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Government of Canada Trust and Transparency Strategy

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Government of Canada Trust and Transparency Strategy

From: Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat

Public trust in government is essential for a healthy and functioning democracy. To remain strong and resilient, our democratic institutions need to build and maintain public trust. The Government of Canada Trust and Transparency Strategy sets out core principles, a whole-of-government vision, desired outcome, strategic objectives, and commitments to support federal government institutions in reinforcing public trust.

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Message from the President

Public trust in government is essential for a healthy and functioning democracy, particularly as we face an unprecedented surge in misinformation and disinformation. While Canadians have a high level of trust in our democratic system, we must take additional action to ensure the Government of Canada continues to meet citizen expectations for transparent, accountable, and participatory government.

I am therefore honoured to present the Government of Canada's Trust and Transparency Strategy, which sets out a whole-of-government blueprint to strengthen public trust in federal institutions. Trust and transparency go hand in hand. By increasing transparency, we are better positioning Canada's federal institutions to remain strong, resilient, and responsive to the evolving needs of Canadians.

Founded on the principles of transparency, accountability and participation, the Trust and Transparency Strategy identifies objectives and supporting commitments that will guide federal institutions' work.

It builds on Canada's commitment to an open and transparent government and important work already underway across the federal public service to combat misinformation and disinformation, strengthen the resilience of democratic institutions, and support social cohesion across Canada.

To monitor progress in a transparent and accountable manner, an annual year-in-review report on implementation of the Trust and Transparency Strategy will be published on Canada.ca.

Canadians rightfully expect that their government is being run effectively and responsibly. By making government more transparent, accountable and participatory, we can meet that expectation.

I invite you to read this strategy to see how the Government of Canada's commitment to the principles of transparency, accountability and participation will strengthen public trust in government and the health and

effectiveness of our democracy.

I therefore call on my colleagues to support me in achieving the objectives outlined in this strategy. Together we can work to instill a culture of openness whereby relevant information is made available to the public in a timely manner. This supports increased accountability, makes it easier to understand the functioning of government, and encourages active participation in decision making and democratic processes. By implementing the strategy across all government institutions, we can advance a cycle of continuous improvement for an open, accountable and participatory democracy.

The Honourable Anita Anand, P.C. M.P.
President of the Treasury Board

Introduction

Public trust in government is essential for a healthy and functioning democracy. More than ever, significant ongoing effort is needed to ensure that our democratic institutions remain strong, resilient and trusted. Key to building and maintaining public trust is for the government to operate in a transparent, accountable and participatory manner.

This strategy sets out the drivers, core principles, a whole-of-government vision, desired outcome, strategic objectives, and supporting commitments to support federal government institutions in reinforcing public trust. Specifically, public trust will be reinforced by fostering a culture of openness across federal government institutions, modernizing the policies and practices that support increased accountability and transparency, and continuing to enable public participation where feasible and appropriate.

When governments are transparent, accountable and participatory, there are many benefits for the public, including the following:

- transparent government enables citizens to understand government spending and how decisions are made
- accountable government supports the integrity of the government in view of meeting public expectations with respect to performance and results
- participatory government results in better policies, programs and services that are designed with input from those who are most impacted by them

The adoption of the core principles, achievement of the strategic objectives and fulfillment of the commitments set out in the Trust and Transparency Strategy across the Government of Canada (GC) will support strengthening public trust and ensure that Canada's democratic institutions remain strong and resilient.

In practical terms, this means setting objectives for better access to government data and information, providing information and tools to hold government to account, and making it easier for people to be more involved and engaged in decision-making processes. It also means being able to assess how well we are doing against those objectives, learning from both successes and challenges, and continuously improving so Canadians can see the benefits of their participation in a strong democracy.

Drivers

Although international assessments ¹ indicate that the GC is considered a global leader in making government more transparent, accountable and participatory, there is nonetheless a clear opportunity to strengthen public trust in government and its institutions through implementation of the Trust and Transparency Strategy.

The strategy was developed in response to a recommendation in the Evaluation of the Open Government Program, conducted by the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (TBS). The evaluation found that, although the

open government program has been effective and positive overall, “there is a need for a strong vision of open government in the Government of Canada,” to better align resources and activities to improve government transparency, accountability and participation.

Moreover, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) also recommended that Canada develop a strategy in its Open Government Scan of Canada: Designing and Implementing an Open Government Strategy.

Although TBS’s evaluation and the OECD’s open government scan focused on open government, they provided the impetus and opportunity to strengthen the integration and coherence of complementary policy areas under a broader vision and strategic approach that supports transparent, accountable and participatory governance.

Core principles

The Trust and Transparency Strategy is founded on the following core principles, which are integral to an effective and responsible government that meets the expectations of Canadians:

- **Transparency:** The government makes available relevant information on policies, programs, services and decisions in a complete, accurate and timely manner – while protecting privacy, security and confidentiality – so the public can access, understand and monitor the activities and decisions of government. In short, the public has ready access to information they want and need.
- **Accountability:** The public can exercise its right to hold the government to account for its activities, performance and decisions through timely access to information. In other words, the public should be able to see and to question how their government is being managed.
- **Participation:** The public can influence the activities and decisions of the government through meaningful and targeted consultation and

engagement. That is, the public should find it easy to be involved and participate in government decisions and initiatives.

In addition to these core principles, an equitable, inclusive and protected civic space is a key enabler of public trust and participatory democracy. A protected civic space is necessary for the public to access information, speak, associate, organize and participate in a democratic society.

Sustained and coordinated effort by federal government institutions to ensure the widespread adoption of these core principles in carrying out their mandates will optimize the GC's approach to:

- developing and delivering equitable and inclusive policies, programs and services to Canadians
- proactively and reactively sharing information of value with the public
- enabling citizens to engage meaningfully with the government and participate in the democratic process

Vision

The GC is open by design in support of a transparent, accountable and participatory culture of governance that contributes to the equitable and inclusive economic and social well-being of Canada and reinforces public trust in government and democratic institutions.

Desired outcome

Public trust in Canada's democratic institutions is strengthened.

Strategic objectives and supporting commitments

Three strategic objectives and supporting commitments are intended to guide federal government institutions in strengthening their application of the core principles of this strategy and reinforcing public trust in government and democratic institutions.

Strategic objective 1: Foster a culture of openness and improve associated principles and practices across federal government institutions

Commitments

- Assess the effectiveness of current open government policies, practices and tools, and identify opportunities for continuous improvement
- Raise awareness and promote the continued adoption of open-by-design approaches, practices and tools in the planning, design, development and implementation of government policies, programs, services and decision-making
- Equip federal institutions with guidance and tools to advance the core principles of this strategy, including the continuous improvement of open data initiatives
- Continue to consult and collaborate with the Multi-Stakeholder Forum on Open Government² to advance government-wide commitments and activities, including through the National Action Plan on Open Government

Strategic objective 2: Modernize the policies and practices that support increased transparency and accountability

Commitments

- Optimize existing transparency and accountability policies and practices, including approaches for reporting on performance and results, across all government institutions
- Leverage the cyclical review of the *Access to Information Act* (ATIA) to improve access to information services and enable equitable, inclusive and timely access to government information
- Enhance trust and transparency by ensuring complete, accurate and timely access to government records through proactive publication or when requested – and ensuring that the exceptions to that access are limited and specific – to help counter misinformation and disinformation
- Advance Indigenous reconciliation by addressing unique issues faced by Indigenous requesters

Strategic objective 3: Explore opportunities to enhance public participation in federal government policy- and decision-making

Commitments

- Assess the current practices and effectiveness of public participation in federal government policy- and decision-making and identify opportunities for improvement
- Optimize current participatory practices and enabling tools
- Raise public awareness of opportunities to participate in federal government policy- and decision-making
- Facilitate access to the data and information resources necessary to support public participation in federal government policy- and decision-making

Legislative and policy framework

The core principles of this strategy are reflected in the following legislation and policy instruments:

- The *Access to Information Act*'s purpose is to “enhance the accountability and transparency of federal institutions in order to promote an open and democratic society and to enable public debate on the conduct of those institutions.”
- The *Policy on Access to Information* sets out the objectives, intended results and requirements of the access to information regime.
- The *Directive on Access to Information Requests* and the *Directive on Proactive Publication under the Access to Information Act* provide clear direction to government institutions for the effective and consistent administration of the *Access to Information Act*.
- The *Policy on Service and Digital* sets out the requirements for the open and strategic management of information in the digital era, including the release of departmental information and data as an open resource on the Open Government Portal, which is administered by the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat.
- The *Directive on Open Government* complements the *Policy on Service and Digital* and provides more specific guidance to federal institutions on the release of federal government information and data to Canadians.

Open government

Open government provides a proactive means to address current challenges of Canada's domestic and international context that are impacting public trust. Open government also provides a more equitable and inclusive way to deliver policies, programs and services to the public. That is, it is about delivering government in a way that is fair and allows Canadians to feel heard and respected.

The GC has been implementing dedicated open government activities for over a decade, including the launch of the Open Government Portal in 2011, which provides public access to GC information. Significant efforts are under way across the GC to be more open, including:

- ongoing implementation and optimization of open data and open science initiatives and tools
- addressing misinformation and disinformation
- protecting civic space

In addition, Canada remains an active member and supporter of the Open Government Partnership, the leading multinational organization that brings together governments and civil society organizations that are committed to the principles of transparency, accountability and participation.

The GC has made progress in fostering a culture of openness through the development, implementation and cyclical renewal of the multi-year National Action Plan (NAP) on Open Government. The NAP provides an opportunity for the government to consult with the public and for federal government institutions to identify key commitments in specific policy areas. The NAP is the GC's key instrument to consult, collaborate, identify and implement open government initiatives and the first of two key pillars of this strategy.

Access to information

Canada's trust and transparency ecosystem is underpinned by the ATIA, the purpose of which is to enhance the accountability and transparency of federal government institutions. The act provides a right of access to enable individuals to request records from government institutions and hold them to account. The ATIA is based on a simple concept. For citizens to be involved in their government, they need to be equipped with information and have the tools to request that information when it is not available.

Accordingly, the act promotes an open and democratic society and enables public debate on the conduct of federal government institutions through the proactive and responsive release of government information.

Internationally, the right to seek, receive and impart information is reflected in Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which directly supports the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

Bill C-58, which received Royal Assent on June 21, 2019, introduced a new requirement for a periodic review of the ATIA every five years. The President of the Treasury Board is responsible for undertaking each review and tabling a report in Parliament. Parliament is also required to conduct its own parallel review of the ATIA every five years. The first review of the ATIA was launched on June 18, 2020.

In December 2022, the President of the Treasury Board tabled the *GC's Report to Parliament on the first legislated review of the Access to Information Act*. The report presented 21 conclusions that highlighted several areas where administrative or operational improvements to the access to information regime are needed. The government committed to seizing these opportunities for improvement, resulting in the development and publication of the second pillar of this strategy, the Access to Information Modernization Action Plan. The action plan focuses on addressing the operational and administrative challenges currently facing the access to information regime. The next review of the ATIA will be initiated no later than June 2025.

Implementation

The Trust and Transparency Strategy is intended to drive an ambitious whole-of-government shift toward an open-by-design approach to governance, which embeds the core principles of this strategy in the planning, design and delivery of government policies, programs and services, as well as reporting on performance and results.

Two key pillars will support the achievement of the strategic objectives outlined in this strategy: the NAP on Open Government and the Access to Information Modernization Action Plan.

National Action Plan on Open Government

Developing the multi-year NAP on Open Government is a fundamental commitment resulting from Canada's membership in the Open Government Partnership. The NAP sets out the GC's commitments to making the government more transparent, accountable, and participatory. It also provides the public, civil society, academia, and the private sector the opportunity to participate and influence government policy- and decision-making. The GC develops, consults on, implements, and monitors the NAP in collaboration with Canada's Multi-Stakeholder Forum on Open Government.

The GC is currently implementing the 2022-24 NAP, which focuses on the themes of:

- climate change and sustainable growth
- democracy and civic space
- fiscal, financial, and corporate transparency
- justice
- open data for results

As the GC prepares to launch consultations on the next NAP, federal government institutions are encouraged to be more engaged, ambitious, and collaborative in identifying opportunities and initiatives to strengthen Canada's open government posture.

Access to Information Modernization Action Plan

The Access to Information Modernization Action Plan describes the targeted policy, administrative and operational activities the GC will undertake over three years (from fiscal year 2023–24 to 2025–26) to strengthen the access to

information regime in advance of the next legislated review of the *Access to Information Act*, to be launched in 2025.

Strengthening the access to information regime will support greater transparency, increased accountability and enhanced public participation. Requesting records under the act should be the last resort for Canadians to obtain information from an open-by-design government. The next legislated review of the act will seek to address underlying issues with the legislation itself and provide an opportunity to reinforce linkages and bring greater coherence and integration between the access to information regime and the open government program.

Monitoring and reporting

Setting objectives is important but being able to assess whether and how well they are being met is just as important. In the spirit of transparent, accountable, and participatory governance, the GC will report on progress in implementing this strategy through a public-facing annual year-in-review report. This way, those that have an interest in this work will know the objectives that are set out and whether they are being met.

The report will be informed by the two pillars of this strategy (the NAP on Open Government and the Access to Information Modernization Action Plan) each of which is subject to its own reporting requirements. The NAP is also subject to assessments conducted by the Open Government Partnership's Independent Reporting Mechanism, which measures the completion and impact of activities.

Assessments of the effectiveness of this strategy may also be conducted by other external bodies, such as the Open Government Partnership and the OECD, which would inform the GC's ongoing approach to strengthening public trust and ensuring strong, resilient democratic institutions.

Footnotes

- 1 Assessments include the Open Government Partnership’s Global Report: Democracy Beyond the Ballot Box, the World Justice Project’s Open Government Around the World, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s 2023 Open, Useful and Re-usable data (OURdata) Index and the Global Data Barometer.

- 2 Considered a best practice by the Open Government Partnership, the Multi-Stakeholder Forum has 12 members (8 from civil society and 4 from the GC) and represents the interests and perspectives of civil society. It provides input and advice on the GC’s open government commitments, identifies new areas of focus, and contributes to strengthening the open government community across Canada.

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