

Malcolm Menzies, Andrew Jackson
and Jonathan Boston

An Experiment in Governmental Futures Thinking: long-term insights briefings

Abstract

New Zealand's Public Service Act 2020 requires departmental chief executives to give a long-term insights briefing (LTIB) to their respective ministers at least once every three years. The LTIBs must provide 'information about medium- and long-term trends, risks, and opportunities that affect or may affect New Zealand', along with 'information and impartial analysis, including policy options' to address the matters raised. The first suite of LTIBs were prepared during 2022–23. This article assesses the first round of LTIBs, giving particular attention to how they identified future risks and opportunities and the extent to which they adopted robust foresight techniques. Based on this analysis, we suggest how the process for preparing future LTIBs might be improved.

Keywords futures thinking, foresight, long-term insights briefings, New Zealand

Malcolm Menzies is an independent writer and commentator on futures issues. He is a former chairperson of the now-disestablished New Zealand Futures Trust, and has a PhD in public policy from Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/malcolmmenzies/>. Andrew Jackson spent 30 years in senior roles in the public sectors of New Zealand and the United Kingdom working on foresight, policy and regulatory design. He was the managing director of a strategy and futures consulting company and now works at Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka. Jonathan Boston, ONZM, is Emeritus Professor of Public Policy in the School of Government at Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka. His research interests include: climate change policy (both mitigation and adaptation); child poverty; governance (especially anticipatory governance); public management; tertiary education funding; and welfare state design. **Disclosure statement** The authors have described their involvement in the LTIB process in the method section of this article and report that there are no competing interests to declare.

Over the past few decades, governments across the OECD have been experimenting with ways to improve their capability for prudent anticipatory governance (Boston, 2017). These moves include establishing new foresight units in central government agencies, requiring the preparation of periodic reports on major long-term policy challenges, improving long-term fiscal forecasting, and reforms to enhance the accountability of governments for the quality of their long-term governance. Such moves are taking place within a wider context of international initiatives to improve futures thinking and foresight-related activities, protect the interests of future generations, and enhance sustainability (e.g., via the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the Sustainable Development Goals, etc.). In September 2024, for instance, the United Nations will host the Summit of the Future (United Nations, n.d.).

Aotearoa New Zealand has not been isolated from these developments, having its own history of futures thinking (Menzies, 2018) and multiple efforts to protect long-term societal interests. Moreover, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic,

climate change risks, rapid technological innovations, and growing geopolitical tensions have underscored the vital importance of prudent anticipatory governance. Indeed, both locally and globally, policymakers are currently confronted with a daunting array of challenges – or what is increasingly referred to as a ‘polycrisis’ (World Economic Forum, 2023). Not only are there multiple short-term economic, social and security-related problems; there are also numerous intergenerational policy challenges, not least anthropogenic climate change and biodiversity loss.

While acknowledging the wider futures context described above, a full discussion here is not possible. Instead, this article focuses on a specific policy initiative to improve the quality of long-term governance in Aotearoa New Zealand. Under the Public Service Act 2020 the chief executives of central government departments are required to provide a long-term insights briefing (LTIB) to their ministers at least once every three years. These LTIBs must provide ‘information about medium- and long-term trends, risks, and opportunities that affect or may affect New Zealand’, along with ‘information and impartial analysis, including policy options’ to address the matters raised (s8). The legislation is the latest in a long history of efforts to enhance the futures thinking and foresight capabilities of government departments and to give proper attention to nationally significant policy problems, whether currently emerging or looming on the more distant horizon. As a consequence, it is hoped that policies will be developed to better protect the nation’s long-term interests.

Altogether, 18 LTIBs were completed during the first round (i.e., between mid-2022 and August 2023). One (on health) remained at the draft consultation phase at the time of writing. Of the total of 19, four were joint briefings by two or more government departments (see Table 1). By the time Parliament was dissolved at the end of August 2023 – ahead of the general election in mid-October – 17 LTIBs had been reviewed by parliamentary select committees, and the Governance and Administration Committee had published

[Long-term insights briefings] must be developed independently of ministers – that is to say, departmental chief executives are free to decide the nature and scope of the issues that are explored and do not require ministerial approval for the contents of the resulting publications.

two interim reports on aspects of the new LTIB regime (Public Service Commission, 2024; McKelvie, 2022, 2023).

This article begins by defining key terms and summarising our methods. The latter makes clear the authors’ perspectives by referencing their various contributions to futures thinking and foresight processes, both in New Zealand and internationally. Following this, we explain the relationship between the requirement for periodic LTIBs and other future-focused policy initiatives. We then undertake a practical, high-level assessment of the first round of LTIBs. This is set against the backdrop of various critical long-term policy issues facing New Zealand and the wider international community. We conclude with reflections on the overall merits of LTIBs as a policy instrument for enhancing long-term governance, including suggestions for improving current policy processes.

Definitions

There is much variation in the way future-related terms are defined and applied. For the purposes of this article, we use the Government Office for Science (2021) definitions for:

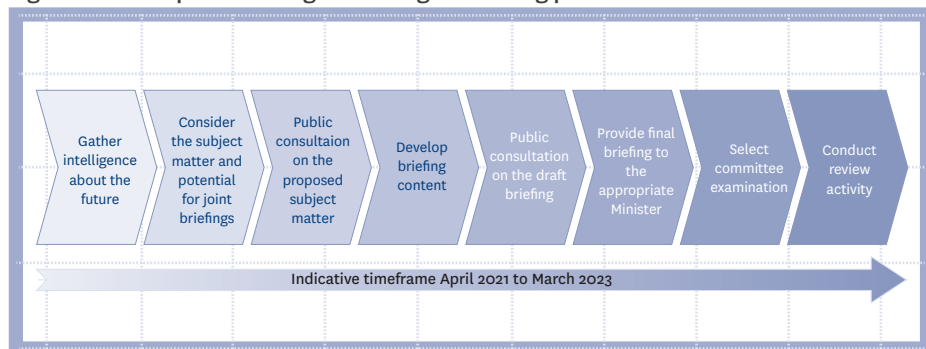
- *Futures*: refers to systematic approaches to thinking about the future and exploring factors that could give rise to possible and probable future characteristics, events, and behaviours.
- *Foresight*: refers to the application of specific tools/methods for conducting futures work, for example, horizon scanning (gathering intelligence about the future) and scenarios (describing what the future might be like).

For *strategic foresight*, we have followed the approach of the European Commission, which describes this as activity that ‘seeks to embed foresight into European Union policy-making. It builds on collective intelligence in a structured and systematic way to help better develop possible transition pathways, prepare the EU to withstand shocks and shape the future we want’ (European Commission, 2024). Further, we use the term *futures thinking* to denote a mindset which enables the practice of futures and foresight (after OECD, 2017).

Methods

Our article draws on a range of sources. First, all three authors contributed in various ways between 2019 and 2023 to the development, implementation and assessment of the LTIB process. This included multiple interactions with ministers, members of Parliament and departmental officials. Specifically, one of us (Boston) was involved in the initial consultations which led to the requirement for LTIBs being included in the Public Service Act 2020. All three authors attended workshops during 2020–21 on the design of the LTIB process and provided advice to the Public Service Commission and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet on possible approaches. One (Jackson) completed a review of the topics chosen by departments for the first round of LTIBs and presented an analysis to the Public Sector Futures Group (a group of officials he established when employed previously within the public

Figure 1: The steps in the long-term insights briefing process



Source: adapted from Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, n.d.a

sector). All of us provided advice to one or more government departments on their proposed LTIB and/or participated in the associated consultation process. Next, one of us, drawing on a futures perspective, wrote a ‘mid-term review’ of the LTIB process (Menzies, 2022). We also made a joint submission to, and appeared before, Parliament’s Governance and Administration Committee, which was charged with scrutinising the overall LTIB process, and responded in writing to the committee’s subsequent questions.¹ The committee endorsed some of our suggestions in its second interim report (McKelvie, 2023).

Additionally, we undertook a systematic, rolling desktop review of all the draft and published LTIBs, along with other relevant and publicly available official documents. We then employed an evaluation framework drawn from the requirements of the Public Service Act and our involvement in policymaking and futures thinking in New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

Legislative and operational provisions

As noted, the Public Service Act (see schedule 6, ss8, 9) requires departmental chief executives to prepare a LTIB for the appropriate minister at least once every three years, reflecting the length of the parliamentary term. LTIBs must be developed independently of ministers – that is to say, departmental chief executives are free to decide the nature and scope of the issues that are explored and do not require ministerial approval for the contents of the resulting publications. Independence, of course, does not rule out ministers being informed about their department’s intentions.

As specified in the Act, the purpose of LTIBs is to provide:

- a) information about medium- and long-term trends, risks, and opportunities that affect or may affect New Zealand and New Zealand society; and
- b) information and impartial analysis, including policy options for responding to matters in the categories referred to in paragraph (a). (s8(2))

Under the Act, a ‘briefing may set out the strengths and weaknesses’ of the policy options identified but must do so ‘without indicating a preference for a particular policy option’ (s8(3)). This latter provision was explicitly included to minimise possible tensions between departmental chief executives and their ministers by avoiding explicit policy recommendations. Significantly, too, the Act does not require ministers to respond publicly to the briefings they receive, reducing potential conflicts between chief executives and ministers. To ensure accountability, this is counterbalanced by the requirement that LTIBs must be presented to Parliament for review by a select committee.

LTIBs were meant to be policy relevant and improve policymaking processes. To quote Parliament’s Governance and Administration Committee, the briefings were ‘intended to enhance public debate on these issues and contribute to future decision-making by government, Māori, business, academia, not-for-profit organisations, and the wider public’ (McKelvie, 2022, p.5). Whether this goal has been achieved is discussed later.

Several other matters deserve highlighting. Under section 9 of schedule 6 of the Public Service Act, departments are required to consult the public twice during the preparation of their LTIBs (see Figure 1): first, on the topic; and second, on the draft briefing. Departments are obliged to take feedback from consultative

processes into account ‘when finalising the briefing’.

Significantly, the legislative purpose of LTIBs is open to interpretation. As a result, there was considerable variation in the scope and approach taken in developing the 19 LTIBs, from wide-ranging strategic considerations to single topic-based analyses. Equally important, the word ‘future’ does not appear in the legislative purpose and there is no requirement for the adoption of a ‘strategic foresight’ approach. Nevertheless, the guidance of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), which oversees the LTIB process, set best practice as:

The Long-term Insights Briefings require the public service to look over the horizon ... The LTIBs should be think pieces on the future which enhance public debate on long term issues ... [We] recommend that they look ahead at least 10 years ... and consider the context and implications of strategic drivers ... (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, n.d.b)

Additionally, DPMC provided a set of foresight techniques and tools on a webpage entitled ‘Futures thinking’² and offered training for the officials involved in preparing briefings. But no extra funding was provided by the government to support the preparation of LTIBs, associated costs being met from existing departmental budgets.

The recommended deadline for the first round of LTIBs was June 2022, to allow the briefings to inform the election manifestos of the political parties for the October 2023 election and parliamentary scrutiny beforehand. In the event, few briefings were completed by the proposed date, with nine not submitted until 2023 and several published in mid-2023. This left little time for proper parliamentary scrutiny during the 2020–23 parliamentary term. As acknowledged by the Governance and Administration Committee, however, there were understandable reasons for slippage in the proposed timetable:

We acknowledge the unusual context in which this first cycle of long-term insights briefings has taken place. The

Table 1: List of Long-term Insights Briefings and Parliamentary Select Committees Reports (August 2023)

Department(s) (Titles in English and Māori)*	Title of LTIB	Name of Select Committee examining LTIB
Department of Conservation (Te Papa Atawhai) and Toitū Te Whenua (Land Information New Zealand)	How can we help biodiversity thrive through the innovative use of information and emerging technologies?	Primary Production
Te Tari Taiwhenua (Department of Internal Affairs)	How can community participation and decision-making be better enabled by technology?	Economic Development, Science and Innovation
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet; Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade; Government Communications Security Bureau; Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment; Ministry of Defence; New Zealand Customs Service; New Zealand Security Intelligence Service	Let's talk about our national security: Engaging an increasingly diverse Aotearoa New Zealand on national security risks, challenges and opportunities	Intelligence and Security
Education Review Office (Te Tari Arotake Mātauranga)	Education For All Our Children: Embracing Diverse Cultures	Education and Workforce
Inland Revenue Department (Te Tari Taake)	Tax, investment and productivity	Finance and Expenditure
Manatū Hauora – Ministry of Health	Precision health: Exploring opportunities and challenges to predict, prevent, diagnose, and treat disease more precisely in Aotearoa New Zealand	N.A. (still at consultation stage)
Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE)	The future of business for Aotearoa New Zealand: an exploration of two trends influencing productivity and wellbeing – purpose-led business and use of blockchain technology	Economic Development, Science and Innovation
Manatū Taonga (Ministry for Culture and Heritage)	Into the future, what are some of the key areas that will influence the vibrancy and resilience of the cultural sector ecosystem?	Social Services and Community
MBIE Ministry of Social Development; Ministry for Women Ministry of Education	Youth at risk of limited employment: Preparing all young people for satisfying and rewarding working lives	Education and Workforce
Ministry for the Environment	Where to from here? How we ensure the future wellbeing of land and people	Environment
Ministry of Justice - Ara Poutama Aotearoa Department of Corrections Crown Law Office Serious Fraud Office Inaia Tonu Nei - Climate Change Commission Oranga Tamariki – Ministry for Children	Long-term Insights on Imprisonment, 1960 to 2050	Justice
Ministry for Pacific Peoples, Te Manatū mō ngā Iwi ō te Moana-nui-ā-Kiwa	Improving Pacific Data Equity: Opportunities to Enhance the Future of Pacific Wellbeing	Social Services and Community
Ministry for Primary Industries (Manatū Ahu Matua)	The Future of Aotearoa New Zealand's Food Sector: Exploring Global Demand Opportunities in the Year 2050	Primary Production
Tatauranga Aotearoa Statistics New Zealand	Aotearoa New Zealand: empowered by data	Governance and Administration
Te Kawa Mataaho (Public Service Commission)	Enabling Active Citizenship: Public Participation in Government into the Future	Governance and Administration
Te Manatū Waka (Ministry of Transport)	The impact of autonomous vehicles operating on Aotearoa New Zealand roads	Transport and Infrastructure
Te Puni Kōkiri	Thriving whānau in 2040	TBC
Te Tūāpapa Kura Kāinga (Ministry of Housing and Urban Development)	The long-term implications of our ageing population for our housing and urban futures	Social Services and Community
Te Tai Ōhanga (The Treasury)	He Tirohanga Mokopuna 2021: The Treasury's combined Statement on the Long-term Fiscal Position and Long-term Insights Briefing	Finance and Expenditure

* Names of departments are as on the LTIB documents, some of which include Māori as well as English names.

continual revision of completion dates can be attributed to the consequences of COVID-19 and major structural reform work, the availability of stakeholders to engage with the briefing, and the time needed to process the feedback received from public consultation. (McKelvie, 2023, p.6)

Table 1 outlines the list of LTIBs, their titles, and which parliamentary select committee scrutinised each briefing. Related select committee documents are accessible at 'Long-term insights briefings' on Parliament's website.

Several reviews of the first round of LTIBs have already been completed and/or have commenced. By August 2023, the Governance and Administration Select Committee had issued two interim reports (see McKelvie, 2022, 2023). Meanwhile, DPMC commenced a review of the first round of LTIBs, including how departments chose their topics, the tools and methods employed, and 'the initial effects on public service stewardship and policy advice' (McKelvie, 2023, p.6). Consideration will be given to the number of LTIBs prepared and the implications of this for the level of public engagement (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2022). Additionally, departments are 'expected to conduct self-assessments to feed into the system-wide review' (McKelvie, 2023, p.6). The DPMC published a review of the first round of LTIBs in November 2023. The review focused on the process to develop LTIBs – it did not assess their quality or how they might influence longer-term policy (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2023). These reviews are expected to inform the second round of LTIBs.

Other futures initiatives

The LTIB process is part of a broader set of governmental initiatives that have been proceeding simultaneously. This includes regular reports by various Crown entities, such as the Climate Change Commission, the Productivity Commission (now disestablished), the Infrastructure Commission, the Retirement Commission, the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, and government-funded think tanks, such as Te Puna Whakaaronui, which has a role in transforming the food

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and fibre sector (i.e., wool and wood fibre) by 2030.³ The External Reporting Board (XRB), which sets reporting standards for businesses, has implemented a requirement for all listed companies with an annual turnover of over \$100m to assess their climate risks based on the development of sectoral climate change scenarios, which will add to this set.⁴ A private initiative has produced a list of more than 50 scenarios for New Zealand on various topics (McGuinness Institute, 2023).

Other recent long-term strategies and plans include:

- eight industry transformation plans (ITPS), long-term plans for key sectors to drive the transition towards a productive, sustainable and inclusive economy by 2050 (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2020, 2023);
- a freight and supply chain strategy which looks over three time horizons in an area of crucial importance to New Zealand, given its relative isolation and

dependence on two-way trade (Te Manatū Waka Ministry of Transport, 2023);

- the first national climate change risk assessment for New Zealand, identifying a set of 48 priority risks, with extreme or major consequence ratings for now, by 2050, and by 2100 (Ministry for the Environment, 2022);
- the first Emissions Reduction Plan.

There is no explicit coordination of futures activities across the public sector, and much overlap. For instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade's strategic paper in 2023 – *Navigating a Shifting World* – traverses much of the same ground as the LTIB led by the same ministry in partnership with the DPMC (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade Manatū Aorere, 2023). Also, in August 2023 the government released national security and defence statements which between them display a significant amount of futures thinking and linkages with various LTIBs and other strategies (New Zealand Government, 2023c, 2023a, 2023b).

Assessing the first round of long-term insights briefings

Any analysis of a new or existing policy depends on the assessment criteria adopted. Our approach has been to assess each LTIB through a futures lens, together with oft-employed techniques of policy analysis.

Drawing on these considerations, our assessment of LTIBs addresses the following matters:

- the nature and adequacy of the consultative processes undertaken by departments;
- the comprehensiveness of the coverage of long-term risks and opportunities;
- the extent of the application of foresight methods;
- the adequacy of the assessments of the drivers of change;
- the importance of the topics explored;
- the likely impact on policymaking; and
- the sustainability of the current LTIB model.

Nature and adequacy of the consultation processes undertaken by departments

Departments took different approaches to consultation, on the time allowed and the form of public engagement. In most cases,

the consultation periods were brief (two to four weeks). The Ministry for Culture and Heritage was an outlier, allowing three months for each stage of the process.

Consultations were undertaken through a range of channels (e.g., online interactions, workshops, webinars, surveys and submissions). The numbers of entities engaged with (i.e., individuals, organisations and communities) ranged from eight to over 1500 individual responses to an online survey (the justice sector briefing). Direct consultations (i.e., not accounting for those represented by membership bodies) were confined to a relatively small number of people. This was inconsistent with the intentions for public debate highlighted by the Governance and Administration Committee (McKelvie, 2022). On the other hand, the secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade told the Intelligence and Security Committee that his ministry ‘was struck by how few other countries had sought to engage their public in this manner’ (i.e., the manner of consultation used for the security LTIB) (Intelligence and Security Committee, 2023, p.3).

Furthermore, as in many democracies in recent years, public discourse has become more polarised, fractious and difficult to manage. Given these constraints and challenges, more extensive consultation on the LTIBs may not have been affordable or fruitful (Franke-Bowell, 2023). However, a more coordinated approach with fewer LTIBs could have allowed a more structured, better resourced and more accessible consultation process, enabling engagement with a larger number and wider range of citizens. The Department of Internal Affairs noted that it selected its LTIB topic largely because of prospects of using virtual reality in consultation, and this could be a way to proceed in future (Chen, 2023, p.4).

Comprehensiveness of the coverage of long-term risks and opportunities

During the 21st century, New Zealand faces many issues that are common elsewhere (e.g., an ageing population), although the scale of the challenges may differ. It must also confront some distinctive, if not unique, issues, such as establishing just and productive relationships between Māori and non-Māori.

While all the LTIBs were well written, in many cases the relevant assumptions, mental models, and key uncertainties and risks were either inadequately specified or insufficiently tested.

In broad terms, we identified key drivers of change, including:

- increasing ethnic diversity and population ageing;
- rapid technological innovation;
- increasing levels of debt;
- greater socio-economic inequality;
- unequal educational opportunities;
- heightened pressures on healthcare systems; the rise of nationalist and populist movements;
- the mounting economic and social impacts of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss;
- increasing geopolitical tensions.

Various international bodies, such as the World Economic Forum (2022, 2023), compile annual lists of global risks. Many of the issues identified in such reports were also recognised in the LTIBs.

Not unexpectedly, the Treasury LTIB focused on the country’s long-term fiscal position, but in the context of demographic change (mentioned by almost every LTIB), especially an ageing population. It also highlighted the uncertainties and risks arising from the impacts of economic

shocks, a major earthquake and climate change. Interestingly, the Office of the Auditor-General, which reports directly to Parliament, under section 20 of the Public Audit Act 2001 ‘on matters arising out of the performance and exercise of the Auditor-General’s functions, duties, and powers’, has published a critique of Treasury’s work, and proposed (among other things) that in future it ‘consider a wider and more integrated range of scenarios that could take place in different time periods within the 40-year horizon to provide more realism and relevance’ (Controller and Auditor-General, 2022, p.7).

Most LTIBs adopted a time horizon of 10–20 years, although several looked out to 2050, and the Treasury’s LTIB has a 40-year horizon. It could be argued that for some topics, such as sea level rise, a time frame of a century or more is needed, while 10–15 years might be seen as long term for the security LTIB.

Despite the uncertain global context, most LTIBs focused primarily on domestic policy issues. Several incorporated a literature review, but little attention was given to other relevant national and international futures assessments. Several LTIBs were narrowly topic-based to the extent that they could be considered as ‘business as usual’ (i.e., dealing with issues that should preferably be addressed as a matter of course, regardless of whether LTIBs are required). In such cases, it is questionable whether departments focused on the really ‘big issues’ or adopted the appropriate time horizon.

In some cases, the topics chosen appeared to be of second-order importance. For instance, the LTIB prepared by the Ministry for Primary Industries focused on changing food preferences rather than the potentially more significant impact of climate change and biodiversity loss on global food supplies and food security, and the implications for New Zealand’s agricultural producers and consumers.

Most LTIBs played safe and avoided politically sensitive topics. No doubt this reflects the pressures on departmental chief executives to retain a good working relationship with their respective ministers and to avoid topics or advice that might cause political embarrassment. However, it is instructive that the Treasury’s LTIB

Figure 2: Foresight Techniques Adopted in Long-Term Insights Briefings

Trends	Drivers	Scenarios	Visioning	Backcasting
5				
	4			
		3		
1				
1				

Note: shaded cells indicate which techniques were used and the number in the row the number of departments using that combination of foresight techniques.

Table 2: Drivers of Change identified in Long-Term Insights Briefings

Driver	Number of LTIBs that considered the driver
Demographics	14
Climate Change	8
Social Values	7
Shocks	4
Inequality	3
Digital Technology	3
Geopolitical change	3
Trust in information	3
Values and preferences	2
Public management	2
Skills and work	2
Waste and pollution	2
Land use	2
Regulation	2

specifically mentioned the option of introducing a capital gains tax, a highly contentious issue.

While all the LTIBs were well written, in many cases the relevant assumptions, mental models, and key uncertainties and risks were either inadequately specified or insufficiently tested. As a result, the potential implications were not properly identified or assessed.

This approach contrasts starkly with the LTIB drawn from the New Zealand Defence Force *Future Force Design Principles*, where it is explicitly stated that assumptions are tested against future iterations of investment planning (New Zealand Government, 2023b, p.10) and guidance from the New Zealand Financial Markets Authority:

To be challenging, assumptions should confront conventional wisdom and simplistic understandings of today’s

environment. When thinking about the major sources of uncertainty, scenarios should explore assumptions that will significantly alter the basis for business-as-usual thinking. (Financial Markets Authority, 2023)

Extent and use of foresight techniques

Fourteen LTIBs adopted and applied one or more foresight techniques, although the quality of the application was uneven. The foresight techniques employed included:

- trend analysis – forward project based on historic patterns;
- driver analysis – factors which will have an effect on the issue being considered: for example, changes in population size will change demands on housing;
- scenarios – plausible possible stories of what the future could be like;
- visioning – a desired future state;
- backcasting – starting from a desired future state and working out what steps and changes would be needed to deliver the desired future state.

Most LTIBs identified trends. These are an important starting point. But there is always the possibility that trends might change. Four used both trend and driver analysis to underpin their scenarios; one used both trend and driver analysis alongside visioning and backcasting. Only four developed specific scenarios.

Adequacy of assessment of drivers of change

While many LTIBs included trends and drivers (see Table 2), they did not include comprehensive lists; nor were the trends and drivers prioritised. Hence, there is the possibility of important matters being missed. Further, there was almost no consideration of the interplay between the drivers and trends, or of how they might change over time.

It would have been more efficient and effective to have conducted a coordinated identification and analysis of key drivers and trends at the beginning of the LTIB process. The results of this exercise could then have been shared across departments, with each one selecting the drivers and trends of greatest relevance to their LTIB, followed by an analysis of the possible responses. Such a process could also have included an evaluation of the relevant interrelationships and interdependencies between the various drivers and wider implications.

Our ‘reverse engineering’ of the process identified 41 drivers that were considered by LTIBs. Descriptions range from cursory mentions to more detailed reviews of individual drivers. Collectively, the sets of drivers represent a valuable source of information. Eleven of the drivers are covered in more than one LTIB, highlighting the advantages of a coordinated approach. Significantly, in only 11 of the 41 cases was there a reference to the interplay between drivers (e.g., the impact of climate change on migration). Most LTIBs did not discuss interdependencies, although two looked at similar issues (‘Enabling active citizenship: public participation in government into the future’ and ‘How can community participation and decision-making be better enabled by technology?’) and the economically focused LTIBs were complementary, albeit leaving some gaps.

The importance of the topics chosen

If LTIBs are to contribute to better policymaking, especially regarding important inter-temporal issues, the issues addressed must be of genuine policy relevance and importance. But this immediately raises a range of normative and methodological issues. What, for instance, are the appropriate criteria for determining ‘relevance’ and ‘importance’? Moreover, even if agreement can be reached on such matters, how should priorities be determined? In a pluralistic democracy such as New Zealand, there are bound to be differences of view on whether particular matters are policy-relevant and which policy issues should be prioritised. Aside from this, given the inherent uncertainty surrounding issues of a long-term nature, there will always

Table 3: Topics identified in Long-Term Insights Briefings

LTIB topic summary	Critical/important	National vs sectoral	Current and future issue
Supporting biodiversity through technology	Important	National	Future
Enabling community participation through technology	Important	National	Current
Engaging on national security issues	Critical	National	Future
Embracing diverse cultures in education	Important	Sectoral	Current
Tax investment and productivity	Important	National	Future
Precision health	Critical	National	Current
Purpose-led business and blockchain	Important	Sectoral	Future
What will influence the vibrancy of the cultural sector	Important	Sectoral	Current
Supporting youth at risk	Critical	Sectoral	Current
How to ensure the wellbeing of the land and people	Critical	National	Future
Long-term insights on imprisonment	Critical	Sectoral	Current
Improving data to improve Pacific wellbeing	Important	National	Current
Opportunities for the food sector	Important	Sectoral	Future
Data to empower New Zealand	Important	National	Current
Enabling active citizenship	Important	National	Current
Impact of AVs on New Zealand's roads	Important	Sectoral	Future
Thriving Whānau in 2040	Critical	National	Current
Long-term implications of aging on housing and urban futures	Critical	National	Future
Long-term fiscal challenges	Critical	National	Future

Table 4: International risks

World economic forum top 10 risks 2023	Was it the focus of LTIBs?	Australian Treasury Intergenerational Report for 2023	Was it the focus of LTIBs?
Cost of living	No	Repairing the budget	Yes
Natural disasters and events	No	Fostering a dynamic economy	No
Geo economic confrontation	Yes	Defence capability for regional security	Yes
Failure to mitigate climate change	No	Transforming to zero emissions	No
Erosion of social cohesion	Yes	Addressing disadvantage	Some aspects
Large scale environmental incidents	No	Sustainability meeting case and support needs	No
Failure to adapt to climate change	No	Growing workforce skills	No
Widespread cybercrime	Yes		
Natural resource crisis	No		
Large scale migration	No		

be scope for debate about which topics deserve the most attention.

Accordingly, we assessed the topics covered in LTIBs against three criteria: was it critical or merely important; was it a national or sectoral issue; and was it concerned with mostly short-term risks and opportunities or longer-term ones? Topics meeting at least two of these criteria were assessed to be a critical long-term issue. When applying these criteria, half the LTIBs met the test (see Table 3).

Note that for the purposes of our analysis, 'critical' refers to issues that are vital to New Zealand's social, economic or environmental future, 'national' refers to issues that are likely to have significant impacts across the whole country, while 'current' refers to an existing capability or harm.

We also considered whether there were topics of greater long-term importance or

strategic significance which could have been addressed. We drew on two risk assessments to guide this analysis: the first, the top ten risks identified by the World Economic Forum (2023); the second, the seven key areas identified in the Australian federal Treasury's *Intergenerational Report* (Australian Government, 2023). The results are summarised in Table 4. Overall, there were many topics which could have been given higher priority, at least in some LTIBs (e.g., the future challenges from large-scale migration, supply-chain disruption, and delivering a just transition to a low-carbon economy). Of course, there are many risk reports and they vary in their approaches and assessments. We chose the World Economic Forum's risk assessment because of its global perspective and the Australian Treasury's Intergenerational Report because of its

long-term scope and the fact that Australia is our closest neighbour. As such our assessment isn't definitive, but it is instructive.

Impact on policymaking

It is too early to judge the long-term impact of the LTIBs on government policies and programmes. The early signs, however, are not encouraging. Neither the LTIBs nor the select committee reports generated significant media coverage. Other future-focused exercises, referred to above, have received a good deal more attention.

While almost all the briefings were reviewed by a select committee during 2022–23, most of these reviews were perfunctory. The five verbatim (i.e., Hansard) transcripts we have found range from eight to 31 pages in length, and these tend to reflect the political leanings of

committee members and/or a fixation on operational or methodological matters.

The committee reporting on the Ministry of Transport's LTIB included an explicitly written differing view from opposition party members. The MPs in question charged that the briefing pursued 'an ideological view around car use which appears to be a feature of the report' (Transport and Infrastructure Committee, 2022, p.7). This reflects a degree of political polarisation on the future direction of transport in New Zealand. Debates on such matters are not, of course, unique to New Zealand (International Travel Forum, 2021). But there is a suggestion that the LTIB was focusing on one technology (autonomous vehicles) rather than more important, broad questions about the future of the transport system.

The written select committee reports provide a good summary of the related discussions by committee members. Their contents, however, show little evidence of deep analysis of, or in-depth engagement with, the issues explored in the LTIBs. Nor was there serious scrutiny of the processes departments employed to produce their briefings. More significantly, perhaps, there is no evidence of select committees seeking independent advice on the contents of LTIBs, whether from one of the officers of Parliament (e.g., the Office of the Auditor-General) or academic experts. In four instances, committees asked follow-up questions of departments which were answered in writing. Apart from the joint briefings, these are the only instances we found of cross-checking of LTIBs. Unsurprisingly, given these limitations, the committee reports contain few recommendations, and most of these are anodyne (e.g., 'that the House take note of the committee's report').

Further, while the select committee reports were listed on Parliament's order paper in mid-2023 for debate in Parliament, no such debate took place prior to the general election, and it seems doubtful that one will occur subsequently.

Finally, there is little evidence of political parties drawing on the contents of LTIBs to guide their policy development. It is also unclear whether the preparation of LTIBs influenced departmental officials' views on the issues explored. Assessing such influence is notoriously difficult, but the Inland Revenue Department told the Finance and

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Expenditure Committee that it 'had found the process extremely useful and had enjoyed the opportunity to investigate long-term future issues, rather than just immediate concerns ... it had been great to work on something that would help inform public discussion on tax policy for years into the future' (Finance and Expenditure Committee, 2023, p.7). And the chief executive of the Ministry of Education commented that 'one of the opportunities that this presents us with is to think quite differently about things' (Education and Workforce Committee, 2023, p.9). Despite such comments, the available evidence suggests that LTIBs have had a minimal impact on either public debate or public policy settings. Accordingly, they have yet to demonstrate their capacity to serve as a powerful 'commitment device' (Boston 2017), for instance by ensuring that significant long-term policy issues receive proper political attention.

Sustainability of the current LTIB model

It is doubtful whether the current LTIB model is sustainable. To start with, it

is highly likely that public expenditure in New Zealand will be significantly constrained over the medium term, thus placing ongoing pressure on departmental budgets and staff resources. Policy processes that are not essential or deemed to be a low priority by the government of the day will likely be reviewed, with a risk of being terminated or at least downsized.

Additionally, informal feedback from officials involved in preparing their department's LTIB suggests that the process was often frustrating and difficult. In part this reflected the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Departmental resources were often stretched, creating tensions when seeking to ensure effective public engagement and wade through the normal multi-layered scrutiny of public sector processes. There are indications that many officials who contributed to the first round of briefings will not willingly participate in subsequent rounds. The workload was simply too demanding. If so, then institutional memory and futures-thinking capability will be lost. Aside from this, the current public engagement processes place substantial burdens on those being consulted: sometimes feedback was sought from the very same people by multiple departments at roughly the same time.

The sustainability of the LTIB process could be enhanced in several ways. For instance, the process could commence with a coordinated horizon scan of key risks, opportunities, drivers and trends. This could be the responsibility of DPMC or the public service. Departments could draw on this common resource in their briefings. Next, there could be better interdepartmental coordination of the topics selected. Ideally, this would contribute to more joint briefings and thus fewer LTIBs. A concerted effort could be made to build a cadre of staff with skills in futures work to support the periodic preparation of LTIBs. Many other jurisdictions (e.g., Canada, Finland, Singapore and the United Kingdom) have created specific public institutions to build this skills base, and there is no reason why New Zealand could not do the same.

Aside from this, it is questionable whether the current mode of parliamentary reviews is fit for purpose. The auditor-general, for instance, has suggested some

improvements. One of these would be for select committees to develop a standard set of questions for their scrutiny of LTIBs (McKelvie, 2023, p.7). Alternatively, an expert advisory group could be established and resourced to provide the select committees with advice on the risks and opportunities considered in the LTIBs.

Overall, it will be vital that the lessons from the first round, such as those just noted, are properly documented, and that sufficient expert advice and support is available for subsequent rounds.

Conclusions

New Zealand's short parliamentary term provides little time to address major longer-term policy challenges. The introduction of LTIBs was designed to help shift the inter-temporal orientation of policymakers and bring critical long-term problems into sharper short-term political focus. This goal is to be applauded. However, the Public Service Act does not require departments to undertake a formal piece of futures work or foresight, and nor does the DPMC guidance specify such an approach. Rather, departments were free in the first round to experiment with, and learn from, the use of foresight approaches if they chose to adopt them. This allowed for the development of pockets of foresighting/futures thinking in addition to those already existing, and some shared learning.

Notwithstanding such positive elements, the first round of LTIBs has contributed only modestly to realising the Act's goals. First, as noted, the initial round lacked appropriate central agency coordination and sufficient interdepartmental collaboration. As a result, there was no agreed methodology, no common time horizon, no overarching narrative, no agreement on the drivers of change or key trends, and an inadequate assessment of the interdependencies between the various drivers. In short, in most cases each department provided its own perspective on a defined set of issues and did so in its own way. While many of these perspectives were interesting and discerning, collectively they did not produce a comprehensive, integrated and critical strategic assessment of the country's probable and possible futures.

Second, many of the LTIBs focused on relatively narrow policy issues and/or

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applied mostly short- to medium-term horizons. Only a few employed multiple foresight techniques. Most lacked a systematic assessment of the options available to ameliorate, let alone resolve, the policy problems under investigation. And many LTIBs suffered long delays, with limited resources and the Covid-19 pandemic as undoubted contributing factors.

Third, little effort was made by the central agencies to ensure that the published reports were readily accessible (e.g., via a common website). Nor was it easy to track the progress of LTIBs once they entered the parliamentary system. A more certain inventory and better public engagement would be enabled if the website which lists the published reports also provided progress updates and links to ensuing select committee hearings or parliamentary debates.

Fourth, the preparation of LTIBs was inadequately coordinated with the drafting of other future-focused documents. What we observe across these initiatives is a 'futures bricolage' where similar issues have been examined through different lenses

and published in separate formats. This is not wholly bad. After all, multiple overlapping future-oriented policy processes can potentially contribute to a wider and deeper futures-thinking capability than that which underpins the LTIBs alone. Nevertheless, there is a risk in such circumstances of LTIBs being viewed merely as 'add-ons' to the serious business of government, rather than as first-order foresight documents. To avoid this outcome, LTIBs will need separate and adequate resourcing, better coordination, and timely delivery to their ministers and Parliament. Only then will they have a reasonable chance of improving the quality of anticipatory governance.

Even so, requiring all departments to produce (or contribute to) periodic foresight documents may not be the most efficient or effective way to encourage robust futures thinking within a nation's policy community, enhance risk management, and improve long-term outcomes. Indeed, such an approach is unusual from an international perspective. Other models are more common, such as the creation of a separate governmental agency dedicated to regular foresight activities, as, for instance, in Singapore and the United Kingdom.

Interestingly, the Australian federal government, under the leadership of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, has been trialling the use of LTIBs. It released its first report in late 2023 on the topic, 'How might AI affect the trustworthiness of the delivery of public services' (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Australia), 2023). Building on international experience, including recent developments in New Zealand, the Australian approach has deliberately eschewed the idea of requiring all departments to produce their own LTIBs on a regular basis. Instead, the aim is to produce a small number of LTIBs annually on a collaborative interdepartmental basis, with central agency leadership and dedicated staff.

For the future, New Zealand could combine the features of several overseas approaches. This might include oversight of the LTIB process by a central agency supported by a foresight unit, coupled with greater interdepartmental collaboration.

Independent reviews by parliamentary select committees could be assisted by staff in the Office of the Auditor-General and independent experts. Under such an approach, most briefings would involve two or more departments. This would reduce and spread the administrative burden, while also placing fewer demands for feedback on key stakeholders and members of the public. Potentially, briefings could be organised on a sectoral basis (e.g., economic, social, cultural, environmental, security-related, etc.). Key strategic questions could be selected for consideration via a consultative process among departmental chief executives, the departments with specific interests in each topic area pooling their resources to prepare a suitable briefing.

Aside from this, future rounds must take adequate account of, and build upon, the disciplinary knowledge base and work of other domestic and international futures initiatives, including their assessments of

risks, opportunities and drivers of change. Employing a consistent set of foresight techniques and applying them rigorously (e.g., with proper sensitivity analyses where relevant) would be advantageous. Equally, there should be a concerted effort to build the foresight capability of the public sector, and avoid burning out of key staff members. Also, it will be important to continually challenge underlying assumptions and ensure that processes and findings are subjected to independent review.

It is difficult to escape the impression that, despite its legislated mandate, the LTIB experiment has thus far received less than full-blooded political and bureaucratic support. Indeed, there is a risk that LTIBs will be added to the historical roll call of short-lived attempts to encourage futures thinking in Aotearoa. This would be unfortunate. In an increasingly interdependent, complex and uncertain world, there is a pressing need locally and globally for sound futures thinking. But

this requires an approach that produces high-quality outputs that are taken seriously by elected officials. Achieving such an outcome will likely require modifying the current model in one or other of the ways outlined above.

- 1 A recording is available here (from 29:00): <https://www.facebook.com/GASCNZ/videos/5913967975315015/>.
- 2 <https://www.dPMC.govt.nz/our-programmes/policy-project/policy-methods-toolbox/futures-thinking>.
- 3 <https://fitforabetterworld.org.nz/>.
- 4 <https://www.xrb.govt.nz/standards/climate-related-disclosures/resources/>.

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