

ANNEX B: HORIZON SCANNING WORKSHOP 19 JUL 12

I have outlined below the key themes of the day. From my perspective it was clear that there is a real appetite for horizon scanning activity, but that we need to make better use of what we already have whilst remaining realistic regarding the limitations of horizon scanning activity. There is work to be done to coordinate the diffusion of best practice and to improve networks within the horizon scanning community and across policy areas to ensure output is relevant and duplication of effort is avoided.

KEY THEMES

Benefits. Governments are often accused of short termism. Horizon scanning can assist in bridging the gap between the long and short term view and integrating horizon scanning into policy and strategy making will be good for building resilience.

Education. Across government, horizon scanning is deemed to have sufficient value and resources are invested in it. It is incumbent upon us to ensure we use the output effectively. Perhaps part of the reason why horizon scanning is not better utilised at present is because it is not a predictive tool, although many view it in that way. The future is unpredictable, and thus incorrect judgements are made. Horizon scanning is therefore sometimes viewed only as an intellectual exercise rather than a practice relevant to policy making. Horizon scanning cannot remove uncertainty and there is a requirement to recognise its limitations, but it does offer us a useful strategic planning tool. If we are to change the perception surrounding horizon scanning, it would be useful for practitioners to show where horizon scanning activity has proven to be beneficial to policy planning in the past.

Cultural change. There was a useful discussion surrounding the question of changing the way we as the Civil Service engage in horizon scanning. Horizon scanning as an activity needs to be embedded within Departments in order to feed into the senior leadership and the policy making cycle. Horizon scanning should not be seen as an independent activity which bears little relevance to policy making and currently the extent to which horizon scanning is included in strategic decision making is often personality dependent. For Government to use horizon scanning to most effect, it needs to be driven in a non-partisan fashion. This can be difficult, particularly when the topic is politically sensitive, but this should not be a barrier. Key to changing the way horizon scanning is perceived by senior leaders and Ministers is to change the way it is promoted and presented. Practitioners of horizon scanning need to think about the language they use and of innovative ways of presenting their findings.

Why and how should the current 'structure' be changed? We discussed how best practice and output is currently shared. It was agreed that there are at present strong networks of analysts at the working level, and very informative internal products, but there is weak integration between Departments and with the policy agenda. Horizon scanning activity should be coordinated to avoid duplication of effort and ensure, where appropriate, cross-Government products which are relevant and timely. To maintain the credibility of horizon scanning, a system of robust challenge and contestability should be introduced. It was also agreed that a shared definition of horizon scanning be established.

Jon Day