

National Library of Scotland

Horizon Scanning Procedure

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Introduction

Horizon scanning is a process which systematically examines future developments which are at the margins of current thinking and planning, but which may be (or may become) of significance to the Library.

Horizon scanning is a critical function for modern organisations, enhancing their ability to 'think outside the box', to anticipate and prepare for new threats, risks and opportunities, and to ensure that potential strategies are informed by better understanding of future contexts. It may explore novel and unexpected issues, as well as persistent problems or trends. Overall, Horizon Scanning is intended to improve the robustness of NLS strategy development, policy-making and evidence base.

NLS began implementation of a horizon scanning process early in 2006, based on an earlier version of this procedure.

Benefits of Horizon Scanning

Horizon scanning is a resource for monitoring strategic developments. It is also available to all NLS staff to help them inform their work planning and provides a structured mechanism for staff to contribute ideas and information for the benefit of the Library.

Horizon scanning activities and outputs can be tailored to suit a variety of timescales, information breadth and depth, depending on the urgency of the situation. The process should therefore also be able to alert senior management to developments which demand a fast response.

Information to be included in Horizon Scanning

Horizon scanning must focus on areas not emphasised by traditional research and development – events and changes on the 'horizon', rather than those near at hand. The Library's horizon scanning process focuses especially on technological and communications developments, which are particularly relevant to the digital library environment.

However, the scanning process also needs to look beyond technological developments and a PEST analysis (Political, Economical, Social and Technological) is used to analyse the external macro-environment, in order to ensure that other significant trends in society are identified.

Methodology

Gathering information

All staff are invited to contribute to the horizon scanning process. This approach has the advantage of providing as wide an opportunity as possible to involve staff in drawing attention to relevant issues. It has the advantage of fully utilising the knowledge, expertise and networks of staff, formalising what has always happened to an extent (some staff have always been proactive in sharing information on topical and important subjects with colleagues).

Simple guidance has been drawn up and distributed to all staff outlining the kind of issues to be identified, appropriate time frames and how to log these as a contribution to the horizon scanning process. This guidance noted that information should relate to the aims of the organisation, to avoid expenditure of time and energy for little benefit.

Horizon scanning identifies emerging areas and issues that have the potential to affect the Library through media such as:

- Websites/Newsgroups/Email discussion lists/blogs;
- Newspapers/magazines/journals/books;
- Television/radio programs;
- Networking.

Staff involvement in the Horizon Scanning process

NLS tries to engage as many staff as possible in the horizon scanning process by making contributing simple and straightforward. Staff need only email an article or URL to a central coordinator. Content and reports are easily available through our intranet site so everyone can see what topics are current and we highlight new reports via email announcements. We have also run 'horizon scan debate sessions' at the NLS Learning at Work Week addressing contentious issues of relevance to the Library, and attend unit or departmental meeting to discuss the process itself and how people can get involved. We have found that this approach has encouraged staff to contribute who may not otherwise, and has raised the profile of the process.

Managing the information

A centralised system manages the information received through the Horizon Scanning process. This enables issues to be tracked from identification through to further investigation, to be categorised in an intelligible way and to make the response by NLS to the issue transparent. This centralised system consists of a simple database which provides an efficient means of storing and sorting material submitted through the Horizon Scanning process (e.g. forwarded emails or websites, newspaper cuttings etc).

The Strategy and Performance Assistant and Corporate Information Officer are responsible for collating information gathered by the scanning process and entering the data into the central database. These resources are accessible to all staff to assist with planning their work.

The NLS intranet provides a home for the information gained through the horizon scanning process and associated documents such as reports and meeting minutes. The structure of the information storage is quite simple, based on a hierarchical folder structure.

The first delineation between documents is those that are the basic items of information that are collected by horizon scanning (Inputs) and those documents that are a product of the process itself (Outputs). Products such as the reports and meeting minutes, can all be given separate folders for clarity, but are kept together in the Outputs section.

The next separation occurs when dealing with the information that feeds the horizon scanning process. Information is initially collected in monthly folders and kept in chronological order. Each folder contains a reference document for the articles collected that month which gives quick access to the topics and relevance of the individual articles to the organisation. Month by month the information collected is stored and periodically analysed. After approximately 6 months it should be possible to identify recurring themes and topics that are emerging.

At this point, other theme-based folders can be set up so that all information on a particular topic collected so far can be easily accessed. Folders for areas that are of particular organisational interest may also be set up to encourage more information collection on these themes.

General folders are there to provide easy access to information on specific topics, and therefore duplicate information stored elsewhere. NLS felt that this duplication was acceptable given that maintaining the chronological folder structure helped to provide information about trends and the occurrence of particular issues was of value for analysis. However, the additional general approach to information storage proves useful as it allows easy access to the main topics being highlighted by the process, and helps given people a clear idea of what the 'big issues' being identified are. This helps them to understand the process more and hopefully be inclined to contribute.

Analysis and interpretation of information

The material received is analysed, in the first instance by the Strategy and Performance Assistant and the Corporate Information Officer. From this, a small number of provisional topics of strategic significance are identified, to be discussed with the Strategy and Performance Manager and by the wider NLS Horizon Scanning Group.

The Group may rank these horizon scanning findings using techniques such as SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) and NLS risk management assessment. Two or three key issues are chosen as the subject for the next horizon scanning report to the NLS Senior management team. Other issues which may be of interest or significance, but which are not considered in detail, are listed in an appendix.

Outputs

Information from the horizon scanning process is intended to enable greater evidence-based policy. We aim to generate two horizon scanning reports each year to the Senior Management Team. The reports are designed to contribute objective,

referenced information into strategic planning, in order to ensure an outward-looking focus. Each report identifies a small number of issues (usually three) raised by the process, along with background information as necessary, and updates on previously-highlighted issues which are still of relevance. The reports identify possible responses to the identified issues.

A summary of horizon scan findings is produced to inform the annual corporate planning process, and possibly wider stakeholder communities, in consultation with Marketing.

Managing the Process

An NLS Horizon Scanning Group (HSG) was established to oversee the Horizon Scanning process as a whole. The HSG meets twice a year with the twin aims of evaluating the significance of the information that has been identified, and steering the horizon scanning activity and process as a whole.

The group decides the guidance to staff on scanning processes and may assign members to specific subjects or resources for regular review. The membership of the group is intended to represent a cross-section of the Library staff, although there is specific representation from Digital Library staff. Directors nominate staff to represent their department on the HSG. As the findings from the horizon scanning process inform strategic planning, the Strategy and Performance Manager chairs the Group.

Further development

NLS now has three years of experience in 'horizon scanning'. The process will be reviewed and developed over the next twelve months, in order to ensure that it is as effective as possible, bearing in mind the resource constraints in a relatively small organisation like NLS. This review is likely to explore the following areas:

- How to mobilise staff involvement in the process most effectively, for example, by encouraging individuals to take responsibility for identifying more material specific to individual interests and expertise;
- How to ensure that horizon scanning remains focused on topics which are both long term/strategic, but also relevant to the work of NLS;
- How best to link with wider relevant horizon scanning activities in Scotland, the UK and abroad;
- How to disseminate insights gained more broadly, particularly for Scottish library and cultural organisations and networks;
- The scope to develop other 'futures' work, in particular scenario planning to inform longer term strategic planning.

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