



Backgrounder: Open Government

The term ‘Open Government’ refers to a government culture that recognizes the public’s right to access data and information held by the government (with appropriate exceptions for privacy and security considerations), and to engage with the government on matters that affect them.

Governments across Canada and around the world are taking steps to become more transparent and accountable to their citizens. Governments are recognizing the benefit of the input, knowledge and expertise that citizens can contribute to government decision-making, and the benefit to society as a whole when government data and information are shared and used to help solve complex problems.

In the Northwest Territories (NWT), establishing an Open Government Policy is one way the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) is meeting the commitments made to improve openness, transparency and accountability in the [Mandate of the Government of the Northwest Territories, 2016-2019](#).

Public engagement on Open Government in the NWT

To develop the Open Government Policy, the Minister Responsible for Public Engagement and Transparency, Louis Sebert, conducted a series of public engagement meetings across the NWT between December 2016 and May 2017. Fifteen public sessions were held in 13 communities across the territory, and included targeted sessions for selected stakeholders, including media and non-government organizations. Written submissions on the Open Government Policy were also accepted during the process. A [“What We Heard” report](#) was tabled during the fall 2017 legislative session.

Open Government Policy

The Open Government Policy was developed based on the results of the public engagement, as well as input from GNWT departments, research on Open Government initiatives in other jurisdictions, and feedback from the [Standing Committee on Government Operations](#). The Open Government Policy establishes a set of principles, and provides a framework for government action to increase openness, transparency and accountability.

The Open Government Policy defines the three pillars of Open Government in the following ways:

- **Open information:** Government-held information, including but not limited to information about government programs, publications, activities and spending,



which is released proactively (routinely and without the need for a specific request) and made available to the public in a variety of ways and in formats that are accessible and user-friendly, with minimal or no restrictions on use or reuse, excluding anything considered sensitive or subject to privacy, security or legal restrictions.

- **Open data:** Government-held data, including but not limited to data sets, facts, figures or statistics, which is released proactively (routinely and without the need for a specific request) and made available to the public in a variety of ways and in formats that are accessible and user-friendly, with minimal or no restrictions on use or reuse, excluding anything considered sensitive or subject to privacy, security or legal restrictions.
- **Open dialogue:** A range of engagement activities that allow residents, communities and other organization to meaningfully contribute their ideas, insights and expertise into government decision-making processes.

Implementation of the Policy

Open Government is not a new idea for the GNWT. It represents principles the government applies regularly through its numerous public engagement processes, online access to programs and services, and other information and data sharing activities. What *is* new is the commitment to bring these practices, ideas and principles together under one policy and establish clear and consistent approaches across government.

The Open Government Policy is an important step that will help all departments examine and improve existing practices and integrate Open Government thinking at all levels. The Policy requires that the GNWT put in place directives and guidelines for:

- sharing **government information and data** (with appropriate exceptions for privacy and security considerations); and
- improving the way the government does **public engagement** and explains how the views of residents were considered in the decisions it makes.

Work to develop these directives and guidelines has already begun as a central focus for the implementation of the Policy.

Roles and responsibilities

The Open Government Policy and Open Government directives and guidelines will apply across the various departments and agencies of the GNWT. It will be the responsibility of



each Minister and Deputy Minister to implement the policy in their respective departments and agencies.

An Open Government Steering Committee of senior government officials has been established to oversee implementation of the Policy. The Steering Committee is responsible for the overall coordination of the development of directives and guidelines, and for overseeing efforts by departments to improve and standardize the way government shares information and data and engages with the public.

Next steps

It is important to recognize that while the principle of Open Government is simple, implementation can be complex and will take planning, time and effort.

The Open Government Steering Committee has already established a working group of GNWT officials from all departments to discuss the challenges and opportunities of Open Government and work collaboratively to develop the tools and initiatives needed to advance the principles of openness, transparency and accountability in concrete, practical ways. Next steps for the working group will include:

- understanding the work that is already planned or underway in departments that supports Open Government, to determine best practices and areas for collaboration;
- determining what information and data departments already publish, and looking at ways to make it more accessible and available to the public;
- developing guidelines to help departments identify and prioritize data and information for release to the public;
- looking at how other GNWT initiatives are related to Open Government and can help departments make better decisions about when and how to release information and data, including the review of the *Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act* and the Service Innovation Strategy;
- developing guidelines for public engagement and how technology can be used to improve the quality and consistency of engagement activities;
- looking at how to get feedback from the public about the GNWT's performance on Open Government and ideas on what it can do better; and
- determining how to report to the public about progress on implementing Open Government.