

Workshop to explore young public servants' views on Te Kawa Mataaho's Long Term Insights Briefing

Context

The Public Service Futures network is a cross-agency Employee-Led Network aiming to connect and amplify the voices of young public servants to influence the direction of the public service. Our belief is that the young public servants who will lead the public service in 30 years' time have a valuable role in informing long-term decisions about the way the public sector operates. We therefore play a system role to help bridge the gap between young public servants across agencies and key stakeholders who shape the sector.

We identified an opportunity to engage young public servants on an aspect of our work that is important to the nature and experience of our roles into the future - the way we engage with the public - by submitting on Te Kawa Mataaho's Long-Term Insights Briefing (LTIB). LTIBs are required to be produced by each public service department every three years under the Public Service Act 2020. They are designed to encourage long-term stewardship. For their inaugural LTIB, Te Kawa Mataaho selected the topic *"How can we better support public participation in government in the future?"*.

We wanted to explore the kinds of views young public servants have on the future of public participation in our work, to help Te Kawa Mataaho to understand how young public servants think the public service may evolve. To this end, we undertook a workshop split across two sites to explore young public servants' perspectives. This note summarises the themes of our workshop.

We acknowledge some of the views expressed are outside of the scope of Te Kawa Mataaho's LTIB. We think this is a feature rather than a bug of the exercise, in that it allows us to usefully complement the Commission's work without the same institutional constraints, and adds a different set of considerations to the thinking.

Methods

Conceptual framework

LTIBs generate thinking about how we can best prepare for many different futures in the present. Scenario analysis is inherently sensitive to assumptions, and can benefit from divergent perspectives to improve robustness to different starting assumptions.

Our goal was to supplement existing work led by the LTIB team at Te Kawa Mataaho by gathering divergent and creative views from a pool of young public servants, in order to help them to understand young public servants' aspirations and understanding of the drivers of change. It is important to note that our sample is not intended to be representative.

To achieve this overarching aim, we used a Futures thinking methodology. [Futures thinking](#) is an approach to policy development that provides tools for understanding the drivers of change for the future, in order to understand which courses of action today might be resilient across multiple future scenarios.

Workshop structure

Our workshop had three key questions:

- Why is public participation in government important?
- How does your ideal public service in 2050 engage with the public?
- How do we join the dots between the imperfect present and intended future? What trends will we face along the way?

The first question was intended to ground participants in their motivation for attending the workshop, and explore the stakes at play.

The second and third questions used a Backcasting methodology, in which we asked participants to explore a desired future state, and think about the conditions that need to be put in place in the present to put us on track toward the desired future state, taking into account current and future trends that may arise.

We prompted participants to think about a range of trends affecting the future at the start of the workshop. The trends we socialised were sourced from Te Kawa Mataaho, and included trust in government, digital innovation, demographic change, increasing inequality, and increasing expectations of government.

Participants

We recruited participants by advertising our workshops on staff intranet pages. Our representativeness was limited by our steering committee's reach and venue capacity limits.

Participants on the day comprised 11 young public servants split across two sites for COVID-19 social distancing purposes. Staff were present from the Ministry of Health, MBIE, Treasury, MSD, OT, and Public Service Commission.

Themes

The summary below reflects the views of our participants in relation to each of the three headline questions.

Why is public participation in government important?

Participants discussed the following key benefits of public participation:

- Participation makes policy more effective at achieving its intended purpose

- Participation also has secondary benefits; most notably building social licence. Effective public participation allows the public to trust that their voice has been heard, and to understand and trust the process that has led to an alternate path being taken
- The process of participation is sometimes important independent of the outcomes produced. Eg, from a Treaty perspective, active participation and partnership is about justice as much as good outcomes.
- Participation can have democratic value, independent of outcomes. Participation in processes of government allows the public to hold the government accountable & to have transparency of process.

Participants discussed the role of public servants in participation:

- Public servants serve as conduits for public participation processes
- Public servants are stewards of the systems through which services are delivered

How does your ideal public service in 2050 engage with the public?

Participants took a holistic lens to this question. The core line of thinking was that participation in government depends on the way we set up the relationship and boundary lines between the 'government' and 'public' in the first place, and the way in which future services are commissioned and delivered..

Participants discussed that participation often exists to fill a knowledge gap that the government needs to fill to achieve its work programme, usually to deliver bulk services nationally. In the future, there may be greater viability to deliver more localised, tailored and bespoke services, with fewer siloes between government departments, and with greater consumer choice. This could be delivered through regional hubs, and may be more viable in future given the trend toward working from home and the decline of office space. This would also have the benefit of enabling more diverse and representative types of people to join the public sector workforce than those who currently are willing or able to work in Wellington. Participants discussed the opportunity to empower local community sector organisations and champions to deliver more bespoke services.

Participants across both sites felt accessibility was one of the major barriers to better participation that needed to be overcome, particularly for people with disabilities and ethnic minorities. We discussed that accessibility can be financial, geographical, cultural, relating to physical or cognitive ability, educational, language-based, and time/capacity-based. Our participants imagined a future state in which active and engaged local populations had the capacity and resources to access the resources of the state to achieve mutually agreed goals. The end goal might be more of a network approach with capacity built in the community sector, rather than a top-down centralised model.

Participants also acknowledged the need for iwi/Māori to have choice over their engagement processes as Treaty partners. We discussed that there are wider constitutional questions that impact on how we conceptualise participation with Māori. We acknowledge this area is outside the scope of Te Kawa Mataaho's LTIB.

How do we join the dots between the imperfect present and intended future? What trends will we face along the way?

Our final exercise was to generate 3-5 ideas per group about things we might need to do to reach our intended future state. We also asked participants to think about what might go wrong along the way. We have summarised these suggestions below based on whether they are suitable to develop now, or whether they require more fundamental shifts.

Ideas that were suitable to be developed now included:

- Diversifying the composition & experiences of the public sector workforce
 - Increased hiring from regions of NZ other than Wellington, enabled by the rise of remote working
 - Increasing availability of frontline secondment experience to increase exposure to public-facing services (ie MOH staff go to hospitals/DHBs, MSD staff go to employment offices)
- Addressing accessibility barriers to participation
 - Increased civics education
 - Increased diversity of languages used
- Supporting forms of active citizenship
 - Exploring citizens' juries
 - Exploring the range of areas where the Crown delegates power to communities to address their own issues where it makes sense to do so

Ideas that required more fundamental shifts included:

- Shifting toward more localised public services with greater use of bespoke service arrangements. This would require building capacity in existing initiatives like Regional Public Service Leads and the Auckland Policy Office, as well as more fundamental changes to the policy workforce skillset.
- Reviewing constitutional settings to give effect to true partnership with iwi/Māori
- Linked-up IT system / information sharing among departments to reduce the duplication between government departments consulting on similar topics. We recognised that a challenge would be retaining adequacy data sovereignty controls.

Our participants acknowledged that there are many risks to successfully achieving our desired future state. In the time available, we were not able to fully develop our thinking here. The most significant theme for our participants was social licence. There are changing and contradictory expectations of government that may not align with our intended direction. There is a growing minority who do not trust the government.