



# Building Long-term Public Sector Capability for Future Policy Challenges

*Insights from an ANZSOG Roundtable with  
Academic Fellow Professor Brian Head*

June 2026

# Insights from ANZSOG Roundtable

27 May 2026

This is the second in a series of ANZSOG roundtables exploring public sector capability, convened with Academic Fellow Professor Brian Head. The first discussion focused on over-reliance on external consultants and rebuilding in-house capability. This session asked a related question: how can governments build and sustain the capacity for long-term strategic thinking in an increasingly complex world?

Practitioners from across Commonwealth, state and territory government, central agencies, specialist units, and academia took part. While genuine activity is happening across jurisdictions, the discussion made clear that most of it is happening in isolation. All contributions are anonymised in accordance with the Chatham House Rule.

## Key Takeaways

- Long-term thinking capability exists across Australian and New Zealand government — but practitioners are largely unaware of each other, addressing the same problems independently.
- The authorising environment is crucial. Without explicit political and executive permission, foresight and strategy teams may get built, deliver good work, but then get cut.
- The tension between building grassroots capability and targeting senior decision-makers is real and unresolved — most teams have to navigate both levels simultaneously.
- Learning and development budgets are usually the first to be squeezed in a fiscal contraction. The case for capability investment needs to be made now.
- Foresight is a beneficial ‘Trojan Horse’ — the entry point for introducing systems thinking, human-centred design, and anticipatory decision-making to organisations that might not otherwise engage.
- Building more capability without demand is not sustainable. Good work and skilled teams mean little if senior leaders are not actively calling for and creating space for new capabilities.

## What the Discussion Surfaced

*Short-termism, structural barriers, and why long-term thinking can struggle to take root*

Governments know they face complex, long-term challenges — climate change, digital disruption, demographic shifts, geopolitical instability. Yet they consistently allocate most of their attention and resources to the immediate. The political reasons are familiar: short electoral cycles, media pressure, and an opposition with little incentive to engage with long-term policy. The discussion went further, surfacing the institutional and cultural barriers that are harder to name and harder to shift.

Four factors stood out. Career structures that reward short-termism: senior leaders who move roles every two to three years will naturally focus on what they can achieve now, and those demands flow through every level below them. Reputation-mindedness: the risks that damage careers are short-term ones, so longer-term concerns get deprioritised. Silos — within agencies, between them, and between government and the public — make the broad engagement required for long-term thinking genuinely difficult. And psychological safety: foresight means raising uncomfortable ideas and questioning assumptions. Where that open culture does not exist, the insights of foresight will not emerge — regardless of what tools are used.

***“The average SES 1 time in position is two to three years. In that time, that person is thinking about how they can make a difference now. As a result, it’s very hard to think beyond that horizon. And that flows all the way down through the public service.”***

— Roundtable participant

Several participants described building foresight and strategy teams that did good work, generated real engagement — but which were then cut when budgets tightened or a new government arrived. The contradiction between governments committing to long-term thinking while treating the teams that deliver it as discretionary ran through the whole discussion.

One example was particularly instructive. A team developed rigorous foresight models covering a large and complex portfolio, projecting scenarios a decade ahead. The models were credible — no one disagreed with the data or the findings. What the team exercise revealed was that government did not have the funding or other resources to deliver on what it wanted to do. The projected futures were grim. The organisation is now facing a major reprioritisation process as a direct consequence of what the foresight work surfaced. However the team will not continue. The lesson is not simply that good teams get cut. It is more pointed: foresight can work exactly as intended — producing findings that are insightful, credible and confronting — and the institutional response can still be to sideline the function rather than act on what it found. This brings to attention the central issue of the authorising environment. Leaders must be genuinely prepared to receive and respond to what long-term thinking surfaces, not just commission it.

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## What Is Being Tried

### *Approaches and models from across jurisdictions*

Despite these barriers, the discussion surfaced substantial positive activity. Foresight units, evaluation functions, capability programmes and strategic insights teams are doing real work across multiple jurisdictions. The landscape may be fragmented — but it is far from empty.

- Dedicated foresight and strategic insights teams are providing anticipatory intelligence to senior decision-makers. These teams all face the same tension: build capability broadly across the sector, or concentrate on senior leaders? Those given only the grassroots mandate tend not to survive — without demand from the top, impact is hard to demonstrate. The most effective approach combines both, using senior engagement to create the demand that flows down.
- Legislative mandates for long-term thinking have required agencies to produce insights briefings on a three-year cycle. The outputs have been good. But the process has proved costly in ways that worked against the initiative — as one participant described it, it burned relational capital on the value of long-term thinking before its value had a chance to be fully demonstrated. One lesson: mandate design matters as much as the mandate itself.
- Whole-of-sector capability programmes are building the craft of public sector work — policy skills, collaboration, systems thinking, sector stewardship. Contemporary problems require cross-agency responses. Yet agencies have historically not worked well together. These broad programmes invest deliberately in collaboration as a skill, recognising that the structures of government do not produce collaboration naturally.
- Practitioner networks are connecting people doing similar work across agencies who would otherwise operate in isolation. These networks have grown well beyond expectations, pointing to genuine appetite for theme or discipline-based communities across government.
- AI and immersive tools are being used to create shareable artefacts from foresight workshops — briefings, podcasts, visual summaries — solving the persistent problem of participants having a rich experience which then fails to travel through the organisation.

***“Long term thinking had several layers of public consultation required. Departmental heads needed to commit a reasonable chunk of resources. And that effectively burned a lot of relational capital inside the system on the value of long-term insights briefings.”***

— Roundtable participant

One insight was surfaced in many of the contributions: foresight works best as a gateway, not an endpoint. It introduces systems thinking, human-centred design, and anticipatory decision-making to organisations that would not engage with those disciplines if approached more directly. The concept-branding matters less than the door it opens.

International experience adds a useful reference point. Countries that have embedded long-term goals into their governing frameworks — with national targets set decades ahead — have a structurally different relationship with foresight. It is not optional, and it is not treated as discretionary. Several countries have

also invested in dedicated foresight infrastructure at the centre of government, with mandates to support long-term decision-making across the whole of government. The contrast with how most Australian agencies currently treat this work is instructive.

***“We've often used foresight as a bit of a gateway drug — an entry point for exploring the broader disciplines that good policy design requires.”***

— Roundtable participant

***“The change I'd like to see over the next couple of years is really a change in the authorising environment where senior executives and chief executives acknowledge the time and effort that collaboration and breaking down silos requires.”***

— Roundtable participant

## What Emerged

### *Shared views and honest uncertainties*

Several conclusions held across the discussion, alongside questions participants worked through without fully resolving.

- The authorising environment is the single most important factor. Without leaders who actively protect the space for long-term thinking, this capability will always be vulnerable.
- Investment must happen before the crisis, not just in response to it. Teams that pivoted quickly when unexpected challenges hit were the ones that had already built the capability. At the point of need, it is too late — and that is when agencies tend to reach for external providers.
- Foresight is not prediction. Conflating the two produces risk registers, not strategic insight. The distinction matters in practice, not just in theory.
- Learning as part of the flow of work outperforms training programmes, although both are important. Skills built in the context of real problems, with managers who create space for development, produce more durable change than courses or materials however well designed.
- Emulation matters more than new frameworks. What practitioners need most is worked examples — concrete illustrations of what good practices look like — so they can see how to apply these insights in their own context. Sharing practice across jurisdictions, through task forces and targeted networks, is more catalytic than formal guidance.

***“We could pivot quickly because we had that capability investment already there. It's a lot harder to build it at the point of need — and that's when you end up outsourcing.”***

— Roundtable participant

**“You’ve got to have that sponsor at a senior level who can advocate to the chief executive or the minister and convince them of the value — and also why that shouldn’t just be outsourced.”**

— Roundtable participant

The sharpest uncertainty was about scale and reach. Individual teams are doing excellent work — but largely without knowledge of what others are doing across jurisdictions. Several participants described discovering, too late, that another jurisdiction had already worked through a problem they were grappling with independently. The missing ingredient is less about more programmes, and more about connections.

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## What Comes Next

*How this discussion feeds into the broader work*

Together, the two roundtables have mapped the terrain: the consultant over-reliance problem and the push to rebuild in-house capability; and the long-term thinking and foresight challenge. Both point to the same underlying gap — governments have under-invested in the skills, structures and cultures needed for genuinely strategic work, and are now trying to rebuild them.

The insights from both sessions will feed into Professor Head’s fellowship report, providing deeper analysis and recommendations for policymakers and public sector leaders.

For ANZSOG, the sessions have surfaced a specific role: connecting practitioners doing this work in isolation, making the capability landscape visible, and hosting the peer exchange that participants have said was missing. A further piece of work drawing on both roundtables is being developed to support this.

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*This summary report was prepared following the second ANZSOG Roundtable Discussion in the Building Public Sector Capability series, held on 27 May 2026. All contributions have been anonymised in accordance with the Chatham House Rule. For further information about ANZSOG’s Academic Fellows Program, contact ANZSOG.*

## Suggested Further Reading

The following resources were shared by participants during the discussion.

- **ANZSOG Roundtable Summary — Building Internal Capability in Government and the Appropriate Use of Consultants (Roundtable 1, March 2026)**  
[https://a.storyblok.com/f/287203581577192/x/902e222a30/anzsog-roundtable-summary\\_brian-head.pdf](https://a.storyblok.com/f/287203581577192/x/902e222a30/anzsog-roundtable-summary_brian-head.pdf)
- **Harvard Kennedy School — Systems Leadership Framework**  
<https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/mrcbg/files/Systems%20Leadership.pdf>
- **Queensland Government — Collaborating in Government (2025)**  
<https://www.forgov.qld.gov.au/service-design-and-delivery/governance-and-collaboration/collaborating-in-government>
- **NSW Parliament — Building up NSW Public Sector Capability (2024)**  
<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/tp/files/188714/Research%20Summary%20-%20Building%20up%20NSW%20public%20service%20capability%20and%20driving%20down%20use%20of%20consultants%20-%20June%202024.pdf>
- **The Future Laboratory — Back to the Future (Sally Washington and Scott Perugini Kelly)**  
<https://www.thefuturelaboratory.com/blog/back-to-the-future-sally-washington-and-scott-perugini-kelly>
- **OECD OPSI — NSW Trend Atlas (2022)**  
<https://oecd-opsi.org/innovations/nsw-trend-atlas/>

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