



Open Government- beyond the 'usual suspects'

Introduction

Open Government works to benefit the people living within a country, yet largely work to improve their relationship with government and the services it offers them is done without their involvement.

We are in a period of political flux, public trust in politics and its institutions have remained at a very low level. In the annual trust barometer report for 2018 published by [Edelman](#), only 36% of the respondents trusted the government. The three top reasons given for this lack of confidence were as follows

- A feeling that the government is not delivering on its promises.
- A perception that the government does not communicate honestly when problems arise.
- A feeling that the government is not transparent enough.

To rebuild trust, it is clear that the principle of Open Government, guided by the key themes of transparency, accountability and participation, is vital.

This decade has seen a recognisable surge in the promotion of Open Government. The Open Government Partnership was created in 2011 and since then over 2,000 commitments have been made by 79 participating countries, covering a third of the world's population. These projects have not only improved how these governments are seen but also how they work.

In Wales, the Welsh Government has recently published their self assessment of its commitments as part of the UK Open Government National Action Plan 2016-18. Progress is obviously being made but what does it mean to the people that matter, the citizens the Government is there to serve? How do you make a much needed concept like Open Government more accessible to the public, especially those who aren't involved in the political sphere such as the third sector? How do we get beyond the usual suspects?

As part of the Open Government Pioneers Project, 'Open Government: Beyond the usual suspects' will look at how we can engage a wider group of people in Open Government in Wales, particularly focussing on underrepresented groups.

Methodology

This project has attempted to look at how we promote Open Government in order to make it more accessible using two focus groups to collect and collate qualitative data to produce recommendations for improvement.

The focus groups consisted of students from St David's Catholic sixth form college as well as members of protected groups under the Equality Act 2010 including from an ethnic minority background, women and people with disabilities.

Each focus group first considered Open Government as a concept, looking at the three themes of accountability, transparency and participation. Before looking at four projects that could be considered as Open Government including two starred commitments from the Open Government partnership as well as a commitment from the Welsh Government's 2016-18 plan. Participants were asked what they liked and disliked about the projects. The final part of the focus group was to propose recommendations on how to improve the public's knowledge on Open Government especially those who are considered 'hard to reach.'

Focus groups

Have you heard of Open Government?

It is not surprising as we were engaging with people considered 'beyond the usual suspects' that only two people over the two focus groups had any knowledge about Open Government with both also stating that while they had heard of it, could offer nothing concrete about what it actually was.

Four examples of Open Government were then presented to the group. These projects or commitments were chosen because they covered the three themes of transparency, accountability and participation. The three international examples were expanded upon in more detail while the example of the commitment from their own government was taken verbatim from the Welsh Government source as to illicit a response not only about the commitment itself but the language used.

They were:

Paris

In Paris the local Mayor committed to Participatory Budgeting (PB) allowing citizens to come up with their own project ideas. Between 2014 and 2020, the city has committed to reserving €500 million (about 5% of the city's capital fund) to be spent through PB.

In 2016, 158,964 people voted on how to spend nearly €100 million, including €10 million set aside for schools.

Georgia.

This republic has only been independent since 1992 but by 2003 Georgia was ranked 124 out of 133 in the corruption perception index.

Georgia as part of its Open Government commitments set out to ensure all financial declarations and other related information on all registered political parties would be published a by the state audit office. In 2016 the country was 44th out of 176 in the corruption perception index rising to 41st out of 180 in 2018.

Wales

This is one of the commitments listed in the Welsh Government's Open Government plan for 2018-2020, presented as written.

"Commitment 2: Open data service - Develop an Open Data Service for Wales with a focus on helping improve public services.

Objective - To increase the openness and amount of data about Wales that is published by Welsh Government and other public sector bodies.

Status quo - Only a subset of data about Wales held by Welsh Government and other public sector partners is currently published.

Ambition - Developing an Open Data Service for Wales will increase the accessibility and the amount of data published by Welsh Government and other public sector bodies in Wales. Furthermore making more data openly available will hopefully help improve public services in Wales".

Austin, Texas

The commitment was to co-create a systems map of homelessness for shared reasoning around this complex issue to better inform funding and policy-making.

All projects were well received prompting the comment '*Why don't we know about these things?*'

Views

All examples elicited positive comments. The project that involved participatory budgeting (PB) was particularly popular. The direct accountability of decisions made in the PB process was talked about in both groups as something positive:

“Engaging the public for them to decide what the money should be spent on...that’s a great way and they will actually see themselves what will change with that money.”

“There are many different communities in Cardiff, if there was this (PB) then it would be best for that community.”

A participant stated afterwards that PB could be a gateway into learning more about Open Government.

The second and fourth examples highlighted the use of open data which is another key component of Open Government in the belief that the opening up of government data, and making it accessible, sharable and reusable can better enable informed debate, improved decision making, and the development of innovative new services.

There were two key concerns that were raised from one of the groups about open data. Firstly, concern about how the data could be misinterpreted and targeted by spin but interestingly there were questions asked about how open data could be utilised in Wales when the national media could be seen as too weak to take advantage of it.

With regards to the Welsh example, it came as a surprise that this data wasn’t already available.

“Why isn’t this already available, why only a subset? How could you not agree with that?”

The use of different examples of Open Government also led to confusion of what the term covered. One participant stated that a lot of it was ‘too abstract’ another, ‘too wide a concept’. Even during the focus group itself there was concern that the examples were too disparate to be considered part of the same idea. This has to be a concern in communicating the positives of Open Government and improving its accessibility.

All of the participants spoke positively about the highlighted projects and any moves for government to be more transparent, accountable and to involve more people in decision making. There was, however an overriding belief that it had to be made clearer why and how the ideas of Open Government or some of the commitments could impact on ‘real’ people’s lives. To make it accessible, the way that projects are communicated has to mean something tangible for people to engage more in them.

How do we make Open Government more accessible?

After the discussions and some of the examples, many participants were surprised they had never heard of Open Government before. Some stated that it was the responsibility of government to communicate their projects better and having a central website for Open Government in Wales would be of benefit.

There was general concern that people in Wales were not politically knowledgeable enough with the basics of governance and therefore would have trouble understanding the more complex aspects of Open Government. One of the focus groups believed Open Government should be taught in school as part of a political education curriculum.

Conclusion

This was a good first tentative step in seeking ways to better engage with more people in Wales about Open Government but it is a first step and more needs to be done.

As this was the first time many of the participants had ever really had any real discussions about the term and concept Open Government, they were unaware of what resources were already available such as www.opengovernment.org.uk or <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/>. This means that more work needs to be done to consider if the resources already available are successful in ensuring that Open Government is engaging and accessible. This also raises a point about how Open Government has traditionally been targeted and why those communities that could benefit the most from it haven't been engaged in it to date.

It is clear from the responses of the participants that there are positive stories to be told about Open Government and how it can benefit society. For many involved in it, the positives are self-evident but this shouldn't preclude from these positives being repeatedly communicated to the public. The way that we communicate Open Government is also vital. We must ensure that Open Government has a stronger and more relatable narrative.

There was concern that general apathy and a lack of basic knowledge about politics and what governments do amongst parts of the general public may hinder a better understanding of what Open Government does. This is not confined to the subject of this report but to all aspects of politics and how our society works. Political education for people in Wales is much needed and Open Government needs to be a central part in any politics curriculum within schools.

Open Government is a concept that people *should* understand; one where a government makes decisions that are transparent and accountable on every step of the journey from beginning to end and where the citizens they are elected to serve can play a deep and valuable part in that process. It is about how public money is spent and how services we need are shaped. Changes to a political culture takes time, the concept of transparency, accountability and participation, while not new are hardly embedded in ours.

Further public engagement is needed; as one of the participants said.

“This is good stuff, why don't we know about it?”