

## NI Open Government Network Response to the Draft Programme for Government

The Northern Ireland Open Government Network is an alliance of individual citizens and representatives of community and voluntary organisations with the following aim:

*“To contribute to delivering more open, transparent and accountable government that empowers citizens to shape decisions that impact on their lives.”*

### 1. General Response

We welcome:

- The outcomes based approach that should enable government to focus its efforts on achieving impact, rather than on generating inputs and outputs and meeting targets
- The dashboard of Indicators underpinned by independently verified data
- The focus on Wellbeing and the outcomes that matter to people’s quality of life and the common good
- The emphasis on participation, ownership and accountability
- The move from top-down to bottom-up decision making: from *doing-to* to *doing-with*
- The move from working in silos to a whole of government approach that involves departments and citizens working together
- The willingness to link social, economic and democratic outcomes

We believe that:

- People and communities have a deep and instinctive desire to work for social and political participation and transformation; and these democratic capabilities are, in themselves, valuable as a means and as an end in the pursuit of wellbeing.
- A PfG process designed to enhance public engagement and the common good can deepen democracy and improve public trust and confidence in government
- Dialogue with citizens is critical to ensure that the PfG does not merely reproduce existing assumptions about wellbeing and social progress
- The ability to monitor progress towards the achievement of outcomes is crucial
- The dashboard data visualisation should be simple and accessible and allow citizens to track progress and provide feedback
- Scrutiny is crucial for trust in the Programme and ensuring that managing the accountability data that informs progress does not lead to gaming or goal displacement
- Co-production is key, because it will: improve services and wellbeing by involving people in service design; and create wellbeing through the social interaction activity generated through involvement in delivery
- The outcomes in the PfG’s must link directly to budget and financial decision-making process. This will: support accountability and transparency and facilitate proper scrutiny of the budgets presented to the Executive and the Assembly; aid efficiency by improving allocation of monies; and improve public sector performance
- Trade-offs between outcomes should be made democratically and transparently and not opaquely on the basis of hidden assumptions

We note that:

- The OECD Public Governance Review references OGP and the NIOGN and emphasises the importance of transparency, accountability and citizen engagement

<http://www.oecd.org/gov/northern-ireland-united-kingdom-implementing-joined-up-governance-for-a-common-purpose-9789264260016-en.htm>

## 2. Proposal

We propose that **‘Deeper Democratic Engagement’** be included as an additional specific outcome in the new NI Programme for Government. Why? Because meaningful citizen engagement in the democratic process is both a means and an end:

*“It is a means to a better framework that reflects the needs of the people of Northern Ireland; it is an end because reasoned deliberation and engagement with the decisions that affect our lives is known to directly improve wellbeing.”* (Towards a Wellbeing Framework, Carnegie Trust)

Wellbeing is linked to enhanced levels of political agency, autonomy and embedding a culture of democratic deliberation. It’s about people’s sense of control over their own futures; it’s about achieving outcomes that people want, rather than those the government believe they want; it’s about harnessing collective wisdom and creativity; and it’s about closing the gap between citizens and politicians.

In this context, **Deliberative Civic Engagement** could help create:

- better policy and service delivery options, grounded in better knowledge of public values and priorities
- greater transparency and accountability (and thus legitimacy) for decision-making
- greater public understanding of the issues considered; and shared responsibility for policy creation and outcomes
- greater empowerment, education and motivation of the public
- opportunities for citizens to influence decisions that affect their lives

Deepening democratic engagement will require more open government and commitment to the kind of actions around open data, access to information, transparency, accountability and anti-corruption detailed below. And the Framework of Outcomes, Indicators, Measure and Actions re our proposed outcome would look like this:

**Outcome:** Deeper Democratic Engagement and more Open Government

**Indicators:** Increased trust in government  
Increased number of citizen engagement opportunities  
Increased level of citizen involvement in decision making  
Increased publication of open data across government and public sector bodies  
Increased number of informed citizens

**Actions:** Increase: access to information; political transparency; fiscal transparency; lobbying transparency  
Improve: freedom of information; public accountability  
Introduce: open policy-making; open contracting; participatory budgeting

**Measure:** Level of trust in government; number of citizen engagement opportunities; level of civic participation; level of citizen involvement in decision making; number of datasets published as open data, response times for open data suggestions; number of citizens who feel more informed

### 3. Concrete Actions

We would like to see commitments in the PfG to deliver the following actions and activities:

#### *Open Data*

Open data, i.e., accessible, usable and shared data, creates open knowledge and improves innovative processes. Open data will: increase public choice; drive efficiency; and offer economic potential – better decisions and lower service costs; and it will provide the building blocks for open knowledge, which is what open data becomes when it's useful, usable and used.

1. Encourage the public sector to work toward the proactive publication of open data and toward 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.
4. Make data accessible to a wide range of users: from the lay-person to the public sector analyst to the entrepreneurial web developer.

#### *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

1. Commit to ensuring that: Government departments proactively publish the same performance data externally which they are internally held to account for.
2. 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.
3. 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 the term 'public authorities' has specific meaning in relation to the Act.  
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/36/section/3>
4. 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.
5. 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.
6. Enable the Commission to create an online database of all FoI requests and the information released.
7. Take forward legislation to extend Freedom of Information duties to bodies such as: contractors who run privately-managed prisons; providers of secure accommodation for children; grant-aided schools; and independent special schools.
8. Adopt the recommendations of the recent Independent Commission on Freedom of Information.

### *Transparency*

Transparency is the key way of guarding against corruption; it helps increase trust in government; and enables the public to hold public officials to account.

1. Commit to delivering fiscal transparency through the timely publication of essential budget documents.
2. Commit to making these essential budget documents available in a user-friendly easily accessible format.
3. 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.
4. Publish all departmental spending transactions over £25,000 on a quarterly basis, as part of a commitment to transparency and openness.
5. Affirmatively disclose documents and information related to public contracting in a manner that enables meaningful understanding, effective monitoring, efficient performance, and accountability for outcomes.

### *Innovation and new technology in improving access, openness and democracy*

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

### *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.

1. Commit the Northern Ireland Executive to publishing diary information about departmental business in an open data format on a yearly basis.
2. Commit to delivering greater lobbying transparency by introducing a statutory register of lobbyists covering those engaging with NI Executive Ministers. Bring forward a Lobbying Bill to further improve the public transparency of elected representatives' activity.
3. Place duties on Ministers to consult on, publish and report on the outcomes and performance of the PFG.

### *Citizen Engagement*

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.

1. Commit to adopting open policy-making and open contracting principles in NI.
2. Develop participatory budgeting to involve people and communities in decisions on spending on public services at local government and departmental level.
3. Back local organisations to involve communities in leading change on their own terms by continuing our new Empowering Communities Fund.

**ENDS**