

# Demystifying horizon scanning and futures for Defra

Sparknow demystified horizon scanning and futures (HSF) at the Department of the environment, food and rural affairs (Defra) using a powerful narrative enquiry exercise that encouraged the memories and stories of people involved in its early futures projects. The memories revealed forgotten or unconsidered lessons which when combined with Sparknow's facilitation of workshops enabled Defra to create its own project lifecycle work wheel for best practice HSF projects. At the end of this journey a Toolkit was constructed by Sparknow to transpose the work wheel into a format to assist the collaborative dynamic of futures work evolve at Defra.

Futures studies is a way of thinking about what could, would and should happen, it includes the use of horizon scanning and is sometimes termed Foresight. It is vital to the formation of Defra policy since it engages stakeholders, academics, scientists and policy makers in consideration of future environments.

**“The horizon scanning team is a window onto the wider world. It interacts with industry, with the universities and research institutions, and it feeds into the policy division, bringing policy people into contact with the people who can help them.”**

Sir Howard Dalton, Chief Scientific Advisor to the government 2002-07

The new head of the Horizon Scanning and Futures unit at Defra, wanted to carry out a review of the initial Defra Foresight programme (2002-05). The aim of the review was to learn hard lessons, re-engage potentially damaged networks, and create a body of materials and methods which could be injected into a fresh programme of work that would extend Defra's national and international excellence in futures work, and actively shape the development of policy. The new head remembered a commanding lessons learned summary provided in story form by Sparknow at the Countryside Agency's annual conference, and it was on the back of this that she contacted Sparknow.

An investigative narrative enquiry technique and strong facilitation skills were key Defra requirements for the lessons learned project. In winning the contract Sparknow helped Defra identify the issues it faced in the use of futures work by policy makers and scientists and subsequently created a project lifecycle work wheel and Toolkit from these lessons.

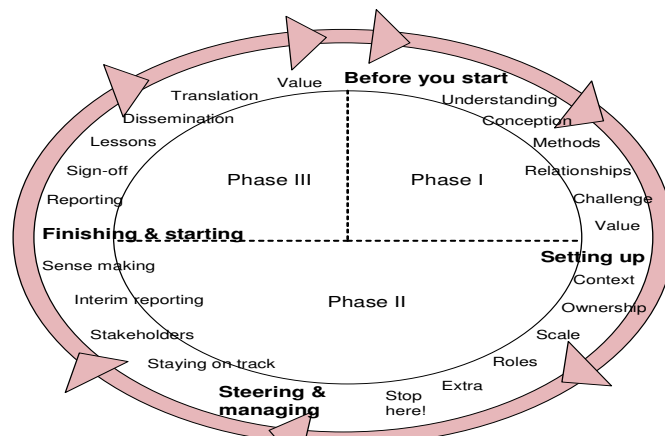
**Never before in Defra have we done a lessons learned project in the way this one was done. It completely vindicated doing it.**

Fiona Lickorish, Defra: Head of Horizon Scanning and Futures Strategy and Evidence Group

## HSF work wheel and Sparknow's methodology

### Before you start

The first phase of any project is about understanding what the issue is, its conception, methods, relationships, challenge and value. Sparknow began to understand how HSF worked at Defra by first capturing the lessons learned from Defra's initial Foresight projects through an extensive series of 10-minute interviews with Defra scientists and project managers, Defra appointed contractors and futures specialists involved in these projects. In essence, Sparknow



*The three phases of the project are shown in the centre of the work wheel diagram.*

captured and documented the formal and informal lessons from the initial HSF projects on a private database.

Interviews were confidential and highly effective with Sparknow working in teams of two to provide a dedicated listener/questioner and co-listener, plus the interviews were recorded to provide an accurate account of each interviewee's narrative. In this way Sparknow provided a channel through which annoyances could be aired feely with no attributions. As a result there was a surprising level of honesty that came from the interviewees who were asked not just for their opinions but questions which allowed them to express their issues and thoughts, simple prompts such as 'what questions would you ask?'

Consequently Sparknow was able to act as the 'honest broker' throughout the interview process, in effect being the voice that can't speak inside the organisation. This was invaluable to Defra as it is to any organisation whose reputation is a big issue.

### Methods

The oral history interviews identified about 100 questions during the first quarter of 2006 which were then grouped using a pinboarding technique. Finally, eight central themes emerged from the process. Meanwhile, back at the Sparknow desk a chronology of early futures work at Defra had developed in which to locate interviewees.

The initial narrative enquiry and desk research suggested five or six projects from the original 2002-2005 futures programme as being suitably good or bad to provide further lessons from 20-minute interviews with the associated Defra Project Managers. These personal stories were then developed into a series of vignettes on the primary issues within futures work at Defra.

### Relationships

Looking back, the first phase of the project was private and cathartic and limited to finding out what the questions were that should be asked. But the process of getting to those questions was also a way of releasing a lot of bruised feeling and emotion. It was very much about listening and healing and creating the possibility of repairing networks. It was about getting people interested in HSF again, both within Defra and externally.

### Setting up

Phase II of Sparknow's work represented much of the synthesis or sense making period of the project and was dominated by an 'event week'. The symposium drew on Sparknow's stage management and choreography skills and facilitation abilities.

This attention to the tiniest detail prompted the client to liken her involvement in the workshops to a 'Royal Progress' of Queen Elizabeth I around her English estates - *everything* had been done and checked. For the client it felt "thorough and scary!"

### **"It felt like I was on a Royal Progress"**

Fiona Lickorish, Defra: Head of Horizon Scanning and Futures Strategy and Evidence Group

One of the highlights of the week for Defra was the immense privilege of hearing other people's thoughts, external and internal to Defra, and how people came in and gave of their experience freely.

The event was transformative; it lasted four days with two sessions each day covering the eight themes identified during Phase I. The week was well attended by Defra policy makers and futurists across a number of government departments and assisted by world leading professional futurists. The week was designed to use surprising and artful interventions drawing upon the power of the



"My expectation of Horizon Scanning is that it ought to be taking risks with projects. It ought to be doing things that otherwise wouldn't be funded within the mainstream. We should be having projects that fail, that don't achieve what we planned to achieve."

visual, physical and that of the story. It all combined to produce many magical and joyful moments, memories of participants on their hands and knees sorting all the pinboard cards out.



*Sense making on the floor with pinboard cards*

### **It was the creativity, honesty and stimulating material that set Sparknow's methods apart from other contractors.**

Tony Pike, Defra: Social Researcher, Food and Farming Group & member of the Advisory Group

The advice for running futures projects gained from the various workshops of Phase II was distilled into checklists. These lists were then transformed in a miraculous manner into a number of witty essays – the process nearly killed Sparknow! What was so tricky about these essays is that they needed to provide a context for the checklists and to make the banal somehow engaging, such as making sure people turn up to meetings! So the essays were written in a slightly droll, provocative way which did not upset the Sparknow 'owner' of a checklist point, nor it was hoped a potential reader. From Defra's comments on the essays, it was worth the agony.

### **"The essays crop up everywhere I go, inside and outside of government"**

Fiona Lickorish, Defra: Head of Horizon Scanning and Futures Strategy and Evidence Group

### **'It's not like a normal government document is'**

Comment often heard by Fiona Lickorish

#### **Sense-making with stories**

- ⇓ Event located in a neutral space that did not 'belong' to anyone in the group
- ⇓ Experience sharing conducted in groups (when one of the eight themes had really mattered)
- ⇓ Experience exploration in pairs then as a group
- ⇓ Story retelling in plenary and writing morals
- ⇓ Morals and what they reveal
- ⇓ Advice writing and suggestions
- ⇓ Presenting back suggestions
- ⇓ The bigger questions

## Looking back at looking forwards

### Next steps for Horizon Scanning and Futures

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After five years of building possible futures and testing their implications, Defra's Horizon Scanning and Futures (HSF) programme decided that it was time to look backwards for a while.

The programme entered a year-long period of review and consolidation and commissioned Sparknow, a pioneer in the use of narrative techniques to capture knowledge, to help it review the work thus far and draw out the lessons to be learned.

Through a series of events, interviews, discussions and exercises we've gathered countless experiences and insights that tell us how the programme has been run in the past and how our 'critical friends' think it should be run in the future.

The lessons we've found are presented in a big folder, of which this is the electronic version. Each page is a frank and readable summary of our findings on a core 'sticky' question identified by our stakeholders. They range from specific governance issues like steering group composition to broad cultural challenges like the effective communication of difficult findings.

Wrapped around them, the folder itself also functions as a walkchart, overview and planning tool. It lays out the project lifecycle and places on it the collected advice and hard-won experience of the people who carried out Defra's early futures projects.

Having reviewed and understood our history, it is now time for the HSF programme

to look forwards again. We have worked hard to learn from these lessons and build a strategy for the future programme that will engage and support the Defra community, build on previous successes, learn from previous mistakes and incorporate the views of our stakeholders at every step on the way.

Our aim is to clear the murk that surrounds the subject of futures work. We want to strip away the myth, mystery and bunkum around the subject, create an effective dialogue and provide Defra with a clear and easily understood set of processes and methodologies. Futures research is a powerful tool that needs to be understood.

From now on we are going to work in three ways: continuous horizon scanning, occasional large-scale futures investigations and systematic capacity-building within the department.

Horizon scanning is a 'knowledge radar' that scans for clues and suggestions at the outer periphery of what is known and understood and gives advance warning of the opportunities and threats that lie just out of sight. We are setting up a continuous scanning function to spot emerging issues and bring them to Defra's attention.

The scan will look at technology and science in its broadest sense, including the social sciences, economics, political science and the natural sciences.

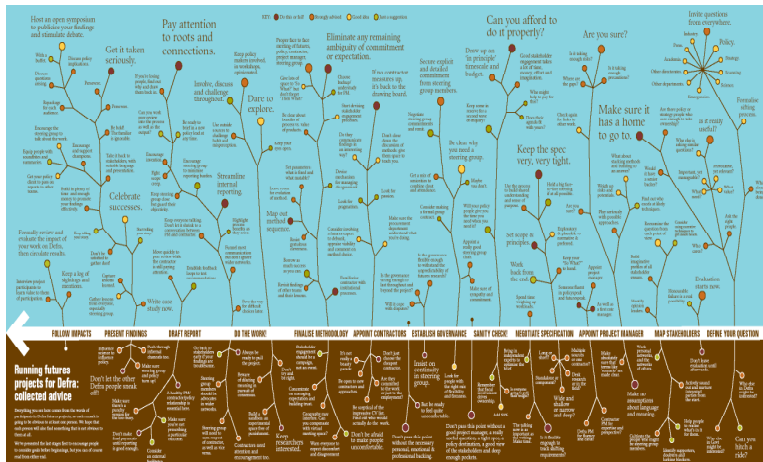
Senior scientists will use the scan to locate emerging issues of particular importance to our overall strategy, and these will become the focus of cross-cutting futures projects designed to provide detailed evidence and guidance for Defra's policy makers.

The unit will continue to be a very small one, but we will also help policy teams to undertake their own futures work. We will help people to find the right expert knowledge and skills, provide training, promote technical understanding of the various futures methodologies through our website, publish models of good practice and establish governance guidelines.

We will provide the analytical capability to translate emerging issues into useful forms. We will also offer a number of communication services including seminars on futures projects, expert workshops and horizon scanning newsletters highlighting science and technology issues.

By combining incisive cross-departmental futures projects with a broad increase in futures capacity among policy teams, we aim to help Defra to be anticipatory, to manage risk and exploit opportunity and to be an efficient, proactive organisation able to build robust and resilient policy.

Horizon Scanning and Futures Team,  
Science Economics and Statistics DG,  
Defra



A beautiful project lifecycle or 'flowerbed' was another output from the event week. This showed all the advice that had been gathered in running futures projects, both the formal and informal, represented above and below the earth.

*The flowerbed project lifecycle for a futures project*

### Scale

By September 2006 the project had leapt from what had happened to what should happen in Defra's futures projects. And an answer to the problems surrounding the use and acceptance of futures work at Defra had been identified – an electronic interactive Wikipedia (Wiki) toolkit.

Sparknow proposed using collaborative Wiki technology that would enable users of the HSF Toolkit to develop and edit it, both in its development stage as well as when live. Sparknow saw Wiki technology as the perfect match to HSF work, collaborative, evolving and exploratory. This would place Defra at the cutting edge of futures work.

### Stop here!

But then came a period of budgetary constraints at Defra that had the twin effects of putting the project on hold whilst also providing thinking time regarding the value of the HSF lessons learnt and the potential for a toolkit.

## Steering & managing

Phase III of the project was reignited in the Autumn of 2007 when Defra approached Sparknow to help facilitate a meeting to discuss a potential HSF Toolkit with members of the extended Defra family. November '07 saw the decision taken by Defra to proceed with the building of the Wiki based HSF Toolkit Sparknow had proposed in September '06 at the end of the project's investigative stages. A toolkit to help users to do the right futures work in the right way, with the greatest possible effect and the least possible waste.

## \*Anatomy of a Toolkit Page

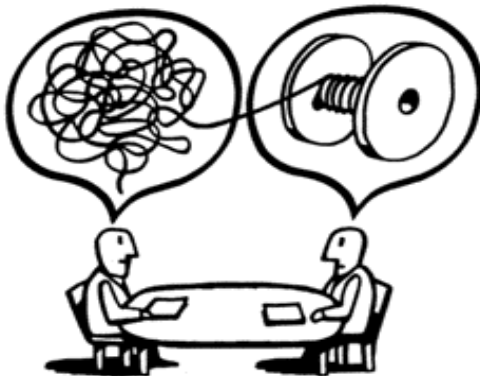
1. The Main Points offer authoritative, formal knowledge, implying an organisational and personal standard to be upheld, even in less codified areas of judgement and backing.
2. These points are derived directly from the checklists and useful notes and should feel thoroughly related to both.
3. Pithy, these points are made in whole sentences, with verbs, but do not trouble the reader with paragraphs. It will be important that they do not jump



Key to the development of the Toolkit was the first workshop which developed user profiles for how potential users might use a notional toolkit, complete with likes and dislikes. This background was then used, together with the checklists developed previously, to review the series of choices and actions necessary to carrying out futures work well in the Defra context.

*An output from the 1Q '08 workshop, 'Anatomy of a Toolkit Page'.*

The workshop was also aimed at understanding the 'sticky moments' in the HSF commissioning processes, those moments that require a particular grasp of the challenges that are affecting or influencing it. Plus, the event was aimed at determining the level of commitment critical friends, or professional futurists, would be willing and able to provide to the development of a toolkit.



The HSF Toolkit Advisory Group which Sparknow established within Defra for the development of the Toolkit was critical for its unflagging effort from smart, entrepreneurial people. By April '08 the chapter headings for the Toolkit had been agreed and by June Sparknow had built a 'strawman' of the wiki Toolkit. The Wiki was populated by material previously gathered in the project: checklists, explanatory notes and anecdotal stories that touched a nerve in the reader plus the odd cartoon to cause a wry smile.

*Cartoon used on the knowledge Translation page*

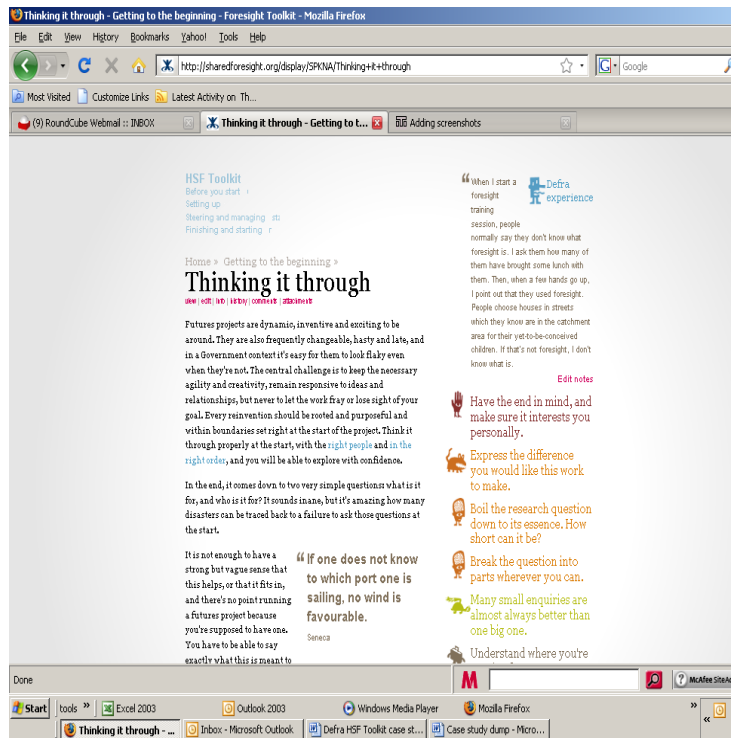
## Interim reporting

Now the Advisory Group was asked to comment on the content and operation of the Toolkit. An informal trusted outsider was used to gather feedback from group members in addition to directly using the Wiki comments pages of the Toolkit. The feedback gained from a person not directly involved with the development of the product proved to be an important lesson for Sparknow, similar in effect to the original narrative investigation Sparknow conducted with Defra scientists.

## Finishing & starting

Phase III of the project saw the content and appearance of the Toolkit revised to reflect the initial round of feedback from the Advisory Group. This was then followed by further feedback sessions which included peer reviews from external critical friends and futures professionals that had attended the event week of Phase II. Defra's openness to have the Toolkit content

independently evaluated by experts in the outside world was a significant feature of the project, both for the quality of the Toolkit and for the further development of external futures networks.



**It's written in a very engaging way. I liked the stories ... if it were a live, public resource I would have bookmarked it!**  
Melanie Howard, Future Foundation

*The Conception page of the Toolkit is all about 'Thinking it through'.*

The Toolkit was approved by the Defra client in December 2008 and will now be migrated onto Defra's internal system.

### Value

The project has rebuilt the trust and credibility of Defra's futures networks at the same time as developing guidelines for futures projects which are presented in an authentic voice in the HSF Toolkit. It is now hoped that the Toolkit will persuade people to take notice and embed futures within the normal work of the department.

Foresight helps Defra to be more prepared, more able to act, and the Toolkit is a valuable asset in this endeavour.

Finally, it should be noted that all those involved in the journey to create the Toolkit by learning from earlier projects have been affected by the process. In effect this was a rigorous change management project to embrace and effectively use futures; only time will tell whether the lessons learned from the process and presented in the Toolkit product will continue to be a living and evolving part of Defra's work.

### Extra value

Reviewing the project with Defra there is an obvious joy from the memories recalled.

**“Apologies for being Romsfeldian but usually the outputs of work-shops are the ‘known, knowns’, with Sparknow you get to the ‘unknowns’ - not the obvious stuff.”**

Fiona Lickorish, Defra: Head of Horizon Scanning and Futures Strategy and Evidence Group

**I enjoyed the creativity of the work coupled with rigour and attention to detail, plus the good interactive and engaging discussion and dialogue.**

Tony Pike, Defra: Social Researcher, Food and Farming Group & member of the Advisory Group



And for Sparknow this project, which drew on many of its narrative and facilitation techniques, consolidated its method of working on lessons learned and change management projects more than any other, and will go on informing and evolving its way of thinking about its methods.

For Sparknow the HSF Toolkit and underlying work wheel represent a product and process of enduring value and usability, both may be transplanted to any other organisation wanting to learn past and future lessons and to demystify its evolution.

**[About Sparknow ...[www.sparknow.net](http://www.sparknow.net)]**

Sparknow are pioneers of organisational narrative having over ten years' experience of using story to help organizations improve their effectiveness and efficiency.

Sparknow knows how to break through the barriers of indifference, inertia and even hostility that every organization encounters at least occasionally, particularly in times of change.

Sparknow works with people who are undergoing changes, mergers, moves and rebrandings, who are re-evaluating their position in the market and their future directions, or reconnecting to their staff.

To find out more about Defra's HSF Toolkit project contact Fiona Lickorish, at Defra email [Fiona.Lickorish@defra.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Fiona.Lickorish@defra.gsi.gov.uk)

To find out more on how the Toolkit might be applied in your own organisation or how to conduct a similar lessons learned project contact a member of the Sparknow team: [Victoria.Ward@sparknow.net](mailto:Victoria.Ward@sparknow.net) or [Paul.Corney@sparknow.net](mailto:Paul.Corney@sparknow.net)