

Strategic Futures Planning: A Guide for Public Sector Organisations

By Ben Ramalingam and Harry Jones

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Executive summary

Strategic futures planning is an anticipatory discipline that supports and complements organisational planning and policy-making processes. The success of organisations such as Shell and of broad ranging initiatives such as the Limits to Growth study has contributed to futures approaches being adopted in many different settings and in many different kinds of organisations, including those in the public and not-for-profit sector. There is now an increasing amount of work being undertaken by public organisations on futures issues. In a 2004 speech to civil servants, the then UK prime minister Tony Blair made explicit links between policy making and futures approaches:

“Strategic policy making is a professional discipline in itself involving serious analysis of the current state of affairs, scanning future trends and seeking out developments elsewhere to generate options; and then thinking through rigorously the steps it would take to get from here to there.”

The report aims to provide managers, planners and strategists in public sector organisations with more information about futures planning efforts, why they are useful, and what needs to be considered in putting together a futures initiative. It brings together practical examples from a range of efforts, including the Club of Rome’s Limits to Growth work in the 1960s which identified the global challenges facing human development, the Mont Fleur process which steered South Africa out of apartheid and into democracy, health planning futures

in the Australian state of New South Wales, and the Scottish Parliament’s Scottish Futures Forum. The groundbreaking work of recognised futures planning and scenario experts and institutions have informed and strengthened the report. These include individuals such as Pierre Wack, formerly of Shell Plc, Andy Hines, formerly of Dow Chemical Company, and organisations such as the Henley Management Centre and the Global Business Network.

Part I of the report covers the origins where strategic futures work came from, why it is important, how to do it, and the useful methods that could be considered.

Chapter One looks at the origins of strategic futures planning, drawing on examples from outside the public sector such as Shell’s groundbreaking use of scenarios in the 1970s. The chapter also explains how futures work is taking on growing importance for public sector organisations, and concludes with a four part rationale of the value of futures thinking.

Chapter Two explains how organisational futures projects need to be carefully positioned in terms of their scope and their ambitions, and the need to clarify from the outset the kind of futures project that should be used, depending on context and the available resources. The chapter moves on to cover the key stages that futures projects should cover, and provides an initial insight into the different tools and methodologies that can be utilised.

Chapter Three goes into more detail about the different strategic futures tools and methodologies, using powerful examples from the UK government’s Foresight Unit to

clarify what tools are most appropriate for different kinds of projects. The chapter provides a range of ways in which futures tools might be selected, ranging from the hoped-for outcomes, the kind of analysis that would be most credible and useful, and the kind of thinking processes that would be most appropriate. The chapter ends with a summary of ways in which different tools can be used in combination to strengthen the overall futures process.

Chapter Four provides practical insights on specific methodologies, ranging from scenarios and visions – the most famous and widely used futures tools – to less well known methods but equally powerful tools such as Delphi and Backcasting.

Chapter Five provides information about the common problems faced by organisations trying to implement futures projects, and provides useful tips and tricks on issues as where to position futures groups within organisations, the appropriate timeframe to look into the future, and how to broaden ownership of futures projects.

Part II is made up of a number of case studies of the use of futures planning in leading public sector bodies and organisations. These were drawn from publicly available information about high profile exercises, and cover methods such as scenario planning and trend analysis on different issues. They include futures initiatives that are wide-ranging, including an update to the Limits to Growth study, to more specific initiatives such as the UK Climate Change Impacts programme.

Specific case studies are drawn from the following organisations: the Club of Rome think tank; the South African Mont Fleur process; the UK Cabinet Office; Scottish Futures Forum; the European Commission's Forward Studies Unit; the UK's Local Government Association, the UK Climate

Impacts Programme in DEFRA, and the Foresight programme managed by the Office of Science and Technology.