



UK OPEN
GOVERNMENT
CIVIL SOCIETY NETWORK

Government accused of ‘backsliding’ in new anti-corruption plan

- Last minute changes ‘watered down’ anti-corruption plan. Civil society calls for ‘public standards’ commitment ‘ignored’.
- Commitment on a register of overseas entities owning property in the UK removed.
- The UK risks being asked to leave an international anti-corruption partnership.

Civil society organisations have accused the UK government of ‘watering down’ an [anti-corruption plan published this week](#) [31/01/22].

The UK National Action Plan for Open Government is a series of policy commitments developed by the government and civil society to improve accountability and transparency.

It is a mandatory part of the UK’s membership of an international anti-corruption body called the [Open Government Partnership](#) (OGP).

But civil society organisations have reacted angrily to the plan following last minute removals of key promises, and a failure to engage in areas of reform, including public standards and freedom of information.

Leaders also warn the UK could be asked to leave the 78 country-strong OGP despite being a founding member, as it is currently [‘under review’](#) following failures to reach the required standard in the previous two plans.

Kevin Keith, Chair of the UK Open Government Network, who coordinate civil society’s input into the plan, said:

“Ineffective lobbying laws, unlawful procurement practises, and investigations into breaches of the ministerial code, have eroded trust when lives have depended on it. This plan could have demonstrated the government is serious about rebuilding that trust. Yet repeated requests to the government for a commitment on public standards were ignored, many commitments have been watered down including on corruption, and some have been taken out completely. It’s contemptuous.”

“The UK government now runs the risk of being asked to leave an international anti-corruption partnership altogether. It must urgently work with civil society to improve this plan in the months ahead.”

The reaction follows the recent resignation of the Minister with [responsibility for open government, Lord Agnew](#), due to the government's 'lamentable' record on covid fraud, warnings from the Chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life that the [UK could become a 'corrupt country if we don't attend to ensuring that we maintain standards.'](#) and ongoing investigations into parties during lockdown.

Commitments in the plan include: [how the government spends money](#); improving public understanding [of the justice system](#) and [health data](#); [how citizens can challenge decisions made by algorithms](#); [anti-corruption and illicit finance](#); and [ways to improve transparency in the local government sector](#).

But some of these commitments had limited civil society engagement despite it being a joint plan, and others were watered down unilaterally by the government just days before submission, including the removal of a commitment to a register of overseas entities owning property in the UK [see notes to editors].

At last year's [Summit for Democracy](#) the Prime Minister declared he would ['bring more openness to the purchase of properties in the UK by overseas entities.'](#) and in the last week [26/01/22] the PM's own Anti-Corruption Tsar, John Penrose MP, said it was ['absolutely essential for the credibility of his country and of this government'](#) particularly at a time ['Russian oligarchs \[are\] waiting to move money into this country.'](#)

Rachel Davies-Teka, Head of Advocacy at Transparency International UK, said,

"It's disappointing that, while the Plan commits the Government to enhance beneficial ownership transparency abroad, much-needed action to advance this at home is missing. If the UK is to have credibility overseas, it must get its own house in order."

The government also failed to engage on commitments relating to Public Standards and Freedom of Information. This is despite an initial agreement with the then relevant Minister, Julia Lopez MP, and [a follow-up letter to the Minister](#), which received no response.

Dr. Susan Hawley, Executive Director of Spotlight on Corruption and Co-Chair of the UK Anti Corruption Coalition, said:

"The UK desperately needs a significant upgrade to its framework for regulating standards in public office and how ministers behave. The government has yet to publish any response to its own review on this matter, the Boardman review, or to the Committee on Standards in Public Life recommendations. No timetable has been produced by the government to do so. It beggars belief that the government could be facing its worst integrity crisis in decades but is refusing to engage with civil society about how to implement basic reforms recommended by expert, independent bodies."

Commitments stripped out of the plan altogether include: Official Development Assistance transparency, Diversity and Inclusion, Misinformation, Democracy, and Natural Resources and climate change.

Calum Green, Director of Advocacy & Communications at Involve, said:

“The Open Government National Action Plan is a unique opportunity for the UK government to work with civil society to develop a clear roadmap to increase accountability and transparency. Instead, the government has chosen to water-down and remove key commitments. The government must do better if it’s to show the rest of the world that the UK still values open, transparent and accountable politics.”

ENDS

Notes for editors

1. **Illicit finance and Anti-Corruption Commitment:** The following was removed from this commitment during the write-around process: “Introduce a new economic crime bill in the third session which includes reform of Companies House, limited partnerships law and a register of overseas entities owning property in the UK.”
2. The [UK Open Government Network \(OGN\)](#) is a coalition of active citizens and civil society organisations committed to making government work better for people through increased transparency, participation and accountability.
3. For more information, please contact jon.narcross@electoral-reform.org.uk