The Centre of Government (CoG) is the body that provides direct support and advice to the Head of Government and the Council of Ministers. The CoG meetings began in the 1980s, and were consolidated into an annual event in the 1990s. CoG constitutes a forum for informal discussion and remains one of the OECD’s highest-level policy networks.

The meetings serve two main purposes:

- To review issues of how to make the centre of national government work more effectively; and
- To work on broad governance issues fundamental to achieving economic and social public policy objectives.
The annual meeting of senior officials from Centres of Government is one of the highlights of the OECD calendar.

As one of the most high-level OECD networks, it offers a unique insight into strategic thinking at the top. We look to the Centres of Government to help us find new approaches to the unprecedented economic challenges that we face today."

Angel Gurría
Secretary-General of the OECD
Welcome

Dear colleagues,

I am delighted to welcome you to Reykjavík to participate in the 38th annual meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government. This will be the second time that Iceland is hosting the meeting; it was first held here in 2001 soon after the 9/11 atrocities. We still remember the great sense of solidarity that characterized that meeting.

The agenda of this year’s meeting focuses on three diverse and highly relevant issues being addressed by OECD governments across the board: strategic foresight and anticipatory government; public communication; and mainstreaming gender equality. What unifies them is the critical role of the centre in their success.

As policy challenges become more cross-cutting, the centre is increasingly called on to lead policy processes. As such, the centre continues to transition towards a more pro-active, outward-facing and leadership role in the public administration and beyond. Despite different administrative structures and legal traditions, we come together to share experiences and support each other in moving forward.

The work that the OECD has been conducting in this field is commendable and I want to thank our colleagues from the OECD and encourage them to continue with their good work. I also want to thank the OECD for organising this event along with my staff at the Prime Minister’s Office.

Furthermore, I very much look forward to welcoming you to Iceland and I hope that we will have an invigorating debate about these pressing issues that will stimulate actions and impact for years to come!

Ragnhildur Arnljótsdóttir
Chair, 2019 Meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government
Permanent Secretary, Prime Minister’s Office, Iceland
Questions for discussion

Strategic foresight and anticipatory government

- How can a culture that promotes the use of foresight and its use in decision making be promoted and sustained?
- How can considerations of the impact of alternative future scenarios on policy outcomes be systematically integrated in the policy-making process?
- What is the most appropriate role for the centre in furthering the use of foresight?

The role of public communication

- How can governments effectively use social media and other digitally enabled media to communicate their agenda? How can the insights gained through these media allow governments to improve their policies and better respond to citizens?
- What actions can governments take to respond to the challenges of “fake news” and disinformation?
- How can the centre co-ordinate these activities across government? What new strategic capacities are needed at the centre for more effective public communication?

Mainstreaming gender equality

- What are the most important institutional barriers to achieving gender equality objectives and how can they be overcome?
- How can a “gender lens” be systematically applied to all aspects of policy making, including the core functions of the centre?
- What is the appropriate role of the centre in designing and implementing national gender equality strategies?
Session 1

Strategic foresight and anticipatory government

In times of rapid change, growing complexity, and critical uncertainty, responsible governance requires preparing for the unexpected. Strategic foresight offers the means to do that. Anticipatory governance is the systematic use of strategic foresight for government decision making.

Governments face multiple pressures in the present, including economic disruption from emerging technologies; growing tensions over international trade and investment; risks of economic recession; unrest and conflict in various parts of the world; polarisation and declining trust in the political process; large-scale migration; and ageing populations. At the same time, the future will be no less challenging: climate-related crises, further rapid digitalisation of economies and societies, and new forms of political turbulence both at home and abroad could make for a future that is very different from what is commonly expected.

In this context, governments are seeking to better anticipate, prepare for, and adapt to the future. Attempting to predict or forecast the future is of limited benefit in a world of high uncertainty. What is highly valuable, however, is identifying a number of different plausible future scenarios, exploring what impacts they could have and pinpointing potential implications for policies.

The immediacy of today’s challenges often means that governments fail to take the time to step out of the here-and-now and engage with the future at all. Policy making inherently means taking the future into consideration, but governments rarely prepare for and effectively respond to developments that are unexpected, unprecedented, and unconventional. Moreover, government strategies often fall short in delivering desired social, economic, or other outcomes. Strategies can fail for several reasons – but a crucial one is that they fail to take into account important possibilities that may be unprecedented, undesirable, uncertain, undocumented, unlikely, or long-term—but still very real.

Strategic foresight and policy making

Strategic foresight is a systematic approach to looking beyond current expectations and taking into account a variety of plausible future developments in order to identify implications for policies today. It does this by revealing implicit assumptions, challenging dominant perspectives, and engaging with surprising and significant disruptions that might otherwise be dismissed or ignored. Foresight uses a range of methodologies, such as scanning the horizon for emerging changes, analysing megatrends and developing multiple scenarios, to reveal and discuss useful ideas about the future.
Strategic foresight supports government policy making through:

- Better anticipation: to sooner identify and prepare for new opportunities and challenges that could emerge in the future
- Policy innovation: to spur new thinking about the best policies to address these opportunities and challenges
- Future-proofing: to stress-test existing or proposed strategies against a range of future scenarios

Strategic foresight is especially useful whenever there is a high degree of uncertainty surrounding changes to the relevant future context. This applies as much for broad national decisions as it does for more specific decisions in particular sectors or policy domains.

Examples of broad national decisions that can benefit from foresight include a country’s overall strategy for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, or approaches to addressing key emerging “megatrends,” such as demographic changes and new technologies, that have a significant impact for the country as a whole. More specific uses of foresight include national skills strategies and industrial policy strategies. These more targeted uses are much more widespread. Many strategic foresight efforts at both the broad contextual and sector-specific levels interlink and reinforce each other.

A strategic foresight process alone is not designed to produce a specific strategy or plan of action. The task of developing strategies and plans is enhanced and supported, but not replaced, by the process of considering multiple alternative futures and their implications. Instead, strategic foresight aims to pose key questions that might have gone unasked in developing a strategy, and to reveal and challenge potentially fatal assumptions and expectations built into current policies and plans.

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**Strategic foresight methods**

**Horizon scanning**: seeking and researching signals of change in the present and their potential future impacts. Horizon scanning is the foundation of any strategic foresight process. It can involve desk research, expert surveys, and review of existing futures literature. This is sometimes referred to also as “meta-scanning.”

**Megatrends analysis**: exploring and reviewing large-scale changes building in the present at the intersection of multiple policy domains, with complex and multidimensional impacts in the future.

**Scenario planning**: developing multiple stories or imaginary pictures of how the future could look in order to explore and learn from them.

**Visioning and back-casting**: developing an image of an ideal (or undesirable) future state, and working backwards to identify what steps to take (or avoid).
Implementing strategic foresight

In undertaking strategic foresight, it is important that it not be viewed as a one-off, isolated activity – or even a series of one-off, isolated activities – but as part of an overall governance system that sustains a culture of regular, useful, effective, valuable foresight and its subsequent use in decision making. Together, they create a virtuous circle: a system is built on the recurrence and usefulness of interventions, while the ability to deliver effective foresight relies on the system’s ability to foster and use effective interventions.

Similarly, strategic foresight should not be seen as an isolated or optional ‘add-on’ to the conventional policy-making process, but an integral part of it. Indeed, anticipatory governance is the systematic use of strategic foresight for government decision-making. Foresight can be used at any point in the policy cycle, from initial scoping through design and implementation, to review and testing of existing strategies. For example, horizon scanning can aid initial scoping and research, and strategy’s robustness can be tested against alternative scenarios while it is already being implemented.

The institutional arrangements needed to deliver foresight can take many forms, but a key ingredient is having certain foresight capacity at the centre to champion, conduct and co-ordinate foresight work across government. The aim is not to centralise foresight, but rather to provide some of the “heavy lifting” to enable the effective mainstreaming and integration of foresight practices across all government departments and within central decision-making processes. Similarly, most departments and agencies that take the challenge of developing future-ready policies seriously will typically develop their own dedicated foresight teams to support the application of foresight across their respective areas. While the ultimate aim is mainstreaming, a degree of autonomy and even insulation for some parts of these foresight units can provide space to incubate ideas that challenge more widely held assumptions about the future.

Strategic foresight is an evolving discipline. No government claims to have a formula for systematically implementing it – anticipatory governance – in an optimal way. It is a developing area of governance, and the centre has a unique opportunity to shape it.

Questions for discussion

• How can a culture that promotes the use of foresight and its use in decision making be promoted and sustained?

• How can considerations of the impact of alternative future scenarios on policy outcomes be systematically integrated in the policy-making process?

• What is the most appropriate role for the centre in furthering the use of foresight?
Session 2

The role of public communication

Rapidly changing information and communication technologies offer new possibilities for the centre of government to communicate government policies, programmes, and reforms, to interact with the public, and to collect information that can improve policy making. At the same time, evolutions in media “ecosystems” at the global, national and local levels have changed how people consume and share information – and disinformation. This has affected who and what sources of information the public trusts.

Against this backdrop, governments have an opportunity to develop new strategic capacities at the centre for more effective public communication aimed at a diverse audience and using a variety of channels. It is also crucial for the centre to address the challenges that technological and market changes bring, notably those related to the spread of disinformation.

Effective public communication

Public communication – as distinct from political communication – establishes ways to inform citizens about key policies and services, and also to allow citizens to interact with the government. Increasingly, communication is used by governments to engage the public in two-way conversations and create opportunities for citizen participation in policy making. Indeed, through the strategic use of communication tools, governments can engage with a variety of stakeholders, including those from traditionally underrepresented segments of the population. When designed and delivered strategically, communication can thus support better policy making and service delivery, help the government make more informed decisions, and increase citizens’ awareness and buy-in of reforms.

The progression of public communication can be divided into three stages: The first stage – the traditional one – encompasses press releases, press conferences, and official spokespersons. The second stage focuses on the Internet and the use of government websites as a principal means of disseminating information to citizens. The third stage – the current one – focuses on social media and other digitally enabled media.

Each stage retains its importance as public communication evolves. Official spokespersons remain central in setting the public communications agenda and are at the fore in times of crisis. Websites need to be up to date, user friendly, easily searchable and readable, and accessible from different platforms. Social media (such as Facebook or Twitter) and other digitally enabled tools (such as WhatsApp or Telegram) are, however, the means through which most stakeholders engage with the government, and they allow for a much more interactive dialogue between public officials and citizens.
In fact, unlike traditional channels, they allow for timely and fast – even instant – feedback from governments about policies and services or concerns raised by citizens. The centre’s social media pages are often the most viewed in the country. It is crucial to provide attractive content that avoids jargon and breaks down complex processes.

Social media also allows the government to collect data and insights from followers that can be compiled and analysed. Posting polls and survey questions, hosting a Twitter chat, or launching an interactive online programme to encourage citizens to give input on various topics can go a long way in guiding policy choices. Collecting “offline” data is a useful way to sense citizens’ motivations, concerns, needs, fears and hopes, or to understand their media consumption habits and how they best prefer to access government information.

Gaining a deeper understanding of how different audiences perceive the subject that is meant to be communicated to them and their level of knowledge about it can also help improve communication practices. Further insights may be gained by commissioning studies to better comprehend and segment stakeholders, monitoring related trends, and sharing information collected across the government.

To harness these opportunities, strategic capacity in new approaches to public communication is needed at the centre. Efforts across government should be co-ordinated to ensure that the “right” information is being collected, and that it is reaching the “right” entities within the government in a timely and useful fashion. Enhancing strategic capacity also requires a specific set of skills and dedicated human and financial resources.

**Addressing disinformation**

Online social platforms have greatly increased the speed of the spread of information and have changed distribution models from “one-to-many” (where information is distributed from a primary source, such as a government or news outlets, to the wider public) to “many-to-many” (where news and information are exchanged in the digital world).

In addition, online social networks have built into their design an incentive for users to share the most engaging posts, increasing the propensity for sharing emotional content and disinformation. The public is increasingly worried about these changes: for the past two years, the Edelman Trust Barometer found that nearly seven in ten people worry about false information or “fake news”. While threats related to disinformation are not new, modern technologies have greatly amplified them, raising important implications related to trust in institutions, national security and even democratic stability.
False information spreads faster than the truth

Recent studies have highlighted the specific threat that false news, misinformation, and disinformation play in the context of technology platforms that facilitate the rapid and expansive spread of information. Two factors stand out in the research: first, that “falsehoods were 70% more likely to be retweeted than the truth and that they generally were shared farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly; this was even more pronounced for false political news.” Second, the study found that humans contribute more to the spread of false news than bots do. Together, this implies that responses to misinformation and disinformation “should also emphasize behavioural interventions. Understanding how false news spreads is the first step toward containing it.”

The OECD is developing a framework to help countries better understand the range of potential responses to the challenges of disinformation. These policy responses can be arranged on a spectrum, moving from direct engagement between government and the public to efforts to affect the wider media and information ecosystem.

Range of potential responses to the challenges posed by disinformation
Beyond strengthening their public communication activities, governments can undertake explicit efforts to identify disinformation, create counter-narratives and measure the effectiveness of their initiatives. Countries can pursue regulatory and legislative reforms in an attempt to shape the media and information ecosystem by reinforcing freedom of speech, encouraging coordination across relevant regulatory bodies (for example, those focused on media, competition and elections), promoting self-regulation of social media companies, and drafting specific regulations focused on platform transparency and even content. Finally, governments can pursue policies that improve the media and information ecosystem generally, by promoting media, digital and civic literacy. The scale and speed of changes to the media and information ecosystems suggest that countries will ultimately need to pursue a diverse range of approaches and quickly identify those that work best.

Questions for discussion

- How can governments effectively use social media and other digitally enabled media to communicate their agenda? How can the insights gained through these media allow governments to improve their policies and better respond to citizens?
- What actions can governments take to respond to the challenges of “fake news” and disinformation?
- How can the centre co-ordinate these activities across government? What new strategic capacities are needed at the centre for more effective public communication?

1. Media ecosystems are understood as the combination of communication and media governance structures (i.e. institutional, legal, policy and regulatory frameworks) as well as principal actors (i.e. governments, traditional and social media companies and citizen journalists).
2. Disinformation is understood as the deliberate creation and/or sharing of false information with the intention to deceive and mislead the audience.
4. Visoughi, Soroush; Roy, Deb; and Aral, Sinan “The spread of true and false news online,” Science 09 Mar 2018: Vol. 359, Issue 6380
Mainstreaming gender equality

Gender inequality persists, to varying degrees, in all countries. Many disparities and inequalities between the sexes appear to have become embedded, to a greater or lesser extent, in the baseline of public policies and the allocation of public resources. The negative impacts of this legacy are evident across many policy domains, including in the labour market, education and health, as well as in gender disparities in management and leadership. These inequalities hamper economic growth and societal well-being and can damage confidence in government. Closing gender gaps is a pressing global challenge, and the public sector has a major role to play in addressing this untenable situation.

Sluggish progress in achieving gender equality shows that many government initiatives to date have not adequately addressed persisting stereotypes and cultural norms. Closing gender gaps is a multifaceted challenge requiring a government-wide commitment to gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming - or the practice of accounting for gender-related dynamics in all policies, regulations, and budgets - helps policy makers identify and remove systemic barriers to the equal participation of women in public life. Without it, policies can exacerbate existing disparities and propagate gender-based stereotypes and biases, thereby deepening inequalities across society.

Institutions, strategies and instruments

Traditionally, most OECD countries did not design public policies with gender equality as a key consideration. But accelerating progress towards gender equality is possible; it starts with the recognition that gender inequality is a “wicked” problem and a complex public policy issue. It requires a comprehensive response by governments, encompassing institutions, strategies and instruments.

All OECD countries have an institution responsible for leading policy initiatives on gender equality and women’s empowerment. These institutions are usually also tasked with providing expert advice across the government. Specific arrangements vary greatly by country. The most common is to have a unit on gender equality located within the ministry responsible for social policy. A small number of countries have a dedicated ministry on gender equality and women’s issues.

A whole-of-government gender equality strategy is the first important step in closing gender gaps, and most OECD countries have developed multi-year strategies for gender equality. Such strategies demonstrate the government’s commitment to gender equality, may espouse specific targets or goals, and outline the government’s action plan.

Most strategies provide a list of outcomes they aim to achieve, outline the roles and responsibilities of all relevant institutions and actors, and include priority issue areas (e.g. work-life balance, economic empowerment, preventing gender-based violence). In short, these strategies seek to apply a “gender lens” to all aspects of public policy making.
Policy instruments, especially budgets and regulations, can all affect gender equality outcomes – for better or for worse. Countries are increasingly making use of tools such as gender budgeting and gender impact assessments of regulations. These tools are not objectives in their own right, but should be used to drive progress in line with the whole-of-government gender equality strategy.

**Ex post and ex ante gender impact assessment, 2017**

*Ex ante* assessments (development stage)

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Yes, always</th>
<th>Yes, in two or more cases</th>
<th>No, but government plans to do so</th>
<th>No, and it is not foreseen in the future</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary legislation</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>23%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subordinate regulations</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>31%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Policies</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>39%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Government programmes and initiatives on the delivery of public services</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>31%</td>
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*Ex poste* assessments (evaluation stage)

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<td>Subordinate regulations</td>
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<td>23%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* (OECD 2017), OECD Survey on National Gender Equality Frameworks and Public Policies

Despite the importance of gender mainstreaming, its implementation remains uneven across OECD countries. While many countries state that they practice gender mainstreaming, only a few have established legislative requirements to ensure its institutionalisation and enforcement. Moreover, gender mainstreaming in practice often leaves more to be desired. Serious problems have been identified with the implementation of the institutions, strategies and instruments highlighted above.

For example, gender equality institutions usually have only limited influence over line ministries to co-ordinate and monitor the implementation of such strategies. This may be due to the status or resources of the respective institutions, or to national governance traditions where gender equality-related issues are the responsibility of each respective line ministry, whole-of-government strategies notwithstanding. Furthermore, line ministries themselves often lack sufficient expertise and resources to implement gender mainstreaming initiatives. Effectively tackling gender issues may also exceed the capacity of a single institution.
Gender equality strategies also often fall short, as they remain disconnected from broader governance and policy frameworks and lack effective monitoring mechanisms, clear lines of responsibility and accountability structures.

Finally, the tools for carrying out gender impact analysis of budgets and regulations have often been implemented purely to meet bureaucratic requirements, and have had little or no impact on the decision-making process. Other barriers also persist, such as the limited availability of gender-disaggregated data for analysis.

**A pivotal role for the centre**

Through its leadership in implementing cross-cutting goals, the centre could play a pivotal role in removing these barriers across the board. In fact, the centre is the only institution in a position to do so. It can provide strategic guidance and oversight in the implementation of gender equality objectives and empower gender equality institutions to work with all public sector institutions to drive change. The figure below provides an overview of how a gender equality agenda can be further integrated into the core functions of the centre.

### Promoting gender equality from the centre

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key functions of the centre of government</th>
<th>Potential role to promote gender equality policy</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Co-ordinating preparation of Cabinet meetings</td>
<td>Challenging line departments to ensure that key cabinet proposals include gender impact assessments based on gender-disaggregated data, clarifying expectations in this regard</td>
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<tr>
<td>Policy co-ordination across government</td>
<td>Steering policy co-ordination and removing barriers across government for the implementation of high-level gender equality objectives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategic planning for the whole-of-government</td>
<td>Ensuring strategic alignment between high level gender equality objectives, the government programme and the ministry-level planning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating government’s messages to the public</td>
<td>Ensuring the outreach of government’s messages to a broad range of groups from diverse backgrounds and use of inclusive language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring the implementation of government’s policy</td>
<td>Effective monitoring of the implementation of cross-cutting gender equality objectives, in collaboration with gender equality institutions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Questions for discussion

- What are the most important institutional barriers to achieving gender equality objectives and how can they be overcome?
- How can a “gender lens” be systematically applied to all aspects of policy-making, including the core functions of the centre?
- What is the appropriate role of the centre in designing and implementing national gender equality strategies?