

Working Paper 2015/11

Observations from the GDS Index 2015

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Author McGuinness Institute

Research team includes Wendy McGuinness and Madeleine Foreman

For further information McGuinness Institute
Phone (04) 499 8888
Level 1A, 15 Allen Street
PO Box 24222
Wellington 6011
New Zealand
www.mcguinnessinstitute.org

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Observations from the GDS Index 2015

Authors: Wendy McGuinness and Madeleine Foreman

1.0 Introduction

Each of the 136 GDSs in operation has been assessed against the scorecard's six elements and twenty-two sub-elements essential to good strategies. Analysing GDSs against a metric allowed us to identify patterns, similarities and variations across GDSs, sectors, and departments. The scoring of each GDS enables us to uncover the more complex relationships underlying the strategy creation and documentation process. These observations are summarised in the following seven messages. Following the key messages are examples of best practice, illustrating practical examples of what resonated with the reviewers.

2.0 Seven Key Messages

1. GDSs tended to describe external environments more critically than their own internal realities.

Although GDSs generally describe the policy problem they are attempting to resolve in terms of the wider external landscape, they do not apply the same level of rigor, assessment and reflection when it comes to describing internal realities (their own capabilities and resources). The GDSs which are ably discussing the resources available to them tend to be the ones that are explicitly designed to chart their capabilities and resources of their departments in specific focus areas.

2. GDSs often failed to document lessons learnt from past strategies or from the wider public service.

Departments rarely discuss predecessor strategies or other strategic documents relevant to the GDS in question. However when they do this discussion rarely extends to an analysis of the 'lessons learnt' from these documents. Their successes are sometimes mentioned, and their progress tracked, but their shortcomings are not highlighted. This means institutional knowledge is not reported.

3. Assumptions were not well articulated.

Many GDSs neglected to not make assumptions explicit in their GDS. This means the reader, rather than the writer, is making assumptions about the strategy design and implementation. The ways that hidden assumptions currently weaken GDS can be illustrated by briefly outlining the effects they have on stakeholders:

- a. Conflicting assumptions are frequently made about the users and readers of the GDS, thus creating documents that are confused in tone, structure, and content.
- b. Problems are defined broadly without specificity, leaving readers with an unclear understanding of how one would know whether the problem was resolved. Even though some GDSs are not dealing explicitly with 'problems' they still lack clear articulation of the issue they are trying to address.
- c. The ways in which progress will be tracked and measured is often assumed rather than expressed directly, leaving the reader wanting to know more about 'how' the problem will be solved. This means that the departments need

About the authors:

Wendy McGuinness is Chief Executive of the McGuinness Institute.

Madeleine Foreman is a fourth-year student at Victoria University of Wellington studying towards a BA/LLB.

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to then create action plans after the GDS has been published, leaving the reader with a further document to find and read.

- d. Many GDSs imply that they have access to the resources to implement the strategy, but this may not be the case. For example, if the GDS is signed by a minister, does this imply resources are assured and if yes, over what time frame? What does that mean for GDSs not signed by a minister or the department's Chief Executive?
- e. Only a few GDSs discuss how much the strategy will cost to implement over a specified time frame. For the reader, gaining an understanding of how committed the department is to implementing a strategy is often missing.

4. Good structure sometimes masked bad strategy.

Some departments fell into the trap of believing that by creating a clear and concise document, they had in fact created a good strategy. Good structure (setting out GDSs clearly with defined strategic objectives and articulations of available resources, along with sections for measures of success et cetera) is only half of the equation. An example of this is seen in the articulation of strategic outcomes. Most GDSs contained a section devoted to the desired goals. However, these goals often lacked any real value, uniqueness or specificity. The inverse was also apparent. Bad structure can obscure good strategic thinking and rich, valuable detail. Many GDSs met the requirements of the sub-elements and were thus marked highly, but this result was obtained due to the reviewer's perseverance than any desire on the writer to illustrate their creative thinking.

5. GDSs that were considered useful to the public sector were also considered useful for the general public.

GDSs rated as 'user-friendly' for the public also rated as valuable and effective for members of the public sector. Distilling strategic information and the strategic approach into a simple and accessible structure, once met, meets the needs of both the public and private sector.

6. A number of GDSs read as though they reflected a decision and then back-filled.

Without a discussion of alternate approaches, many GDSs simply sounded like 'statements' rather than strategies. They did not explore or explain choices, trade-offs or alternative outcomes.

7. GDSs often failed to articulate who wins (and who might lose) from implementing the strategy.

GDSs often described the stakeholders required to implement the strategy but failed to describe the specific beneficiary groups. This ties into the issue of assumptions above. Without an explicit explanation of how a GDS will benefit certain demographic groups, or potentially impact others, readers and reviewers are unable to assess the quality of the strategy going forward.

3.0 Examples of Good Practice

To showcase how the scorecard analysis worked in practice, examples of GDS good practice have been featured below.¹ We have selected examples of GDS receiving full (or close to full) point totals in specific elements of the scorecard in order to demonstrate how these elements are being satisfied by current GDSs.

Many departments are producing GDSs which act as examples of effective, user-friendly strategies. Examples of GDS good practice for each element will be listed below. However, before illustrating good practice by each element, it is important to showcase strategies which included the elements in a clear and concise manner. We recommend the following two strategies as they represent overall good practice and are a pleasure to read.

1 PDFs of all GDSs discussed below can be found on the McGuinness Institute website in the list of 136 current GDSs found here www.GDSIndexNZ.org.

GDS072: *Tau Mai Te Reo: The Māori Language in Education Strategy 2013–2017* (MoE, 2013)

This is a very good example of a GDS and the main elements required of a strategy. The funding section on pages 24–25 is particularly good.

GDS103: *Rising to the Challenge: The Mental Health and Addiction Service Development Plan 2012–2017* (MoH, 2012)

This GDS covers the key points of the issue comprehensively, and there is very good discussion of how the outcomes sought will be achieved. The groups involved in the implementation of the GDS, and its beneficiaries, are well described. It discusses its integration with current government priorities well.

There is a comprehensive discussion of the threats which are present in the focus area and which might result if the GDS is not implemented. There is thorough discussion of the groups of people involved in the implementation of the GDS and its beneficiaries. This information is highly useful for any reader of the GDS.

Element 1: Opportunities and Threats

GDSs which scored highly in this element provided their readers and users with a clear picture of the strategic landscape in which they seek to operate. The GDS must describe the major opportunities to be gained from its implementation, and it must outline the threats to its vision or inherent in its strategic focus area to be awarded high scores in this element. This description of the ‘external environment’ is essential for a good strategy, as it requires strategy drafters and users to examine the current situation and anticipate how the GDS might improve (or at the very least affect) this situation. More importantly, it requires drafters to anticipate and devise solutions to threats to the GDS’s vision or in its focus area. Many GDSs scope the threats in their focus area but do not discuss the opportunities to be gained. This is problematic as it signifies that there are assumptions about the benefits that the GDS will bring which are not being made explicit.

Many GDSs avoid altogether a description of the problem they aim to solve. Although some GDSs are not dealing specifically with a ‘problem’ in the ordinary use of the word, it is important that GDSs describe clearly the issue/problem they are focusing on. The sub-element (1.3) dealing with this issue of ‘problem articulation’ was weighted to demonstrate its importance; it featured a possible high score of eight instead of the usual four. Without a comprehensive scoping of the problem and the external environment, the implementation plan and all following sections of the GDS lack context.

Examples

GDS005: *New Zealand Sea Lion Species Management Plan 2009 – 2014* (DOC, 2009)

This GDS defines the problem it is trying to manage brilliantly. It is very clear in describing the issues it is seeking to address.

GDS071: *Ka Hikitia: Accelerating Success 2013–2017* (MoE, 2013)

The GDS outlines its historical strategic context very well and the challenges its previous iterations faced. It provides context to the users and readers due to its articulation of the opportunities it may be able to bring about if implemented. It is a very clear, well laid out GDS with concise sections. The ‘key readings and resources’ section on page 59 is a good tool for the public and public servants.

GDS082: *New Zealand’s ASEAN Partnership: One Pathway to Ten Nations* (MFAT, 2013)

This GDS efficiently articulates all threats and opportunities which may result if the strategy is implemented.

GDS126: *Connecting New Zealand: A Summary of the Government's Policy Direction for Transport* (MoT, 2011)

The opportunities and threats are identified consistently throughout this GDS during discussion of all policy outcomes sought, and their specific details are articulated in great detail.

GDS132: *Leadership Strategy for the State Services* (SSC, 2013)

This GDS very clearly discusses the threats and opportunities arising within its focus area, which is very useful for providing its readers and users with a context. The GDS devotes a section to the discussion of the 'problem', which is rare to see in such a structured way.

Element 2: Capabilities and Resources

Many GDSs did not discuss their financial limitations or restrictions to their capabilities. Perhaps underrated or overlooked, this element is important, as the vision of a GDS is limited in the real world by resource constraints; GDSs should therefore reflect this. GDSs which scored highly in this element took note of where they were lacking resources, skills and/or capabilities. Similarly, GDSs which scored highly scoped the current capabilities and partnerships available to the agency/ies carrying out the strategy well.

GDSs excelling in this category explained what financial resources were available for the implementation of the strategy, and often this was linked to time-frame information relating to the GDS's strategic outcomes. This shows that discussion of financial and other resources in a GDS often indicates a holistic approach to strategy drafting – the whole picture of the outcomes sought is being described.

Examples

GDS017: *Measures to Improve Youth Mental Health* (DPMC, 2012)

This GDS considers existing initiatives in the focus area and how to build on these, and it articulates in detail funding that may be required in its implementation. Further, it explains thoroughly the partnerships of agencies who will be involved in bringing about the outcomes of the GDS. The strategic outcomes in this GDS are presented with supporting information which illustrates how discussion of capabilities and resources can be effective when tied to the main threads of the GDS (in this case, strategic outcomes).

GDS051: *Rena: Long-term Environmental Recovery Plan* (MfE, 2011)

This GDS focuses on the long-term recovery and restoration of the Bay of Plenty after Rena and gives high priority to discussion of who is responsible for which aspects of the recovery throughout the GDS. The GDS is a good example of how strategies can clearly articulate partnerships described in their strategic outcomes. Despite an arguable lack of information on funding, the strategy excels at informing a public servant reader on what their agency's role will be.

GDS064: *Defence White Paper 2010* (MoD, 2010)

This GDS outlines the areas needing investment within the defence sector and describes the best way to get value for money over the next 25 years. It considers excellently the capabilities available to it and provides illustrations of these, making it easy to follow for readers of the GDS.

GDS072: *Tau Mai Te Reo: The Māori Language in Education Strategy 2013–2017* (MoE, 2013)

This GDS is concerned with investment in Māori language education and where this will be most effective. Therefore, it is not surprising that it is a good example of a GDS comprehensively scoping its actual (and desired) capabilities and resources.

Element 3: Vision and Benefits

GDSs which scored highly in this element clearly identified the reasons why they exist. A high scorer needed to clearly describe its purpose and comprehensively demonstrate the ‘future condition’ it is trying to bring about. The sub-element dealing with the issue of ‘vision articulation’ (3.1) was scored out of eight, instead of the usual four, to demonstrate its importance. GDSs which clearly provided their vision sometimes attached detailed statistics illustrating the improvements sought. These GDSs were awarded with high points to reflect the value of these detailed visions of success to users of strategies.

Some described the vision without supporting statistical evidence but provided highly detailed descriptions of the change sought for certain beneficiary groups or policy areas. Identification of beneficiary groups and how they will benefit from GDSs was generally marked poorly. GDSs which scored highly in this sub-element explained the benefit of the strategy and how this might change for certain demographics.

Measuring success of GDSs is important, as agencies cannot be held accountable if they are unable to be measured against a metric of success. GDSs which excelled in this sub-element either provided specific numbers by which their progress could be monitored (e.g. % of recidivism) or outlined the main indicators by which their progress can be monitored in non-numeric but very specific ways.

Examples

GDS013: *Government ICT Strategy and Action Plan to 2017* (DIA, 2013)

This GDS references beneficiaries and stakeholders fully. The public will find the ‘implications for stakeholders’ section very useful. The action plan is extremely comprehensive and provides a clear vision of what the GDS is aiming to achieve.

GDS026: *A Biosecurity Science Strategy for New Zealand, Mahere Rautaki Putaiao Whakamaru* (MPI, 2007)

This GDS fully explains the time frames for its delivery and the agencies involved in the process of delivery. This is an excellent GDS, which is logically set out and covers all necessary elements of a strategy comprehensively. It prioritises its objectives and actions, and it has sound and understandable measures of success.

GDS121: *Delivering Better Public Services: Supporting Vulnerable Children: Result Action Plan* (MSD, 2012)

This GDS identifies four specific ways to measure success. The implementation plan for this GDS is very clear and is attached to ‘concrete real world’ outputs, which makes it very user-friendly for a public servant. The specific outcomes sought from this GDS are set out clearly, and its vision is supported by statistical examples. This makes understanding the vision very easy for the public.

GDS129: *Safer Journeys: Action Plan 2013–2015* (MoT, 2013)

The measures of success in this GDS are clearly set out and attached to time frames, making them very useful for public servants. The GDS discusses its partners, stakeholders and strategic context very well, and its vision

is described in detail. It measures success by describing tangible outputs which can be monitored by the public. There is comprehensive discussion of the different beneficiaries of this GDS.

Element 4: Approach and Focus

This element is extremely important, as it measures whether GDSs have identified what they will not do and what trade-offs and choices they have made. Scores were generally not very high in this element due to the lack of strategic scoping of alternative options in most GDSs. GDSs which scored highly in this element identified clearly the specific steps necessary in order to achieve their vision.

Some high scorers in this element described the implementation timeline of each strategic outcome and provided very specific information on the beneficiaries, stakeholders and impacts of each strategic outcome. GDSs which scored highly in this element discussed and scoped all options possible (given the constraints scoped in element 2) to achieve this vision. Then, they explained why the specific approach of the GDS was chosen above the other options. Generally, this was done very poorly across all GDSs.

GDSs which scored highly in sub-element 4.4 focused on the impact of the GDS and described any possible negative effects it may have to anticipate. Overall, this element was not fulfilled by many GDSs.

Examples

GDS015: *Tackling Methamphetamine: An Action Plan* (DPMC, 2009)

Each of the strategic outcomes in this GDS are clearly articulated and include specific, unique information on funding, responsibilities and timing. Page 35, which features tables breaking down the strategic outcomes, is very informative.

GDS057: *New Zealand Energy Strategy to 2050: Powering our Future: Towards a Sustainable Low Emissions Energy System* (MBIE, 2007)

This GDS aims to ensure that the energy demands of New Zealand's growing economy are met. It is very detailed in explaining how each strategic outcome will be achieved.

GDS134: *Transforming the New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings: Issues, Options, and Strategy* (Statistics NZ, 2012)

This GDS is focused on the future direction of the current census model and thoroughly scopes many alternative long-term options. The section on strategic scoping builds a thorough understanding of the strategic options available in the focus area. The GDS is set out very clearly with signposts for readers, which makes it accessible.

Element 5: Implementation and Accountability

GDSs which scored highly in this element identified clearly the agencies or individuals responsible for their implementation and who is accountable for the impacts of the GDS. GDSs scoring highly here often explicitly discussed responsibilities (especially when the GDS concerned collaboration across agencies): however, sometimes it was implicitly identified in discussion of strategic outcomes and their implementation.

Discussion of both review of the GDS and reporting on progress was done poorly across the board. However, GDSs that were awarded high total points in this element often had a standalone section explaining the mechanisms for monitoring their progress and discussed in great detail when this would happen. GDSs who discussed their

‘expiration’ plan were awarded many points, and those that did this often featured a small section at the end to discuss the next steps for the strategy.

Examples

GDS014: *Result 10 Blueprint: A Strategy for Digital Public Services* (DIA, 2014)

In this GDS the key points of the issue are clear, and it gives information on whom the strategy applies to and who will be carrying out implementation. The ‘agency alignment plan’ is a very useful feature of the GDS. Splitting up the strategic outcomes between ‘consumer vision’, ‘service vision’ and ‘system vision’ is a great way to enable stakeholders, whether public or private, to understand what they can expect from the GDS.

GDS095: *National Health Emergency Plan* (MoH, 2008)

This is a great example of how feedback from the public can be asked for within a strategy and how the public can be given a phone number or directed to a website to give feedback. Review processes are discussed at the very beginning of the GDS; there is a space explaining where the public can give feedback. MoH also describes where electronic versions of the GDS can be found.

Element 6: Alignment and Authority

This element is essential to a good GDS, as it shows that the GDS is aware of its place within a wider strategic framework. GDSs which excelled in this area explicitly referenced government department strategic instruments. The discussion of predecessors to the GDS is very important, as it demonstrates that there is coherence and continuation in the strategic approach. GDSs which scored highly in this sub-element referenced the strategic lineage leading to their creation, and in some cases they discussed the failings and successes of the previous GDS/GDSs.

Examples

GDS001: *Recovery Strategy for Greater Christchurch* (CERA, 2012)

This GDS expertly highlights its connections with other strategies and wider plans.

GDS070: *New Zealand Aid Program: International Development Group Strategic Plan 2012–2015: Development that Delivers* (MFAT, 2012)

This GDS is very good at discussing the ways it integrates with its department’s statement of intent and annual report – see page 8.

GDS090: *Youth Health: A Guide to Action* (MoH, 2002)

The explanation of how this GDS relates to other strategies is very good – see pages 22 and 25.

GDS091: *New Zealand Cancer Control Strategy* (MoH, 2003)

This GDS very clearly and comprehensively explains how it integrates with other MoH GDSs and wider goals – this is seen on page 9 and is quite exemplary. There is excellent discussion of strategic integration and comprehensive references to other GDSs on page 19. On page 59 there is an entire appendix devoted to ‘The Strategy in Context’, which features all of the GDSs with which this GDS integrates – this is very useful information for a user of the GDS.



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