



Northern Ireland Open Government Network  
89 Loopland Drive  
Belfast, BT6 9DW  
028 90455770

10<sup>th</sup> May 2016

[jonathan@nienvironmentlink.org](mailto:jonathan@nienvironmentlink.org), [david@nienvironmentlink.org](mailto:david@nienvironmentlink.org)

Dear INSERT NAME OF PARTY LEADER,

The NI Open Government Network (OGN) is an alliance of individual citizens and representatives of community and voluntary sector organisations aiming to contribute to delivering a more open, transparent and accountable government that will empower citizens to shape decisions that impact on their lives. The Network is aligned to the UK Open Government Civic Society Network.

I am writing on behalf of the NI OGN about two important opportunities for the Executive and Assembly to advance the open government agenda. In the next month the NI Executive has the chance to join the other devolved regions in signing up to the UK Open Government National Action Plan (NAP) which is expected to incorporate Northern Ireland specific open government commitments.

Officials from the Department of Finance and Personnel (now the Department of Finance) have been asked to report to the Cabinet Office by early June with NI commitments for inclusion in the UK NAP. DFP officials have been engaging with civic society organisations, including the NI OGN, to produce a series of draft commitments related to the themes of open data, access to information, transparency, public accountability and citizen engagement. These commitments were passed to the Minister for consideration and approval prior to anticipated Executive endorsement ahead of the Cabinet Office deadline of early June.

With the Assembly Elections and work on the Programme for Government taking priority, we are concerned that Northern Ireland could fail to meet the deadline to be part of the UK-wide process and miss the opportunity to put openness at the heart of the political mandate at Stormont.

The second opportunity to demonstrate commitment to open government is through the new Programme for Government. A list of PFG considerations and commitments relating to transparency, accountability and citizen engagement are included below.

Our presentation to the OFM DFM Committee on 6<sup>th</sup> January was well received by all Parties. As we enter the new mandate we would like to see demonstrative commitments to open government and a willingness by your party to help deliver greater openness, transparency and accountability.

We would be delighted to meet with you to discuss the open government initiative in more detail.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Colm Burns'.

Colm Burns  
Chair of the Northern Ireland Open Government Network

Northern Ireland Open Government Network  
Programme for Government Asks  
May 2016

Acknowledge the importance of **Open Data**.

1. Encourage the public sector to work toward the proactive publication of open data and engagement with their users to establish a thriving open data ecosystem in Northern Ireland and deliver the milestones outlined in the NI open data strategy document.  
<https://www.dfpni.gov.uk/publications/open-data-strategy-northern-ireland-2015-2018>
2. Support open data by matching UK government commitments, particularly in terms of spatial and transport data.
3. Identify, document and publish core reference data for Northern Ireland, as per the UK government's National Information Infrastructure project.<sup>i</sup>

Acknowledge the importance of **Access to Information and Freedom of Information**.

Access to information supports good governance, effective and efficient public administration, compliance with laws and regulations, efforts to combat corruption and greater government transparency and participation in decision-making; and it is essential to the spirit and practice of open government

4. Commit to ensuring that: Government departments proactively publish the same performance data externally which they are internally held to account for.
5. Commit to ensuring that there is a meaningful and enhanced level of coordination and oversight of the FoI process across all public authorities, to reduce duplication and increase response rates.<sup>ii</sup>
6. Commit to ensuring that all public authorities in Northern Ireland covered by the Freedom of Information Act adhere to the processes and requirements as laid out by the ICO.  
Here public authorities has specific meaning in relation to the Act.  
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/36/section/3>
7. Create a new Freedom of Information clearinghouse role for the Information Commissioner to facilitate researchers, journalists, and citizens in readily understanding the nature of information released under FOI/EIR legislation and to make all of that information readily available.
8. Amend the legislation governing the role of the Information Commissioner in Northern Ireland to the effect that the Commissioner shall receive an electronic copy of each piece of information generated by a Freedom of Information and Environmental Information Regulations request in Northern Ireland.
9. Enable the Commission to create an online data base of all FoI requests and the information released.
10. Adopt the recommendations of the recent Independent Commission on Freedom of Information.<sup>iii</sup>

Acknowledge the importance of **fiscal and political transparency**.

11. Commit to delivering fiscal transparency through the timely publication of essential budget documents.
12. Commit to making these essential budget documents available in a user friendly easily accessible format.
13. Commit to the creation of a citizen's budget that provides a summary and explanation of basic budget information and presents it in an accessible format using simple, clear and understandable language.
14. Publish all departmental spending transactions over £25,000 on a quarterly basis, as part of a commitment to transparency and openness.

15. Affirmatively disclose documents and information related to public contracting in a manner that enables meaningful understanding, effective monitoring, efficient performance, and accountability for outcomes.

Acknowledge the importance of **innovation and new technology** in improving access, openness and democracy.

16. Commit to carrying out research and experimentation to create new tools and platforms empower users to be full active citizens

Acknowledge the importance of **Public Accountability**.

Public Accountability is an umbrella term that covers distinct concepts like democracy, efficiency, responsiveness, responsibility, and integrity; and it involves transparency and trustworthiness.

17. Commit the Northern Ireland Executive to publishing diary information about departmental business in an open data format on a yearly basis.
18. Commit to delivering greater lobbying transparency by introducing a statutory register of lobbyists covering those engaging with NI Executive Ministers.

Acknowledge that **civic participation and citizen engagement** in policy making, planning and governance, is a necessary condition for wellbeing, democracy and social justice. And acknowledge the importance of increased subsidiarity in decision making in order to strengthen local democracy and allow greater leadership at community level. The outcome and benefits of citizen engagement will include: better policy outcomes; better service delivery; more engaged and empowered citizens; as well as better understanding of and greater trust in government.

19. Commit to adopting open policy making and open contracting principles in NI.
20. Develop a Westminster style petition system that promotes participative democracy.<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Government often does not know what data it holds, or should hold. It would be useful therefore to develop a register of core reference data, analogous to the National Information Infrastructure report produced by the Cabinet Office. You can read an explanation of why this is important here:

- <https://theodi.org/blog/what-national-information-infrastructure>

- [https://data.gov.uk/sites/default/files/library/odugUK\\_NII\\_final%20%281%29.pdf](https://data.gov.uk/sites/default/files/library/odugUK_NII_final%20%281%29.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> The only coordination that so far takes place is the Information Management Central Advisory Branch in OFMDFM which is essentially toothless and doesn't (and can't) compel other departments to respond or do much in the way of coordination - only offering advice to other departments on request. They do produce statistics on central department's FoI response performance, but this doesn't cover agencies/arms-length bodies (with the exception of PRONI included in DCAL stats), and so misses out a very wide range of requests.

<sup>iii</sup> Recommendations 4-6 look particularly useful (see page 57):

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/504139/Independent\\_Freedom\\_of\\_Information\\_Commission\\_Report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/504139/Independent_Freedom_of_Information_Commission_Report.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> Regarding e-petitions, it looks like NI Assembly is moving in that direction – this report was considered by the Committee on Procedures in February

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/procedures/inquiries/public-petitions-procedures/report---review-of-public-petitions-procedures.pdf>

The minutes of the meeting suggest the report was endorsed, though not sure what hoops still have to be jumped through before it is enacted

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/procedures/minutes/2015-2016/6.-agreed-minutes-090216.pdf>