

# Open Government Partnership needs a little more time and attention

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In November 2015, soon after he became Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull committed the Australian government to participating in the Open Government Partnership, something that had been promised by the Rudd/Gillard Labor Government but not acted upon by the Abbott Coalition Government.

The [Open Government Partnership](#) is an international initiative that provides a platform for reformers inside and outside governments around the world to develop reforms that “promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption and harness new technologies to strengthen governance”. Since its foundation in September 2011, over 2,000 commitments have been made by 65 participating countries, covering a third of the world’s population.

Countries must meet a set of basic eligibility criteria and agree to an [Open Government Declaration](#) to join. Once a member, governments must develop a [National Action Plan](#) with civil society in their country on a biennial basis. The government must regularly report on its progress and work with civil society to achieve the agreed reforms. Progress is evaluated at regular intervals by an independent researcher appointed by the [OGP’s Independent Reporting Mechanism](#). The OGP emphasises [partnership between government and civil society](#) at all levels. Its [steering committee](#) is formed of equal government and civil society representatives, with co-chairs drawn from each.

Once Australia had signed up we were then obliged to work within the timeline set by the OGP which required a final plan to be submitted by July 2016. In the pre-Christmas

rush information sessions were held in various capital cities and a wiki established to solicit suggestions from the community for what should be on the National Action Plan. Then in April this year people came together in Canberra to try to whittle down over 200 suggestions and the shortlist was taken back to government to be turned into a plan and approved before the election was called... This did not happen and now we are in care taker mode with the July deadline still looming.

In order to help coordinate the community engagement side of the OGP project, and push the government to commit to the process, a group has set up the [OGP Civil Society Network](#) which anyone can join. Below we provide an update on where things are at with the OGP process which needs an urgent response from government if we are to either make or extend the 1 July target.

What happens now we're caretaker mode?

On 17 May 2016 Network Chair David Solomon wrote to the [message to the Prime Minister](#) urging the government to take extra time beyond the 1 July target date to formulate and submit a national action plan. So far there has been no response. And no announcement or communication from the government since early April regarding possible commitments to be included in the plan. The caretaker convention arrangements impose limits on what can be done during the campaign.

However a different government elected on 2 July should have the opportunity to put its own stamp on the plan.

And a re-elected Turnbull government should take another look at where things stand because of the wide gulf between thinking inside and outside government about possibilities, and the absence to date of a formal process that brings government and civil society together to negotiate and agree on priorities.

When the government called a halt to engagement in early April:

[Two hundred and ten](#) suggestions from outside government had been submitted during a public consultation from which eighteen were selected in a somewhat arbitrary fashion at a government initiated workshop in Canberra on 10 April. They were transformed into [fourteen drafts](#) that cover:

- Open data – infrastructure, better open data for the public
- Public integrity – contract transparency, anti-corruption, open policy and consultation, whistleblower protection, parliamentary conduct
- Innovation – fostering innovation, opening procurement processes
- Fiscal transparency– EITI, beneficial ownership transparency
- Access to Information – FOI and role of OAIC
- Public Participation – new ways to engage
- Ongoing engagement – joint government-civil society management of the process.

[Government agencies](#) meantime adopted a narrower focus suggesting the following initiatives, none of which have been the subject of any elaboration or dialogue with those outside government during the OGP plan process:

- Centralised Annual Report discovery portal
- Create a Digital Marketplace
- Create, manage and preserve information digitally
- Enable and encourage more data-driven digital report publishing
- Future-proofing open data infrastructure
- Grants.gov.au redevelopment
- ICT Project dashboard
- Redesign the open data request process
- Scoping a public consultation platform
- Scoping an e-Tabling system
- Transforming high volume services.

Minister for Justice Keenan in London at the recent Anti-Corruption Summit committed the government to linking [commitments](#) made there with its OGP plan, a welcome grander idea than those contemplated by public servants. ([Communique para 31](#))

On another ‘big picture’ issue the government has been silent on following [the lead](#) of other OGP members in linking Sustainable Development Goals with the plan.

Whoever wins the election on 2 July should renew efforts with civil society – hence the need for a formal process – to develop a plan setting out commitments that “promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption and harness new technologies to strengthen governance,” the goals the OGP seeks to advance.

[Prime Minister Turnbull](#) in November told the Co-chairs of the international OGP Steering Committee these goals “directly align with Australia’s long and proud tradition of open and transparent government.”

On the other side of the election tussle, then Labor Attorney General [Mark Dreyfus](#) in May 2013 said “Australia shares the values of the Open Government Partnership.”

With five weeks to go until the election the OGP and related issues concerning transparency, accountability, open government and citizen participation should surely get a mention.

The Network stands ready to play a role in partnering with government after the election to develop an ambitious plan Australia can submit slightly late to the OGP .

But a plan that can go forward with pride, and shared government and civil society ownership.

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The Australian Open Government Partnership Network is a coalition of civil society organisations and individuals committed to making government work better through transparency, participation and accountability. The network collaborates with and challenges governments in Australia to develop and implement ambitious open government reforms through Australia's membership of the Open Government Partnership.

Member organisations include Accountability Roundtable, Transparency International Australia, Open Knowledge Australia, OpenAustralia Foundation, Electronic Frontiers Australia, Code for Australia, Australian Press Council, Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, Publish What You Pay, Blueprint for Free Speech, Creative Commons Australia, Australian Privacy Foundation, Australian Policy Online and Internet Australia

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As an open access platform for public policy research and information APO fully supports the principles of open government and the Open Government Partnership and is a member of the OGP Civil Society Network and the Access to Information Working Group. Amanda Lawrence and Peter Timmins both attended the meeting in Canberra in April this year.