Aid Transparency

Objective: Strengthening of transparency and accountability of UK
Official Development Assistance (ODA).

What is the problem that the commitment will address?

Official development assistance (ODA) has a role to play in strengthening open societies
and democracy around the world, as laid out in the International Development Strategy.
Ensuring information on ODA is easier to access, understand and use means that taxpayers
in donor countries, and communities and governments in developing countries can more
easily hold development partners to account for using funds wisely. It also enables
international development actors to coordinate and plan their activities more effectively.

The UK has a strong reputation of supporting international transparency initiatives and set a
high standard for transparency of ODA, with substantial progress made in the last decade.
Since 2020 there have been a range of challenges to transparency and accountability in the
international development sector.

In the UK:

- Due to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public finances, from
  2021 the UK Government temporarily reduced its ODA budget from 0.7% to 0.5% of
  GNI. The National Audit Office echoed findings of both ICAI and the IDC that a lack
  of transparency in the approach to and outcome of ODA changes affected the quality
  and scrutiny of allocation decisions and contributed to uncertainty in the sector.
- The Department for International Development (DFID) and the Foreign and
  Commonwealth Office (FCO) were merged to form the Foreign Commonwealth and
  Development Office (FCDO). The two departments were assessed in the Aid
  Transparency Index in 2020 with DFID scoring Very Good (85.4 and FCO scoring fair
  (48.6). In 2022 the FCDO scored Good (71.9).
- Ten UK government departments involved in spending UK ODA were assessed in
  the 2020 UK Aid Transparency Review and proposals for improvements were made,
  but work on these proposals has been challenging under the pandemic and limited
  progress has been made.

Globally:

The Covid-19 pandemic and the conflicts in Afghanistan and Ukraine put a spotlight on both
real-time ODA data being published to IATI as a critical mechanism for understanding where
humanitarian and development finance was flowing to enable coordination, effectiveness
and accountability, alongside the challenges of our public data putting people at risk.   Both
these areas need to be explored further to ensure good quality and timely data, while
minimising risk during a crisis.

How will the commitment contribute to solving the problem:

1. The International Development Strategy notes that "Transparency and accountability supports progress", commits the UK to being "a patient partner that champions openness" and to being transparent in its financing model. This National Action Plan commitment reaffirms the UK government's position on aid transparency and to publication of financial and programme information on ODA on devtracker and to the International Aid Transparency Initiative standard (IATI). Through the enhancement of UK aid data and encouragement and support to recipients of UK aid and partner countries, these improvements will contribute to UK ODA being tracked through the delivery chain.

2. FCDO will exceed its 2022 score in future Aid Transparency Index assessments. FCDO and BEIS will proactively engage with the recommendations of the 2022 Aid Transparency Index.

3. To enhance UK government wide aid transparency Government Departments will agree how they will address the recommendations of the 2020 UK Aid Transparency Review, with the expectation for a follow up review.

4. FCDO will create a new programme to enable aid transparency, including to support the International Aid transparency Initiative and support the enhanced transparency of UK ministries spending ODA. The UK will continue taking an active role in IATI, including through the donor harmonisation group, helping improve the standard while supporting improvements in data use and data quality.

5. FCDO will proactively engage with the recommendations of the ICAI rapid review of Transparency in UK Aid, and use them to inform its aid transparency plans for the future.

6. FCDO will adopt a meaningful, inclusive and deliberative approach to ensure effective engagement with civil society. This requires being open and accountable, ensuring participants are kept informed; and creating a well-structured and consistent process.

7. FCDO will work with donor partners on the transparency of data during conflicts, identifying best practice that balances the need for protecting people from harm with the need for data and transparency of aid information.

Milestone to fulfil the commitment	Baseline	New or ongoing	Start Date	End Date
Milestones relating to commitment 1				
By December 2022 to have held a technical discussion with civil society on FCDO data and how it translates into IATI data, in particular including discussions and proposals on handling of budgets and commitments in line with the IATI standard.		New	2022	Dec 2022

By August 2023, FCDO to be consistently (for at least 3 consecutive months by milestone end date) publishing all project level expenditure data monthly, within 2 weeks of the month end.	FCDO publishing both monthly and quarterly.	Ongoing	2022	August 31st 2023
By Sept 2023, FCDO to ensure all activity descriptions of projects and programmes provide an overview of implementing activities and target groups				Sept 2023
Milestones relating to commitment 2				
FCDO will improve its score by the time of the Aid Transparency Index in 2024 .	Score of 71.9 (Good) in 2022	Ongoing	2022	2024
Milestones relating to commitment 3				
By December 2022, FCDO and BEIS to outline actions to be taken to address recommendations of the 2022 Aid Transparency Index	NA	New	2022	December 31st 2022.
By end 2022, OGDs to have agreed a process for addressing outstanding challenges highlighted in the 2020 UK Aid Transparency Review and agreed the timeline for a future assessment.	NA	New	2022	Dec 31st 2022
Milestones relating to commitment 4				
FCDO to publish the business case of the new transparency programme and plan to support IATI and the transparency of OGDs	NA	New	Sept 2022	March 2023
Milestones relating to commitment 5				
The UK government to respond to the ICAI review within allocated timeframes, outlining actions that will be taken in response to recommendations.	NA	New	2022	Within agreed timelines from ICAI review publication
Milestones relating to commitment 6				

FCDO to hold quarterly meetings with civil society to discuss aid transparency, seeking input from and consulting civil society organisations on pertinent issues, and providing feedback on how the input is used.	NA	New	Autumn 2022	Ongoing
Milestones relating to commitment 7				
FCDO to work with other IATI donor publishers to develop an approach to IATI publication during conflicts.	NA	New	2022	March 2023

ii) Diversity and Inclusion

Objective: Encourage and facilitate wider participation in the development of the UK government's National Action Plan for Open Government so as to improve outcomes.

What is the problem that the commitment will address?

Diversity and inclusion matter for the legitimacy and the effectiveness of open government. It is important that everyone has the right to participate in public life as different groups have different needs and experiences of government and public services. Yet research has shown some groups face barriers to doing so which means they are less likely to participate in public decision-making and advocate for their own needs and demands.

In response to this, governments and civil society leaders are seeking to increase the involvement of underrepresented groups in the policy-making process. This leads to higher quality, representative and proportionate decisions and programmes, that meet the needs of a greater number of people from a diverse set of backgrounds.

In the last few years the UK government has hosted a series of sessions on gender equality as part of Open Government Week 2019 and the OGP Global Summit in Ottawa to discuss this issue with leading global figures. It has also created a single page for access to disaggregated sets of gendered data.

But more can be done to promote the engagement of underrepresented and diverse groups in the Open Government process, as well as provide opportunities to improve accessibility to government through the simplification of language and by bridging the digital divide.

How will the commitment contribute to solving the problem:

1. Attract participants from diverse backgrounds to engage in the development of the Open Government National Action Plan (OGP NAP). This would include: an equality impact analysis of the NAP, to identify where and how policies, proposals and actions may disproportionately impact underrepresented groups; a comparison of representation across NAP working groups against official UK benchmarks (utilising ONS' Harmonised Standards

for collecting demographic data). The purpose would be to inform the planning stage of the next NAP through a stakeholder engagement and communications plan to engage groups that are currently underrepresented in the process and that targets individuals and groups from diverse backgrounds.

2. Mainstream diversity and inclusion considerations across OGP NAP commitments. This should utilise findings from the equality impact analysis to develop diversity and inclusion success measures that will be mainstreamed with our broader NAP commitments - from the overall process, to commitment design and oversight. The standards would include mainstreaming requirements such as data disaggregated by relevant characteristics, as well as requirements for standalone commitments focused on diversity and inclusion issues. The intention would be to create an iterative assurance framework that allows for continuous improvements in diversity in future OGP NAPs.

3. Work with civil society partners to develop indicators of diversity and inclusion for ongoing year-by-year reviews and assessment of the OGP NAP as part of the co-creation process, learning from the development of the Civil Service's D&I assurance framework
Taking a data-driven, evidence-led and delivery-focussed approach to reviewing our D&I outcomes after each NAP cycle, with clearly defined measures of success, will enable us to continually improve our delivery, to incorporate new ideas and ensure incremental increases in diversity alongside regular reporting.

4. Provide guidance and support on the mainstreaming of diversity and inclusion objectives in the OGP NAP as part of the co-creation process.

This would include the creation of a D&I Working Group led by the government, bringing together government and civil society representatives on a regular basis (to be determined) to exchange best practice, policy updates, and provide oversight of the NAP process.
This will consider the Inclusive Britain policy paper.

It would also be expected to explore data-driven approaches to D&I across government with appropriate attendance (GDS).

An interim group would be established by representatives from GEO / GDS, supported by the UK OGN to further refine the D&I Working Group's objectives.

5. Work with key stakeholders to champion the importance of diversity and inclusion in the development of the OGP NAP process. This is likely to be led by the D&I working group and would include ensuring diversity and inclusion issues are discussed at all co-creation forums, and focuses on providing and improving an equality of opportunity for people to inform the OGP NAP co-creation process and deliver better outcomes for all citizens.

This could also include working with diverse civil service employee networks and advice as to how civil society can broaden engagement.

Milestones	Expected Outputs	Expected Completion Date	Stakeholders
Provide guidance on the integration of diversity and inclusion interests in the OGP NAP as part of the co-creation process.	This would include the creation of a D&I Working Group, led by the government.	Oct 2022	Government Equalities Office, Cabinet Office, Government Digital Service, Civil Society (UK Open Government Network).
Attract participants from underrepresented and diverse backgrounds to engage in the development of the Open Government National Action Plan.	Equality impact analysis of the NAP5. Government to support the promotion of engagement in the NAP process.	Oct 2022 and ongoing	Government Equalities Office, Cabinet Office, Government Digital Service, Civil Society (UK Open Government Network).
Work with civil society partners to develop indicators of diversity and inclusion.	Work led by the Diversity and Inclusion Working Group.	Dec 2022	
Integrate diversity and inclusion interests across the OGP NAP commitments.	The Diversity and Inclusion Working Group to produce an assurance framework, mandated into the process via the Multi-stakeholder Forum.	Prior to next NAP cycle	
Ensure key stakeholders champion the importance of diversity and inclusion in the development of the NAP process.	Integrate Diversity and Inclusion into pre-planning phase of the next National Action Plan.	Prior to next NAP cycle	

(iii) Freedom of Information

Objective: To consider measures to strengthen FOI practice across public authorities with a view to improving compliance with the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act, including the timeliness of responses.

What problem does the commitment aim to address?

The Freedom of Information Act is a vital tool for holding public authorities to account. But delays in answering requests and completing internal reviews (required before a complaint to the Information Commissioner can be made) undermine its effectiveness. Delays are a major source of frustration for FOI requesters, leading to increased complaints to the Information Commissioner.

FOI requests should be answered promptly and usually within 20 working days. Public authorities are permitted to extend the standard 20 working day period to consider the public interest test which applies to certain exemptions. In these cases, an unspecified 'reasonable' extension is permitted under the Act. The Information Commissioner's guidance says that extensions should not normally exceed a further 20 working days. If a requester is dissatisfied with how their request has been handled, they can ask for an internal review and, beyond that, complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).

Only half (51%) of the extensions taken by central government bodies in 2021 were completed within 20 working days. In 2021, less than half (46%) of internal reviews by central government bodies were completed within 20 working days.

The extent of delays in the wider public sector is not fully known as many authorities do not publish compliance statistics despite being advised to do so in a statutory code of practice under section 45 of FOIA. This makes it harder for requesters and the ICO to recognise consistently underperforming authorities, shielding them from pressure to improve.

There is a backlog of FOI complaints at the ICO. At the end of June 2022, ICO FOI/EIR monthly summary data showed it had an active FOI caseload of 2223 complaints, of which 1425 (64%) were awaiting allocation to a case officer.

FOI performance by public authorities varies considerably. It has also affected by the pandemic, due to the reallocation of resources to other areas, closure of premises and staff absences. As a result, some public authorities have backlogs of overdue requests. The ICO announced at the beginning of the pandemic that it would not penalise public authorities for failing to comply with FOI time limits as a result of Covid restrictions.

Some under-performing public authorities have managed to significantly improve their FOI performance. Many of the measures used are not cost intensive. They include better tracking of requests, reminders to staff of approaching deadlines, closer monitoring of performance, the use of disclosure logs and proactive publication to publish information known to attract frequent requests and, crucially, the retention of experienced FOI staff and senior leadership. There is scope for sharing good practice more widely.

The recent PACAC report on the FOI clearing house recommended "The Cabinet Office should drive a cultural shift from mere baseline compliance with the Freedom of Information Act to a greater advocacy for the core principles and tenets of the Act through proactive leadership across Government."

How will the commitment contribute to solving the problem:

The government should establish an information rights user group to discuss how FOIA is working and what can be done to improve compliance. The group could be chaired by a senior Cabinet Office official, and have a membership drawn from the Information Commissioner's Office, civil society, the media and public sector. It should meet quarterly to consider how FOIA practice can be improved. Ministerial attendance at some meetings would be desirable but is not essential.

This will open a channel of communication between key FOI stakeholders, promote better understanding of the issues that each face leading to more responsive use of and compliance with the Act. It will help to ensure any challenges in the system are discussed in an open and collaborative way.

The user group will help engage the Cabinet Office, Information Commissioner and members in efforts to share FOI best practice across government and more widely.

Bringing government, public authorities and civil society together in a regular forum will increase engagement in FOI policy and how the legislation is working in practice, as well as providing opportunities to advocate for greater transparency across Government.

Milestones	Expected Outputs	Expected Completion Date	Stakeholders		
Commitment agreed	Working group meetings

Further milestones to follow from these meetings. | August 2022 | Lead: Eirian Walsh Atkins, Kevin Keith, Katherine Gundersen | | |
			Supporting Stakeholders		
			Government	CSOs	Others
			Cabinet Office	CFOI MySociety Gavin Freeguard	ICO