

Open:UK[®]



Making the UK the
Home of Open Source



Building a firm “foundation” for UK home of open source AI

Open Source Infrastructure, AI and the UK - OpenUK proposals to UKRI

One year ago, OpenUK brought its collective industry expertise to UKRI, commissioned to look at how we could build sustainable digital infrastructure for the UK, enhance the country’s leadership position in digital and AI, and build capacity from the UK.

OpenUK shared a suite of recommendations for UKRI and now, in the second phase, we are building these out into programmes of work and designs for the future. These recommendations have not previously been publicly shared.

The UK has consistently been the number one country in Europe in both open source software and AI openness. If this leadership position is to continue, we must take note of the focus around openness in the EU and other nation states. We must evolve and learn from what they are doing as we build, as well as bring the power of our unique expertise and depth of experience in open source to bear.

The OpenUK recommendations are designed to enable the UK to fill the missing pieces in the landscape necessary for a successful open source ecosystem to exist and be sustainable, whilst enabling businesses to scale and reduce talent and innovation flight. They are broad-ranging and ambitious.

How to make the UK the home of open source in AI

Designed to enable success by building the landscape that underlies open source in the UK and fill gaps, the recommendations are split into two categories. As a:

- (1) Funder of Innovation:
 - (a) Build an Open Source “National Foundation” for the UK - hold projects and IP locally whilst enabling global collaboration
 - (i) Host and maintain publicly funded projects
 - (ii) Ensure good governance of open source hosted by it
 - (iii) Provide a software steward to meet regulatory requirements
 - (iv) Provide training
 - (v) Build user community engagement
 - (vi) Organise events and a convening point
 - (vii) Engage with global ecosystem of open source
 - (viii) Engage with philanthropic and other potential funding partners
 - (ix) Raise funding
 - (x) Manage the UK’s contribution to and UK fund for open source
 - (xi) Engage with the UK’s global experts
 - (xii) Focus not only on broader open technology infrastructure
 - (xiii) Other associated functions as determined in its scoping - taking place with OpenUK engaging UK and international experts, and updating using EU responses, etc
 - (b) Build Open Source Incubator/ Accelerator to monetise and scale
 - (c) Build practices and processes enabling open source first policy delivery
 - (d) Training to support
 - (e) Ringfence 20% of innovation investment for maintenance and ecosystem
 - (i) Support maintenance of innovation
 - (ii) Contribute to global open source ecosystem
 - (f) Utilise UK insurance markets to build insurance products for open source and AI - using models that have evolved over the last decade
 - (g) Support creation of a new corporate structure for UK-based foundations and co-creation led from UK
 - (h) Support tax breaks for enterprises investing in collaborative innovation

- (i) Support the creation of funding mechanisms supporting sustainable software, including public-sector-led, FCA-approved open source endowment. Extend reach to open technology and build ontology
- (j) Support open standards and consensus adoption in the UK
- (k) Investigate and build public-private partnerships to enable these

(2) User of Innovation:

- (a) Don't build an Open Source Program Office, but build skills centrally and across the public sector
- (b) Build a centralised portfolio/ Repo for the Public Sector with foundation
- (c) Unblock Management with skills
- (d) Support practical approaches and tools as an alternative to regulation
- (e) Shift procurement practices and skills to enable procurement of open source and its maintenance
- (f) Fund global open source at scale - beyond existing sovereign funds
- (g) Participate in more collaborative innovation, and co-creation and encourage practice in UK enterprises
- (h) Investigate public-private partnerships to enable each of the above as appropriate.

Non-Isolationist global approach - Learning from others as we go

The UK has incredible experience and leadership in open source and AI. But it is not the only nation considering this challenge. Every national state is doing so. An EU Consultation on this very topic ended only a couple of weeks ago with 1,658 responses. More than any consultation previously conducted by the EU. OpenUK has also distilled the breadth of these suggestions to understand any enhancement they may offer to last year's recommendations. We will keep a watching brief on this activity and feed any best practices into our work.

AI Sovereignty

In the world of AI, there are three groups of countries:

- (1) "Top Tier": USA and China - able to invest heavily in developing and building frontier AI models with all the expense that is involved;
- (2) "Middle Nations": UK, Singapore, Germany, France, India, Canada and around 10 countries in total, individually lack the funding to build frontier models but have the money to invest in AI systems; and
- (3) Bottom: countries where the budget to build AI systems is not available, so buying services from others is the only option.

We recognise three forms of sovereignty: National, enterprise and individual to be reached.

The UK and the other middle nations seek to build sovereignty in their infrastructure stacks, at a level that enables sustainability and resilience whilst breaking dependency. Open source is being seen as a cornerstone of this. Collaboration is also critical to these nations, and open source may offer cost savings and better innovation to these countries. Our UK "Compute Road Map" published by DSIT last summer recognises that we will not build this infrastructure stack in isolation. Among those middle nations, the UK has a special place and relationships to bring to the table, and this is particularly true of open source.

OpenUK's concept of open source and its UK community as a submarine under the digital economy, powering a significant part of that economy but unrecognised and unrepresented in the UK's policy decisions around technology, is true of the open source environment in middle nations generally. It is due to our scale perhaps more true of the UK than any nation state.

For the UK to have a true impact in AI, it must aim to make the UK the "home of open source AI" as Kanishka Narayan MP, our AI Minister, said a couple of weeks ago.

But how do we do this?

Homing the Homeless

The first step in giving something homeless a home is to build the place in which it will be housed. That central location provides a base on which everything else can be built, and then live.

Open source is generally housed in “foundations” which host the codebase, manage the governance and develop the frameworks for software contribution and collaboration. There are many foundations, but the Linux Foundation is by far the dominant player. Based in the US, it has a turnover of hundreds of millions of dollars per year due to its events and community activities. It is home to over a hundred sub foundations, including one for Europe, taking considerable funding from the EU. It has become the almost default location for significant open source projects that want to build a community.

In December, the Linux Foundation announced the Agentic AI Foundation, with the jewel in its crown, the Model Context Protocol (MCP) standard. MCP is a critical part of today’s agentic AI infrastructure. While developed by Anthropic, a US company, MCP was created by two engineers in London.

But in reality, the Linux Foundation is not the only significant foundation in the world.

At the Impact Summit last year, France announced \$500m in funding for the CurrentAI Foundation. This has gotten off to a faltering start, has not embraced open source fully and appears more focused on looking at data and AI, rather than code specifically. It’s also unclear that the initial funding has been delivered or whether more of the targeted \$2.5bn still has to be raised.

China has spent the last nine years in a very public open source love story. Open source was featured prominently in the country’s last two five year economic plans around software and technology, and this has brought it to the position of leading the world in AI and openness. To do this, China fully embraced open source. It included building its own foundation for open source, “The Open Atom Foundation”. This gave open source projects from China a home for collaboration across companies and communities locally and internationally, allowing them room to grow and develop while keeping control over how these projects expanded within the country, rather than under a US Foundation.

The National Foundation

So how can the UK learn from the approach in the US and China? Creating a new nationally-supported “foundation” - The National - to provide a home for open source in the UK, yet supporting global collaboration. The National Foundation would be at the heart of the open source software and AI environment in the UK. It would benefit from public, private and philanthropic funding and enable developers in the UK to build fast and efficient open source. It would house and retain IP locally in code, standards and datasets that are paid for by the UK.

How would this work in practice?

The foundation would hold repositories, standards and data. It would enable IP to remain in the UK and for our ecosystem to flourish, whilst collaborating globally on projects, enabling those building businesses to focus on that and supporting them with co-creation, co-opetition and community contribution and building.

A foundation would be utilised in place of building a UK open source program office (OSPO) or a sovereign fund, but would incorporate elements of these and serve wider needs. It would be a one-stop shop for the functions each entity would fulfil, providing open source advice and engaging with those communities.

The foundation would be the central repository for funding open source in the UK and globally from the UK, ensuring the ecosystem received the UK’s appropriate contribution to adequate funding. Funding would be public private and include philanthropic and enterprise funding as well as public sector investment.

Importantly, it would hold UK generated and funded IP to be used internationally in a collaborative manner, to enable it to be a part of global de facto standards. This approach around sharing our innovation builds the influence and power we know open source can deliver - when done right.

The UK Government has experience of leading the world around open source and public service delivery since around 2019, with the work undertaken by GDS - this work was a model for governments around the world to learn from and adapt. Under a Foundation model that supports public sector and business collaboration, UK companies can take those new innovations out to market, supporting their growth and delivering more revenues back into the UK from that initial investment.

We envisage this being done collaboratively with other nation states to ensure funding is as broad as appropriate and goes to the right people. We see the Commonwealth as a great starting point for alliances and partnerships in open source.

The foundation would form a close partnership with leading open source organisations in the public sector like i.AI, to create routes to scale public impact.

Working the model for The National Foundation is a significant output of the next phase of our work.

The Submarine under the digital economy

Open source is created by individuals and enterprises, individually or collaboratively, with their end outputs being shared for all to use on a licence that meets the Open Source Definition. There are almost 100 of these standard licences, and knowing that one of these has been used without amendment removes the need for licence review. These licences enable trust that a user can build on top of these projects to achieve their goals. Like a submarine, the work done to build these projects often occurs out of the public eye, but the results are found in products and services that millions of people use every day.

The UK is already home to not only the biggest thriving population of open source software developers in Europe - in fact, one of the biggest in the world - but we host a population of leaders that, for our diminutive size, is unrivaled. Some of the biggest innovations in recent years that power systems like AI or the cloud come down to individual software developers and experts living in the UK. Without their insight, those projects would have taken longer to reach their current market position, if they actually succeeded at all.

Leveraging economic force

China's most recent five-year plan also shows how, having built its foundation and become the leader, it is now focused on rationalisation of competing projects and the generation of economic value. After nurturing open source projects, it is looking for those projects to generate a return on investment both in China and in the global market.

The UK National Foundation will self-fund over time by working with an incubator / accelerator for open source based businesses. This would bring to bear the UK's international business experience in open source, which is unrivalled outside of the US. This will focus on businesses from the UK and lead to international businesses that will be proud to scale in the UK. We know how to do this.

We will also fund the future of the Foundation using secure and trustworthy finance tools. Like ARIA, we will take a percentage of revenue from these businesses. Our model is not simply about shareholder value, but building an equitable and sustainable long term model that supports sustainable and repeatable growth.

Policy Capture and open washing

Open washing has long been a challenge for open source. Created and maintained by an ecosystem of individual and enterprise contributors, there is a lack of collective voice with skilled policy representation, making it difficult to have a representative approach to policy challenges. The ecosystem does not have the means to pay for that voice, and globally, there are a small group of experienced people with the deep understanding needed to provide that guidance. We all know each other. One of the core reasons for OpenUK's existence is to meet this challenge and convene the conversation on open source with knowledge and

expertise.

Both foundations and enterprises in open source have greater access to funding to provide a policy voice on open source, but ultimately, these individuals represent the interests of their employer, not the overarching ecosystem. This can lead to challenges where conflicts of interest exist, and this has been seen to impact legislation in recent times. Those with the funding and wherewithal have been able to take over the discussion, sponsor reporting, and capture the ear of tech policy makers to architect the future in their own interest. This is an ecosystem challenge specific to open source's collaborative and community nature and one which has been very clear in the last two years.

As open source has become fashionable, there has been a correlated level of policy capture. Certain think tanks and organisations with no background or deep expertise in open source have received significant funding to engage. Reports and data gathering exercises are a mixture of quality and have often been funded by single vendors with a specific interest in shaping the results.

Open source experts across the UK and other middle nations have not found the rooms in which these discussions took place to be accessible. Personally, one think tank has uninvited me twice when they realised that I would explain open source as it is and that this did not align with their paid direction. Much (but not all) of the recent reporting must be taken with a pinch of salt, if not a health warning, and the expertise underlying it or corporate motives cannot be relied upon.

In response to this, OpenUK's approach is to have multiple funders on a general basis and not for any particular project. While Big Tech firms support our work, we do not create reporting that is directed by anyone other than our research team and advisors.

A Baroness who had worked on the Large Language Model enquiry by the UK Government commented that she was shocked by "how political with a small p the tech sector is". The easy answer to this is the value of every decision to tech organisations who can win or lose billions of dollars of revenue depending on the outcomes of these policies. The importance of hearing the collective voice in making decisions on open source could not be more important.

A further challenge of the policy landscape is that the output of some of these reports is to ask for more money. Of course, money is needed. We have seen Germany's sovereign tech fund become a Government agency and move in the right direction. But money alone is not the solution, and the tech fund was created in a different time. When you ask anyone who knows about open source, they will tell you that maintainers and developers must be funded, but they will also tell you that giving a project money alone will often destroy the project. Instead, we need smart application of capital alongside community development and planning capacity, so that the project can grow in a sustainable way, while any companies can build their business models as well. This kind of level of understanding is what is needed to grow the ecosystem.

When the reports are reviewed, the better ones indeed suggest a number of the recommendations that OpenUK has made, but in the main, do not have the depth of understanding to go as far as our recommendations.

They frequently suggest an institute or body, but do not go so far as to ask for a code or project holding body.

Next steps

Our immediate next steps are to seek public sector buy-in across other Departments also facing the same challenges as UKRI. This seeks to avoid diversification and waste should organisations spend on the same areas and duplicate their costs.

In tandem, we are working on the next phase of advice, looking at how we would build, and in doing this we will not only collaborate with the UK but also with global experts to bring the best proposal the UK could

possibly have. In doing this, we have one eye to this build being something that will not only be for the UK but will form a blueprint for many other nation-states in their open source strategy.

Our work has not come out of nowhere. We have been researching and reporting on open source for over five years and have undertaken commissioned reports for different parts of the UK public sector, as well as mentoring projects funded to deliver open source. In this way, our depth of understanding has grown.

Our ecosystem and community are the brightest and best, the most experienced in the UK, and we convene the conversation to translate difficult concepts into understandable blocks and practical outcomes. The community includes our incredible UK leaders. They are almost unrivalled globally. But it also includes an international community with a deep understanding and collectively centuries of experience in making open source work.

In a world where expertise is not fashionable, if we are to build a sustainable and resilient future for our digital and AI infrastructure, as a middle nation, it undoubtedly has to be an open source one. The people who should lead in this future are those who understand it. We have many.

Together, our country’s digital future and the future for AI will be open, collaborative and world leading.

The UK will indeed become the “home for open source and AI if it builds on a firm foundation”.

Professor Amanda Brock, CEO, OpenUK

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