

Scotland's Open Government Journey 2016-2025

Future Look Report, March 2025

Introduction

This report takes stock of Scotland's open government journey since joining the Open Government Partnership (OGP) in 2016 and provides recommendations on the development of Scotland's 4th Open Government Action Plan, expected to be launched in 2026 once the current (3rd) Action Plan is complete. It is based on existing reviews of Scotland's progress in open government as well as discussions held during a "Future Look" workshop with government and civil society in February 2025¹.

Scotland has come a long way in its open government journey and has seen some important successes, especially in the areas of fiscal openness and participation. Nevertheless, important barriers remain. These include an increasingly strained resource environment, ongoing challenges with civil society engagement, and the slow pace of change within the civil service. This all points to the need for a more strategic approach to open government going forward.

- Part 1 provides a brief summary of the institutional context, co-creation process and implementation of commitments over the past three action plan cycles (2016-2017; 2028-2020; 2021-2025).
- Part 2 provides a snapshot of the current social and political context in which the next action plan is being considered.
- Part 3 provides some lessons and recommendations for Scotland's next open government action plan cycle.

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1. Looking back: Scotland's Journey to date (2016-2025)

A. Institutional context		
1st Action Plan (2016-2017)	2nd Action Plan (2018-2020)	3rd Action Plan (2021-2025)
<p>Led by Ingage, within the Local Government and Communities Directorate.</p> <p>Political leadership from Joe Fitzpatrick, Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) and Minister for Parliamentary Business.</p> <p>OGP named in the 2017/18 Programme for Government.</p>	<p>Led by Open Government Team (formerly Ingage), within the Local Government and Communities Directorate.</p> <p>Political leadership switched to Michael Russell, MSP and Cabinet Secretary for Government Business and Constitutional Relations.</p> <p>OGP named in the 2018/2019 and 2019/20 Programme for Government.</p>	<p>Continues to be led by the Open Government Team with an expanded team of 3 (later 4).</p> <p>OGP named in the 2021/22 Programme for Government (but not thereafter).</p> <p>Political leadership initially from George Adam, Minister for Parliamentary Business and later Jamie Hepburn, Minister for Parliamentary Business.</p> <p>OGP in Scotland remains reliant on the drive of a small number of individuals and has yet to be fully institutionalised.</p>
B. Co-creation process		
1st Action Plan (2016-2017)	2nd Action Plan (2018-2020)	3rd Action Plan (2021-2025)
<p>Civil society engagement coordinated by SCVO; Previous experience with OGP (UK) from Involve and Democratic Society.</p> <p>Establishment of the online Scotland Open Government Network (OGN).</p> <p>Consultation process was designed to give civil society a central role in reaching out to stakeholders in order to</p>	<p>Formal MSF (SG) with equal govt-CSO representation (co-chaired). Met 3 times a year.</p> <p>Broader co-creation process led by SCDC (>100 participants at in-person events, > 50 crowd-sourced proposals). More feedback provided: workshop reports, reflection report from SCDC.</p>	<p>A more focused and strategic co-creation process than previous cycles but less participatory, with a trade-off between deep vs broad consultation.</p> <p>Unlike previous action plans, the main themes were pre-defined before consultation began, in recognition of the need for more ambition, a sense of continuity,</p>

<p>build a sense of partnership. Successful in building momentum around the open government movement in Scotland.</p> <p>Structured engagement with civil society and the wider public in shaping specific commitments and milestones in the final action plan was limited.</p> <p>Little formal feedback on whether, or how, inputs were incorporated into the final action plan or reasons for decisions. Government fine-tuned a number of the milestones to include specific actions which had not previously been discussed with civil society. The draft plan was not made public for comment before publication.</p> <p>Informal steering group (SG) comprising government commitment leads and civil society reps from the OGN. Useful for updates but not for steering the overall strategic direction of the action plan. SG minutes were not published.</p>	<p>Draft Action Plan was published for public comment. Many suggestions ultimately not included but the process was recognised as more inclusive than the previous plan.</p> <p>OGN membership dropped significantly after a technical hitch – and has yet to recover. The network became disconnected from the open government process and was largely inactive during the second action plan period.</p> <p>Greater involvement of a wider range of public sector stakeholders in the plan’s development and delivery, including COSLA and public sector scrutiny bodies, including the Scottish Information Commissioner. More buy-in, but increased coordination and accountability challenges.</p> <p>External engagement deteriorated during implementation as compared to the action plan design phase due to the COVID-19 pandemic, challenge of maintaining civil society involvement with limited institutional and financial support, and uneven political support for open government from higher levels of government.</p> <p>Introduction of a commitment tracker that was regularly updated throughout implementation and publication of SG minutes.</p>	<p>and prioritisation of existing strategies rather than creating new initiatives.</p> <p>Onboarding of civil society partners in the co-creation process happened later than hoped, which contributed to weak civil society ownership of the plan.</p> <p>Creation of joint civil society - government working groups to develop and later implement each commitment as a useful model (initially trialled in the 2018-2020 plan).</p> <p>Continued use of the commitment tracker but presentation of other open government related information remained fragmented and difficult to navigate for someone unfamiliar with the process.</p> <p>Questions remain concerning whether the Scotland OGN Network is fit for purpose.</p>
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C. Commitments

1st Action Plan (2016-2017)	2nd Action Plan (2018-2020)	3rd Action Plan (2021-2025)
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The first plan contained five broad commitments understood as “a framework for further discussions with civil society”, rather than a set of fixed targets. Commitments were generally low on specificity. The work on financial transparency and participation built a solid foundation and elements of these were carried over to the second plan.

Commitments:

- 1. Financial transparency:** The Scottish Government will seek to improve the presentation and clarity of the financial, procurement and commercial information.
- 2. Measuring Scotland’s progress:** The development of a robust framework which enables Scotland's progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- 3. Deliver a fairer Scotland:** To deliver the 50 actions in the Fairer Scotland Action Plan, with annual engagement with people and communities on progress.
- 4. Participatory budgeting:** The Scottish Government will work COSLA to increase the scale and pace of community choices.
- 5. Increasing participation:** (i) development of new legislation; (ii) ensuring the people who use public services are involved in designing them; (iii) building an Open Government movement in Scotland.

The second plan was more specific and more ambitious than first plan (especially the ambition to develop a participation framework, although this did not quite deliver on expectations and was rolled into the third plan). Higher completion rate than its first action plan, with two of the five commitments fully completed and two substantially complete. One commitment was likely to remain a one-off intervention (Brexit), while the accountability commitment failed to adequately address the complexity of the issue (accountability gaps among scrutiny bodies).

Commitments:

- 1. Financial and Performance Transparency:** Scottish Exchequer, SNIB, budget and procurement transparency.
- 2. Framework for Participation** in open policy making and service delivery (guidance, training, piloting).
- 3. Improving how information and data is shared:** Make more data/statistics more easily findable, understandable, and reusable).
- 4. Improving the accountability of public services:** Mapping of the accountability landscape and the development of a citizen-centred approach to advice and consumer services.
- 5. Transparency and participation in Scotland as the UK exits the European Union:** Understanding people’s concerns around Brexit.

The third plan adopted a longer (4 year) cycle, with a more iterative approach to developing commitments. This enabled greater strategic ambition and adaptation to changing circumstances but heightened the risk of losing momentum and focus, and closing out new opportunities. The fiscal transparency work (commitment 1) offers a particularly good example of how open government reforms can evolve over time across action plans. Participation work remains ambitious but overly broad.

Commitments:

- 1. Fiscal Openness and Transparency:** Benchmarking progress on fiscal transparency, improving the accessibility of fiscal information, and improving engagement and participation.
- 2. Health & Social Care:** Adapting the Scottish approach to service design to the health and social care sector.
- 3. Data & Digital:** Building data literacy and applying the Data Transformation Framework to specific areas of data.
- 4. Climate change:** Establishing a stakeholder network to provide advice and support on delivering engagement in key climate change policies.
- 5. Participation:** Improvement and roll out of the Participation Framework, embedding open government principles in ongoing consultative processes.

2. Contextual considerations for Scotland's next action plan

Declining trust in government: Trust in the Scottish government has fallen to the lowest level since the Scottish Parliament was established in 1999, according to [an official measure of social attitudes](#). The Scottish Social Attitudes Survey for 2023 showed the percentage who said they trusted the Scottish government to act in Scotland's best long-term interests fell to 47%, down from 61% in 2019.

Unsustainable public sector finances: Audit Scotland has recently urged the Scottish Government to [introduce urgent reforms](#) to address the public sector's unsustainable finances. The Scottish Government attributes financial challenges to a range of factors such as inflation, the pandemic, and prolonged austerity measures from Westminster. Audit Scotland has also [criticised a lack of transparency](#) from the Scottish government, calling for improvement in the quality of information collected from public bodies on costs, savings and progress on reform.

Challenges for civil society sustainability: The third sector in Scotland is under increasing financial strain, especially from cost of living and inflation pressures since the pandemic. The Scottish Parliament's Social Justice and Social Security Committee found in 2024 that [funding cycles are creating financial instability](#) and diverting time and resources away from charities' delivery of services.

Rising health inequalities and falling life expectancy: Scotland faces [widening health disparities](#), with life expectancy decreasing to 76.6 years for men and 80.8 years for women, with the gap between richer and poorer widening. The gap between affluent and deprived communities is growing, influenced by factors such as austerity measures, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis.

Social care system under strain: The [social care sector is under significant pressure](#) due to an aging population and a shortage of care workers. Challenges include a complex and fragmented funding structure, low wages, limited professional development opportunities, and demanding work conditions, leading to difficulties in recruitment and retention.¹

Environmental setbacks: The collapse of the power-sharing agreement between the SNP and the Scottish Green Party in 2024 has led to [delays and potential rollbacks of key environmental initiatives](#), such as the deposit return scheme for drinks containers and ambitious carbon emission reduction targets.

Ongoing FoI reform: The Scottish government's handling of FoI requests has continued to come under scrutiny over recent years. In 2023, the Scottish Information Commissioner identified [a number of areas for improvement](#), including clearance procedures, quality assurance, case file records management, case handling, and FOI monitoring. To address these concerns, the government introduced a [Freedom of information \(FOI\) Improvement Plan](#) and [Freedom of Information Policy Objectives 2024 to 2026](#) to improve the operation of FOI rights in Scotland.

Rise in mis- and dis-information: [Disinformation is having a significant impact on the open government](#) agenda globally by undermining transparency, accountability, and public trust. Political actors are increasingly manipulating open data and using selective transparency or misinformation to control narratives rather than empower citizens.

3. Looking ahead: Lessons and recommendations for Scotland's next open government action plan

3.1. Strategic approach

Scotland's experience has shown that the policy areas which have seen most success under the open government agenda are those which have secured senior buy-in, have been allocated (even modest) dedicated resources and where there has been strong collaboration both across government and between government and civil society. With this in mind, there is a growing consensus among both government and civil society that it is time for a more strategic approach to open government in Scotland.

The suggestion is therefore to build the next plan around a broader open government strategy which would set clear priorities for Scotland going forward. Government and civil society could jointly identify a set of shared objectives and high-level principles in the form of an Open Government Charter (or similar) covering some core strategic areas (e.g. FoI, fiscal openness, open data ethics etc). The open government action plan could then sit beneath this strategy, focussing on impactful actions under key themes for which relatively small discreet bits of work could be piloted and, where appropriate, scaled-up, while pooling resources from different departments. In essence this would entail a two-track approach, whereby the open government action plan focuses on a more targeted set of commitments and activities, while the government's broader open government work continues in parallel to, but not explicitly part of, the formal action plan process. This would also give scope for incorporating work on the fringes of commitments, rather than being locked into a predetermined set of outcomes. It has been suggested that the National Performance Framework (NPF) might be a useful framework for monitoring the high-level outcomes of the strategy, while more specific indicators (commitments and milestones) would continue to form the core of the action plan.

The process of developing the strategy offers an opportunity to go back to first principles and revisit some core questions, including (but not limited to):

- What is open government in Scotland aiming to achieve? What are the issues that people care about that open government can meaningfully contribute to?
- How does the open government agenda intersect with other related work happening in and beyond government? How can open government be seen as part of what civil servants do, rather than a burdensome add-on. What are civil society partners working on that open government could provide genuine added-value to? How might a more strategic approach help join up the dots under the open government banner?

3.2. Engaging the civil service

A recurring theme across action plans has been the challenge of building both the drive and skills for openness within the civil service in the context of an increasingly challenging "blame and shame" culture. A key question is how government colleagues can authentically communicate with the public in such an

environment. To this end, a number of approaches to which an open government strategy could contribute (drawing also on experience from elsewhere) have been suggested:

- Re-energise efforts to show the value of open government (“internal rebranding”) and ensure senior level ownership of the process so that decision-makers put people and resources behind what comes out of the co-creation process. The act of developing an open government strategy could be both a tool to achieve this and a successful outcome in itself. A strong strategic focus on (re-)building public trust could be an important lever for building support both internally and externally.
- Integrate some clear lines/principles on open government into other, larger government strategies. For example, open government was a thread through numerous Programmes for Government in the early years of Scotland’s involvement in OGP, although this has not been the case since 2021/22.
- Support the civil service to embed openness through a set of shared outcomes/logic model while providing civil servants with the language and the confidence to communicate with the public. This could, for example, take the form of internal guidance on how to work more openly, running internal events on trust-building, developing case studies of practical ways to build these skills etc. (See examples from [Spain](#) and [Córdoba](#), Argentina).

3.3. Engaging civil society

Civil society engagement, beyond a small group of motivated partners, continues to face numerous obstacles including resources, time, and the broader crisis in the sector. The participation infrastructure that is needed to drive greater engagement remains fractured and is still not given sufficient priority. At the same time, as noted in the mid-term review, the fact that many deliverables under the current and previous open government action plans have remained largely internally focused means that commitments have struggled to make a compelling offer to civil society that aligns with their interests and existing priorities. The technical language of milestone and commitments can be off-putting to many CSOs who may struggle to see the relevance and direct impact of open government on citizen wellbeing. Addressing these challenges requires structured and ongoing dialogue which goes beyond the open government process. That said, some more immediate actions that could be considered include:

- Invest time in better understanding the current barriers to civil society involvement in open government, identifying potential areas of alignment between government and civil society interests, and considering what can be done to support a stronger civil society in Scotland. Build a picture of how people have become involved to date and why they have or haven’t remained involved, to gather learning on engagement for the next plan.
- Consider how to frame the next action plan (including the open government strategy) in a more outward facing way that offers a clear sell for civil society (beyond those who have a direct professional interest). What can open government offer in return? How can open government link up with other civil society engagement processes beyond OGP? How can it move beyond digital spaces into the physical world?
- Provide greater support for engaging civil society, including more accessible information about the roles, process and investment needed for civil society members to play an active role in open government processes (both under the next action plan and under a broader strategy). This could include considering how a future action plan might include more concrete roles for civil society partners in implementation beyond an oversight role.

3.4. Developing a strong co-creation process with clear communication

The current period of reflection offers the opportunity to ensure deeper collaboration in co-creation through a longer and more involved consultation period and more engagement with other issue-based networks earlier on in the process, before key decisions have been finalised. It will be important to strike the right balance between strategic alignment with existing/emerging priorities and the extent of citizen input during co-creation. Given the proposed strategic approach, it could be important at the outset to ensure the commitment of a small number of invested CSOs who help support sustained engagement with their constituencies. At the same time, the issue of clear language and the importance of accessible communications has been acknowledged as an area of opportunity²:

- Develop a practical roadmap with sufficient lead in time for the next co-creation process including promotion, marketing, and engagement. Consider what kind of stakeholder engagement strategies could be used to create stronger links between open government stakeholders and other issue-based networks.
- Consider what role (if any) the online Open Government Network (OGN) should play in the next co-creation process and beyond.
- Define a compelling narrative frame for the open government agenda in Scotland to better communicate the concrete contributions it has and could make to Scottish society more generally in advance of the next co-creation process. Consider developing a set of stories of success/impact from Scotland's OGP journey to date to demonstrate why OGP matters for Scotland

3.5. Defining future commitment areas

The selection of commitment areas (including whether to continue/build upon some of the existing commitments) will be contingent on the strategy development and co-creation processes referred to above. That said, experience to date suggests that it may be more sustainable to focus on longer-term strategic commitment areas (e.g. financial transparency, data, participation) than ones which address specific short-term needs (e.g. Brexit). Other considerations include:

- Maintain a focus on how open government can contribute to concrete policy areas (such as health, education, social care, etc.) and how it relates to existing initiatives.
- Continue participation as a central thread through the next action plan, as it is at the heart of the OGP approach. Given that progress has been mixed as a standalone commitment, however, it might be worth considering it as a more cross-cutting approach (i.e. applying participatory methods to other commitments).

² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/open-government-partnership-steering-group-minutes-december-2024/>

- Consider revisiting the (largely absent) accountability element of open government (e.g. greater engagement with parliament, mechanisms through which citizens can seek answers or justification from government). While accountability-focussed commitments can be more challenging than many other areas as they may imply a more overtly political approach, the rewards in terms of building trust, can be significant.
- Consider if and how Scotland's action plan might align with global open government priorities as articulated through the global [Open Government Challenge](#).

4. Useful resources

- OGP Participation and Co-Creation Toolkit
https://www.ogp.euskadi.eus/contenidos/documentacion/doc_recursos_ogp/es_def/adjuntos/cocreacion_plan/OGP_Participation-CoCreation-Toolkit_20180509.pdf
- OGP Local: Co-creation Playbook
<https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/English-Local-Co-creation-Playbook.pdf>
- OGP Local 2025 Report with examples of good practice from other OGP Local members [*forthcoming Autumn 2025*]
- OECD (2022) Taking an integrated approach to the promotion of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholders' participation: Towards an Open Government Strategy [https://one.oecd.org/document/GOV/PGC/OG\(2020\)4/FINAL/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/GOV/PGC/OG(2020)4/FINAL/en/pdf)