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# Open data surgery at the UK's NHS Business Services Authority - providing user access to vital information



By **Mark Samuels** February 8, 2024



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**SUMMARY:** NHS Business Services Authority's open publishing approach supported 7.5 million transactions last year.



NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA) is an arm's length body of the UK Government's Department of Health and Social Care, is responsible for the delivery of services that account for about £43 billion of NHS



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access to any of its large datasets. Today, that situation has changed. NHSBA and the people that use its services can now tap into an Open Data Portal, where important information is made available in a machine-readable format.

Paul Westrip, Service Lead at NHSBSA, explains:

**"** *We didn't publish trends or information on things that might happen – for example, in HRT prescribing – and any data science projects that ran were very useful but delivered only internally or to a select few stakeholders. The big thing is that there's now one place where all our open data lives. It's searchable and it has metadata tags.*

## Overcoming challenges

While there were some considerable technological blockers, the cultural barriers were even more critical, according to Westrip:

**"** *The risk-averse nature of our approach made us feel like, 'Well, if we collect the data, we hold the data, we package it, and then we can choose who gets hold of it, no one can tell us we're doing anything wrong.' It was just a cultural thing that we needed to overcome. In broad terms, we felt we needed to make data open.*

Some data was brought together and presented to NHS colleagues through an Information Services Portal. While people could log on and access data, the collected insight only represented a small amount of the total information available. What's more, technical limitations meant it was difficult to make full use of data, says Westrip:

**"** *It wasn't machine-readable, there was no API connectivity, no metadata, and there was limited documentation. And, as you might have guessed, users weren't happy with this approach. Our feedback said people felt confused, frustrated, and that they were jumping through unnecessary hoops.*

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was also driven by external stakeholders, recalls Westrip:

**"** *All our lovely primary care activity data was only available to a select few people who wanted to make policy choices. People were saying, 'It's not acceptable for it to be so hard for get us to access to all that amazing data.'*

The move to open access at NHSBSA began in 2019, with the development of a publication strategy. Westrip pitches the rationale here as:

**"** *Let's actually tell people what we intend to publish, what we can publish and the journey we want to go on, knowing that we're incomplete and we're not going to do everything that we should be doing straightaway. But let's start that journey.*

Today, the organization benefits from a range of data principles that govern its open access approach, he adds:

**"** *We're open-by-default where we can be and we try to be proactive. We've also driven towards being accessible and towards demonstrating the impact of partnerships.*

## Providing benefits

The Open Data Portal launched in March 2020. The portal was built using CKAN, which is an open source platform for sharing data. The biggest business benefits have come from open access to data. Per Westrip:

**"** *All of a sudden, we were packaging data, we were thinking about what we wanted to publish, and it was machine readable – it was available in CSV format. All data we publish onto the portal can be reached using an API. And the business has decided to publish metadata and data dictionaries alongside everything we do.*

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have been published. There were 7.5 million transactions on the Open Data Portal last year while as many as 6.5 million API calls were made.

Another of the key results of the NSHBSA's open approach to data is a move towards official statistics. The organization is publishing reports and applies a voluntary code of practice, which means the business considers how data is made available. Westrip explains:

**"** *The information's used in research, in academia, and we get huge media interest in our publications, which I think is brilliant. We talk about how we can democratise information for people. Sometimes, information needs to go through the lens of a journalist to package the data up, so people aren't having to sift through documents.*

A recent publication from the statistics team on medicines in mental health was used in 150 different articles. As there's now a big appetite for open data at NHSBSA, Westrip's team wants to do more – and they've created an Open Data Managed Service to help people build a business case:

**"** *We help identify the data that will be suitable for publication. We take people through a discovery and planning stage, where they can do research, engage with stakeholders, and talk to users. And we try to take people through the governance process, looking at what they need to do and how they might persuade people.*

Westrip and his colleagues regularly publish up-to-date information on Open Data Portal user numbers, so people can see which datasets and reports have been used. The long-term objectives is to work with other NHS organisations and ensure the user is always at the centre of the open access approach:

The aim in the next year to 18 months is to develop a hub, which is a data platform for all users to access dashboards, open data, narrative reports, data science reports, and all that lovely stuff.

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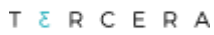
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Thanks Greg - I don't see the co-pilot being the peak of AI yet. A co-pilot is only as good as the data it has and the automations it can invoke. Right now the easier stuff has already been...

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**greg\_not\_so:**

Hi Jon,

in my mind, copilot is going to be the peak of AI, whichever enterprise manages to stay independent from all microsoft - will benefit in the long run.

cheers,  
greg

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**cliveb:**

Perhaps ERP functionality is different for tier 3 vs tier 1; SMEs vs Fortune 5000. SMB/SMEs will always buy cutting edge ERP that holds promise to help generate profits over HRM/CRM. Conversely...

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**Jon Reed:**

"It's fundamental that ERP includes capabilities to plan that give an edge" another area of disagreement :) I believe third party software can excel in next gen planning which would include...

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**cliveb:**

All acknowledged, except for MRP not being considered part of core ERP, although it may have fallen out of favor, or not even been part of post y2k era vendors concentrated in HRM/CRM. As US...

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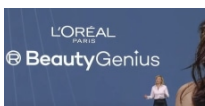
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