

# Futures Tools

---

Summary of a cross-government  
training workshop

October 2017



Ministry of **Transport**  
TE MANATŪ WAKA



**The  
Policy  
Project**

Responsive today,  
shaping tomorrow

# Purpose and intent

---

In October 2017, the Ministry of Transport hosted a two-day training workshop on Futures Tools. Participants included both practitioners and managers who work in policy or strategy. The purpose of the workshop was to understand futures thinking and tools, as well as impart tips for putting these into practice in a policy setting. The workshop's aims are supported by the Policy Project, which supports the Head of Policy Profession in working with policy leaders and practitioners to improve policy quality and capability (see our [website](#)). The intent of this summary is to spread the learnings for the benefit of the broader policy community. We encourage policy teams to discuss this and decide what practical steps might help improve their practice.

---

## The importance of looking ahead

“The public service has a duty of stewardship to look ahead and provide advice about the future challenges and opportunities New Zealand faces.”

“Building the capability to provide quality strategic advice on medium to longer-term issues is a challenge for the system.”

“It is necessary to allocate sufficient resources to enable future-focused research, analysis and evaluation beyond the immediate policy priorities and preferences of the government of the day.”

**Source:** [Guidance on free and frank advice and policy stewardship](#) developed by the Head of Policy Profession and issued by the State Services Commissioner in December 2017. The following link will take you to [frequently asked questions](#) and answers about the guidance.

## Facilitators

**Dr Stephanie Pride** has delivered numerous futures projects as head of StratEDGY. Previously she led the State Services Commission's Future Programme and was Chief Advisor for the NZ-OECD Schooling for Tomorrow Project.



**Phil Tate** has 25 years experience in senior strategic roles across the technology, financial services and logistics sectors. He trained in strategic foresight through the University of Houston.



Both Stephanie and Phil are members of the Association of Professional Futurists.

# Advantages of using futures tools

Futures tools have been developed to help us understand complex issues that feature high levels of uncertainty (e.g. the current scale and pace of technological change). Futures tools support us to:

- frame an issue by asking the right questions
- scan, identify change and explore uncertainties
- explore multiple ways to achieve a policy outcome in different futures
- explore possible unintended consequences of interventions (e.g. behavioural or attitudinal changes)
- explore different effects that an intervention may have across different policy domains, sectors and levels.

Futures tools help us to broaden our assumptions about:

- what has happened in the past
- what appears to be happening now
- what *could* happen in the future
- how we *could* respond
- how we *should* respond.

“Good futures work needs to take into account diverse views, so it’s really important to engage with diverse stakeholders.”

“Methodological pluralism – using more than one type of tool for the same stage of work – creates richer understandings of the present and future.”



“Futures thinking has some similarities with design thinking. Both approaches require you to surface, articulate and test underlying assumptions.”

# The Seven Questions method

---

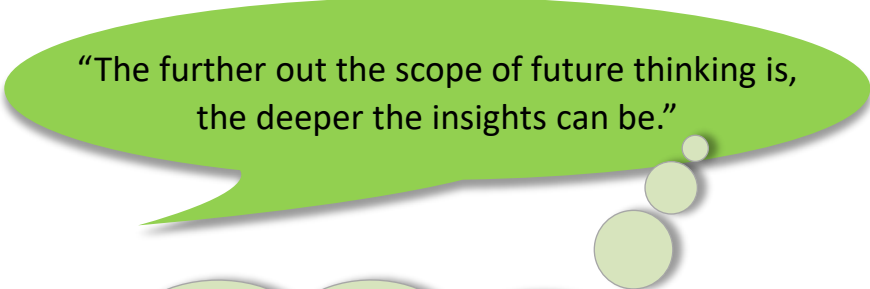
The Seven Questions technique uses a series of strategic questions to uncover vital strategic issues.

Through this technique, you can identify and explore various possible futures, and consider options for getting there. The technique is very similar to ethnography, a method also applied with design thinking.

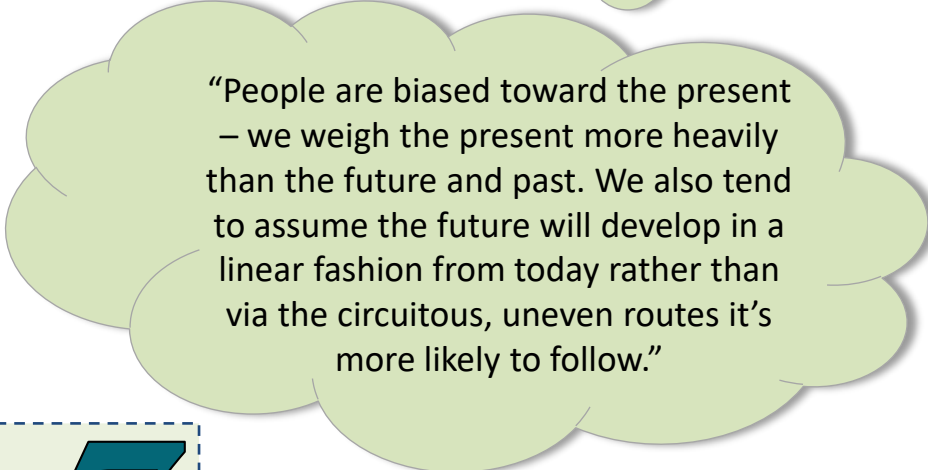
While most design thinking techniques focus on finding a solution, the point of this futures thinking technique is as much on the journey as on the destination. It helps you to ask the right questions so you explore the right areas and frame the enquiry in a way that helps you find the best way to get to the right destination.

## The Seven Questions are:

1. What is the critical issue for the future of your domain?
2. What might a possible, desirable future look like?
3. What would you worry about if things went wrong?
4. What would need to be changed to achieve the desired future?
5. What historical reasons led to the way things are?
6. What are the most important things that need to be achieved in the short term?
7. What you would do in a perfect world, with no constraints?



“The further out the scope of future thinking is, the deeper the insights can be.”



“People are biased toward the present – we weigh the present more heavily than the future and past. We also tend to assume the future will develop in a linear fashion from today rather than via the circuitous, uneven routes it’s more likely to follow.”

## TIPS

- With this method, it can be hard to ask the questions and remain silent. You need to allow space for people’s own thoughts to emerge.
- It’s important to tailor the output to what has been commissioned.

# Frameworks for environmental scanning: can all add value

## STEEP

Use these five domains to ensure the change factors you explore are not unduly narrow. **STEEP** stands for:

- **S**ocial
- **T**echnological
- **E**conomic
- **E**nvironmental
- **P**olitical

### PROS

- Enables broad/diverse ideation and discovery
- Helps reveal connections

### CONS

- Hard to prioritise
- Takes time to cluster themes

## VERGE

Offers a second range of domains to examine dynamic elements:

- **Define:** ideas, views, beliefs, faith
- **Relate:** social groups, connections
- **Connect:** source of goods, services
- **Create:** connective tech, media
- **Consume:** ways we buy and use
- **Destroy:** how/why value is destroyed

### PROS

- Enables exploration of diverse threads
- Puts human nature in the frame
- Brings things up at the margin

### CONS

- More vague
- Relies on everyone having open minds

## CCC

Citizen, Community, Civilisation (CCC) is a framework for considering change. It involves thinking either sequentially or simultaneously on three levels:

- **Micro:** the *citizen*
- **Meso:** the *community*
- **Macro:** the *civilisation*

### PROS

- Helps look at impacts across levels
- Levels are adaptable (e.g. organisation, country, world)

### CONS

- Can miss the dimensions of STEEP
- Can be too human-centric

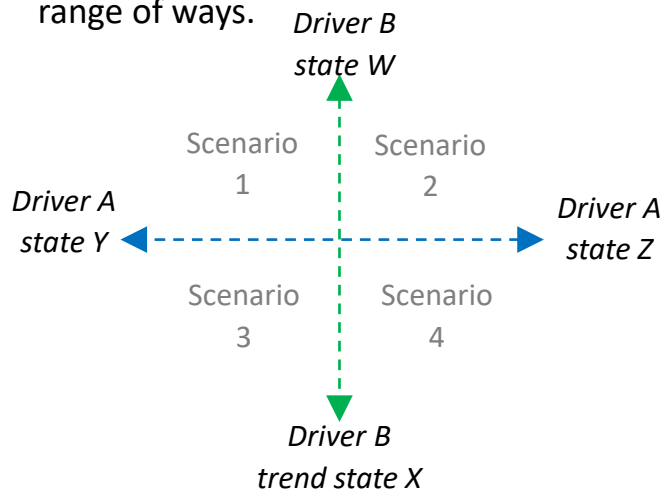
- One way to use these frameworks is to start with STEEP, then use VERGE for more interrogation, followed by CCC.
- Gather a group with diverse views, set a time horizon to explore, then explore the changes that are shaping the future.

## TIPS

- You need to leave your personal preferences about the future at the door.
- Leverage other relevant scans to avoid reinventing wheels, but be careful not to just 'plug and play' them into your different context – remember that the benefits are from the thinking process.

# Scenarios: Global Business Network approach

The Global Business Network (GBN) approach uses two aspects of uncertainty: **driver** (e.g. technology) and **state** (e.g. socially embraced, or not), to create a matrix of four scenarios which can be used to inform policy and strategic thinking in a range of ways.



“It’s not about picking the right scenario – it’s about exercising our thinking to broaden our minds about what’s possible.”

“Try rapid pairs of prototype scenario skeletons to land on the most useful ones.”



## TIPS

- The trick is to first agree the right focus question – it can take time to agree what you *really* want to explore and answer, without being too open ended or specific.
- It is crucial to then define the axes well – choose drivers where there is most uncertainty about direction or rate. Ensure that they will also have a big impact, but avoid evaluative descriptions of states (e.g. good, bad, high or low) which will suggest preferred scenarios.
- It is important to really stand in the future scenarios (or worlds) to explore them (e.g. what might you see, hear, feel?) *before* going back to consider your focus question.

# Using scenarios to inform policy development

The facilitators described the following four methods, which have been effective for some policy makers.

## A. Experiential scenarios

Experiential scenarios create an immersive experience for participants, allowing them to explore different futures. You can put people into staged events or scenes that recreate the worlds of your scenarios.

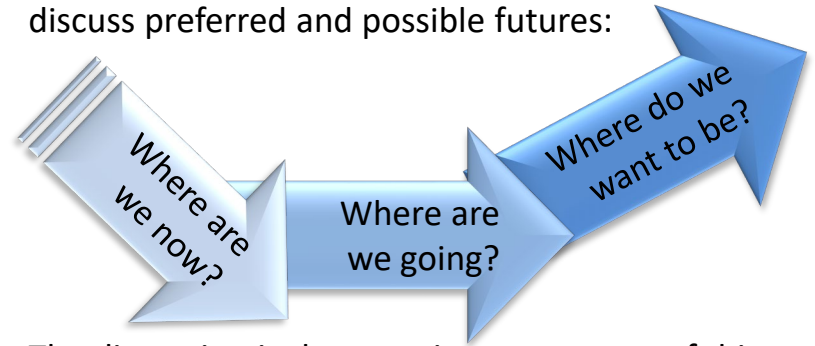
These work best when they are elaborate, with performers and props.

Role playing is also a valuable design thinking technique – extroverts may find this easier than introverts.



## B. Creating shared understanding

Think about the four scenarios as a shared space that you can move across at will. Use that process to discuss preferred and possible futures:

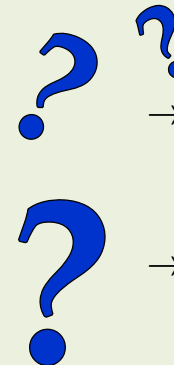


The discussion is the most important part of this exercise.

## C. Wind tunneling

Wind tunneling is a process in which you imagine how a policy would perform in each of your four GBN scenarios. This aeronautical term refers to a controlled testing environment that recreates the stresses of real flight. Similarly, this process can be used to test a policy and find out where its 'breaking points' are. Wind tunneling helps you anticipate how the policy might perform in different possible futures and consider how you might alter the policy to make it more fit for future conditions.

By interrogating your policy with scenarios that cause your policy to fail, you can investigate the resilience of the policy objective, the policy solution and the policy mechanism. Going through this process can help you develop policy or strategy that will endure over a longer timeframe.

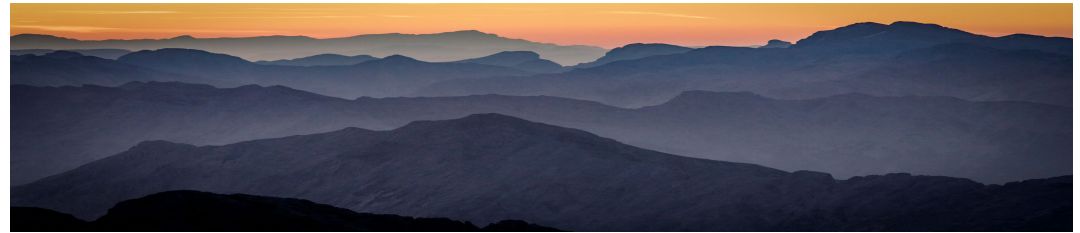
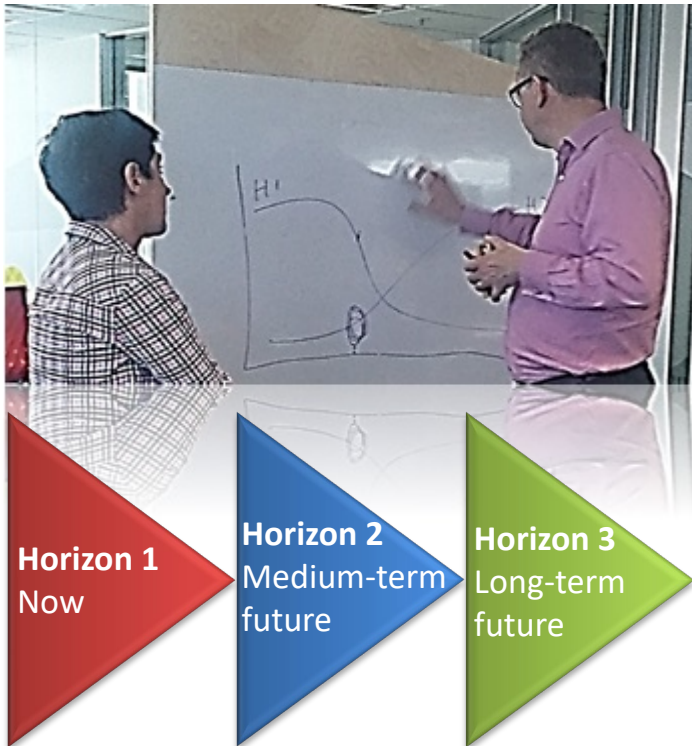


### Ask:

- What 'breaks' the policy and can we monitor it?
- Can we design a policy that works for all scenarios?

# Using scenarios to inform policy development: 3 Horizons

**D. 3 Horizons** The 3 Horizons approach is exactly what it sounds like – thinking about three time horizons simultaneously. There are lots of different applications of the 3 Horizons approach. The application that works best for policy development in conjunction with GBN scenarios is to work out what actions we can take in the present in relation to all three time horizons.



**Horizon 1** is now and the very near future. The policy related question we ask here is: **‘how do we act today to maximise impact in the current conditions?’**

**Horizon 2** is the medium term future. The policy related question we ask here is **‘how do we act today to position ourselves well for what’s coming?’**

This approach can reveal that the policies or strategies that are best for the current arrangements may not be best for achieving longer term goals. It can show that we may need divergent strategies to manage at the same time for the world we inhabit and the one we want to create.

It can be powerful to frame the conversations for senior leaders like this, to help them discuss how to simultaneously manage for now and for the longer term.

**Horizon 3** is the long term future. The policy related question we ask here is: **‘how do we act today to shape the future environment as it is evolving?’**

Ask the **Horizon 1** question in relation to the current state. Using your most preferred scenario from your GBN scenario set, ask the **Horizon 2** and **Horizon 3** questions in relation to the world of that scenario.



# System level reflections and challenges

---

## Unaware of 'present bias'

"If the future cannot be known, then let's worry about it when it occurs and focus on the issues of the day."

- This mindset prioritises the present over the future, but in doing so fails to appreciate that our actions in the present are heavily influenced by our current working assumptions (explicit or implicit) of what the future will be.
- These assumptions need to be surfaced and tested on a regular basis through ongoing scanning if policy decisions are to remain robust in the light of changing environments.

## Ready to accept others' version of the future

- A perennial problem for policy-makers is the paucity of the time they feel able to allocate to consider potential futures given the tyranny of today's operational necessities.
- The danger is that this leads people to more readily adopt someone else's future as a short-cut to understanding a future, when in reality there are many futures which need to be explored in the local context.

## Too willing to act without thinking much

"Vision without action is a daydream, but action without vision is a nightmare." This often reflects a time-poor environment, but too often the drive to derive a short term action from strategy conversations reinforces the idea that thinking has less value than a published action plan.

- Both are needed, and foresight helps to ensure robust thinking occurs on a regular basis to challenge the underlying rationale and assumptions of respective action plans.

# Concluding thoughts

---

## **Futures thinking is a valuable skill for policy and strategy development, because it:**

- uses evidence and insights about what's happening now to identify future uncertainty
- helps identify social and organisational assumptions, not just empirical assumptions, to question our mental models, values and paradigms
- challenges world views by bringing in external perspectives and information
- confronts biases that get in the way the more uncertain the future is.

## **We need to be thoughtful when practicing futures thinking**

- gain permission so you have appropriate authorisation for exploring uncertainty (e.g. get agreement to clarify what success would look like via a workshop with various methods)
- ensure all parties understand that when officials undertake futures thinking it is stewardship thinking, not government policy
- supplement futures tools with other tools people are familiar with, and be methodologically flexible
- work in a fresh, external physical environment (not your usual office space) to help reduce ingrained thinking
- help people to keep an open mind and layer new knowledge gained through priming discussions, existing scans, workshop inputs (videos, props) and plenary synthesis.

## **Want to know more or get help?**

For the opportunity to discuss futures initiatives and topics with colleagues in other agencies, and to participate in cross-sector futures work:

- Senior leaders can participate in the Strategic Futures Group (by contacting [cathy.swanson@ird.govt.nz](mailto:cathy.swanson@ird.govt.nz))
- Futures practitioners can participate in the Cross-Agency Futures Network (contact [Robert.Hickson@sportnz.org.nz](mailto:Robert.Hickson@sportnz.org.nz))

The UK government's [Futures Toolkit for Policy Makers and Analysts](#) provides a set of tools and techniques to help government officials use long-term strategic thinking in policy making.

These are links for [Guidance on free and frank advice and policy stewardship](#) and for [frequently asked questions](#) about the guidance.

For all levels of foresight training, support for designing and running futures protects, and presentations on the future contact Dr Stephanie Pride at StratEDGY Strategic Foresight, go to [www.stratedgy.co.nz](http://www.stratedgy.co.nz)

For tailored support to build strategic thinking and develop new futures for your organisation contact Phil Tate at [www.linkedin.com/in/philiptate](http://www.linkedin.com/in/philiptate)

---

**Acknowledgements:** Special thanks to the Ministry of Transport for funding this cross-agency training