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# Open data user group's Olympic launch sets tone for powerful future

Members of group laid out a clear, independent agenda at their inaugural meeting



The Cabinet Office is supporting the independent Open Data Users Group in its race to find a business case for opening up government data. Reuters/Kieran Doherty Kieran Doherty/REUTERS

Wednesday 18 July 2012 06.00 BST Last modified on Wednesday 21 May 2014 05.50 BST

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The Open data user group (ODUG) is up and running, and held its first meeting in Hackney House, off Shoreditch High Street, on 10 July.

This temporary space has been created by Hackney council and UK Trade & Investment (UKTI) to showcase the growing digital community in the area and will provide a base for journalists to report on the regeneration of East London during the Olympics.

As well as being right in the middle of tech city, the setting – a place for government and the community to come together – was particularly apt, since the open data user group is essentially a way of helping the public and private sectors collaborate on open data.

ODUG members comprise a diverse and independently minded group. There was real excitement in the air as we discussed the challenges ahead, which is to prioritise and present business cases for government datasets to be released as open data. There was also a sense of responsibility, as this is probably the first time a government in any country has asked open data users and developers to compile information of this kind.

In our experience,governments rarely ask users proactively what they want, and that high-profile open data releases have often been hard-won. This time, though, I genuinely feel things are different. Ministers and civil servants have recognised the need to harness the skills and experience of open data users in planning how to open up more government data for the general good.

This is surely the right approach to evaluating the possible benefits – bringing together those who have access to the data and those who know what to do with it.

Naturally, we also talked about the scope of our activities. The new user group was announced alongside the creation of the data strategy board and the public data group of trading funds, which includes the Met Office, Ordnance Survey, Companies House and Land Registry. Our main job is to identify further beneficial data releases from these trading funds – but while they have really great data, some of it already open, we also want to see suggestions for data releases from across the public sector.

It is no mean task that we have been set. I am keen forthe group to operate by consensus and to reach out to as many existing and future users of open data as possible. The [recent open data white paper set out a "presumption to publish"](http://www.guardian.co.uk/public-leaders-network/2012/jun/28/open-data-white-paper-published) for government data. Yet, in fixing a timetable, we will need to prioritise the datasets to focus on and build evidence to show the beneficial impact their release would have for the UK as a whole.

So we are developing a system of "elevator pitches", allowing anyone to propose a dataset for release and to present their argument for the benefits this will bring. We will take up the cause of the most persuasively supported datasets and develop business cases for them – appealing to the community we represent for their input to gather more detailed evidence.

We'll be publishing full minutes of all our meetings on [data.gov.uk](http://data.gov.uk/), and the first set of minutes is now available.

An early task is simply, but crucially, to determine the best ways of communicating and collaborating with each other and with the whole open data community. Very soon, I hope to be able to develop space on data.gov.uk where we can gather elevator pitches for the release of more open data.

We are well supported by the Cabinet Office, but it is important that we are recognised for what we are – an independent body, canvassing and distilling the views and needs of the all the organisations and individuals using government open data. We aim to take the views of data users right into the heart of government.

I've already been impressed by Odug members' enthusiasm. They have a wealth of experience and skills – but the group won't be able to do its job without the contributions and support of everyone in the wider open data user community.

Each of us will be reaching out to gather your opinions and evidence, but we also want you to get in touch with us. To make this easier, we are going to build our presence on data.gov.uk, but in the meantime you can follow our work and comment on it through Twitter [@odugUK](https://twitter.com/ODUGUK), or via our [LinkedIn group](http://www.linkedin.com/groups/Open-Data-User-Group-4367612).

Please send as many suggestions to usas you can about the public sector data you would like to see released, why, what you could do with it, and the benefits you believe that would bring to the UK as a whole. Our work starts here.

Heather Savory is chair of the recently formed [Open Data User Group](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/content/open-data-user-group)