

Lessons Learned from the first three years of the Open Data User Group (ODUG)

1. The role and remit of the Open Data User Group (ODUG)

ODUG has provided strong evidence-based advice to the UK Government, initially via the Data Strategy Board, later via the Public Sector Transparency Board, to make the case for the release of Public Sector datasets as Open Data for the wider public good. A key strength of the group was the establishment of the Data Request Mechanism to gather evidence and support from across the open data community, to deliver Demand-led Open Data where priorities for data release are evidenced through user requirements. Often ODUG's achievements have not been easily apparent to the outside community. A number of specialists have asked, 'What have you actually done?' This might be inevitable since ODUG does not release any data itself and any credit for data release accrues to the organisations publishing the new data. Mentions of ODUG interventions have been very rare. Also, as much of ODUG's work has been through persistent, private persuasion its influence and impact is easy to underestimate. Moving forward, there is a danger of the UK falling behind on the open data agenda, so clearer powers for an 'ODUG type' of group would be welcome, also a more transparent recognition of its impact.

Recommendation:

If an ODUG group continues to exist its powers need to be clearly delineated and a transparent escalation process should exist.

2. Role of the Cabinet Office Transparency Team (COTT)

ODUG relied significantly on the COTT for secretariat support and as a conduit between ODUG and data owners in government. We appreciated the enthusiasm and commitment of the individual team members. However there have been challenges, the main ones being: the high turnover of staff in COTT; a lack of experience of open data issues amongst some of these staff and the lack of decision making powers and senior level support to resolve individual dataset issues. As a result delivery has been slow: activities were fragmented each time new staff bedded into COTT; there was a shallow internal government knowledge of some key data-release related issues and decisions often had to be referred elsewhere. Also, ODUG and its supporting staff in COTT received little active support from senior CO officials.

Recommendation:

If COTT are required to provide similar support in future they need a clear strategy for dealing with staff turnover; clear and transparent definitions of roles and responsibilities; an up-to-date organisational chart and more active support from their senior officials.

3. Open Data Champions in Departments

Open Data Champions in departments have an important role to play in the open data environment. COTT relationship managers liaised with these champions to follow-up any issues around particular datasets and progress issues within departments. However, during

the three years, ODUG was never entirely clear who the departmental leads were, what they did and what powers, if any, they had. This is quite disappointing as a key aspect of the open data agenda is transparency, which was lacking here.

Recommendation:

As long as COTT relationship managers exist their roles and responsibilities and who they are interfacing with in departments should be transparent. If departments move towards having Chief Data Officers the role of COTT relationship managers should be reviewed. They might need to become more public and externally facing, interacting directly with data consumers.

4. Infrastructure support for ODUG

ODUG content such as agendas/minutes of meetings, blog posts and reports have been published on data.gov.uk (DGU) <http://data.gov.uk>. DGU support was a continual source of disappointment and confusion. ODUG's existence was pushed to a low level on data.gov.uk; the group and its work was not easily discoverable. This reduced the ability for the data community to interact with ODUG, the group set up to represent them. There were also many delays waiting for new items to be published and when there were changes to the DGU platform, during ODUG's second year, significant content was lost. The Data Request mechanism, which had proven a useful tool to engage with the data community in ODUG's first year was de-prioritised at this time, not properly tested when data.gov.uk was rebuilt and thereafter did not work properly. The result of ODUG being buried on data.gov.uk was that there was a perception that the group was too closely aligned with the very people it was supposed to be holding to account and there was sometimes a perception of a lack of independence. As a result ODUG has now built our own website (at its (unfunded) members cost) to deal with many of these issues and provide a robust audit trail.

Recommendation:

For future groups like ODUG, who are meant to be 'critical friends', more thought should be given to how their external presence is managed and what technical support they should receive.

5. Sector Transparency Boards (panels)

The role of ODUG is to interact with the wider community of data consumers which includes departments' own Sector Transparency Boards. These focus on data issues around the datasets the department, or its arm's length bodies hold. More work could be done to make sure that such sector panels cover all key topics, meet on a regular basis and that their existence is widely known so that they provide a clear channel for user feedback. It has sometimes been necessary for ODUG members to use Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to find out what the panels are doing.

Recommendation:

Documents should clearly set out and publicly which panels exist, how often they meet and how to join them or submit feedback to them.

6. Release of Data Fund (RoDF)

The Release of Data Fund (RoDF) worked well and should continue for the foreseeable future. It has encouraged innovation and enterprise supported by well thought out business

cases, for example: the Leeds Data Mill. Most funded projects have required relatively small amounts of funding and have delivered excellent results. There has been a tendency for organisations 'in the know' to apply to the fund which suggests that wider awareness of its existence is needed. Once the total amount of any new fund has been decided and after fully evaluating the last cycle of work there should be a significant campaign to publicise the new monies.

Recommendation:

The Release of Data Fund should continue whilst taking care not to overlap with other initiatives. It needs significantly more publicity across a number of organisations and platforms such as the Open Data Institute; the Government Digital Service; the Office for National Statistics etc. The outcomes should be publicised more widely and recipients should have a badge to show that they had money from the Fund; a small annual ceremony recognising successes might be worthwhile.

7. Data Request Process on data.gov.uk

One of ODUG's activities was to design, and have oversight of, the Data Request process, hosted on the data.gov.uk site so that it was close to the already published open datasets where people might search for data. This was a productive process during the first year and provided a good mechanism to hold the government to account in the public arena, although somewhat hampered by a lack of publicity to the wider data community. There were some technical and processing problems that slowed down data releases. In addition there is confusion as to how this mechanism sits together with the Freedom Of Information (FOI) process (which has proven more immediately effective than the data request process, as it has an agreed regulatory framework), and with the regulatory function of ICO.

Recommendation:

The requests submitted through the Data Request process should be cleared by officials. It might be superseded by the National Information Infrastructure (NII) which, if implemented correctly, should prioritise and drive the release of high value data. It could also be worth requiring every public body to publish a definitive list of their datasets. In the meantime a short review should be commissioned of how data can be requested and released to create one clear comprehensive process to avoid overlapping and duplicated processes. Such regulations exist in the United States and are regulated by the Office of Management and Budget. It would be worth enquiring whether that regime is effective and whether lessons can be learnt from it.

8. Reasons not to release data

It is still too easy for public sector bodies to be creative around the reasons why they cannot release their data in an open format. There is an almost standard pick-list of reasons which are given as to why each public sector body/topic is 'unique' and therefore data cannot be made open, typically citing concerns around, for example, quality (which has been shown to improve once more users are given access to the data); privacy (although Open Data is not about the release of identifiable personal data), and difficulties extracting public sector data from legacy IT systems subject to contractual restrictions from third-party suppliers.

Recommendation:

Organisations must have reviewed the ODI checklist before they put forward their arguments for the non-release of data to ensure that their case includes some genuine unique issues that need to be considered. This should be more of a push around the Government's agreed presumption to publish, rather than withhold, data.

9. Dealing with legacy issues

Many of the issues that ODUG has worked on over the last three years have been dealing with the legacy of decisions taken decades ago. Typically this is because information was collected manually on paper and held locally. The tide is turning and ODUG has helped make more of such data openly available; though there is still much more work to be done. However the focus should perhaps change as the National Information Infrastructure (NII) is rolled out and there should be a focus on building the new or revised processes from the bottom up.

Recommendation:

There are legacy issues and cultural changes needed which still need to be tackled by an ODUG type body able to represent and provide evidence of the demand for Open Data (see below). This body should also start advising how new processes can be built from the bottom up using the lessons learnt over the last three years. For example considerations need to be given to Core Reference Data/Registers, the National Information Infrastructure (NII); and the wider [data landscape](#).

10. Prioritisation of activity

ODUG has been a critical friend encouraging and cajoling bodies to release more open data directly focussing on the datasets which will deliver the most benefit if made open. The less important cases have been delegated to COTT for action. However this is all an extremely slow process, hampered by the lack of clear deadlines for action by organisations and their lack of accountability.

Recommendation:

That each body empowers or creates a role similar to a Chief Data Officer to be the flag bearer for open data in their organisations and drive this agenda. They should be accountable for the delivery of the National Information Infrastructure (NII) and work with the Government's Chief Data Officer, the National Statistician and the Information Commissioner to develop a comprehensive open data strategy, with strong governance.

11. Issues with charging model for Public Sector Data Group

Some progress has been made with the members of the Public Data Group (Ordnance Survey, Her Majesty's Land Registry, The Met Office and Companies House) and their willingness to make more of their data open. Companies House and the Land Registry have significantly widened their delivery of Open Data over the last three years. However members of the Group are hampered by funding models which create perverse incentives for their executive (small cash returns to the Treasury taking precedence over the potential for significant wider economic benefit) and restrict how much data they can make freely available. The Ordnance Survey has delivered more open data but continues to push back that it needs to derive commercial revenues from the sale of public mapping data and has not opened up either the Universal Property Reference Number (UPRN) or clarified its 'derived data restrictions' on other third party data as it promised the previous government

that it would. The successes made and significant steps forward have been the result of sustained pressure and conversations between ODUG and related parties - often with no credit attributed to ODUG (see 1 above).

The lack of an Open National Address Database; the primary Core Reference data necessary to link other datasets together continues to be a huge barrier to the delivery of wider social and economic benefits for the UK. A key barrier to this was the unfortunate sale of the Postcode Address File (PAF) as part of the privatisation of the Royal Mail; a national economic disaster.

Recommendation:

There should be an open, strategic review of the cost/benefit models of the Public Data Group including how they are funded by HM Treasury where, as publicly owned bodies, their costs are made open for all to see. Consideration should be given to how their data is of value to the economy, any potential changes of status for such bodies, how to open up more of their data and how to avoid the future 'privatisation' of public data.

12. The future of ODUG

The existing mandate of ODUG expired on 31 May 2015: should that mandate be extended or should it be replaced by another body? The current ODUG Chair has stepped down as her three year term has come to an end. Members of the group are, on the whole, willing to continue contributing to the opening up of public sector data. However the last three years have been a lot of hard work for the group – without proper support or any funding, so there is some level of caution. Some of the issues raised above have limited ODUG's effectiveness and caused a high level of individual frustration. There is still an important role for a body like ODUG to be a 'critical friend' of the public sector regarding open data where significant legacy issues continue to exist and an external data user perspective is needed to continue to evidence the demand and potential benefits of Open Data.

As the National Information Infrastructure (NII) evolves and the role of the new Chief Data Officer develops the data landscape is clearly going to change. ODUG would question the role and remit of data.gov.uk in the emerging landscape.

Recommendation:

That a group of people like ODUG representing a similar cross section of views, organisations and experiences continues to exist with clearer, stronger powers, to push the open data agenda. A senior sponsor is required; probably still the Minister for the Cabinet Office, but it could also be Parliament, the Information Commissioners Office or the National Audit Office. Better financial and practical support is also needed for the next term.