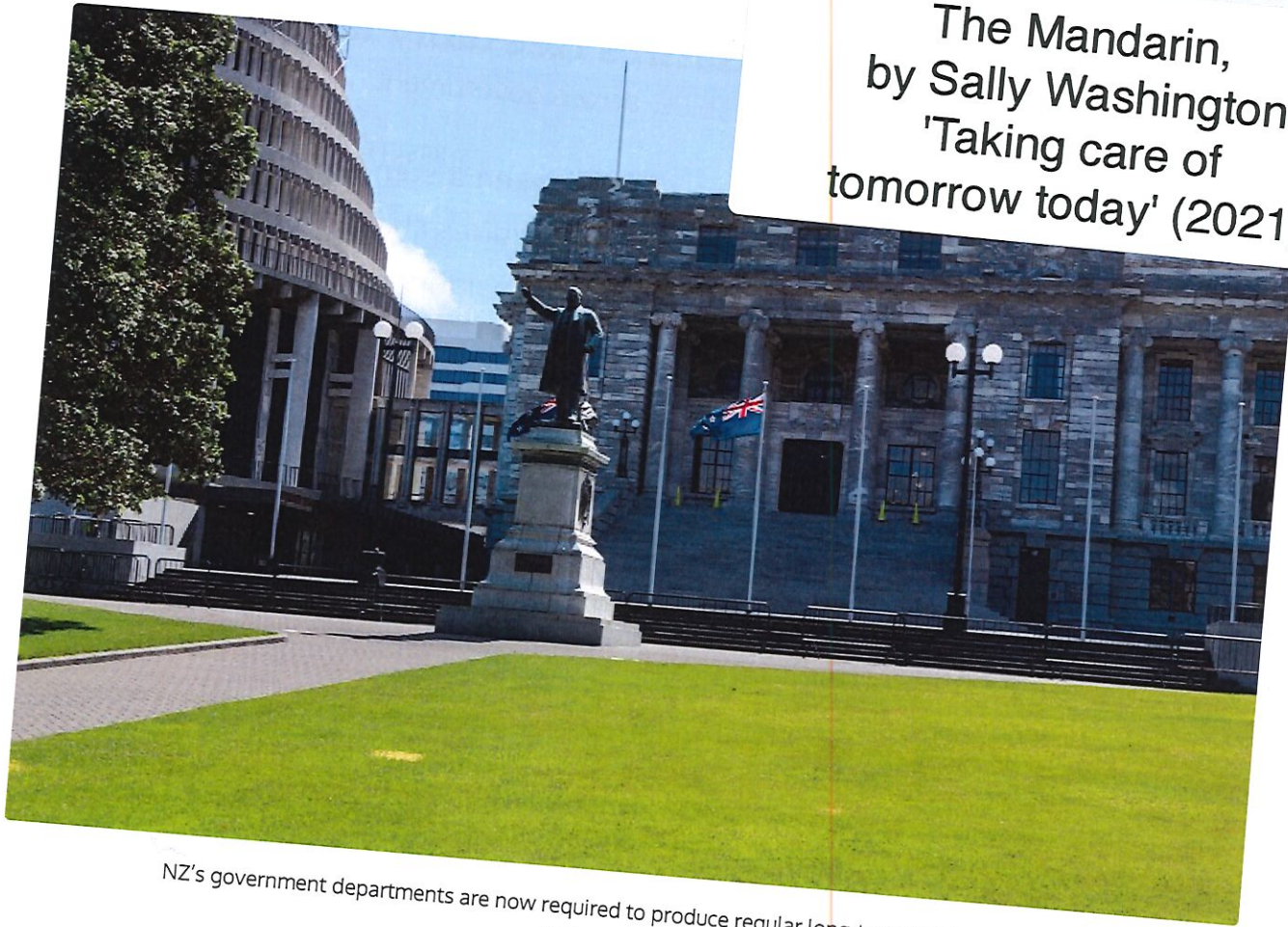


The Mandarin, by Sally Washington 'Taking care of tomorrow today' (2021)



NZ's government departments are now required to produce regular long-term insights briefings.
(steheap/Adobe)

The pandemic showed that few governments were able to anticipate and prepare for future events, good and bad. The OECD (<https://www.oecd.org/gov/report-centre-stage-2.pdf>) has warned that:

"Governments in general do not appear to have developed the institutions, processes and practices to focus on the long term...This will inevitably weaken their ability to identify challenges and risks, or to mitigate and manage those risks, let alone to contribute to strong and resilient future economies and societies".

It called for governments to:

- Improve requirements for long-term economic, social and environmental reporting
- Embed future considerations into policy and analytical frameworks

- Strengthen future-focused institutions and their connections to current policy processes
- Improve and join-up foresight capability across government

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New Zealand's new Public Service Act 2020 has taken a step in the right direction. The Act (Schedule 6, clauses 8 and 9) requires chief executives of government departments to produce a Long-term Insights Briefing (LTIB) at least once every three years.

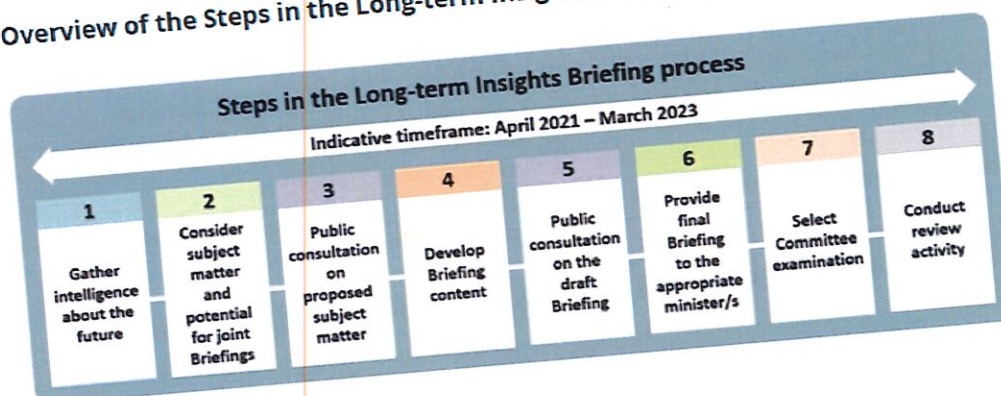
This could also be a boon for democracy. The LTIBs are destined for parliament, not ministers or the current government and will be public. This means that other political parties and external stakeholders will have access to public service analysis and insights about future trends, opportunities and risks, which they can subsequently build into political manifestos and policy positions.

So, how will it work? And what are the potential pitfalls?

Long-term insights briefings: the process

Guidance (<https://dpmc.govt.nz/our-programmes/policy-project/long-term-insights-briefings>): about how to produce a LTIB has been issued by the chief executive of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), who is also head of the Policy Profession. It sets out an eight-step process (see below) over two years. However, the Standing Orders Select Committee has requested that the first round of briefings be presented to parliament by 30 June 2022. The rationale is that this would avoid briefings being caught up in any fraught pre-election period but allow them to "inform public debate prior to the next General Election". But it truncates the process.

Overview of the Steps in the Long-term Insights Briefing process



(Source: DPMC)

Already LTIBs will require some administrative and analytical gymnastics. The chance says that briefings should set out future trends, risks and opportunities, looking at least 10 years out. Departments must consult with the public twice — on subject matter, and on the draft briefing itself. They must also take particular care Your email address Subscribe You'll also receive special offers from our partners. You can opt out any time. not to indicate a preference for different policy options — either current or future policy. Moreover, they are not to seek ministerial input into, or approval of, the content of the briefing, but at the same time should maintain the 'no surprises' principle. They are told to focus on issues "particularly relevant to their department's functions" and consider "resourcing, capability and existing stakeholder relationships" when deciding the scope and substance of any briefing. In short, there is a big tricky job to do, but cut your cloth accordingly. Privately some senior leaders admit their departments are "struggling" with the task.

Foresight experts (https://www.newsroom.co.nz/this-chance-cant-be-left-to-interns?utm_source=Friends+of+the+Newsroom&utm_campaign=73da49d31f-Daily+Briefing+09.06.2021&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_71de5c4b35-73da49d31f-88913239) from outside government have expressed scepticism that the process will turn out well. They doubt that senior leaders are paying enough attention to such an important exercise and have expressed fears that the job is being left to staff with no expertise in foresight or futures. They say it requires significant expertise not widely available in the wider ecosystem in Aotearoa, let alone in the public service, and argue the work needs to involve credible experts and international input, given that many of the most pressing future issues will come from offshore. So how did we get to here and does the public service have the requisite capability?

Baby steps towards policy stewardship

In Aotearoa, the need to consider and build long-term issues into current policy thinking has been building for some time. Professor Jonathan Boston has published (<https://ojs.victoria.ac.nz/pg/article/view/4614>) widely on "anticipatory governance", arguing that in many areas "the current policy institutions and frameworks are deficient." The public service has had a few attempts to collectively consider future issues. Under the auspices of the Policy Project (<https://dpmc.govt.nz/our-programmes/policy-project>) — set up in 2014 in the DPMC to improve policy capability across government — Tier 2 Policy

Leaders (deputy secretaries) canvassed future issues, including an interactive workshop in 2015 to produce a 'heat map' of issues that could bite in future, or are already nipping at our heels.

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This was followed by a workshop in 2017 on Policy Stewardship to examine progress and whether government departments had invested in futures capabilities. The 'stewardship' responsibilities in the previous State Sector Act already implied an obligation on chief executives to build future considerations into policy advice. What those sessions revealed was an overall dearth of capability in foresight, futures, and policy stewardship (albeit with some pockets of good practice). They also provided a stark reminder that many of the most challenging policy issues are cross-cutting and/or fall through the cracks of current administrative responsibilities. So, what does that mean for the current exercise and the quality of LTIBs?

Pitfalls and promising practice

Some key factors will enhance or undermine the quality of the overall LTIB process. Firstly, how will the many LTIBs — there are around 32 government departments — be curated into some overall collective insightful and useable analysis? Some LTIBs are being prepared on a sector basis, like the Justice sector, but many departments will likely stay in their lane and produce something limited to their own portfolio or departmental remit. A "Reference Group" of chief executives convened and chaired by the Head of the Policy Profession will consider the potential '1000 flowers blooming' from across the public service — but only towards the end of the process to examine "linkages, duplication and prioritisation".

What about gaps? Previous heat map exercises showed that many issues fall between administrative cracks. And what about departments responsible for certain population groups like Maori, women, Pacific peoples, and the newly established Ethnic Communities? Will they produce their own LTIB or try to



influence everyone else's or both? And who will cover new technologies like artificial intelligence or automated decision making — the latter examined in a recent report by the Digital Council Aotearoa — that is everyone's and no-one's?

And who is the 'public' that will potentially be consulted twice on each, and every, briefing?

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Some collective whole of government analysis will be required to draw out key trends or drivers of change. This might have been better produced at the front end for everyone to use. There are plenty of up-to-date international efforts to draw on: from the private sector, like McKinsey's report

([https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/the-eight-trends-that-will-define-2021-and-beyond?](https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/the-eight-trends-that-will-define-2021-and-beyond?cid=soc-web)

[cid=soc-web](https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/the-eight-trends-that-will-define-2021-and-beyond?cid=soc-web)) on 8 future trends, or Arup's drivers of change and recent 2050:

Four plausible futures

(<https://www.arup.com/perspectives/publications/research/section/2050-scenarios-four-plausible-futures>); to international organisations like the OECD

([https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/df7ebc33-en/index.html?](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/df7ebc33-en/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/df7ebc33-en)

[itemId=/content/publication/df7ebc33-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/df7ebc33-en))'s Global Scenarios 2035, or its

awkwardly named 'anticipatory innovation governance' (<https://oecd-opsi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/AnticipatoryInnovationGovernance-Note-Nov2020.pdf>). Recent activity in other jurisdictions also offer pointers.

In the UK, a recent 'trend deck'

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/trend-deck-spring-2021>) prepared

by the Government Office for Science sets out an evidence base of long-term change for government officials and others to use, while Spain

(<https://bigtrendsguy.medium.com/spains-new-foresight-office-completes-its-first-output-a-strategy-for-remaking-the-country-by-956e4665459>) has just

articulated the demographic, economic, geopolitical, environmental, social, educational and other challenges and opportunities it might confront in the

medium and long term. Of course, the exemplar for this type of capability is

Singapore, where dedicated strategic futures capability has been built over

many years. A special unit in the prime minister's office has catalysed futures

capability across departments, resulting in long-term thinking being an integral

part of policy design and delivery. NZ has no equivalent internal government

capability to draw on.

Watch this space

Kudos to the NZ government for taking the first steps. And kudos to the external

experts who have offered to help with advice on methodologies for generating long-term insights. The public service would do well to corral that expertise.

New Zealand, like other jurisdictions, needs some real conversations about the future we might be facing and what future we want.

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This is an ideal opportunity to think about and eventually shape what a post-covid world might look like. It will be interesting to follow how the NZ public service responds to this challenge. Fingers will be crossed that it turns out to be both a successful exercise and one that generates some ongoing capability — so that considering the future is not a three-yearly compliance exercise, but an integral part of the ongoing policy-making infrastructure.

Watch this (future) space.

READ MORE:

Will Defence and Home Affairs bureaucrats be honest when briefing their new ministers? (<https://www.themandarin.com.au/152407-will-defence-and-home-affairs-bureaucrats-be-honest-when-briefing-their-new-ministers/>)

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