

6 FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

6.1 Why use Futures at all?

We all would like greater certainty about our futures. We feel this as individuals, as citizens, managers or policy makers. The future, however, is uncertain and if we are going to either prepare ourselves or plan our preferred futures we need to organise our thinking effectively. Futures tools can help us to do this.

In facing the challenges and opportunities posed by the effects of globalisation, technological change, demographic changes and environmental pollution businesses, organisations and public authorities often have to react to external events, with ad hoc policies based on imperfect knowledge and severe constraints.

Futures tools and approaches provide new approaches that are creative and anticipatory are needed that will equip them to deliver benefits for their people and businesses. The key element in futures work is the use of these tools to stimulate engagement across society in understanding and debating a future that is characterised by uncertainty but where present day policy choices will influence the achievement of the "desired" future.

Futures techniques frequently are used to complement other tools such as planning, strategy and networking. Futures tools are used to deal with the greatest uncertainty and provide scope for choices to be made. Through the use of futures tools businesses, organisations and public authorities can deal with important challenges and trends in an intelligent and strategic way.

6.2 What are some typical reasons for carrying out a Futures exercise ?

There are many reasons why the use of Futures tools may be appropriate. The most common motivations are described in Section 1 of the toolkit although there are likely to be as many reasons as there are exercises.

Typically, the initiation of futures exercise will be stimulated by the need to take decisions with long term implications possibly arising either from the emergence of new opportunities or the negative impact of economic or social 'shocks' and the recognition that before decisions can be taken it is necessary to generate a widespread dialogue about future choices and preferences.

The long term implications may arise because of the need to formulate longer term national and regional programmes, planning the future direction of an organisation or sector of industry or the need to plan major public spending with long-term implications, for example, infrastructure investments or research priorities for science and technology funding.

Other motivations could simply be to refresh the thinking, mindsets or assumptions that have underpinned policy or strategic thinking for a number of years and thereby stimulate new thinking in a region, organisation or business and establish a new trajectory of development based on an inclusive and fresh set of perspectives.

6.3. What results can we expect from carrying out a Futures exercise ?

Foresight exercises can produce both formal and informal results.

For example, each exercise will produce a body of evidence, opinion and reports that can be widely disseminated and whose reading is in itself an important element in contributing to the opening of minds and fresh thinking in the region business or organisation.

Similarly, the events associated with futures exercise such as workshops, conferences and focus groups are potentially an important result in themselves placing, as they do, people from different areas of society or the business alongside each other in order to think in fresh ways on challenging topics.

Informal results are of course more difficult to describe but will include a new shared experience; a consensus view of futures trends, challenges and opportunities and a strong 'learning' effect gained from participation in the futures exercise itself. New networks may emerge; modifications to the decision making processes in an organisation or region to take into account futures thinking and futures based trajectories leading to a systematic effort to understand the global environment are all feasible expectations.

6.4. Who should lead the Futures exercise ?

As described in Section 2, the lead organisation may be any organisation with the necessary competency and legitimacy. Generally this legitimacy or competence is expressed in terms of the governance to effectively deliver the exercise. The leaders of the exercise should be sure that they will be able to deliver not only the futures exercise but the implementation of the results or risk wasting a great deal of effort; resource and goodwill.

Further leadership may be vested in stakeholders who provide the resources necessary to deliver the futures exercise; these may be from the public or private and can sometimes be from both.

The most common **public sector leaders** are national, regional and local authorities and agencies or from organisations and institutes whose mission is to analyse and study the development of socio-economic scenarios. (Further important contributions may come from national and European Community public programmes set up to finance studies and analyses.)

Private leadership and sponsors may typically include large enterprises, banks and other financial institutions.

6.5 Who should be invited to participate in a Futures exercise ?

As noted in Section 2, stakeholder engagement and participation is at the heart of most futures exercises. Consideration needs to be given to the list of stakeholders needed; the timing and depth of their involvement and the gaps in stakeholder support that may be apparent at the outset. The scope of the planned exercise and the comparative competency of the lead organisations will influence the engagement needed as will the ability and willingness of stakeholders to satisfy the information needs of the exercise

A broad range of regional actors, including regional governments, universities, businesses, chambers of commerce, local media, industry associations, other NGOs, and a wide range of citizens, can all potentially be included in futures activities. The scope of the futures exercise will clearly have a significant bearing on the range of stakeholders involved from business interests involved in sector futures exercise to the wider public being likely to become engaged in social or spatial futures.

Futures exercises may involve hundreds or even thousands of participants from a wide variety of interests and backgrounds although inevitably the degree and depth of engagement will vary from exercise to exercise.

Although experts are necessary to provide the input to a futures exercise, the majority of futures exercises should avoid over-reliance on the engagement only with 'experts', particularly where socio-cultural issues are concerned.

Similarly, the extent of political involvement in a futures exercise needs to be carefully thought through in order to avoid political bias in discussions; conversely however, the involvement of politicians in understanding and debating the future with citizens and stakeholders is to be encouraged in most futures exercises.

As noted in Section 3, wide engagement is often expensive and difficult to coordinate, which means that many exercises prefer to rely on stakeholder or expert working groups to ensure that the focus on the agreed scope of the futures exercise is maintained. In some cases, citizen or stakeholders panels and expert working groups are often run in parallel to a wide consultation process.

6.6. How can we best prepare for using a Futures exercise ?

Four key issues need to be fully discussed and agreed upon before a futures exercise can get underway or be launched effectively. These issues are inter-related and operate in an iterative non-linear way - the issues, reflections on them and the decisions taken on them are dynamic and may not be concluded before setting out on the futures exercise.

- Determining the scope of the exercise:
- Competency & legitimacy
- Information & data
- Level & type of engagement

Readers are referred to Section 2 of the Futurreg Toolkit

6.7 What criteria or considerations should we have in deciding which tools to use ?

The motivations, the scope of the exercise, the resources available and the political context all have to be taken into account in defining the tools and methods to be used in a futures exercise.

Readers are referred to Section 4 of the Futurreg Toolkit

6.8 What information sources or data analysis capacity do we need to have access to ?

The information and data inputs and capacity required will vary depending on the specific futures tool being used. Information is the foundation of a futures exercise and its availability is critical, however, the needs of the futures exercise will be determined by the scope of the exercise and the availability of information will be strongly influenced by resources but also by the type and depth of stakeholder engagement (as suppliers or sources of information) and by the competency of the lead organisation to request the necessary information from other tiers of government; academia or industry group

Readers are referred to Sections 4& 5 of the Futurreg Toolkit

6.9 Is there a 'best practice' Futures tool that we can use 'off-the-shelf' ?

Readers are referred to Sections 4 & 5 of the Futurreg Toolkit

6.10 Where can we make best use of external expertise within a Futures exercise ?

The choice of the Futures tool and method exercise will partly dictate the type of external expertise required and the extent of expert involvement that will be appropriate.

Experts may be used to assist in the management of the futures exercise or to the delivery of the futures tools themselves. In other cases, external experts may usefully provide an independent view of the emerging outcomes and conclusions from the futures exercise.

Regional expertise may exist in some cases, although a typical secondary motivation for many futures exercises is to mobilise expertise and interest in futures tools and methods.

In summary, external experts can provide benefits in a number of ways:

- Achieving economies of scale by reducing the learning curve (and costs) by drawing on their past experience and links to international good practice and key players and sponsors overseas
- Providing momentum of the exercise by working closely in support of the futures exercise leader (project manager)
- Providing an external and independent view on the outcomes of the futures exercise by questioning entrenched assumptions and taking a role in synthesising results and reporting to stakeholders so helping to build consensus

6.11 How can we monitor or assess the impact of our Futures exercise ?

Monitoring and evaluation assesses how an activity is or has met its expectations in terms of activity and the objectives that were initially set. Evaluation can also assess the impact of the exercise and whether any additional benefits and lessons can be learnt from the exercise.

Evaluation and monitoring are closely related and may use the same data but they are different tasks. The **monitoring** of an activity is a management task that seeks to ensure that the necessary tasks are being performed on time, to budget and progress is being maintained as planned. **Evaluation**, on the other hand, examines whether such tasks are accomplishing their objectives.

The evaluation of a Futures exercise requires careful planning and design if the underlying motivations for the use of the futures approach in the first place are not to be undermined. An independent evaluation that provides a credible and legitimate review of the exercise, its objectives, delivery and outcomes is desirable.

Evaluation can take place as in “real-time”, while the activity is underway, or “post hoc”, when it is completed.

Real-time evaluation can provide feedback to those responsible for an activity, so that they are able to identify shortcomings more rapidly and address problems. For a futures exercise, the accuracy of the futures thinking cannot be tested and in any case, in most exercises are not the sole motivation of the exercise. Therefore for a futures exercise, a real-time evaluation will be aimed at identifying the extent to which the futures exercise has achieved its ‘process’ objectives such as engaging new stakeholders or opening mind-sets to futures or long term thinking and perspectives.

Most evaluations are **post hoc**, i.e. working with the benefit of hindsight. These are often conducted to close the exercise. An evaluation of this sort, if left for a few years following the closure of the exercise can usefully examine issues such as the extent of networking or networks, the embeddedness of futures approaches and futures thinking etc.

In any case it is best if the basis and method of evaluation is set out at the beginning of a futures exercise.

6.12 What is the typical cost of implementing a Futures exercise or tool ?

There is unfortunately no easy answer to this question, partly because there is no reliable data available from other futures exercise (the same problem arises for foresight exercises) and partly because the question of costs depends on so many variables - scope; information availability; the type of futures tool selected; the level of engagement etc etc.

The financial burden of futures exercise is typically borne by a wide range of stakeholders and in most cases not all costs are financial costs. Participants typically provide a considerable amount of resource as 'contribution-in-kind' through the provision of data and information or through participation on panels and working groups etc.

Core financial costs are likely to be incurred from:

- The costs of a project management team
- Meetings and events costs
- Publicity material,
- Consultation exercises
- Engagement of experts

The project plan prepared at the initial stage of the futures exercise will need to identify the likely costs and the sources of funding for the exercise. However, stakeholders should bear in mind that these are estimates and ideally, some flexibility is desirable as the futures exercise unfolds.

6.13 How much time will we need to implement the Futures exercise ?

As with Question 13, there is no easy or clear answer to this question and the scope, foresight tools and expected outcomes of the futures exercise will all influence the time schedule for the exercise. However, most exercises last anything between 6 months and 3 years.

6.14 Over what time-span should we project our Futures exercise?

Setting a time horizon for your project will depend on its context, objectives and users. Strategic or territorial visions for regions often have a time horizon of 20 years. Sector-based initiatives often opt for a shorter time horizon (e.g. 5-10 years).

Generally speaking, regional futures projects should have a time horizon which is beyond that of normal planning horizons.