Civil society ideas for the Welsh Government's Open Government Action Plan 2018-20

Wales is set to shortly produce its next Open Government Action Plan for the period 2018-20, as part of the Open Government initiative, outlining commitments in the areas of accountability, transparency and participation.

Over the past few months the network in Wales has been consulting with civil society to develop a series of recommendations for the Welsh Government that we feel should be part of their commitments to open government over the next two years.

A comprehensive list of the ideas from Welsh civil society can be found on the [Discuto platform](#).

This document attempts to bring the ideas together into a comprehensive civil society manifesto, outlining key themes and asks.

The key themes in the ideas that we have identified are:

1. Communication- Welsh Government should do more to engage the public and work in different ways to ensure their communication is more meaningful and effective.
2. Participation- Welsh Government should offer people across Wales direct and innovative ways to participate and have their voices heard in decisions across government.
3. Transparency- Welsh Government must be more transparent about data, procurement decisions and create a culture where their decisions are much clearer to the public.

Communication

One of the major themes of civil society feedback throughout the consultation was a need to improve on the current provision of communication techniques used by government.

These include looking at different ways of communicating information, such as expanding the use of videos, infographics and images alongside traditional policy documents.

Numerous ideas also discussed the need to cater to specific audiences through channels and languages that they use:

"Government needs to understand the best channel to engage and not simply rely on traditional methods of communication. Preferences are changing - young people, for example, will use Snapchat and Instagram over email or

Facebook. Traditional communication channels are unlikely to reach all target audiences."
Idea submitted by Victoria Ford

Welsh Government should also consider breaking from tradition and exploring a much stronger two way communication process. For example, through blogging policy development, and providing regular feedback on input provided through consultations, face to face engagement sessions or formal written responses.

Other civil society members raised how these changes could extend beyond government to other public sector bodies including local authorities, health boards and the Assembly. Opportunities should be explored for all public sector leaders to use digital channels and technology to open up politics to the wider public.

Participation

Giving people the opportunity to get involved in decisions that affect them is vital to improving the health of our democracy.

Countries in the Open Government Partnership are demonstrating the benefits of having stronger participation on mass, including innovative budgeting methods used in [Madrid](#) and [Portugal](#), a 'tripadviser' model for [rating public services in Mongolia](#) and a platform to crowdsource data on [homelessness in Austin, Texas](#). This is a considerable area where Wales can step up and lead.

A significant issue among civil society in Wales is the current provision for consultation, which in many instances can be quite technical and alienating for service users. While we recognise that in many cases there is a need for detailed consultations to be undertaken, there are some very positive examples already in the way that some departments are also offering 'young people's' or 'accessible' consultations. This should be the norm wherever possible with an emphasis on the role of public servants to truly engage with the people any decision will affect. Making consultations more engaging and accessible, alongside the use of better targeted language and formats that we have previously raised would be a substantial step forward.

In the Welsh Government Action Plan there should be an emphasis on ensuring people's voices are heard. One of the suggestions we had was the use of policy lab type approaches such as [VTaiwan](#) to encourage better engagement in consultations and policy development. Other platforms such as [delib.net](#) and [citizenspace.com](#) can support digital consultation, test ideas and gather insight needed to help develop and implement policy whilst encouraging wider engagement.

The use of deliberative democracy methods should also be committed to by Welsh Government. Principle among these is the use of Participatory Budgeting. This is an area that has been used in Wales previously, although on a limited basis, and is used worldwide to good effect. While Welsh Government have been interested in this for a while we would like to see a specific commitment on the use of PB, for a local and potentially a national scale.

Participation in other areas of work is also key. Given the current emphasis in government on co-production, a number of individuals on the platform raised this as an area where progres could be further made.

There was a specific suggestion around the use of co-production in health and social care:

"Regional Partnership Boards, for example, those strategic boards responsible for overseeing the delivery and funding of integrated health and social care services, are unequal in their very design. There is only a requirement to have one service-user representative and one carer representative, seated at a table which is overwhelmingly weighted in favour of statutory services. Not only that, given that decisions have often already been made by other subsidiary Boards (where there is no obligation to have citizen representation) the question remains as to how far the public is not just involved but co-producing those services which are put in place for them."
FTWW

There is also scope for going further on participation, and looking at other models such as Citizens Assemblies and panels, which have been used to great success in the UK and close to home internationally. The recent referendum on abortion law in the Republic of Ireland came as a direct response to their Citizens Assembly. In addition the Health and Social Care Committee in Parliament recently commissioned and endorsed the recommendations of a [Citizen Assembly into the funding of social care](). This type of model could work very well in Wales, depending on the subject area. We would suggest this is worth exploring as the basis for a commitment.

Transparency

Transparency is vital to creating a system where Government is working effectively for the people it serves. At present there are a number of areas where improvements can be made.

At a fundamental level the workings and decisions of government should be made as transparent as possible. One suggestion that we had on our online consultation was that contact information for relevant civil servants be included on pages of the Welsh Government website, as is currently [undertaken in Denmark](). Another was for a detailed organisational map of the Welsh Government and its staff, as well as public bodies, to be produced and promoted on the face of the website. This should include their job role and contact details.

While live streaming of some local authority meetings, and of course First Minister's Questions, already takes place, one user of our site suggested that this be built on, with the use of webinar technology being undertaken much for extensively to open up real time questions and scrutiny.

In terms of procurement, a number of contributors raised a lack of transparency. One user suggested the following, with another commenting on the lack of transparency around commercial decisions:

"[The] procurement process should be more transparent to the public and organisations that offer social value for Wales. Current procurement processes may be shaped by commercial interest that do not offer social value. Welsh Government should be required to demonstrate publically how

contracts meet these criteria. This could be achieved by demonstrating in a public forum how the weighting of a tender reflects social value. The public and social value organisations should have a clear role in reviewing tenders to ensure fairness, transparency and social value for Wales."
Nathan W

Data is another area where transparency could be vital in improving the way Welsh Government works. Fundamentally, Welsh Government should improve access to information through StatsWales and publish data in open formats at a higher frequency and quality.

A specific area where a commitment to improved data could be demonstrated is through comparative data around landlords, which should be published for local authority landlords for social housing tenants, in addition to the private landlord information that is already planned.

Another key focus for information transparency should be the provision of elections data in one place. For example, turnout at local elections is currently published in an ad hoc format, with some authorities releasing that data and others choosing not to. Welsh Government should collect and publish this data, to improve scrutiny and accountability around elections.

List of all ideas on the Discuto platform

1. Participatory budgeting to be used for a certain percentage of cadw funding on heritage projects
2. Provide the name and contact details of the civil servants responsible for particular parts of enacting Government Policy, just like they do in Denmark
3. Pitch for the target audience (publishing information in a wider range of formats, on a wider range of platforms)
4. Actual consultation (to further open up consultations and improve how people have influence on policy decisions)
5. Changes to commercial confidentiality rules
6. Changing local government law to require authorities to investigate illegal activity in areas for which they have responsibility, and to act on evidence provided
7. The Welsh Government website should use more infographics and visual information
8. Open data on deaths in health services
9. Accessibility of data for social housing tenants.
10. Job description (changing Assembly Members' job descriptions)
11. Social value procurement (prioritising social value in procurement decisions)
12. Better consultations, publicly available organisational maps of Welsh public services and an emphasis on co production
13. Communication and Engagement, Leadership and Accountability, Service Design and Data
14. Wellbeing of Future Generations Act: Implementation of learnings from workshops with Third Sector and Welsh Government