

A photograph of two people running on a dirt path in a park. The person in the foreground is a woman with curly hair, wearing a grey and purple athletic top and black leggings. The person behind her is a man with a beard, wearing a blue jacket and black pants. The background shows green trees and foliage, slightly blurred to convey motion.

Data infrastructure for a healthy nation

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About

This paper examines how national data infrastructure – specifically, the OpenActive data standards – can transform public health by making physical activity more accessible.

In an era when physical inactivity costs the UK economy £20 billion annually¹ and contributes to widening health inequalities, we need innovative approaches that connect people with local opportunities to get active and improve their health and wellbeing. This paper demonstrates how standardised open data about physical activities can be a key part of the broader transformation of preventative healthcare in the UK and help realise the government's vision for a healthier nation that is less dependent on acute NHS services.

We explore how OpenActive supports Sport England's 'Uniting the Movement' strategy, complements social prescribing and clinical care pathways, and works alongside standards like Open Referral UK to create comprehensive community wellbeing infrastructure.

Drawing on case studies, economic analysis and policy insights, we make the case for recognising and investing in data standards as critical national infrastructure. In writing this paper, we hope to inform policymakers, healthcare leaders and data strategists about the transformative potential of connected, standardised activity data in addressing our most pressing health challenges.

¹ All-Party Commission on Physical Activity (2014), [Tackling Physical Inactivity - A Coordinated Approach](#).

Foreword

Sasha Karakusevic - NHS Horizons

It is an honour to be asked to provide a foreword for this important paper. The NHS Horizons team has been working with Sport England and partners supporting the ‘Uniting the Movement’ strategy. It has long been recognised that more work needs to be done on data and we are working hard to build the required relationships and shared purpose. This paper makes an important contribution and I hope people and organisations will support its recommendations.

Many things that we take for granted work because they include robust interoperability and standards. And because they work, we pay too little attention to them! Now is the time to change that. Can you imagine a new train without tracks or a signalling system? Your bank account without consistent rules to manage transactions? What would travel planning be like if every provider used different standards?

OpenActive has created a set of common data standards for leisure operators, sports bodies and community groups to publish consistent information about sport and physical activity opportunities.

The creation of these standards is funded by Sport England and the National Lottery, and stewarded by the Open Data Institute (ODI). The initiative was developed collaboratively, bringing together a community of organisations from across the sector including booking system vendors, activity providers, Active Partnerships and national governing bodies. This community-driven approach has kept OpenActive responsive to emerging needs, from the rapid development of a standard for online follow-along-at-home fitness classes during the Covid-19 pandemic, to a data model for describing paths and trails for recreational use.

As everyone involved with Sport England’s ‘Uniting the Movement’ strategy continues to make progress to transform lives and communities through sport and physical activity, there has never been a more important time to take a grip of interoperability.

OpenActive is now a cornerstone of the UK's data infrastructure, transforming disconnected listings into an interconnected network where data can easily be exchanged. It has built the capacity not only to transform the sector, but to provide the foundations that will enable critical work on community development within local neighbourhoods. It provides a framework that can be aligned with key national priorities, from improving health and cutting NHS waiting times, to boosting the economy and strengthening communities.

I hope you will read the paper carefully and use your influence to support the implementation of the recommendations. As we move from hospital to community, from treatment to prevention, and from analogue to digital, it is crucial that we pay attention to interoperability and provide our support to the standards that will make it happen.

Executive summary

Physical inactivity is one of the UK's most pressing public health challenges. The economic impact is substantial – approximately £20 billion annually in lost productivity and increased healthcare costs.

Physical activity has been described as a 'wonder drug' for health.² Yet many people struggle to find appropriate opportunities to get active in their local area. Healthcare professionals, who could be pivotal in guiding people towards physical activity, often lack knowledge about local options, or confidence in discussing specific activities for different health conditions.

A national data infrastructure for health and wellbeing could bridge this information gap. At its core is OpenActive, a set of open data standards that enable physical activity opportunities to be described in a consistent, machine-readable format that flows seamlessly between organisations and digital platforms. This standardisation has already had a significant impact, with thousands of activity providers publishing information about their sessions, creating millions of discoverable opportunities each month.

The true potential of OpenActive emerges when it is integrated with healthcare systems. By embedding this standardised activity data into NHS workflows and clinical care pathways, healthcare professionals can more confidently recommend suitable physical activity to patients, as they can search for classes or groups by location, availability or specific requirements.

Physical activity or exercise-based community rehabilitation is recommended in nearly 100 National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines and quality standards, each tailored to specific conditions or care settings. These include cardiovascular conditions, musculoskeletal conditions, mental health conditions, cancers, fertility issues, irritable bowel syndrome, liver disease, and antenatal and postnatal care. NHS England has said: 'By embedding physical activity into clinical care pathways, the NHS can support improvements in

² Sport England (2021), [Uniting the Movement](#).

patient outcomes and deliver evidence-based care across various conditions. This means fewer complications and less use of NHS resources'.³ Here are just three examples of the significant role that OpenActive has to play:

1. **Musculoskeletal conditions** are a leading cause of absence from work. OpenActive can provide healthcare professionals with tailored activity recommendations at multiple touchpoints throughout treatment, turning general advice into actionable steps.
2. **In mental healthcare**, particularly for young people with depression and anxiety, OpenActive can connect patients with community-based activities that are known to support mental wellbeing, increasing uptake through personalised recommendations.
3. **For patients undergoing surgery**, OpenActive can enhance preparation for surgery and recovery by connecting patients to appropriate pre-surgical fitness opportunities and post-operative rehabilitation activities, potentially improving outcomes and recovery times.

Beyond healthcare, OpenActive supports broader economic and community goals. A more active population means fewer days lost to illness, higher productivity, and more people able to participate in the workforce. Communities benefit through stronger social bonds, reduced antisocial behaviour, and improved mental health and cohesion.

OpenActive can directly empower the mayoral strategic authorities, established under the English Devolution White Paper,⁴ which have new duties for health improvement and reducing health inequalities, and are required to produce Local Growth Plans. OpenActive data provides a critical tool to help them understand activity provision, target interventions effectively, deliver on preventative health strategies locally, and evidence outcomes for devolved funding streams, such as Integrated Settlements.

Moreover, this model of data infrastructure extends well beyond physical activity. As the UK government prioritises digital inclusion and data-enabled public services, the principles behind OpenActive can be applied to other areas, including volunteering, community

³ NHS England (n.d.), [Harnessing the benefits of physical activity](#).

⁴ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2024), [English Devolution White Paper](#).

participation and social services. Open standards across public services can be coordinated, creating an interconnected ecosystem in which apps can be created that help citizens to easily find and access any community service, from exercise classes to volunteering roles, support groups to cultural events. In this way, the collective impact on public health, economic participation and community resilience is multiplied.

To maximise these benefits, we recommend three key policy interventions:

1. Establish data standards as critical public infrastructure, with formal recognition of OpenActive by the Data Standards Authority and cross-departmental coordination mechanisms to ensure consistent implementation.
2. Embed open activity data in health strategies, including integration with the NHS App, social prescribing frameworks and clinical care pathways.
3. Create a sustainable governance model through a dedicated data institution to steward multiple public service data standards, ensuring continued development and interoperability.

Investing in this data infrastructure can create a more connected, efficient and equitable public service landscape that supports a healthier, more active and more prosperous society.

Introduction

The challenge of physical inactivity and health inequality

More than a quarter of adults and nearly one-third of children and young people in the UK are classified as inactive,⁵ falling short of recommended physical activity levels. These figures are not uniform across society. People in the most deprived areas tend to develop long-term health conditions a decade earlier than those in affluent areas, highlighting a stark inequality in healthy life expectancy. More than one in three adults in England's poorest communities are inactive, compared to only one in five in the wealthiest areas.⁶ Children from lower-income families are also far less active than those from higher-income families, contributing to entrenched health inequalities from an early age.

This inactivity crisis fuels a cycle of poor health and disadvantage. The UK government's 'Plan for Change' notes that millions are spending more of their lives in ill health, with 2.8 million people out of work due to health conditions.⁷ This burden diminishes quality of life and drags on the broader economy. Physical inactivity imposes substantial economic costs through lost productivity and healthcare needs. It places enormous strain on the NHS: obesity is estimated to cost the NHS more than £11.4 billion every year, with the wider societal costs of ill health estimated at £74.3 billion.⁸

The health benefits of physical activity extend beyond weight management. Research published in *The Lancet* found that those who exercised for over 90 minutes per week had a 14% reduced risk of all-cause mortality, and a three-year longer life expectancy.⁹ Similarly, studies published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* showed that achieving these activity levels reduced the risk of cardiovascular disease by 17%.¹⁰

⁵ NHS England (n.d.), [Harnessing the benefits of physical activity](#).

⁶ Sport England (2024), [Active Lives](#).

⁷ Lord Darzi (2024), [Independent investigation of the NHS in England](#).

⁸ Office for Life Sciences (2025), [Obesity Healthcare Goals](#).

⁹ Minimum amount of physical activity for reduced mortality and extended life expectancy: a prospective cohort study. Wen, Chi Pang et al. *The Lancet*, Volume 378, Issue 9798, 1244 - 1253.

¹⁰ University of Cambridge (2023), [Daily 11 minute brisk walk enough to reduce risk of early death](#).

Yet, if physical activity is medicine, it is not reaching those who need it most. Too many people cannot easily find or engage in exercise opportunities that suit them due to a lack of awareness and accessibility. The challenge of physical inactivity, intertwined with health inequality, demands a new approach. We need to remove the barriers that keep people from being active, especially in underserved communities. One critical way to do this is to improve how information about activity opportunities is shared and accessed locally. This is the central idea behind building national data infrastructure for health and wellbeing.

The case for national data infrastructure

Strong, trustworthy data infrastructure is the lifeblood of the modern economy, comparable to essential utilities like clean water, transport networks and energy systems. The ODI views such infrastructure as crucial for people, communities and organisations to thrive in today's data-enabled world. Just as physical infrastructure connects localities, data infrastructure connects information to those who need it, enabling decision-making and catalysing innovative services.

Data infrastructure built on common standards and interoperability can address pressing challenges by breaking down silos between systems and organisations. The ODI's response to the UK's industrial strategy consultation emphasises that a central authority should develop cross-sector data standards to ensure different systems can work together effectively.¹¹ International models demonstrate how thriving data ecosystems emerge when standards are consistently applied. The ODI's five-year strategy stresses that open data provides the best foundation for such infrastructure, as it is the starting point for unlocking data's full value across society and the economy.¹²

As data becomes increasingly central to public service delivery, including via the newly created [Mayoral Data Council](#), OpenActive offers a proven model for how open standards can enhance efficiency, drive innovation and improve outcomes. It supports the government's 'AI Opportunities Action Plan' by providing high-quality, structured data that can power smarter, more personalised public health interventions.

¹¹ Kilcoyne, M. et al. (2025). Open Data Institute, [Invest 2035: The UK's Modern Industrial Strategy](#).

¹² Open Data Institute (n.d.), [Our strategy](#).

Physical activity data

The need for robust data infrastructure is particularly acute in the context of sport and physical activity; to promote physical activity as a cornerstone of public health, the UK requires standardised and widely adopted ways of sharing data about opportunities to be active. OpenActive fulfils this role. This set of open data standards is a shared 'language' for publishing information, allowing physical activity opportunities to be described in a consistent, machine-readable format. Through these standards, information about classes, sports facilities, group activities and events can flow seamlessly between organisations and digital platforms, enabling a growing ecosystem of activity-finder apps and websites that help people discover opportunities to get active.

"It [OpenActive] should be seen as a part of infrastructure in the same way as roads and electricity networks and the like."

- *Anonymous stakeholder*¹³

Its impact is already evident. More than 4,000 activity providers,¹⁴ from large leisure chains to sports facilities and community groups, publish information about their sessions and facilities in an open, standard format. This creates more than three million monthly discoverable activity opportunities (rising to more than five million in summer when more activities are available).¹⁵ As a result, anyone using an OpenActive-powered service can search a vast range of local activities – dance classes, football games, group runs, gym sessions, and more – aggregated from providers nationwide. Badminton England, the national governing body for badminton, for instance, found that by adopting OpenActive it could dramatically widen the visibility of its sessions:

¹³ Interviews conducted as part of a review of OpenActive in July and August 2024.

¹⁴ Joshi, K. & Newman, A. (2024),. Open Data Institute, [OpenActive Phase 5 Impact Report](#).

¹⁵ Ibid.

"Thanks to OpenActive, the number of activities we promote through our activity finder is increasing, making it easier and more convenient for players to find local opportunities to play badminton... As more organisations launch their own activity finders, all badminton sessions and venues we list are automatically promoted on those platforms, giving badminton a wider reach."

- *Aleisha Challands, Badminton England*¹⁶

This connectivity illustrates how data standards can transform fragmented information into shared infrastructure. When data is published in a standard way, it can be accessed and reused by many parties. By speaking the same data language, leisure operators, devolved leaders and app developers can collaborate more easily to implement local preventative health strategies and address the new statutory duty on health equalities. The momentum behind OpenActive as a national standard is growing. In summer 2024, 56% of stakeholders surveyed in the sport and physical activity sector supported making OpenActive a mandated industry standard.¹⁷ Formal recognition by the government's Data Standards Authority would ensure the consistency, scale and long-term sustainability of this approach.

An ecosystem of data

OpenActive doesn't exist in isolation. It complements other data initiatives that could potentially collectively form a comprehensive ecosystem for public wellbeing. Within the sport and physical activity sector in England, Active Places maintains a detailed sports facility database; Moving Communities measures physical activity levels and other key performance metrics; and Active Lives is a dataset providing insights on how people are getting active. There is also interest in the development of a data specification to unlock Active Travel's potential, while researchers from the University of Southampton and Ordnance Survey have outlined the need for robust spatial data infrastructure for active travel to be successful¹⁸.

¹⁶ Marley, T. (2023), [How forward-thinking organisations use open data to get more people active](#).

¹⁷ Interviews conducted as part of a review of OpenActive in July and August 2024.

¹⁸ [An integrated geospatial data model for active travel infrastructure](#).

Beyond sport, the parallel open standard Open Referral UK (ORUK)¹⁹ provides structured data on broader community services. By aligning with ORUK, OpenActive ensures that data about sport and physical activity sits alongside data about other health-promoting community activities. In practice, these initiatives work together seamlessly. For example, someone on a social prescribing platform could use ORUK to find a local diabetes support group and OpenActive to find a suitable beginner exercise class. Together, they form a joined-up data framework that supports community-based care.

Recognising OpenActive as critical national data infrastructure aligns with the UK government's ambitions. The government has proposed the creation of a National Data Library to improve public service delivery through structured, standardised data.²⁰ By incorporating OpenActive into such initiatives, policymakers – including devolved leaders – can use data-enabled solutions to improve health outcomes, strengthen services and build a more active, resilient population.

With strong data infrastructure, we can tackle complex problems like physical inactivity in smarter, more coordinated ways. The next section explores how such infrastructure can directly support health and wellbeing through closer integration with healthcare and community services.

Introduction: key takeaways

- Physical inactivity affects more than a quarter of UK adults and there are substantial health inequalities, with the most deprived areas having significantly higher inactivity rates.
- Current fragmented information creates barriers to participation; many people cannot easily find suitable opportunities to get active.
- National data infrastructure offers a solution by connecting physical activity information to those who need it most.
- Open data standards like OpenActive provide the foundation for this infrastructure, turning fragmented information into a connected resource.

¹⁹ [Open Referral UK](#).

²⁰ Department for Science, Innovation & Technology (2025), [AI Opportunities Action Plan](#).

National data infrastructure for health and wellbeing

The UK ranks 11th out of 15 comparable European nations for physical activity levels and is the third highest on healthcare costs attributable to inactivity.²¹ One of the government's urgent priorities is to build an NHS that is fit for the future, including cutting record-high waiting lists. A key strategy for achieving this is preventing people from getting ill in the first place, thereby reducing demand on health services.²²

As the NHS shifts towards a preventative healthcare model, initiatives like social prescribing (where clinicians refer patients to non-medical activities to improve health) have gained momentum. Physical activity is among the most effective preventative health measures available. The World Health Organization (WHO) highlights that exercise contributes to preventing and managing various chronic conditions, from cardiovascular disease, diabetes and obesity, to depression and anxiety, and generally improves overall wellbeing.²³ Research suggests that effective social prescribing of physical activity could avert 3.2 to 3.8 million GP appointments annually, easing pressure on primary care.²⁴

Evidence shows that one in four people would be more active if advised by a healthcare professional²⁵ – potentially resulting in 2.9 million fewer inactive adults in England. In its guidance on physical activity, NHS England has emphasised the need to empower health and care professionals to 'signpost patients to physical activity opportunities and events'.²⁶ However, there is a lack of standardised data and digital infrastructure to connect healthcare professionals with local physical activity options.

²¹ Sport + Recreation Alliance (n.d.), [Make the United Kingdom the most active nation in Europe](#).

²² Change NHS (n.d.), [The three shifts](#).

²³ World Health Organization (2024), [Physical Activity Fact Sheet](#).

²⁴ Frontier Economics, [The role of data in unlocking the potential of social prescribing](#).

²⁵ NHS England (n.d.), [Harnessing the benefits of physical activity](#).

²⁶ Ibid.

Empowering referral networks with better data

A National Academy for Social Prescribing study found that a ‘lack of knowledge of physical activity opportunities in the local community’²⁷ is a key barrier for those making referrals. Likewise, a Sheffield Hallam University report recommended developing better links between social prescribing services and activity providers so that link workers know what is on offer nearby.²⁸ Furthermore, in an analysis of survey data commissioned by the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID), 57% of GPs said that better understanding of local exercise options would help them have more productive conversations with patients about physical activity.²⁹

OpenActive provides a structured, open data framework that can connect healthcare, social prescribing networks and community physical activity providers. Using the OpenActive standard, information about local exercise opportunities – from gentle walking groups in parks to dance classes at leisure centres – can be integrated into healthcare professionals' tools and systems. For example, if they use a social prescribing platform during a consultation, OpenActive integration would allow them to pull up a list of relevant activities in the patient's vicinity, filtered by time, location or suitability for that person's condition. This integration can be made even more potent by linking with ORUK, the standard for community services data. ORUK has already been successfully integrated via application processing interfaces (APIs) into systems at various councils (such as Bristol, Buckinghamshire and Hull) and organisations like the Care Quality Commission.³⁰ Building on ORUK's model, OpenActive data can be plugged into NHS systems to create a seamless referral pathway from a healthcare professional's recommendation to community activity.

²⁷ Polley M. & Sabey A. (2022), National Association for Social Prescribing. [An evidence review of social prescribing and physical activity.](#)

²⁸ Dayson, C. et al. (2022), [Social Prescribing and Physical Activity: Scoping an Agenda for Policy, Practice and Research.](#)

²⁹ Lowe, A. et al. (2022), [Physical activity promotion by GPs: a cross-sectional survey in England.](#)

³⁰ [Open Referral UK.](#)

Case study: testing the use of open data in referral settings

London Sport supported five pilot projects to explore the use of open data in referral settings, focusing on the workforce of professionals and volunteers involved in community referral schemes, also referred to as ‘link workers’. Those involved in the pilots were positive about the potential of open data and highlighted several promising benefits.

In the Borough of Waltham Forest, Digital Coproduction integrated an aggregated OpenActive data feed into its Service Finder tool. Feedback from link workers indicated that they could save up to 50% of their time per service user when suggesting activities, compared to traditional methods. If each link worker supports 250 patients a year, this efficiency translates to roughly two weeks of time freed up annually, which can be reinvested in helping more patients or providing more personalised care.

In addition to efficiency, the pilot projects found that integration of open data helped them to make better recommendations. Features such as creating a ‘favourites list’ enabled greater collaboration between link workers and service users, supporting shared decision-making and increasing the likelihood of participation. Link workers reported that the ability to quickly browse up-to-date, locally available activities was particularly valuable in recommending appropriate activities to suit the needs of each individual service user.

Another highlighted benefit of using open data infrastructure in referral settings is the potential to deliver technical software solutions faster and cheaper than by developing bespoke platforms. As open data standards continue to evolve, and more digital platforms that utilise open data become available, referral services will have greater opportunities to integrate these tools into their existing workflows, enabling link workers to access accurate, up-to-date information on local activities more efficiently.³¹

³¹ London Sport (2021), [Using physical activity open data in referral settings](#).

Case study: strengthening local collaboration in the Black Country

In the Black Country region – the most inactive part of England – a concerted effort is underway to use data to reduce health inequalities. Active Black Country, a local partnership, found that 35.9% of adults in its area (covering Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton) do less than 30 minutes of moderate activity a week.³² When they surveyed health professionals about referring patients to exercise, two issues emerged: a lack of knowledge about what activities are available, and a lack of confidence in discussing physical activity in a health context.

In response, Active Black Country invested in Black Country Moving, a new activity-finder platform powered by OpenActive open data. This platform provides the local health and care workforce – including GPs and volunteer community workers – with real-time information on local physical activities. At the click of a button, they can find everything from beginner-friendly park walks and chair-based exercise classes (suitable for those with health conditions), to more vigorous gym sessions or sports, all pulled from live data feeds.

The Black Country initiative directly addressed the knowledge gap by equipping healthcare providers with this resource, making it far easier for a doctor or link worker to say: ‘Here’s something in your area you could try.’ Such efforts can have significant health outcomes, meet statutory duties under devolution agreements, and support the English Devolution White Paper’s ambition to boost collaborative partnerships with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport’s (DCMS’s) arm’s-length bodies.³³

Towards a seamless health data ecosystem

By integrating data on physical activity into the fabric of health and social care through OpenActive and ORUK, we can create a virtuous circle: healthcare professionals become more confident and proactive in recommending exercise; individuals face fewer hurdles in taking up those recommendations; and local activity providers see increased participation. Seamless

³² Salmon, M. (2023), [Addressing health inequalities in the Black Country](#).

³³ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2024), [English Devolution White Paper](#).

data integration with NHS digital systems streamlines the referral process and lays the groundwork for future innovations, such as AI-driven recommendations.

With a robust data infrastructure, in future, an NHS app might suggest tailored local activities to patients based on their health profile, turning vague advice to ‘be more active’ into concrete, accessible plans for each individual. It would allow users to find local exercise opportunities under the same umbrella as their medical records and appointment bookings. This means that a recommendation by a health professional could just as easily be for a walking football session as for a medication; and as easy to find and book as to pick up a prescription at a chemist.

Case study: Singapore’s HealthHub

There are international examples that demonstrate the potential of this approach. Singapore’s HealthHub platform, for example, integrates personal medical records with wellness resources and even includes a national steps challenge with gamified rewards to encourage citizens to move more.³⁴

During one challenge, participants’ average daily step counts increased by more than 1,500.³⁵ This was achieved by seamlessly merging health data with activity data and incentivising engagement. HealthHub serves as a public-private initiative that integrates various health record systems, including the National Electronic Health Record and the National Immunisation Registry, while providing wellness resources.³⁶ The lesson for the UK is that by taking a similarly integrated approach, using the NHS App or other digital health portals to link people to fitness activities and even reward schemes, we could increase physical activity at population scale.

³⁴ [HealthHub](#).

³⁵ Yao, J. et al. (2022), [Evaluation of a Population- Wide Mobile Health Physical Activity Program in 696 907 Adults in Singapore](#).

³⁶ [HealthHub](#).

Integration with NHS clinical care pathways

Integrating OpenActive into specific NHS clinical care pathways is a significant opportunity to embed physical activity recommendations at crucial moments in patient journeys. NHS England, in its recent guidance ‘Harnessing the benefits of physical activity’, recommended ‘four ways forward’, including integrating physical activity into clinical care pathways. They cited NICE guidelines that recognise the important role of physical activity in managing a range of conditions: ‘Physical activity, exercise or activity related community rehabilitation is recommended in 98 NICE clinical and NICE condition specific guidelines and quality standards including those for cardiovascular conditions, musculoskeletal conditions, mental health conditions, cancers, falls in older people, fertility problems, irritable bowel syndrome, liver disease and ante- and post-natal care (Sport England, 2024).’³⁷ There are opportunities for OpenActive to support a broad range of these conditions. Three examples are:

For musculoskeletal (MSK) conditions, which account for significant NHS resource use and are a leading cause of work absence, OpenActive can enhance the care pathway at a number of points. When healthcare professionals discuss treatment options with patients experiencing MSK issues, having immediate access to appropriate physical activity opportunities, from gentle rehabilitation classes to condition-specific exercise programmes, can transform general advice into actionable steps. The NHS MSK pathway involves multiple touchpoints across primary and secondary care. OpenActive data could provide healthcare professionals with up-to-date information about local, appropriate activities tailored to the patient's specific condition, mobility level, and recovery at each stage.

In mental health, particularly for young people experiencing depression and anxiety, physical activity has been recognised as an effective complementary intervention. The NHS mental healthcare pathway, which emphasises early intervention and personalised care, could incorporate OpenActive data to connect patients with community-based activities that support mental wellbeing. At the point where a healthcare professional or talking therapist recommends increased physical activity, the ability to immediately identify and suggest local

³⁷ NHS England (n.d.), [Harnessing the benefits of physical activity](#).

opportunities that match the individual's interests, confidence levels and specific needs could significantly increase uptake.

The perioperative care pathway for patients undergoing surgery presents another integration opportunity. NHS initiatives like Prepwell and Fitter Better Sooner already emphasise the importance of physical conditioning before surgery and structured activity during recovery. OpenActive could enhance these programmes by connecting patients to appropriate pre-surgery fitness opportunities and post-operative rehabilitation activities. When surgeons or pre-operative assessment teams discuss preparation for procedures, having direct access to suitable local activities could help patients improve their fitness ahead of surgery, potentially leading to better outcomes and faster recovery times.

Across all care pathways, the integration points would leverage existing NHS digital infrastructure and workflows. For instance, social prescribing link workers who connect patients to community services could use OpenActive-powered platforms to identify and recommend appropriate physical activities. Similarly, the NHS App could incorporate OpenActive data to suggest tailored activity options based on a patient's health profile and care pathway. The 'four ways forward' to physical activity explicitly calls for 'signposting patients to physical activity opportunities and events' and 'integrating physical activity into clinical pathways';³⁸ these are aims that OpenActive directly supports through its standardised, accessible activity data. In practice, a sensible approach might be to focus initially on a small subset of care pathways, to help support NHS priority areas.

By enabling healthcare professionals to make specific, local, relevant activity recommendations at key points in care pathways, OpenActive can help bridge the gap between clinical advice and practical action, potentially improving outcomes while reducing pressure on NHS services.

³⁸ NHS England (n.d.), [Harnessing the benefits of physical activity](#).

Case study: addressing information gaps in maternal health

The need for better information on opportunities to be physically active is especially evident during the preconception, pregnancy and postnatal life stages. The Active Pregnancy Foundation (APF) found that up to 75% of women do not meet physical activity guidelines when pregnant,³⁹ despite WHO recommendations and evidence showing physical activity can reduce complications like pre-eclampsia, gestational diabetes and postpartum depression.⁴⁰

Research conducted by the ODI and the APF revealed that a key barrier is a lack of the specific information that women need to feel confident in participating, such as assurances about safety, instructor qualifications, and the availability of relevant amenities like breastfeeding facilities.⁴¹ Healthcare professionals similarly lack trusted sources to enable them to recommend appropriate activities.

‘This project is one mammoth undertaking but the potential impact of linking women to opportunities to be active throughout their childbearing years cannot be understated,’ notes APF chief executive Dr Marlize DeVivo. The foundation is now exploring the development of a national directory of activity providers, including integration of OpenActive data, to support women during pregnancy and beyond.

The economy: a healthier, more productive workforce

Ill health is not just a medical issue; it is an economic one. When many people are inactive or have preventable diseases, productivity suffers and public finances come under strain. At present, poor health among working-age adults is estimated to reduce UK productivity by the equivalent of 1% of GDP each year.⁴² As noted earlier, 26 million people are economically inactive due to long-term health issues, including the family and friends who support them.⁴³

³⁹ De Vivo, M. et al. (2024), [MOMentum Lost: Unpicking Maternal Physical Activity Patterns in 2022](#).

⁴⁰ World Health Organization (2020), [WHO Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour](#).

⁴¹ OpenActive (2020), [Staying Active in Pregnancy and Beyond](#).

⁴² Commission for Healthier Working Lives (2024), [Towards a Healthier Workforce](#).

⁴³ Department for Science, Innovation & Technology (2025), [A blueprint for modern technology](#).

Sport England has warned that by 2030, 40% of working-age adults could have at least one long-term health condition, further reducing workforce participation and productivity.⁴⁴

Physical inactivity, in particular, carries a hefty economic price tag. Research by ukactive shows that inactivity accounts for around 10% of the total societal costs of major public health concerns (in the same league as smoking or obesity) and costs each local authority in England approximately £18 million per 100,000 population in healthcare and welfare expenditure every year.⁴⁵ Even a modest improvement, for example reducing inactivity by 1% per year for five years, could save an estimated £1.2 billion in healthcare costs for local authorities, according to that analysis.⁴⁶

OpenActive contributes to the economic mission in several ways. First, helping more people get active can improve overall workforce health and reduce sickness absence. A more active population means higher productivity and fewer days lost to illness. It also means that more people out of work due to health issues might re-enter employment. The government's mission to 'kickstart economic growth' and boost employment is well served by initiatives that improve health at scale. Government research valued sport and physical activity's direct contribution to the economy at £99.6 billion in 2021, £86.8 billion of which comes from people participating in sport (as opposed to spectating at sports).⁴⁷

Additionally, the social value of sports and fitness – through, for example, improved health, reduced crime and better educational outcomes – is estimated at more than £100 billion annually.⁴⁸ These figures suggest that increasing participation even slightly can yield huge returns.

By making physical activity opportunities more accessible, OpenActive lowers the barriers for people to engage in sport and exercise, which can enhance these economic benefits. For example, someone who might not have known about a local low-cost gym class might start attending because they found it through an OpenActive-powered app; over time, this could improve their fitness and reduce the chances of them needing time off work due to ill health.

⁴⁴ Sport England (2021), [Uniting the Movement](#).

⁴⁵ ukactive (2014). [Turning the tide of inactivity](#).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Department for Culture, Media & Sport (2024), [Sport Satellite Account for the UK 2024: Key findings](#).

⁴⁸ Sport and physical activity generates over £100 billion in social value.

Multiply that scenario by thousands of people, and there is a massive cumulative effect, a healthier workforce and lower healthcare costs.

A cost-benefit analysis by the ODI illustrates OpenActive's substantial potential return on investment. If OpenActive engages just 10,000 previously inactive individuals annually, at a projected healthcare cost saving of £767 per quality-adjusted life year (QALY) per participant, this would generate annual savings of £7.67 million for the NHS; approximately £38.35 million over five years.⁴⁹

Second, OpenActive itself spurs economic activity and innovation. It has led to the creation of new products and services in the fitness-tech sector, and established companies have integrated OpenActive data to give their customers more options. By investing in open standards and data infrastructure, the government can stimulate a market of digital health and fitness services, contributing to economic growth. This is analogous to how opening up transport data led to commercial journey-planning apps, and how releasing geospatial data can create opportunities for location-based services.

Finally, OpenActive – and data infrastructure more broadly – can potentially create efficiencies in delivering public services. Standardising data collection through OpenActive helps streamline operations, reduces duplication and lowers costs for managing fragmented systems. As demonstrated in the Waltham Forest social prescribing pilot described earlier in this paper, OpenActive-enabled solutions can save healthcare workers significant time.

In summary, aligning OpenActive with the government's economic mission, kickstarting growth and 'raising living standards in every part of the United Kingdom',⁵⁰ means recognising it as part of the infrastructure that underpins a healthier, more productive society. It reduces the financial burden on the NHS by enabling preventative care, supports businesses by improving workforce wellbeing (fewer sick days, higher productivity), and boosts the sport and leisure industry – a significant part of the economy – by driving greater participation and consumer engagement. If physical inactivity were reduced and more people were active, the UK could potentially gain billions in GDP; evidence presented to parliament noted that if the UK

⁴⁹ Economic analysis covering OpenActive published in 2019 as part of an ODI report commissioned by Frontier Economics.

⁵⁰ Prime Minister's Office (2024), [Kickstarting Economic Growth](#).

matched the physical activity levels of the best-performing European countries, it could save an extra £3.5 billion in GDP and £1 billion on healthcare, and more than £70 billion in wellbeing benefits each year.⁵¹ OpenActive is a tool to help chase those gains by systematically tackling the inactivity problem.

National data infrastructure for health and wellbeing: key takeaways

- OpenActive directly supports the government's priorities for the NHS by making preventative healthcare more accessible and reducing pressure on services.
- Social prescribing and preventative healthcare require trustworthy, up-to-date information about local activity options, which many healthcare professionals haven't got access to.
- OpenActive provides structured data that can integrate with healthcare systems, enabling immediate access to information about suitable physical activities.
- Clinical care pathways can benefit from embedding physical activity recommendations at key intervention points. Deploying OpenActive in a small number of priority pathways could be a good place to start.
- Case studies demonstrate that standardised activity data saves healthcare professionals' time while connecting more people with appropriate activities.
- The potential outcome is a future in which healthcare systems seamlessly connect patients with physical activity as part of routine care.
- International examples like Singapore's HealthHub demonstrate the transformative potential of integrated data systems.
- Economic benefits include improved workforce productivity, reduced healthcare costs and new opportunities for innovation in the fitness-tech sector.
- The combined healthcare, economic and social benefits of OpenActive represent a significant return on investment for relatively modest infrastructure costs.

⁵¹ Culture, Media and Sport Committee (2025), [Game On: Community and School Sport: written evidence](#).

OpenActive: a template for scaling societal value

The government's digital health strategy, outlined in 'A blueprint for modern digital government', envisions a future in which public services are interconnected and data-driven.⁵² It specifically notes the importance of interoperable digital infrastructure to enable this.⁵³ OpenActive's success thus far provides a template for how open data standards can solve real-world problems. Along with other data standards like ORUK, it is beginning to show how national data infrastructure can start small (in one sector) and scale up. It has also demonstrated the importance of good governance and stewardship; having an organisation like the ODI coordinate and nurture the ecosystem has kept the standards open, neutral and focused on public benefit, rather than becoming proprietary.

Turning to broader national priorities, OpenActive is a living example of data infrastructure delivering societal value. However, we have, so far, seen only a tiny percentage of its potential benefits.

The UK government has committed to a set of key missions, from reducing pressure on the NHS to boosting economic productivity, tackling social inequalities and strengthening communities. Investing in data infrastructure can directly support the achievement of these goals by enabling more effective and efficient interventions. OpenActive may have started in the sport and physical activity sector, but at its heart, it is about creating a healthier population, a stronger economy and more resilient communities.

⁵² Department for Science, Innovation & Technology (2025), [A blueprint for modern technology](#).

⁵³ Ibid.

Beyond physical activity – the bigger picture for data standards

As the UK government prioritises digital inclusion, AI-driven public services and data interoperability, OpenActive’s structured open data model can be extended to support volunteering, community participation and social impact initiatives. Indeed, the ODI and others are exploring extending this approach to areas such as adult social care, children’s services, volunteering and community support.

For example, the volunteering sector is facing challenges in engagement and retention. Part of the issue is that people often don’t know what volunteering opportunities exist, or how to get involved. At the same time, many charities struggle with old-fashioned databases or siloed websites for volunteer recruitment. A UK volunteering platform, Doit, found that most people want to volunteer, yet six in 10 charities struggle to find the necessary volunteers. Research shows that despite a surge in community spirit during Covid-19, many charities have struggled to retain volunteers, and digital tools for volunteering remain underused.⁵⁴ Inequities also persist; volunteering tends to be dominated by more affluent, educated individuals, while others participate less, partly due to a lack of accessible information or flexible opportunities. Data on volunteering is fragmented across thousands of platforms and lists, making it hard to match potential volunteers to the right opportunities.

The solution lies in better digital matching. An open data standard for volunteering opportunities could transform the sector. By adopting it, charities and community groups could publish volunteering roles to feed discovery tools. The government’s ‘Digital Inclusion Action Plan’⁵⁵ and the ‘Blueprint for European Volunteering 2030’⁵⁶ both highlight the need for improved digital infrastructure to support volunteering. Building on OpenActive’s template, an open volunteering standard could make it far easier for willing citizens to connect with causes, thereby tackling the volunteering ‘crisis of engagement’.

⁵⁴ Do it. [Open volunteering: the role of digital in tackling the volunteering crisis](#)

⁵⁵ Department for Science, Innovation & Technology (2025), [AI Opportunities Action Plan](#).

⁵⁶ Centre for European Volunteering (n.d.), [Blueprint for European Volunteering 2030 #BEV2030](#).

OpenActive encourages broader cross-sector opportunities. By fostering deeper collaboration across government, and embedding open data standards across departments, local authorities, industry stakeholders and civil society, we can move towards a more sustainable and expansive data ecosystem.

Communities – a stronger, safer and more inclusive society

Communities benefit when their members are active and engaged. Access to physical activity can strengthen social bonds, reduce antisocial behaviour, and improve mental health and cohesion. Conversely, lack of access to physical activity often mirrors and exacerbates social inequalities. Poorer communities tend to have lower physical activity rates and worse health outcomes. Sport England estimates that about £15.6 billion in social value is lost annually due to inequalities in access to sport and physical activity. Its data shows that 34% of adults in deprived areas are inactive, compared to 22% in less deprived areas. For children, the gap is equally concerning: 39% of children from the least affluent families do less than 30 minutes of activity daily, compared to 26% from the most affluent⁵⁷.

OpenActive aligns with the government's goals around prioritising disadvantaged areas and enhancing community wellbeing. By ensuring that data about activities is open and accessible, it acts as an equaliser. It makes it easier for local authorities, devolved mayors, strategic authorities, charities and community organisations to pinpoint gaps (areas or groups with few opportunities) and fill them, because the data highlights where 'activity deserts' might exist. It also makes it easier for people in those communities to find opportunities. Better data can guide investment to where it is needed most, thereby ensuring that new facilities or programmes are set up in the right places. Active Partnerships⁵⁸ in some pilot areas have used data to reduce inactivity significantly among both children and adults. By embedding OpenActive data into local public health efforts, councils can measure and drive progress on narrowing the activity gap between, say, a borough like Barking and Dagenham (where only 49% of adults are active) and one like Brighton and Hove (where 79% are active).⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Sport England (2025), [First 53 Place Expansion Partnerships Announced](#).

⁵⁸ [Sport England: Active Partnerships](#)

⁵⁹ Sport England (2024), [Active Lives](#).

The government has emphasised cracking down on antisocial behaviour and is prioritising the provision of positive opportunities for young people. Sport and physical activities are proven tools for youth engagement and crime prevention. A 2022 report on the youth justice system stated that sport can be a cost-effective intervention to prevent crime or re-offending, especially when combined with other support, due to its ability to build discipline, self-esteem and social ties.⁶⁰ Many communities run sport-based programmes for at-risk youth, including football leagues, boxing clubs and outdoor adventure courses, to divert young people from crime or gang involvement. OpenActive can bolster these efforts by ensuring that those running youth services, as well as police community support officers, school counsellors and others, can easily find and promote local opportunities for young people.

The government envisions a network of youth hubs. With OpenActive, once those hubs list their activities in the standard format, every GP, teacher, social worker or volunteer in that area could see the schedule at a glance through whatever app or system they use. This helps knit together the safety net for young people, where everyone can play a part in guiding them toward positive activities, because the information is transparent. The Sport for Development Coalition (SFDC) recommends forging strong partnerships between youth justice services and physical activity providers.⁶¹ OpenActive and ORUK together strengthen such partnerships by improving data sharing.

Using data standards, schools and local authorities can be better equipped to offer sports and exercise outside of school hours. For instance, many school sports halls or pitches are under-used resources; projects like the Opening School Facilities (OSF) programme have identified that schools often do little marketing of these facilities and would welcome support to do so. An OSF report suggests that helping schools become OpenActive-compliant (by publishing their activity schedules as open data) would enable the community to find and book school facilities more easily.

The common thread across these examples – inequality, youth crime and children’s development – is that data can potentially target and deliver community interventions more

⁶⁰ Local Government Association (n.d.), [Using a SportPlus approach to improve support and outcomes for young people in or at risk of entering the Youth Justice System](#).

⁶¹ Mason, C. et al (2024), [Getting on Track](#).

effectively. OpenActive aligns with the government's community priorities by acting as an enabler, helping good initiatives work better. OpenActive can turn the patchwork of community sport and physical activity programmes into a more integrated picture. The same principles can apply to volunteering, cultural events or any community service, taking the potential beyond physical activity to the bigger picture of data standards driving transformation across public services.

A national data standards institution

The government has already recognised the importance of high-quality data and digital infrastructure for driving efficient public service delivery. A national data standards institution, including standards like OpenActive and ORUK, would help deliver the government's aims for digitalising the state.

The 'AI Opportunities Action Plan', which highlights the need for structured, standardised data to support AI-driven public services, also emphasises the need to unlock high-quality data assets, build sustainable AI infrastructure, and use digital innovation to improve public services.⁶² A national data standards institution would align directly with these ambitions. As the government seeks to use AI to drive economic growth and efficiency in public services, open data standards can form a vital part of this ecosystem, enabling AI-driven solutions for a range of social issues.

A national data standards institution could also support the National Data Library initiative, which seeks to improve public sector data infrastructure. Data standards can be embedded as a core component of this effort, supporting new efficiencies in preventative healthcare, streamlining social prescribing, and ensuring that physical activity data becomes a foundational part of the UK's digital public infrastructure.

The government has acknowledged that siloed data hinders collaboration and that high-friction data-sharing agreements can take months or even years to negotiate. In its 'Digital Inclusion Action Plan', the government outlines that 'we want to use technology to grow the economy, reform our public services and make life better for every citizen. That means creating

⁶² Department for Science, Innovation & Technology (2025), [AI Opportunities Action Plan](#).

a future where everyone can safely access and use digital products and services that could make their lives happier, healthier and easier.⁶³ Further, the government recognises that 'those who cannot use digital technologies are likely to have worse health outcomes, face higher costs when shopping for everyday items, and are over five times more likely to be unemployed'⁶⁴. Developing key digital infrastructure and making it accessible to citizens is therefore paramount. For example, integrating open data standards with the NHS App or local authority platforms could make social prescribing more effective, ensuring that even those with low digital literacy can be seamlessly connected to local exercise classes, walking groups or accessible fitness sessions.

Beyond individual health, open data standards contribute to place-based digital inclusion, enabling local communities – especially in underserved areas – to benefit from data-driven service delivery. The Digital Inclusion Action Plan highlights the need for public services to be digitally connected and interoperable. OpenActive provides a data standard that can enable local authorities, leisure providers and social services to integrate and share information, ensuring that citizens can access the full range of opportunities available in their area. Additionally, OpenActive creates new opportunities for digital businesses, startups and app developers who can innovate using open data, regardless of where they are in the country.

Case study: Estonia

International experience provides proof of concept for the power of integrated data infrastructure. Estonia, often cited as one of the most digitally advanced societies, has a national data exchange platform called X-Road, which links government and private databases across all sectors.⁶⁵

Citizens and officials can use X-Road to access and share information securely, underpinning services from healthcare to policing. The platform connects more than 52,000 organisations, and processes over two billion data transactions annually.⁶⁶ It has enabled hundreds of e-services and even allowed cross-border data exchange with other countries. The result?

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Department for Science, Innovation & Technology (2025), [AI Opportunities Action Plan](#).

⁶⁵ [X-Road](#).

⁶⁶ [Ibid](#).

Estonia estimates that its digital public services save the country about 2% of GDP annually in avoided bureaucracy and efficiency gains.⁶⁷ This demonstrates that investment in data infrastructure pays off in very tangible ways.

Society-scale value

Moving beyond physical activity, an array of open data standards is emerging to support different needs, such as ORUK for community services and others for volunteering, culture and education. Rather than treating each in isolation, the UK should develop a coordinated approach through a data institution, ensuring these standards are up-to-date, interoperable and adopted across government and sectors.

OpenActive's principles can be replicated and expanded beyond physical activity. The bigger picture is interconnected open data standards driving a smarter state – one where finding any service (be it a fitness class, a volunteering opportunity, a library event or a childcare option) is straightforward, where digital services are inclusive, and where policymakers have the data at their fingertips to craft interventions that cut across traditional boundaries. Achieving this will require seeing data as critical infrastructure and investing accordingly.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

OpenActive: a template for scaling societal value: key takeaways

- OpenActive addresses social inequalities by increasing access to physical activity in underserved areas and providing positive opportunities for young people.
- The principles behind OpenActive can extend beyond physical activity to transform other sectors, such as volunteering, adult social care and community support services.
- A national data standards institution could coordinate multiple open standards, ensuring they remain interoperable, up-to-date and widely adopted across public services.
- Open data standards are becoming as fundamental as physical infrastructure for efficient public service delivery and supporting AI-driven innovation.
- International examples like Estonia's X-Road platform demonstrate that investment in data infrastructure delivers tangible economic returns, with Estonia estimating that its digital public services save the country approximately 2% of GDP annually.
- Creating an interconnected ecosystem of open data standards would enable citizens to more easily discover and access any community service, from exercise classes to volunteering opportunities.
- OpenActive can support mayoral strategic authorities in fulfilling their devolved responsibilities under the English Devolution White Paper by providing essential local activity data.

Policy recommendations

As the UK navigates rising NHS demand, economic uncertainty and widening health inequalities, supporting a national data standards institution offers a cost-effective, data-driven solution for long-term sustainability across multiple policy areas. To maximise impact in health, social care and community services, the ODI recommends three key policy interventions:

1. Establish data standards as critical public infrastructure

Recommendation: Formally recognise OpenActive and complementary open standards as fundamental components of national data infrastructure, with appropriate governance and support for their adoption.

Implementation steps:

- Work with the central Data Standards Authority to formally endorse OpenActive (and related standards like ORUK) as official government data standards. This endorsement would encourage all public bodies and contracted service providers to adopt these standards. For example, formally endorsing OpenActive would enable consistent integration with priority NHS clinical care pathways, ensuring healthcare professionals across all systems use the same reliable physical activity data.
- Create cross-departmental coordination mechanisms (for example, a working group spanning the DCMS, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) to ensure consistent implementation of open activity data across different initiatives, from social prescribing to community sports programmes. This could be overseen by the proposed data standards institution to align efforts.

Expected outcomes:

- **Consistency** – physical activity data would be structured and shared uniformly across all regions and systems, making it far easier to integrate and scale successful solutions.
- **Interoperability** – improved data exchange between public health, healthcare, social care and community services. For example, an NHS system could readily pull in community activity data, and a local council system could consume NHS referral data with minimal friction.
- **Innovation** – a stable, widely adopted standard provides a platform for innovators to build upon. Entrepreneurs and community organisations alike would be more willing to invest in new apps, analytics or services if they know the data infrastructure is here to stay and is reliable. This could lead to more tools that help people get active or otherwise improve public wellbeing.

2. Embed open activity data in cross-departmental health strategies

Recommendation: Integrate OpenActive into NHS preventative health frameworks, social prescribing pathways and digital health initiatives as a core component, rather than a standalone project.

Implementation steps:

- Develop a formal integration between OpenActive and the NHS App. For instance, add a feature powered by OpenActive that allows users to search for local exercise opportunities relevant to their health conditions (for example, heart-friendly activities, antenatal exercise classes).
- Explicitly include OpenActive in NHS England's social prescribing guidance and frameworks. When commissioning social prescribing link worker services or developing referral platforms, mandate that they use OpenActive data for the physical activity element of social prescriptions.

- Create best practice guidance and training for healthcare professionals on using standardised activity data. This could involve disseminating case studies (like the Waltham Forest pilot) and tutorials on how to make referrals to activities using OpenActive-powered systems. Building confidence and awareness is key to uptake.
- Support local integrated care systems (ICSs) to adopt open standards for community health. For example, provide seed funding or technical support for an ICS to integrate OpenActive into its population health management dashboards, so it can monitor activity opportunities in its area as part of health outcomes work. Encourage collaboration between ICSs and Active Partnerships to populate and use the data.
- Integration with specific clinical care pathways, perhaps starting with a small subset of NHS priority areas, would demonstrate immediate value, showing how standardised activity data can enhance patient journeys from clinical settings to community-based physical activity.

Expected outcomes:

- **More effective referrals** – healthcare professionals will be able to seamlessly connect patients with physical activity opportunities, leading to greater follow-through. A patient given a concrete referral or booking is much more likely to participate than one that is just told to ‘try to exercise’.
- **Reduced burden on primary care** – improved preventative interventions will help reduce demand on GPs and frontline services by keeping people healthier.
- **Better targeting of resources** – ICSs and public health teams will be able to identify where inactivity is highest and allocate programmes or funding accordingly.
- **Quantifiable improvements in population physical activity levels** – over time, consistent use of open activity data will make it easier to measure increases in activity and the correlation with health outcomes.

3. Create a sustainable governance model for public data standards

Recommendation: Establish a data institution to steward multiple public service data standards, ensuring continued development and interoperability.

Implementation steps:

- Develop a sustainable model for ongoing standards maintenance and evolution.
- Create a cross-sector coalition of stakeholders to guide future development.
- Build capacity within public bodies to implement and maintain open data approaches.
- Establish clear metrics for measuring adoption and impact.

Expected outcomes:

- **Long-term sustainability** – critical data infrastructure will have dedicated support and oversight, rather than relying on time-limited projects or ad-hoc funding.
- **Coordinated approach** – multiple public service data standards (across sectors such as health, care and transport) can be managed in harmony, avoiding duplication and divergence.
- **Improved efficiency** – shared resources and expertise in a data standards institution will reduce costs and effort for individual sectors developing standards in isolation.
- **Greater innovation** – having consistent, reliable open data across sectors will spur innovation, as developers and organisations can build on stable foundations to create new services.

Conclusion

The evidence is clear that physical activity yields profound benefits for individual health, community resilience and economic productivity. Yet too often, the data linking people to these local opportunities is fragmented and inaccessible. As demonstrated throughout this paper, open data standards like OpenActive provide the connective tissue needed to transform how services are delivered, and how citizens access opportunities that improve their health and wellbeing.

OpenActive shows how structured, standardised data can democratise access to services, particularly for underserved communities facing the most significant health inequalities. By making opportunities to be active more discoverable and accessible, this open data standard has already begun to transform the physical activity landscape. Its full potential will only be realised when it becomes fully embedded within national data infrastructure, alongside complementary standards like Open Referral UK. OpenActive should not stand alone as a niche project – it should be part of an integrated ecosystem of data standards underpinning public services.

The UK government's priority missions, from cutting NHS waiting times to boosting economic growth, rely on effective, data-enabled interventions that connect people to the right services at the right time. Whether it's helping a patient find an exercise class to manage their diabetes or guiding a young person to an evening sports club instead of the street corner, data is often the missing link between intent and action. By formally recognising data standards as critical infrastructure, integrating them into health, care and community strategies, and investing in sustainable governance, policymakers can unlock the transformative power of data to address some of the UK's most pressing challenges.

As noted earlier in this paper, and as Lord Darzi's recent NHS report highlighted,⁶⁸ millions of people are economically inactive due to long-term sickness, creating both a human cost in reduced quality of life and an economic burden in lost productivity. This is precisely the kind of complex problem that lies at the intersection of health, the economy and inequality. No single

⁶⁸ Lord Darzi (2024). Independent investigation of the NHS in England.

policy will solve it overnight, but connecting the dots between data, digital transformation, preventative healthcare and community engagement offers a strategic approach to tackling it at the root. Open data standards like OpenActive help make those connections.

The time has come to recognise data infrastructure as fundamental to our national wellbeing. With sustained commitment to open standards, including OpenActive, the UK can build a more connected, efficient and equitable public service landscape that supports a healthier, more active and more prosperous society.