Annual General Meeting Chair's report 2020/2021

January 2022

Introduction

This report covers the period 1 September 2020 to 31 August 2021. Despite a challenging year, still operating in the shadow of COVID, Open Data Manchester (ODM) can be proud of the quantity, range and quality of work we've delivered over the past 12 months.

Continuing our practice from the previous year, with a few notable exceptions, the vast majority of our work has been carried out online. While our team is still based in, and drawn from the Greater Manchester area, we've continued to work remotely for much of this time. To allow us to do this, and to develop and deliver our projects effectively, we have had to embed new ways of working, using Zoom and other online collaborative platforms, such as Miro, Slack and Trello.

Our online events have become firmly established as high-quality and friendly online experiences, with participants attending from across the globe. The procedures for running smooth online events developed in 2019/2020 have become our standard, and being mindful of accessibility, we have ensured all content is recorded and made available online with subtitles.

An unexpected effect of establishing remote working was that we have found ourselves trying to do more. The scope and ambition of our events programme has increased, as has our project development, on top of embedding new working practices and focussing on organisational development, such as the creation of organisational and fundraising strategies.

This had its inevitable consequences and we ran the risk of burning ourselves out – which was especially concerning when all staff members were isolated at home. The team has made a concerted effort to create a supportive environment. We also took on a project manager who enabled us to allocate time and resources more realistically.

Though the last year was challenging, the work undertaken both externally in developing relationships and delivering new projects, and internally through defining our mission and policies, will stand us in good stead for the coming years.

Building our audience and events

Buoyed by the success of the previous year's online event programme, we developed a 2020/2021 programme that was more aligned with our project work. There were two key drivers to this – firstly, it would make creating content and cross-promoting our events easier, as we already had domain knowledge and connections from developing that work – and secondly, it would provide a more coherent story for our existing community.

Over the year, we held 18 public events with 413 attendees, and continued online delivery allowed us to broaden our community geographically. We have been joined by participants from the United States, to Papua New Guinea. As ever, at all our events, we are committed to making them diverse and representative, although this proved challenging on a number of occasions, leading to one event being cancelled because the speakers were not as representative as we wanted.

Policy, Politics and the Algorithm

At the start of 2021, we organised and hosted a series of three events exploring how automated decision-making impacts policy, service delivery and society. Speakers with a wide range of experiences joined us – from international NGOs to a former head of Ofqual – and we welcomed 66 participants.

The events challenged preconceptions about what automated decision-making can do, exposed bad practice and shared advice on what we can do to make those that use the systems more accountable. A report from the events has been written, outlining how automated decision-making is used within policy making, the effects of poor implementation, and how we can make the systems and those who operate them more accountable.

Projects

Declaration for Responsible and Intelligent Data Practice

During the year, we formally launched the Declaration for Responsible Data Practice. This significant piece of work has been in development since 2018, informed by collaboration with stakeholders from across Manchester, and responding to the growing application of smart and automated data-driven technologies.

The Declaration has garnered support from the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), Bolton and Wigan councils from the public sector, and The Coop, Manchester Digital, We are Inevitable and Dsposal from the private sector.

To help organisations practically align their processes, our plans for the future include the development of an implementation framework and governance mechanism, translating the Declaration's 23 principles into action.

Open Data Strategy for the City of Izmir

Commissioned by the International Finance Corporation as part of their multi-billion pound infrastructure investment for the City of Izmir, ODM worked with officials and external stakeholders to develop an assessment of the city's open data capabilities.

The assessment was then used to develop an open-data strategy and roadmap, which was adopted by the city in October 2021.

Izmir has now implemented recommendations from the strategy and is one of only two cities in Turkey releasing open data. This work is being developed into an open-data strategy toolkit that can be used by other cities to implement their own programmes.

Our Streets Chorlton

Working in partnership with WalkRideGM, Sustrans and Groundwork Trust, and funded through the National Lottery Climate Action Fund, we have developed co-design methodologies that allow local residents to collect and use data that is important to them.

Working with local communities, we installed air-quality sensors and low-cost traffic counters across Chorlton, and trained residents to count traffic to a standard comparable to Department for Transport traffic surveys. This will allow them to better represent their communities when policy decisions are being made.

This has been complemented by a programme to develop community Data Champions and work is underway to create a legacy for this project, including an open Community Data Handbook for any local area to use.

Open Data consultation

As part of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority's Local Data Review, ODM was commissioned to deliver a consultation with the data community to understand how open data is being used, what data people want and how available data could be made better. This work has informed the GMCA's data strategy.

Developing cooperative data infrastructure

Funded through the Open Data Institute (ODI) data access stimulus fund, we worked with Carbon Co-op to co-design a data cooperative model. This new framework enables Carbon Co-op's members to have more control over their data, while creating an environment for trustworthy data sharing with external organisations, which could create greater value for those involved.

Following this work's completion in March 2021, we have gone on to develop the Data Cooperative Working Group with Aapti Institute in Bangalore, bringing together an international group of practitioners who are interested in the development of mutual data organisations.

Data standards

Following on from our work on a data standard for tracking waste in 2018, we have continued to develop standards to enable better recycling and reduce the environmental impact of waste.

Working with Dsposal and funded through the ODI's data access stimulus fund, we developed a data standard to enable household waste recycling sites to be mapped onto OpenStreetMap. This project formed a component of the follow-on Plastics Packaging Portal project that launched in August 2021, and seeks to reduce the amount of plastic packaging in the environment and enable better recycling.

Organisational development

The past year in lockdown has given us an opportunity to reflect on who we are, what we do and how we do it.

To ensure that we could better articulate our mission and understand how we affect change, we laid the foundations for the development of an organisational strategy by commissioning Paper Frogs to develop our Theory of Change. The process of identifying the key challenges we are trying to address, the tools and levers we use, and the change we are trying to make was an essential part of our development and created the bedrock on which our new organisational strategy is based.

Further strategy development was undertaken towards the end of Summer 2021, leading to the employment of a fundraising consultant to develop a fundraising strategy in August 2021.

In the last year we have also expanded the team to include a project manager – Sophie Walker – a user researcher – Clara Parada – and a data architect – Maura Hunt. These roles are part-time, with Clara and Maura concentrating on delivery of the Plastics Packaging Portal.

Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)

We have always been aware of the need to be diverse and representative of the communities that we try to serve, but the murder of George Floyd and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement prompted us to put our words into action.

We commissioned fellow Federation House businesses Diverse and Equal, and Honey Badger, to work with our board and team to understand the need to create an inclusive environment that supports and celebrates diversity, while also using our platform to promote more diverse, equitable and inclusive data practices.

This has led to the development of our diversity, equity and inclusion policy, and we are now fundraising for a role that will manage our DEI work.

Financial stability

This increase in our activity has also impacted positively our finances. From September 1 2020 to 31 August 2021, our turnover increased from £99,162 in the previous financial year to £163,777 in the last year. When also taking our Luminate grant into account, we have more than doubled the turnover of the previous year. Our income from commercial work has also increased by more than three-times.

Key partnerships

Over the course of the financial year, we formed a number of new partnerships through our project work.

After the development of a data-cooperative governance model and other work exploring these ideas, we set up the Data Cooperative Working Group with the Aapti Institute's Data Economy Lab.

We are also working with OPRL, Recoup, Ecosurety and Dsposal in delivering the Plastics Packaging Portal project.

As we develop our project work through 2021/2022, we will continue to build more partnerships that will enable us to have greater impact in the work that we do.