



NI Assembly Committee for Finance

Oral Briefing, Wednesday 4 December 2024

Opening remarks:

Chairperson and committee members,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the role of open government in Northern Ireland.

My name is Rebekah McCabe and I am the Chair of the Northern Ireland Open Government Network, which I do on a voluntary basis.

In my day job, I'm a specialist in civic participation and deliberative democracy as Head of Northern Ireland at Involve.

I am joined by two of my fellow directors of the Open Government Network. Colm Burns - a founding member of the network and our lead on fiscal transparency and open contracting, and Dr Andrew Bolster, a cybersecurity data scientist working in the private sector, our lead on open data.

I'll give a little background on who we are as a network.

The NI Open Government Network was established in 2014 as an alliance of individual citizens, activists and representatives of community and voluntary organisations.

We were the first sub-national open government network to form in the UK and were successful in securing Northern Ireland's first formal [open government commitments](#) as part of the UK National Action Plan 2016-2018. Past commitments have included delivery of NI's first Open Data Strategy, exploration of 'open policy-making' approaches such as participatory budgeting and opening up Northern Ireland's public procurement processes to greater transparency and public scrutiny.

The Open Government Partnership is the international, multi-stakeholder initiative that brings together reformers from inside and outside government who are committed to making their governments more open, accountable, and responsive to citizens.

What started, in 2011, as a founding partnership of eight member states, has now expanded to 78 national members and 106 local members

At its heart, open government is about building trust—trust between citizens and their government and trust in the processes that shape decisions affecting our lives.

It is grounded in three principles: **transparency, participation, and accountability**. These principles are essential to improving governance and ensuring that decisions are fair, effective, and inclusive.

Northern Ireland has already made important progress in embracing open government. We contributed to the 2016 UK National Action Plan, and in 2020 we supported our counterparts in the NI Civil Service to successfully apply for membership of OGP in our own right through OGP Local. The Executive is a committed member of the **Open Government Partnership in these two important ways**, and has worked collaboratively with civil society to contribute to two National Action Plans and one Local Action Plan.

In the case of the local action plan agreed in 2021, it has led to the co-production between government officials and civil society of an Open Government Strategy for Northern Ireland which is now before the Minister awaiting implementation.

Included in that strategy is:

- A shared vision for Open Government in Northern Ireland,
- A plan for internal communication and education within the civil service and across government,
- Provision for a new multistakeholder forum that reflects good practice in Scotland, UK, and Ireland,
- And a high quality co-production process for developing collaborative action plans.

While these steps are encouraging, they have not progressed into implementation, and they highlight the potential for more ambitious action.

Open government is not just about delivering individual projects; it is about embedding a culture where transparency, participation, and accountability are integral to how decisions are made.

This is particularly important for Northern Ireland, where trust in institutions has been tested in recent years. Evidence on the need for robust action to build public trust is mounting

- Carnegie research shows that in NI, 74% of people feel they have no influence over the Executive or lower level decision making.
- NI Life and Times research in 2022 showed that only 17% of people trust the NI Executive, and 41% trust the civil service.

That has a corrosive effect on society and on democracy.

Ensuring that decision-making is open, inclusive, and accountable is critical for rebuilding confidence in our democratic structures and for addressing complex challenges like resource allocation, public sector reform, and climate action. The good news is that one of the ways that you can do that is already available to you - the Executive has made this committee, resources have already been given to writing a strategy and developing terms of reference for the multistakeholder forum. We are here as your civil society partners, with a membership and sector colleagues willing to work with you to bring in diverse expertise to explore how we can improve participation, transparency and accountability. But this comes with a caveat. International oversight puts us under time pressure to make this happen. We fear that this opportunity is slipping away.

Today, I want to explore how we can build on the progress already made, and how this committee can help to make sure we don't lose this important asset.

I look forward to your questions and to discussing how we can advance this important agenda together.

Thank you.