

Conclusion: the proposed model satisfies each of the seven Open Standards Principles and each of the CAMSS process and specification criteria. The few additions relative to the international model — an explicit Secretariat, a UK consultation step, a named custodian, and documented ratification and exemption handling — exist precisely to close the gaps between an informal community process and the evidence and transparency a UK government open standard must demonstrate.

7. Recommendations and next steps

1. Adopt this structure as the basis for a published ORUK governance document, mirroring the international “Specification Governance” page.
2. Refresh the Terms of Reference of the Open Referral UK Steering Group to reflect iStandUK as host and to include the decision and escalation roles set out here.
3. Establish and openly recruit the ORUK Technical Working Group, and publish its Terms of Reference and its link to the international Technical Committee. This group should all stakeholders with an interest in the technical work.
4. Confirm role definitions within the new host: iStandUK (within Tameside Council) now holds the IP and tooling, so formalise which body provides the Technical Steward and Secretariat functions and confirm a sustainable funding route for maintenance of the standard and its tooling.
5. Stand up the Secretariat functions: publish a change log, decision register, and a feedback-and-response process.

6. Publish the versioning, release-cadence and deprecation policy, aligned to HSDS Semantic Versioning.
7. Seek a CAMSS-style self-assessment and, if a compulsory cross-government status is sought, engage the Open Standards Board through the GOV.UK open standards process.

8. Sources

Open Referral — Specification Governance: docs.openreferral.org/en/latest/about/specification-governance.html

Open Referral UK — Governance and release cycles: openreferraluk.org/about/50-governance

Open Referral UK — Government and community involvement (Steering Group): openreferraluk.org/about/20-steering

iStandUK — iStandUK and Open Referral UK: istanduk.org/istanduk-and-open-referral-uk

Open Referral community forum — ORUK Launches Under the Stewardship of iStandUK (18 March 2026): forum.openreferral.org/t/oruk-launches-under-the-stewardship-of-istanduk/799

Cabinet Office — Open Standards Principles: gov.uk/government/publications/open-standards-principles/open-standards-principles

GOV.UK — Open standards for government data and technology: gov.uk/government/collections/open-standards-for-government-data-and-technology

European Commission — Common Assessment Method for Standards and Specifications (CAMSS): interoperable-europe.ec.europa.eu/collection/common-assessment-method-standards-and-specifications-camss

Regulation (EU) No 1025/2012 on European standardisation (Annex II criteria for ICT technical specifications).