Northern Ireland: Focus Group with Johnny Bell, David McBurney, Sean Kelly and Craig McGuiken

Purpose of the meeting:
- o Understand the challenges and success of the programme to date to be able to develop a dream statement that can act as a focus for future dialogue
- o Identify any projects/activities beyond those that are already listed on the wiki

Dialogue

Participants
- Johnny Bell, Policy Officer Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL)
  - o Project Manager 2 x days
  - o Co-ordinates monthly Project Group activities
  - o Responsible for work programme and day-to-day activities
  - o Aligns organisational values and SDGs

- David McBurney, Co-ordinator Northern Ireland Open Government Network
  - o Transparency and accountability lead
  - o Works closely with JB (above)
  - o Input into *Reimagine Democracy* conference and associated work

Sean Kelly, Development Manager NIEL
- o Develops links to grassroots projects
- o One example 8/10 partners working with 14-24 year olds on projects to develop the ideas of young people (as both individuals and club members) about nature and the environment
- o Target special schools, young farmers and those participating in Duke of Edinburgh schemes
- o Aim to achieve change by influencing policy and political party manifestoes

Craig McGuicken, Chief Executive NIEL
- o Member of the Project Board and participant in the monthly teleconference
- o Link between Open Government and SDGs = important issues for NIEL members (umbrella group for 75 organisations and connected to over 100,000 people)

Reflections on the Reimagine Democracy conference (15 March)

Overview of what worked and what was less successful?
- Event organised in three sections (i) open government (ii) SDGs and (iii) facilitating participants to make commitments for future action
- Format combined information (about some shocking issues), entertainment and the opportunity for engagement and networking well facilitated by the host and with high quality speakers
- Supported by live stream, video link and twitter

- Good turnout with mix of individuals and organisations who were not the 'usual suspects' (helped by the link to the wider Imagine festival on in Belfast at the time)

The context and relevance
- The conference was well timed (and therefore may possibly achieve more mainstream attention) following statement on 14 March by David Sterling, head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, that not all government meetings were minuted to avoid FOI requests. The Sterling statement will be considered by the Information Commissioner
- First session of the conference got to the heart of NI issues, covering transparency and accountability, 'dark money' and tax justice. As well as FOI (noted that Mandy McAuley, the BBC investigative journalist, 'never had a successful FOI' was a phenomenal fact) other current NI issues discussed were the suspended devolved government and the allegations about dark money in the Brexit campaign
- These discussions should help put increased focus on open government

How the outcomes could help shape what's next?
- The various proposals discussed in the afternoon session could be part of the project programme – exploring how the SDGs could lead to action and raise awareness about the need for government reform and greater transparency
- Government officials are involved in open government commitments
- Brexit raises challenges for agriculture – but priorities could be framed within SDGs and enable ability to compete post-Brexit
- Useful to map SDGs to PfG outcomes

Reflecting on Open Government in Northern Ireland
- There is a culture of secrecy within the NI civil service
- There is no independent environment agency in NI which creates a lack of accountability around environmental regulation
- Issue of equality – important to work with young people with SDGs providing a useful framework for open government
- Democracy Games events at Stormont have taken place three times and build political literacy in a fun and interactive way by encouraging young people to think about manifestos and policy. They develop a slogan under a theme and then present their ideas to their peers who then vote for the one they prefer
- They are popular and over-subscribed
- Encourages young people do something of their own about what's important to them (for the future)
- Politicians are keen to be seen to support the project

What have we done, what is our learning and how can we ensure future support?
- It is first necessary to evaluate the success of the agreed activity plan, e.g. conference webinars, blogs…
- Independence of Open Government Network is crucial
- Without OGN there would be no open government commitments