

## Open Government in Finland

### TRADITIONS MATTER – VALUES, LEGISLATIVE BASE, CONTINUOUS DEVELOPMENT

There are three things that have contributed to Finland's success in open government. Firstly, openness is an underlying value in the Finnish public administration. Secondly, openness is enshrined in legislation and thirdly there is a tradition of continuous development.

Many Acts lay the foundation for openness and public participation in governance: the Constitution, the Act on the Openness of Government Activities, the Administrative Procedure Act and the Local Government Act.

- **Section 2 of the Finnish Constitution** emphasises the importance of citizen participation: "Democracy entails the right of the individual to participate in and influence the development of society and his or her living conditions."
- **The Act on the Openness of Government Activities** provides for the right of citizens and media to access official documents. As a rule, such documents are considered public unless specific grounds exist for keeping them confidential. In addition, pursuant to this act, authorities are obliged to provide information actively.
- **The Administrative Procedure Act** emphasises citizens' rights to receive information from authorities and to offer their opinion on matters that have general

and wide-ranging effects. When the purpose of the Administrative Procedure Act was defined, the focus was on openness and good data management practices in administration. Moreover, particular attention was paid to citizens' opportunities to influence the use of public power and to monitor how their rights and benefits and the use of public funds is realised.

- Pursuant to **the Local Government Act**, municipalities are obliged to ensure that residents have the opportunity to participate and have a say in the operation of their municipality.

In addition, various areas of specific legislation (such as the Youth Act) lay down certain obligations with regard to openness and participation.

### CONTINUOUS DEVELOPMENT

Finland joined the Open Government Partnership (OGP) in 2013 to demonstrate its willingness to commit to continuous development of open government. Finland had been actively involved in the OECD's work on Citizens as Partners already since 1999. That same year the Ministry of Finance created the web discussion forum [Otakantaa.fi](http://Otakantaa.fi) ("Share your views with us"). The idea was to give individual citizens and civil society organisations the possibility to learn about and discuss government projects at the very early phases of the project. This forum still exists and is now part of a wider family of democracy services currently run by the Ministry of Justice.

## DEMOCRACY SERVICES

- **Share your views with us (Otakantaa.fi)**  
*is an online service designed to enhance interaction among individuals, organisations and authorities. The service facilitates civic engagement and access to information and promotes transparency in the planning of initiatives and decision-making while improving their quality.*
- **Ideas of the young (Nuortenideat.fi)**  
*is a national service established to provide young people with a channel for putting forward their proposals, participating and having a say on matters that relate to them.*
- **Residents' petition (Kuntalaisaloite.fi)**  
*online service enables residents to submit initiatives to municipalities that have adopted the service and to follow initiatives submitted by others.*
- **Citizens' petition (Kansalaisaloite.fi)**  
*is a digital service that enables citizens to launch an initiative with a view to proposing a new law, amending an existing law or repealing a law. The Finnish Parliament is obliged to process the initiative if 50,000 eligible voters express their support for it within six months.*
- **Consultation portal (Lausuntopalvelu.fi)**  
*is a tool for requesting and submitting statements in digital form. All central government agencies may publish requests for statements via the service. Statements may be submitted by all organisations and individuals.*

During the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many strides were taken in the field of participation and open government. A civic participation policy programme of the government launched new ideas and strengthened the evidence base of civic participation development in Finland. Many of the democracy services mentioned above were initiated in the programme. Moreover, a Hear the Citizens project produced a handbook for civil servants and created the principles of citizen participation, which the permanent secretaries of ministries and mayors of major cities endorsed.

## OPEN GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES IN FINLAND

In Finland, creating an open government is a joint programme of the whole public sector. It includes ministries and agencies on the national level and municipalities and regions on the local level.

The main goal is to increase the trust of citizens in government and to stabilise it on a high level. This is only possible if the structures of the government and its functions, services and reforms are understandable to citizens and if participation in policy-making, service planning and the development of the welfare society is feasible. Enhancing open government needs to be part of daily work and development of the public administration.

## PARTICIPATION – ENGAGING EVERYBODY

Particular attention within the open government initiatives has been paid to enhancing citizens' possibilities to participate in the preparatory work of public administration decision-making and development projects. As a result, the government has had to ensure that participation possibilities are available and that citizens have access to them. The different forms of participation function only if citizens can find them. Therefore, strengthening the engagement possibilities of those, in particular, who are in a vulnerable position, like children and special groups, is at the core of the Finnish open government action plans.

A special emphasis has been laid on enhancing the participation of children, youth and the elderly in recent years. Children's rights workshops of open government have focused on assessing the impact of budgets and legislation on children's rights. Another example of this work is an annual day for the representatives of municipal councils of the elderly to share best practices and further develop the work of the councils.

## CLEAR LANGUAGE – EASY TO UNDERSTAND

Clear language is a prerequisite for good governance. This is something that Finnish civil society organisations brought up several times even before Finland joined the OGP. The Finnish Open Government national action plans have included commitments to clear language. In these commitments, language does not mean just spoken and written language but also visualisations and info graphics. The names of laws present one challenge. They can be very complicated and therefore one goal of the national action plans has been to create names and summaries for laws that are easier to understand. If such a fundamental thing as a piece of legislation – including its name – is something citizens cannot understand, it may affect participation and compliance. Texts produced by administration are often complicated and work has been undertaken to test them with citizens and customers beforehand. It is important to note that clear language is not just about words, but also

about the whole process and attitude towards customers or citizens.

Our principle is that information is not genuinely public if it is not presented in an easy-to-understand way.

Clear language has been promoted by campaigns and training of civil servants. In our survey to agencies and municipalities in 2019, about 70% of respondents said they have made an effort to promote clear language. Their actions included developing the language of decisions, issuing new guidelines, renewing webpage texts, improving service design, writing in plain language, providing training and using experts to help modify the texts.

### OPEN DATA

One excellent example of the open data initiative is the publishing of procurement data. The Finnish government publishes online information regarding state purchases and their funding sources. The state purchasing data has been public open data since 2017. In addition, an open service has been created where citizens and businesses can

follow almost in real time the use of public money in state purchasing. It is thus transparent what state organisations are purchasing and from where. [www.tutkihankintoja.fi](http://www.tutkihankintoja.fi)

### GOVERNMENT AS AN ENABLER

Many of the areas of open government work are areas where the government is trying to perform better, and to be more open, more transparent and more tuned in to participation and engagement. It is also important to be an enabler. In this regard, obstacles that civil society organisations or individuals come across in voluntary work should be removed. One concrete action by the Ministry of Justice has been to collect all relevant information, rules and regulations about voluntary work into the Suomi.fi website, so that information is easily accessible.

### OPENNESS INSIDE GOVERNMENT

Social media tools might be easy to use, but civil servants need support and training to develop dialogue and interac-

Picture:  
Different areas of the open government initiative in Finland



tion skills. The government cannot expect its civil servants automatically to master the new information management skills needed to foster participation. This is why training is needed and leaders need to set an example.

Engaging citizens also puts a lot of emphasis on what happens internally in government organisations. Attention needs to be paid on how well we engage our people inside our own organisations. That is why internal openness is one of the development areas within the Finnish open government initiative.

## SECURING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF OPEN GOVERNMENT

Finnish national action plans on open government include many challenging commitments. It is crucial that in all of them we try to ensure that implementation is as wide as possible. Therefore, the networks that support the implementation both on national and local level are an integral part of the open government work.

The state Open Government Civil Servants' Network has members from most ministries and agencies. The role of the members is to enhance open government in their own agencies. For example, they share practices that have proven to work well, introduce the open government principles to the leadership and management groups in the agencies and report on the work done in their own agencies to enhance openness. The open government civil servants network meets 4 to 6 times a year in networking events. Agencies and ministries organise events where ongoing projects are presented from different angles of open government. Topical information is shared in these meetings as well as international experiences of open government.

The Finnish Association of Local and Regional Authorities co-ordinates the work of the Municipal Democracy Network. The Municipal Democracy Network consists of members from municipalities, state administration and civil society. The network develops and strengthens municipal democracy and offers a way to learn from peers. The network is also a platform for sharing information and experiences, good practices and development ideas and it supports development through network meetings.

The open government network of the state administration and the municipal democracy network cooperate by sharing information and organising joint events.

A small team in the Ministry of Finance is responsible for coordinating the implementation of the action plan. However, a support group consisting of representatives

from civil society organisations, ministries and agencies, municipalities and research institutions is crucial for implementing the action plan successfully.

## EVERYBODY ON BOARD

The pace of change in today's world is escalating. We have great possibilities, for instance, to make information technology to serve participation in new ways. However, there are threats as well. One big challenge is to make sure that we are not just building new fancy ways for the elites to participate. We need to pay particular attention to safeguarding and developing the participation possibilities of the society's most vulnerable groups, like children, youth, the elderly and immigrants. This has been given special attention in our open government action plans. In addition, we have created an advisory board for civil society organisations with the specific emphasis on digitalisation in everyday life (Digi arkeen -neuvottelukunta).

## OPEN GOVERNMENT FOR TRUST

It has been said many times that citizen engagement has instrumental value. In other words, it leads to better outcomes and more innovative solutions at less cost, responds to greater diversity, improves the use of resources and knowledge and increases compliance.

On the other hand, we can also see that citizen engagement has intrinsic value by building greater trust and strengthening democracy. Collective commitment to the impacts that our joint decisions have on future generations is borne out of public discourse and participation.

In participation, we should try to shift from consultation to a broader civic dialogue. It poses challenges not just for good governance, but also for active citizenship and civic society.

When Finland joined the Open Government Partnership, a key concern was to find new ways to strengthen trust between different actors in society and to ensure that everybody has a chance to participate in developing our society. These will be key concerns also for the coming years.

The Finnish National Open Government Action Plan is for four years (9/2019–9/2023). The four year period enables a better connecting to the Government Programme and more long-term focus. The National Action Plan emphasises sustainable openness meaning that openness is not a project, but part of all work in the Finnish public administration.