

England: Discussion with Tim Hughes, Director, Involve

Purpose of the meeting:

- 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
- Identify any projects/activities beyond those that are already listed on the wiki

Dialogue

- Tim was the Open Government Programme Manager and the original Co-ordinator of the UK Open Government network from 2012
- 18 months ago he became Director of Involve
- Recent work has included running two weekend debates on the future of social care for Select Committees

How does the Open Government Network work in England?

- Originally the Open Government Network brought together a loose coalition of international development type organisations to push long-term demands on development and linked anti-corruption initiatives
- In 2011 the first Open Government action plan was published
- These plans run for two years and aim to create a cycle with the next action plan being drafted in the second year of the previous one
- The second plan included a register of beneficial ownership as an important anti-corruption tool and the last plan open contracting - but these are essentially technical subjects so thinking developed about how to broaden out its aspirations to the rest of the UK (the third was launched at the Prime Minister's Anti-Corruption Summit in May 2016 and the fourth is imminent)
- The Open Government Pioneers Programme was therefore formulated to broaden debate and think about issues such as health and social care
- However Open Government Partnership has been under threat because of Brexit and change in government
- An absence of political leadership (Theresa May is less inclined to support) with six different ministers (and therefore they have no time to get to grips with open government as well as it not being top of the agenda)
- Remit has now moved from the Government Digital Service (not necessarily a comfortable fit) to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, sitting alongside the civil society team with Matt Hancock, the Secretary of State
- Tom Townsend is the civil servant champion
- No political leadership sits alongside threat from neglect, e.g. increasingly poor responses on FOI requests and lack of openness about data, and language around Brexit, e.g. the proposals for the UK to become an offshore tax haven (which would be opposed to open government)
- Sense of fire-fighting to obtain ministerial attention

- Some tension therefore within the OG Network – are they giving government an easy ride?
 - Some cynicism but principle of the network is to be collaborative – and therefore not ideally suited to taking up a challenging stance
 - How to keep the open government agenda going – and maintain a positive attitude towards a longer-term agenda?
 - This battle means that the Open Government Pioneers aspirations have been somewhat side-lined
 - In addition the role of the UKSSD (UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development) – assessment of current state of play re SDGs
 - There is a positive relationship but (lack of) progress on SDGs is similar to Open Government
 - Lack of government interest – cursory inclusion in department plans but lack of co-ordination
 - Voluntary reporting of SDGs – government unwilling
 - UKSSD has recently threatened to highlight this – appears to have had some impact
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- Both agendas – need each other – link through longer-term goals chasing government
 - Important to build civil society links
 - Pick on a couple of sectors – working on SDGs – explore Open Government (FOIs, Open Data and more focus groups)
 - Thinking about how to build relationships?
 - Comparison across the UK?
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- On reflection there should have more time up front to get to grips about what could have united the four parts of the UK in the Open Government Pioneers project
 - Potentially this could be about the long-term sustainability, e.g. effective education and tackling poverty can only come about with open government demanding tough and open conversations
 - How can the assets and resources of people be used?
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- Implementation is a work in progress – following publication of fourth action plan how could work be broadened?

Reflections on the Reimagine Democracy conference (15 March)

- Conference was particularly relevant in Northern Ireland but perhaps there was less reach elsewhere
- Highlighted the importance of language – first session focussed on current situation in NI and illustrated how the debate could have some real meaning and made the issue of open government appear more human
- Tendency for debate to be highbrow – so challenge to articulate and inspire a wider audience

Shaping a dream statement for England

A real significant government commitment to something people really care about

Government commits to a national conversation about the future of the country (and what SDGs mean)

Developmental discussions that led to the above were:

- No attempt by government to have the conversation (to date)
- There is an image problem for SDGs in England
- Perception that they are an international development issue
- Need to win the argument that they are a global issue – including for the UK