

MCGUINNESS INSTITUTE PRESS RELEASE

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NZ Government Department Strategies Fall Short, McGuinness Institute Research Finds

McGuinness Institute urges overhaul for government department strategies, with over half of government plans failing to mention climate change, inter-agency collaboration decreasing and strategies scoring low on transparency. The Institute recommends managing government department strategies in a coordinated fashion, through a centralised public register, which will reduce costs and amplify benefits.

The New Zealand government has an opportunity to be a world leader in coordinated strategic governance. The country's small size and democratic principles make it uniquely positioned to focus on strategies for the future that are clear, transparent and collaborative. However, an independent analysis of government department strategies (GDSs) by think tank McGuinness Institute shows that government departments continue to fall short, with concerning results in a number of areas.

The *2024 GDS Index* has found that New Zealand's strategic leadership is not improving over time. The latest findings show low scores in transparency, a decrease in collaboration between departments, and over half of GDSs failing to mention (let alone plan for) climate change. Wendy McGuinness, Chief Executive of the Institute, says this is a concern because 'GDSs cost a significant amount of public money and have the potential to shape New Zealand's future'.

The *2024 GDS Index Handbook*, which the Institute publishes on a regular basis, contains a detailed analysis of each department's strategies.

Central register required

The Institute launched the GDS Index in 2014, and over the past decade has invested thousands of hours in an effort to improve transparency and accountability in the public sector. 'We hoped the project would inspire department chief executives to work together to provide a public register of operational and archived GDSs,' says McGuinness. 'Coordinating a central register will improve public access to these important documents, as well as improving strategic coordination between different departments.'

However, the project has yet to lead to any meaningful change.

'So far it has been very discouraging,' says McGuinness. 'We have not seen any changes to how government department strategies operate in New Zealand. We have not been able to get traction on the idea of centralising the way they're managed, or even acknowledgement that this is important work for Ministers to oversee, and department chief executives to execute.'

Key findings

The *2024 GDS Index* analysed all 195 GDSs in operation as at 31 December 2024 in order to highlight key aspects of the government's policy direction and priorities. Key findings include:

- 1. Over half of GDSs failed to mention climate change.**

More than half of GDSs (105 of 195) failed to include any reference to climate change. Unfortunately there has been little increase in the consideration of climate change since the previous *Index*, which is surprising given Parliament's acknowledgement of a climate emergency.

- 2. There is a notable decrease in collaboration between departments.**

The *2024 GDS Index* found 27 GDSs were held with another department (compared with 37 in the *2023 GDS Index*). This suggests there is less cooperation between government departments, which may lead to inefficiencies and inconsistencies. (Note that if a strategy is managed jointly by two departments, the Index treats it as two GDSs.)

3. GDSs continue to fail on core transparency elements.

The Institute scores each GDS on transparency, measuring the extent the document reports on opportunities and threats, capabilities and resources, purpose, strategy, implementation and accountability, and alignment and authority. The strategy with the highest score was *Aotearoa New Zealand's First Emissions Reduction Plan*, with a score of 90 (out of a total of 96). At the lower end of the 2024 rankings:

- 14 departments had an average transparency score of 50 or less (out of a total of 96), and
- 10 GDSs (out of the 195) had a score of 20 or less. Only 6% scored 80 or above.

Future outlook

‘GDSs are an important policy instrument, but a central, accessible register that collates all GDSs is urgently needed,’ says Wendy McGuinness. ‘Greater coordination between departments, better feedback from stakeholders, and improved accountability will not only reduce costs but also amplify benefits.’

As departments prepare strategies this year, McGuinness hopes they focus on improving their transparency scores. ‘For New Zealand to be a stable and progressive democracy, it is critically important that government policies and practices are easy to access, understand and engage with.’

The Institute encourages policymakers and the public to engage with the full *2024 GDS Index*, which is available now at mcguinnessinstitute.org.

See excerpt from *Government Department Strategies Index Handbook* (p.16) below.

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About the McGuinness Institute:

The McGuinness Institute is a non-partisan think tank working towards a sustainable future for New Zealand. The Institute applies hindsight, insight and foresight to explore major challenges and opportunities facing New Zealand over the long term. We are committed to positively influencing public policy by empowering New Zealanders to have the uncomfortable, but necessary, conversations that are required to enable New Zealand to realise its potential.

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2024 GDS Index: By strategy

