

Getting futures right

A lessons learned review by Sparknow to develop governance and good practice guidelines for horizon scanning and futures at Defra.

This folder is a compilation of the lessons learned from Defra's first futures and horizon scanning projects. Everything you see here comes from the first-hand testimony of the people who commissioned, carried out or observed those projects.

The folder itself folds out into a wallchart, in which the lifecycle of a notional futures project is broken down into tasks and stages and filled with the pithy advice of people who have faced that task before. It ranges from the rueful to the victorious, and we hope that everyone finds something there that surprises them.

Inside the folder, you will find a series of linked essays, each summarising an important aspect of our findings or looking at them from a different point of view. For the most general introduction, see 'this is not the end' and for the current summary of our findings, 'it might sting a bit'. Other topics include multidisciplinary, stakeholders, policy makers, language, method choice and steering groups. The essays are practical and to the point, and we intend them to be useful.

You will also find a number of key quotes, all more or less verbatim, and we've added a glossary of futures methods and a breakdown of the roles in a futures project. Again these are based on testimony, but summarised so as to be useful background for people new to futures work.

The folder, you will notice, is quite big. That's because we don't want it to be filed away, mailed around, photocopied and forgotten. It is being produced cheaply in small numbers, and given out only to those people who need to read it. If you're holding it now, that means we want to know what you think, and we need your help to take Defra's futures work forward. We will contact you for your reactions, and we'd be very grateful if you could scribble comments all over the essays and send them back to us.

This is one of several outputs from a long enquiry carried out by Defra and Sparknow between February and September 2006. As well as the usual meetings, archive-trawls and working papers, it comes from:

- 9 full oral history interviews with members of the programme team
- 50 short phone interviews with those involved in the early round of work
- 14 long interviews on particular projects
- A full week of intensively documented events and discussions looking at a range of sticky issues, attended by 50 key people from throughout the Defra wider family and the futures community.

Everything we have gathered has been collated in a custom-built library application designed to support researchers in scanning, excerpting, gathering and synthesising raw audio footage. The summaries you find here have been distilled from fifty hours of raw material, tens of thousands of words of transcript and a towering stack of historical Defra paperwork.

The words governance, good practice and guideline are uniquely soporific when combined, so we have taken great care to keep the energy and urgency of the stories that people told us about pioneering futures work at Defra. If this folder doesn't offend you at some point, please write to us and complain.

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