Minutes of Meeting

Q2 Open Referral UK Steering Group Meeting Minutes

Date: 06/10/2026
Time: 11:30am - 13:00pm
Location: MS Teams

1. Welcome, Apologies and Introduction

Sheldon Ferguson welcomed all attendees to the Quarter 2 ORUK Steering Board meeting.

Apologies from:

- Firoze Salim, DCMS
- Laura Sato, NHS England
- Shona Nicol, Scottish Government
- Kathryn Reynolds, Scottish Government
- Kate Parker, Community Action Network
- Kunmi Awodumi, iStandUK
- Mevish Khalid, iStandUK

Attendees:

- Sheldon Ferguson (Interim ORUK Chair), MHCLG
- Kate Cooper, LGA
- Chris Storey, DWP
- Tom Latham, NHS England
- Linda Vernon, NHS England
- Kieran Smith, GMCA
- Mike Thacker, iStandUK
- Paul Davidson, iStandUK
- Michelle Kern, iStandUK
- Shelley Heckman, iStandUK
- Nicholas Oughtibridge, iStandUK
- Raonne Abdelazem, iStandUK

2. The State of ORUK

Paul Davidson provided an update on the current state of Open Referral UK (ORUK) and the future direction of the standard. Discussion focused on the ambition to move beyond individual service directories towards a nationally interoperable ecosystem of high-quality service information, enabling consistent service discovery, referral and commissioning across organisations.

A review of existing ORUK feeds highlighted a number of challenges affecting interoperability, including:

- Inconsistent tagging and categorisation approaches
- Varying levels of data quality and completeness
- Differences in API implementation
- Gaps in key service information fields
- Limited use of identifiers to support aggregation and matching

The review also identified opportunities to strengthen the UK profile of the standard and improve alignment with Open Referral, OpenActive, Schema.org and wider government standards.

Future development priorities were discussed, including:

- Updating the ORUK Standard
- Strengthening Validation Criteria And Quality Assurance Processes
- Defining Minimum Data Quality Expectations
- Improving Interoperability Through Stronger Use Of Identifiers And Standardised Approaches
- Ensuring Key Fields, Web Methods And Service Information Are Consistently Present And Usable

The plans to develop an ORUK Playbook were then outlined, it will be designed to provide practical implementation guidance, define good practice and help organisations move beyond technical compliance towards producing interoperable, reusable service information. The Playbook will capture learning from pilots and create a structured adoption pathway for councils and suppliers.

The group discussed how AI could significantly enhance both the publishing and consumption of service information, provided that data quality foundations are addressed first.

Following this, a demonstration was provided showing how AI could transform the service-finding experience by moving beyond traditional keyword searches and menu navigation towards more conversational interactions. By using semantic understanding rather than simple keyword matching, AI could connect residents with relevant services even when their descriptions do not exactly match the language used within service records.

The discussion also explored how AI could support future ORUK aggregators by:

- Identifying and removing duplicate records
- Harmonising different terminology and classification schemes
- Improving data quality across multiple data feeds
- Supporting interoperability with other service information formats

Members noted that AI could also help commissioners identify unmet need, understand emerging patterns of demand, and analyse gaps in service provision.

While welcoming these opportunities, the group stressed that effective AI applications depend on high-quality service information. There was agreement that creating authoritative and accurate service records must remain the primary focus, with AI seen as a tool to enhance quality rather than replace it.

The group also highlighted opportunities to engage with the LGA AI Network, noting that many councils are exploring similar challenges. Also, proposing to showcase ORUK AI developments to MHCLG's Local AI Directorate to raise awareness of the opportunities being explored.

Action 2.1 - Provide progress update on the development of the ORUK Playbook ahead of the next Steering Group meeting. (Paul Davidson and ORUK Team)

Action 2.2 - Progress enhancements to the ORUK validator so that it assesses data quality, completeness and key implementation requirements alongside schema compliance. (Nicholas Oughtibridge and ORUK Team)

Action 2.3 - Continue developing prototypes for AI-assisted tagging, assurance and conversational service discovery, and prepare showcase sessions for stakeholders. (Paul Davidson and iStandUK Team)

Action 2.4 - Arrange introductions and demonstration sessions with MHCLG's Local AI Directorate to explore opportunities for collaboration. (Sheldon Ferguson and Paul Davidson)

Action 2.5 - Engage with the LGA AI Network and explore opportunities to showcase ORUK AI developments to councils. (Paul Davidson and Kate Cooper)

3. National Dataset Prioritisation

Workshop Findings

Shelley Heckman led the findings from the National Data for Public Services workshop, highlighting the challenges local authorities face in maintaining service information and the potential role of nationally reusable datasets.

Key themes identified through the workshop included:

- Service information is often fragmented, duplicated and difficult to maintain.
- Local authorities frequently invest significant time and resource in maintaining information owned by external organisations.
- Healthcare services and community and voluntary sector information were consistently identified as the highest-priority areas for national coordination.
- There is strong support for authoritative, reusable datasets that can be maintained once and used by multiple organisations, reducing duplication of effort across the sector.

The workshop findings reinforced the case for developing a more coordinated approach to service information management and strengthening the availability of nationally maintained datasets.

The Steering Group considered a proposed programme of work focused on:

- Engaging government departments and key stakeholders
- Mapping priority datasets and data owners
- Strengthening the ORUK value proposition
- Exploring opportunities for reusable national datasets
- Continuing engagement with local government partners
- Using the workshop findings to inform ORUK's future priorities

The board accepted the recommendations proposed in the paper.

ORUK & NHS

The Steering Group received an update from Nicholas Oughtibridge on opportunities to strengthen connections between ORUK and health and social care services. The discussion highlighted a shared challenge across sectors: local authorities require better access to healthcare information, while healthcare professionals need greater visibility of services available across local government, community and voluntary organisations.

Key opportunities discussed included:

- Increasing access to local service information through health and care channels
- Exploring the potential for ORUK data to be made available through the NHS App
- Improving service discovery across health, local government and community services
- Supporting a longer-term vision of service discovery that extends beyond health-focused platforms into wider public services

The group noted ORUK's potential to support preventative and community-based approaches to health and wellbeing by helping people find services that address wider determinants of health, including housing, employment, social connection and wellbeing. Members recognised that this

aligns closely with the increasing focus on prevention and community-based support across the public sector.

The discussion also reflected on learning from existing regional initiatives, highlighting challenges relating to funding models, ownership and maintenance of service information, and the disconnect that can exist between those who invest in service directories and those who realise the resulting benefits. Members emphasised the importance of developing clear use cases and demonstrating practical value to support wider adoption and investment.

Action 3.1 - Shelley & Kunmi to take forward the proposals from paper.

Action 3.2 - Identify priority datasets, map data owners and explore opportunities for reusable national service information. (Shelley Heckman and ORUK Team)

Action 3.3 - Build evidence demonstrating the cost and burden imposed on councils by inconsistent and non-standardised service data. (Sheldon Fergurson, MHCLG and Steering Group Members)

4. Funding & Recruitment Update

Shelley Heckman confirmed that MHCLG has approved funding for ORUK for 2026-27 and provided positive indications regarding future support into 2027-28, subject to future review and evidence of progress.

The iStandUK team has expanded to welcome three new Stakeholder Engagement Managers, including Kunmi Awodumi joining the team, specifically to work within ORUK. The additional capacity and resource will support adoption, communications, community engagement and programme delivery as ORUK moves into its next phase.

5. ORUK Incubation

Shelley Heckman provided an update on the following incubation activities:

- ## Go-No Go Gateway

  ORUK has progressed through its initial maintenance and standstill phases and is now approaching transition into full incubation. Incubation will enable a shift from maintaining inherited services towards actively growing adoption, improving the standard,

strengthening engagement and increasing community support. The gateway decision to move into incubation lies with Tameside Council Metropolitan Borough, as iStandUK's host organisation. The team reported confidence that the gateway criteria would be met following funding approval and the completion of transition arrangements.

- ## ORUK Website

  The current ORUK website will be reviewed and enhanced to provide stronger support for engagement, content publishing, guidance and community participation, with future plans including blogs, updates and additional resources to support adoption.

- ## Engagement Strategy

  A dedicated engagement strategy is being developed, by Kunmi Awodumi, the new ORUK Stakeholder Engagement Manager, to strengthen relationships with stakeholders, improve communications and support wider adoption across councils, suppliers and public sector organisations.

- ## Comms

  There are plans in place to strengthen engagement through regular communications, workshops, forums and potentially a dedicated ORUK newsletter or ORUK section within future iStandUK communications. The aim is to develop a stronger community around the standard and provide more structured opportunities for stakeholder involvement.

  The plan to establish an ORUK training offer was introduced to the Steering Group, including a potential Foundation Course designed to build capability and understanding among organisations considering adoption.

Nicholas Oughtibridge provided an update on the following incubation activity:

- ## Governance

  A proposed governance model for future ORUK development was proposed, which is designed to maintain openness, transparency and broad participation while supporting the ongoing evolution of the standard. Future changes would be driven by stakeholder needs, openly consulted on and supported through structured governance processes.

  It was noted that implementation feedback has identified opportunities to refine the standard and that formal governance arrangements will help manage future changes while maintaining

Members strongly supported the proposal, noting that it reflects the transparent governance principles that originally enabled ORUK to achieve Government Standards endorsement. The Steering Group agreed to endorse the approach, subject to final review.

Action 5.1 - Complete the ORUK engagement strategy and expand adoption and communications activity. (Kunmi Awodumi and iStandUK team)

Action 5.2 - Explore development of the ORUK Foundation Course and wider training academy offer. (iStandUK Team)

Action 5.3 - Finalise the ORUK governance proposal and seek confirmation from the Data Standards Authority (DSA) prior to formal adoption. (Nicholas Oughtibridge)

6. Tools Update

Paul Davidson provided an update on the tools being developed by the iStandUK technical team:

- ## Adoption Tracker

  Paul Davidson introduced an open-source adoption tracker that the iStandUK technical team has developed, to the Steering Board. It is designed to record which organisations are adopting particular standards, what versions they are using, implementation status, supplier involvement and resulting outcomes. The tracker is intended to provide visibility of adoption activity and evidence of impact.

- ## Prototype Service Finder

  Paul Davidson also showcased the ORUK Service Finder prototype, which allows users to query ORUK-compliant feeds through a simple interface. The demonstrator has been created to help explain ORUK to audiences and will evolve to showcase future AI-enabled search and discovery capabilities.

7. MHCLG Funded GMCA and BCP Pilots Update

Kieran Smith, provided an update regarding the Greater Manchester Combined Authority ORUK pilot. GMCA is working with Wigan, Bolton and Answer Digital to explore ORUK implementation within adult social care services. The pilot is focused on building test environments, developing

APIs and understanding how ORUK and SAVVI standards can work together to support the Live Well and prevention agenda.

The pilot includes a formal benefits realisation programme, with learning expected to inform future implementation across Greater Manchester. The project is expected to run through to the end of November and will help shape future procurement and wider adoption activity.

8. Open Floor and AOB: Any Adoption Updated from Board Members

Board members discussed the importance of building evidence of value, creating practical use cases and using pilot activity to drive wider adoption. There was broad agreement that ORUK's next phase should focus on demonstrating tangible benefits, supporting implementation at scale and strengthening partnerships across local government, health, suppliers and central government.