# Idea details: The Open Dialogue Initiative: Making the Government of Canada A World Leader in Open Dialogue

Submitted by:

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*This project for the Government of Canada's third Open Government Action Plan would make the government a world leader in Open Dialogue.*

**Introduction**

This document outlines a proposed project for the Government of Canada's third Open Government Action Plan. The project is designed to make the government a world leader in Open Dialogue. The document also includes three appendices that provide further direction on how the project would proceed and how success would be assured.

Open Government in the Government of Canada is based on three streams of activity: Open Data, Open Information, and Open Dialogue. Although each of these streams can help advance Open Government on its own, they are also complementary. If Open Government is to succeed, much more progress is needed on Open Dialogue.

The Open Dialogue Initiative would build knowledge, skills and capacity in the area through a series of demonstration projects to develop a **toolkit and user's guide to make the use of open dialogue processes far more principled and systematic**.

This toolkit rests on four basic types of processes that governments have at their disposal. These four types are neatly represented in the Government of Ontario's new Public Engagement Framework:

**SHARE:** This is a one-way relationship in which government delivers information to the public, either because government hopes to inform them on an issue or because citizens have requested the information.

**CONSULTATION:** Consultation provides members of the public with an opportunity to present their views on a subject to public officials. The process provides them with a chance to make their views known to government. Once they have done so, the officials retreat behind

closed doors to review the arguments, weigh evidence, set priorities, make compromises and propose solutions. Their conclusions are then presented to the government, which makes the final decisions.

**DELIBERATION:** Deliberation allows participants to express their views (consultation), but it also gets them to engage one another (and possibly government) in the search for common ground. Whereas consultation assigns the task of weighing evidence, setting priorities, making compromises and proposing solutions to officials, Deliberation brings the participants into this process.

**COLLABORATION:** Collaboration involves sharing responsibility for the development of solutions AND the delivery or implementation of those solutions. A government shares these responsibilities when it agrees to act as an equal partner with citizens and/or stakeholders to form and deliver a collaborative plan to solve an issue or advance a goal.

So the key ideas behind Ontario's framework are, first, that there are different kinds of engagement processes; and, second, that choosing the right one for the task at hand is crucial to success. Many governments still rely almost exclusively on only two of these process-types: information sessions and consultation.

This worked well enough in the past, but in the digital era it is no longer adequate. Societies like Canada are now highly connected and, as a result, issues, organizations and outcomes are linked in new and often surprising ways. As officials explore the implications for policymaking, decision-making can get very complex very quickly.

Consultation is ill-suited to this environment precisely because the key choices get made behind closed doors. But in many policy issues, there are just too many factors at play, too many trade-offs that have to be made, too many ways that things could be done differently, to explain to citizens after the fact why government made the choices it did. Those who disagree with those choices are often left feeling that the whole process is arbitrary or, worse, that it was rigged from the start.

By contrast, conducting more of these discussions out in the open would allow the public to see how decisions are made in this new environment and to participate more fully in them. Open dialogue refers to those process-types—deliberation and collaboration—where the trade-offs,

weighing of values, setting of priorities and so on **are conducted openly and with public participation.**

## Objectives

The Open Dialogue Initiative (ODI) would have five key objectives;

1. Establish Open Dialogue as the indispensable third stream of Open Government; and make the Government of Canada a leader in open dialogue and collaboration, within the broader framework of Open Government;

2. Develop a principled and systematic, but flexible approach to open dialogue for the Government of Canada, based on a series of demonstration projects;

3. Build public-engagement capacity within the public service—including experience, knowledge, skills, tools and structures—through the demonstration projects;

4. Establish a group of public-engagement champions within the Government of Canada who will encourage further experimentation and culture-change.

5. Foster development of an open dialogue curriculum through engagement of training organizations, such as the Canada School of Public Service or the School of Public Policy at Queen's University.

## Timelines

The Open Dialogue Initiative (ODI) would begin in July, 2016 and contain three main phases over 26 months:

- Phase I – Initial Planning and Preparation: July 1, 2016 – October 31, 2016
- Phase II – Delivery of Demonstration Projects: November 1, 2016 – April 31, 2018
- Phase III – Consolidating the Results: May 1, 2018 – August 31, 2018

## Project Team

ODI would be led by the Information Management and Open Government Secretariat (IMOGS), in the Chief Information Officer Branch of the Treasury Board Secretariat. The ODI project team would require:

- Adequate capacity in research and analysis to harvest learning from the demonstration projects, share it with the interdepartmental team (see below) and use it to produce the toolkit and user's guide;
- A communications component to inform and engage the public service and the broader public policy community on the progress of the project; and
- A partnership with the Canada School of Public Service (and possibly other organizations) to develop a training program and materials based on the projects.

The IMOGS team leader for the ODI would be responsible to:

- Advise the IMOGS Head on the project
- Chair the interdepartmental committee and provide leadership and advice to its members on how to realize the project objectives
- Provide advice to the departmental teams carrying out the demonstration projects
- Lead the IMOGS team on:
  - gathering and consolidating learning from the projects
  - developing the toolkit and user's manual
  - developing public engagement learning tools for the public service, based on the demonstration projects
  - Developing and implementing a strategy to inform the public service and parliamentarians on ODI and its progress
  - Developing and implementing a strategy to inform and engage the public policy community on ODI and its progress

**Project Description**

- ODI would include at least five major demonstration projects from different departments (projects could involve multiple departments) and one intergovernmental demonstration project.
- The IMOGS would send out a government-wide Request for Submissions to departments who are planning a significant consultation initiative on an issue, but who would be interested in turning it into a demonstration project as part of the ODI. These projects would need to be completed within 18 months or less.

- The IMOGS would review the submissions to identify a shortlist of suitable candidates, then hold meetings with the officials from those departments. Through these meetings, the OGS would identify a final list of at least five projects. A special outreach process would be developed to seek a provincial or territorial partner for the intergovernmental project.

- Each demonstration project would be planned, managed and executed by officials from the sponsoring department—the "departmental team"—however, the ODI project team would work with each of the departmental teams to help them redesign their consultation processes, turning them into deliberative or collaborative projects to be used as demonstration projects in ODI.

- The IMOGS would also strike and chair an interdepartmental committee, with representation from each of the departmental teams. This committee would provide advice and oversight to the departmental teams to help ensure the five projects conformed to basic principles and best practices of Open Dialogue. It would also oversee consolidation of the learning from the projects and production of the toolkit and user's manual.

- Each of the five demonstrations projects would conclude with: (1) a final report evaluating the project's success; and (2) a 7500-word case study describing the process and drawing out best practices and lessons learned.

- Copies of the final reports and case studies would be submitted to the Interdepartmental Committee for use as learning tools.

- ODI would conclude with a national conference to educate the public service, MPs, the broader public policy community, and governments across the country on the merits of collaboration and to showcase the results of the project.

**The Selection of Demonstration Projects**

To be selected, a demonstration project would have to meet a number of key criteria, including:

- Can be completed within 18 months

- Officials are sufficiently motivated by the opportunity and committed to the project

- Project can be clearly defined and scoped

- Adequate and appropriate resources are available to deliver the project

- Project has good prospects for success
- Project will test key aspects of open dialogue and clearly demonstrate the value of public engagement
- Project will make innovative and substantial use of online tools

The final set of projects would strike a balance between different options in three key respects:

- Open Policymaking (e.g. social policy, regulatory issues, service improvement)
- process types (i.e. deliberation vs. collaboration)
- engagement populations (i.e. citizens, stakeholders, intra- and/or intergovernmental partners)

In addition, the dialogue challenge posed by the various projects would differ, including most, if not all, of the following:

- **Trade-Offs and Priority Setting:** Policymaking often involves decisions that are not evidence-based, such as value judgements, trade-offs, compromises and priority-setting. At least one project would focus on this kind of dialogue.

- **Standards and Regulations:** Establishment of standards and regulations in non-scientific areas can get very complex. Often officials lack the competence to decide on the best alternative and will engage experts to help them. At least one project would focus on this kind of dialogue.

- **Collaboration:** Many policy/programs goals need individual citizens or other organizations to play a significant role in the implementation of the solutions. For example, if the goal is to reduce obesity, community health organizations and schools may need to work with government to develop an implementation strategy that reflects community needs and mobilizes community members. Mobilizing citizens and/or organizations around a plan of action requires a particular kind of dialogue—one designed to create ownership and responsibility and to motivate collaborative action. As least one project would focus on this.

- **Community Mapping**: A "community dialogue" is a deliberative process that draws on community members' lived experience to create a "map" of the key risk factors at work in their community and to devise an appropriate strategy for mitigation. This is the approach behind successful community-based poverty reduction and crime prevention strategies. At least one project would focus on this.

- **Evidence-Based Decision-Making**: Open Dialogue is needed to bring a mix of voices to the interpretation of data to ensure that evidence-based decision-making is balanced. At least one project would focus on this.
- **Intergovernmental Alignment**: At least one project would focus on using open dialogue to achieve better intergovernmental alignment.

**Use of Online Tools**

All projects would include a robust online component, aimed at testing and exploring the initiative's use of digital tools in open dialogue, including their role in overcoming distance, involving larger numbers of people, and supporting genuinely deliberative discussions. In addition, they would explore what new tools or techniques are on the horizon that could prove to be "game-changers."

**ODI Outcomes**

The following would be the principal deliverables for ODI:

- Completion of five public engagement projects in five departments, involving stakeholders and/or individual citizens
- Completion of one intergovernmental project with a provincial partner
- Completion of an open dialogue toolkit and user's guide that establishes an official approach for the Government of Canada
- Development of a core group of experienced champions of open dialogue within the Canada public service
- Development of a suite of public engagement learning tools for the public services, including:
- five one-hour educational videos based on the six demonstration projects
- five final reports and five case studies from the demonstration projects
- Heightened awareness across the public service of open dialogue and its uses and benefits
- A concluding national conference to showcase the results of ODI and raise public awareness of the government's commitment to collaboration

Appendix 1: Open Dialogue Principles

The following principles were developed through an open dialogue process at the Canadian Open Dialogue Forum 2016 in Ottawa, from March 31 – April 1, 2016.

**Principles of Open Dialogue**

Open Government aims at strengthening governance by promoting greater transparency, accountability, and public engagement, especially through the use of digital tools. A growing number of Canadian governments define their approach through three streams: Open Data, Open Information and Open Dialogue.

The first two commit a government to making its data and information reserves publicly available and easily accessible. Open data improves accountability by providing evidence for decisions. Open information improves transparency by allowing people to see what is happening inside the walls of government

But openness also involves a willingness to entertain new ideas. If traditional consultation gives participants an opportunity to state their views on an issue, open dialogue engages citizens, stakeholders, other governments, or even different sections of a single government, in respectful discussions of important issues or goals.

Participants work together to reframe issues, identify priorities, assess evidence, make trade-offs and find solutions. Open dialogue strengthens decision-making by ensuring different options are considered, bringing expertise and experience to bear on complex issues, and helping to build public trust and support for decisions.

Open dialogue thus is a different *type* of engagement process from traditional consultation. It follows different rules and provokes different expectations and behavior among the participants. The principles in this document articulate some of these differences and set clear standards for governments and participants alike in the design and execution of open dialogue processes. However, they stop short of providing prescriptions on implementation.

For example, process planners often agree that an "inclusive" process should be designed to include individuals or organizations with a stake in the issue, while disagreeing on how this should be put into practice.

While debates over implementation are important and necessary, the principles here avoid such commitments. They remain at a higher level of generality in order to win broad support from

governments, civil society, the private sector, and citizens. They are also a work in progress and are expected to evolve and change over time.

Open dialogue processes should:

1. **Prioritize design**

   1. **Set clear goals**: The goals of the process should be clear, relevant and achievable. Timelines should be realistic.

   2. **Choose the right process-type**: Information sharing, consultation and dialogue are different kinds of processes that are suited to different tasks. When designing a process, the process-type should fit the task.

   3. **Design to fit the context**: Open dialogue processes are not one-size-fits-all. A single process may include multiple dialogue streams or different ways of engaging at different stages. The needs of the process change along with the context - which can also change. Every process and each stage should be designed and revised with careful attention to the surrounding circumstances and constraints, and open to adjustment as needed.

   4. **Set clear boundaries on decision-making**: The scope or boundaries of the decisions participants are invited to consider should be clearly defined so participants know what is on the table and what is not.

   5. **Communicate openly and transparently**: At the outset of a process, governments should ensure that relevant information is easily accessible; and they should explain how contributions and insights will be used in its own decision-making. At the close of a process, governments should report back to the public on how the results were considered and used. Governments should be willing to openly discuss the process and its design throughout.

   6. **Measure and evaluate effectively**: Appropriate measures and indicators should be in place to assess the progress and results of a process. Governments should carefully monitor each stage of the process and be open to adjustment to ensure objectives are met.

2. **Engage the community**

1. **Be inclusive**: The range of participants should reflect and fairly represent the affected stakeholders and diversity of views and interests around the topic without discrimination.

2. **Explain the process**: Process leaders should explain to participants how the process will unfold, including the objectives, the participants' roles, the different stages, uses of special tools and approaches, timelines, and expected outcomes.

3. **Validate the process**: The integrity of the process should be discussed with participants before the dialogue begins and should be revisited during the process as required.

4. **Be open and respectful**: Governments and participants alike should be forthright about their views, while expressing them in a respectful, honest and courteous way. Each participant should listen to and consider the views of others.

5. **Make the process accessible**: Barriers to participation should be removed to ensure people of all abilities, locations and backgrounds can participate fully in the process.

3. **Lead change and transformation**

   1. **Take a government-wide approach**: Governments should champion open dialogue as a key tool for transforming government and establishing a culture based on openness, learning, risk-taking, dialogue, and collaboration.

   2. **Commit to continuous improvement**: Governments should commit to continuously improve their knowledge and skills in public engagement. They should continue to experiment with new methods and tools to increase the reach, depth and accessibility of engagement processes.

   3. **Provide the leadership**: Open dialogue requires committed and engaged leadership. Decision-makers from both the political and public service levels have critical roles to play and they must work together to ensure a process succeeds.

   4. **Publicize engagement**: Governments should use a variety of easy-to-access tools and channels to ensure that the public is aware of engagement opportunities that may be of interest to them.

Appendix 2:

**From Principles to Practice – Designing a Dialogue Process**

Every engagement process begins with a planning stage where the organizers design the process and plan its implementation. These are some of the primary tasks that must be performed in the planning phase:

- **Define the participant groups:**
  - Which participant groups will be involved: Experts? Stakeholders? Citizens? Other governments? Other departments?
  - Will they be engaged in the dialogue together or separately?
  - If the latter, how and in what order?
  - How will the different discussions be integrated?
  - How many people will be involved?
  - How will the participants be selected and recruited?

- **Identify key issue(s) that will need to be discussed:**
  - How are the issues framed?
  - How deep are the disagreements between the participants?
  - Are differences mainly at the values level or do they involve matters of fact and evidence?
  - Are these potentially win/win issues?
  - How might they be re-framed to help overcome some of the differences between participants?

- **Ensure political buy-in:**
  - How well does the political leadership understand the process?
  - How much confidence do they have in it?
  - Are they clear on the risks/benefits?
  - Have they decided how much scope participants will have for decision-making?
  - Will any of the political leaders be involved directly in the discussions?

- **Establish the role of government:**

  o Is government just a convener or is it involved in the process, as well?

  o Which departments have an immediate stake in the process?

  o Will they be at the table as stakeholders?

  o If so, do they fully understand the process and are they comfortable with it?

  o Is there a clear understanding between them what government is trying to achieve through the process and who is leading?

- **Consider the process options:**

  o Events – how many, how big, what kind, how do they link together, etc.

  o Will there be an online component?

  o What are the timelines for the various stages? Are they realistic?

  o What kind of resources are available and will they be adequate?

- **Establish process governance**

  o Will there be a steering committee or working group to oversee the process?

  o Is this group also managing the process?

  o Does the group include members from outside government?

  o How will this group's activities remain transparent to the participants?

  o Is there a clear and reliable link to the political leadership?

- **Define the reporting strategy:**

  o How many reports will there be?

  o What kinds of reports will be used and for what purposes?

  o Will they play a key role in ensuring:

    - transparency

    - continuity between different stages

    - linking different discussions

- **Validation of Conclusions:**
  - What steps will be needed to ensure that the findings from each stage are validated?

## Appendix 3: Making the Government of CAnada a Leader in Open Dialogue - Four Stages of Development

The following sketch uses the proposed Open Dialogue Initiative as the basis of a four-stage plan to make the Government of Canada a leader in Open Dialogue over the next six years.

1. The Principles of Open Dialogue (Present)

   - The Canadian Open Dialogue Forum 2016 conference used open dialogue to develop a comprehensive set of principles to guide open dialogue initiatives (see Appendix 3 below). These principles provide a point of departure for the Open Dialogue Initiative.

   - The Government of Canada should engage provincial and territorial governments to develop a pan-Canadian vision of Open Government.

2. Systematizing Open Dialogue and Raising Awareness through the Open Dialogue Initiative (July 2016 – August 2018)

   1. The Toolbox and User's Guide

   2. Network of champions within the public service

   3. Awareness raising within the public service

      - Communicating on demonstration projects

      - Case studies from the projects

      - Learning videos

   4. Communications strategy to reach out to parliamentarians, stakeholders, journalists and others in the public policy community

   5. First steps toward intergovernmental collaboration on implementing the pan-Canadian vision of Open Government.

3. Institutionalizing Change and Building Capacity (August 2018 – August 2020)

   0. A Directive on Open Dialogue

   1. Developing permanent open dialogue machinery

- Establish Office of Open Dialogue in TBS or PCO to provide system-wide leadership
- Build technical platform to support departmental initiatives

2. Building knowledge and skills and adding new tools and techniques
   - workshops and training courses from Canada School of Public Service and elsewhere
   - encouraging experimentation with toolkit across the government
   - Building a best practices library
3. Educating the public policy community

4. Sustainability and Culture change (August 2020 and beyond)
   0. Extending capacity across the public service
   1. Working collaboratively with provincial and territorial governments to implement the pan-Canadian vision of Open Government