

3. Futures process design

Introduction

Every futures project is different. Some are large scale, involving extensive consultation, detailed research and stakeholder workshops to identify and advise on future policy challenges. Others are small scale, perhaps requiring only a single workshop with an internal policy or strategy team to explore what's driving change in the future and what that means for their own plan.

This chapter therefore sets out some of the common design issues that practitioners may encounter at the start of a new futures project and offers guidance on how to address them.

The project aims

Defining the specific aims of a futures project is not necessarily a trivial exercise and can take several rounds of discussion.

Foresight's Intelligent Infrastructure Futures project, for example, was set up to...*explore how future science and technology may be applied over the next 50 years to deliver robust, sustainable, intelligent, responsive and adaptive infrastructure systems.*

Foresight's Future of Food and Farming aimed to...*explore the pressures on the global food system between now and 2050 and identify the decisions that policy makers need to take today, and in the years ahead, to ensure that a global population rising to nine billion or more can be fed sustainably and equitably.*

These aims are quite distinct. Intelligent Infrastructure set out to explore how emerging science and technology might be applied to deliver a desired outcome. Food and Farming focused on policy decision making to deliver a desired outcome. Both projects considered science and technology, politics and decision making, value and values and the relationship between the future and the present but they approached it in different ways that were informed by the different aims.

Once a project aim is agreed, it can be used to shape process design. Project leaders should not, however, be concerned if they decide to adjust the aims in light of early discussions with stakeholders and others.

Project aims are sometimes captured as a question (*How might future science and technology may be applied over the next 50 years to deliver robust, sustainable, intelligent, responsive and adaptive infrastructure systems?*). The question should be framed in broad terms rather than specific ones and should be open and not too focused. A question such as *How will the design of cities in 50 years' time create social and economic wellbeing?* is likely to lead to a richer conversation than *How should we design the city of the future?* A broad question helps participants think more widely about the range of factors that (in this case) define the purpose and development of a city and its population rather than focusing solely on physical structure.

Scale

Futures projects can be large or small. They may be delivered primarily in house or they may involve a wide range of external stakeholders. Participants may be familiar with horizon scanning and futures thinking or they may have little knowledge of it.

Intelligent Infrastructure Futures, for example, engaged nearly 300 people at national, regional and local level and commissioned leading researchers to write 18 state of the art research reviews covering areas as diverse as artificial intelligence, data mining, how information affects our choices and the psychology of travel.

At the other end of the scale, the Health and Safety Executive uses foresight to identify new and emerging issues that might affect future workplace health and safety¹. 5 FTEs use a range of tools – horizon scanning, 7 Questions, Delphi, driver mapping, axes of uncertainty, scenarios policy stress-testing and SWOT analysis - on a continuing basis to inform specialists and policy colleagues of what the future implications of emerging issues might be.

There is no optimal scale for futures thinking processes, but processes require some adjustment and project planning if they are to be scaled up – or down – significantly.

Who to involve

Anyone with any kind of interest in – or influence on – the future of the policy or strategy issue can be invited to participate in a futures project. In particular, anyone who is likely to use the project outputs should be involved in their development if at all possible. If a strategy team is developing scenarios for an executive board, for example, the executive board should be involved in developing the scenarios and not just be given them at the end of a process. This will ensure the knowledge and insights of the executive board are included in the scenarios. It will also ensure the executive have ownership of the scenarios.

It is important to involve key stakeholders and senior decisions makers early in the process in order to build ownership and understanding of the futures approach and its outputs. Invite them to participate in development workshops or to contribute horizon scans. Interview experts or senior figures who have limited time and can't make the workshop programme. Involve international experts in Delphi to gather their opinion on strategic issues.

Aim to involve as wide a group of stakeholders as possible such as other departments, businesses, third sector organisations and interest groups. A particular benefit of the futures approach is that stakeholders with differing, even conflicting, objectives can work together to develop and explore future scenarios. Bringing individuals with different opinions into horizon scanning, interview programmes and scenario workshops facilitates development and sharing of new insights and effective responses to future challenges.

¹ There is more detail on this project – and others across government – in Annex 5.