

FORESIGHT

Lyndsay Rees-Jones reports on this Government initiative

Foresight is a Government agenda that the UKSG and its members should be aware of.

What is Foresight? The Oxford Dictionary defines foresight as "regard or provision for the future", "the process of foreseeing", but what does the Government mean by Foresight? Is it of any relevance to UKSG and the sectors it represents? Many may already be involved in the process in some way, either in a key or a supporting role, directly or indirectly. It would be good to share experiences, to open up the discussion, and to identify where we could benefit collectively.

Background

The UK Foresight programme was launched in 1994, following publication of the Government's White Paper on Science, Engineering and Technology, *Realising our Potential*.

Foresight is about:

- developing visions of the future: looking at possible future needs, opportunities and threats, and deciding what should be done now to make sure that we can meet the challenges;
- building bridges between business, science, government and the voluntary sector, across all areas and activities;
- pooling knowledge and expertise, to increase national prosperity and well-being;
- developing visions of the future that will improve decisions taken now.

It is managed by the Office of Science and Technology, in the Department of Trade and Industry, and is cross-departmental involving all government departments, 'one government'. A new round of Foresight began in April 1999.

There are 10 sectoral panels: Built Environment and Transport; Chemicals; Defence, Aerospace and Systems; Energy and Natural Environment; Financial Services; Food Chain and Crops for Industry; Healthcare; Information, Communications and Media; Materials; and Retail and Consumer Services. In addition there are three thematic panels: Ageing Population; Crime Prevention; and Manufacturing 2020. Every panel addresses issues of education, skills and training and the implications of its proposals for sustainable development. They bring together business, academic research and the public and voluntary services and they have published work plans for the period up to November 2000.

The results of Foresight and the process of Foresight, are:

- "being used by companies (large and small) to re-shape their business strategies and build sustained competitive advantage;
- breaking down barriers to collaboration across business sectors and academic disciplines, and between business and the science base;
- focusing business and the science base on key issues for quality of life;
- informing policy and spending decisions across Government."

Britain towards 2020: the changing business environment, Richard Scase, OST, ESRC

The Library Association experience - an example of Foresight involvement

The LA became an Associate Programme to Foresight towards the end of 1998.

"Associate programmes can make

substantial contributions of knowledge and expertise, often through professional institutions and other membership organisations. They will work closely in partnership with the OST under agreed terms. They will usually produce reports addressing the potential of specific topics for future wealth creation or enhanced quality of life. These reports may be specific to the work of one panel, or may be of relevance to the work of many. Associates will make their emerging findings widely available for debate prior to final publication."

Blueprint for the next round of Foresight,
OST December 1998

As part of its commitment to the Foresight programme, the Library Association (LA) participated in the development of the Knowledge Pool, which is a cornerstone of the process, acting as record facilitator and communicator between the various participants in the panel, and as an information tool for people who wish to see the extent of the progress on each programme.

The other strand to the LA's involvement was a commitment to run a programme of four workshops, two of which have taken place to date. The first addressed the issues of 'youth' and the second looked at 'regionalism'. CEST (Centre of Exploitation of Science and Technology) facilitated the full-day sessions, using a scenario approach with participants envisaging a range of possible futures and what would be necessary for them to happen. The LA has drawn upon its membership to join in with the workshops and in the case of the first workshop, on Youth, invited five young people to spend the day at the Library Association.

The LA's involvement in Foresight has the potential to increase the profile of library and

information professionals, and to ensure that they have a say in the future development of a range of services and products. This process of 'visioning' could help to ensure that the library and information profession develops in the most effective and appropriate way, and is guaranteed a future role.

Where now?

Visit the Foresight Knowledge Pool at www.foresight.gov.uk. It contains all the outputs from the first round of the national programme and acts as a single point of access to data and views on the future. It also acts as an e-mail contact point. Alternatively, interested parties can fax Foresight on 020 7215 6715 with their contact details.

What about UKSG?

Is there some mechanism for using the Foresight process and experience, to address the future of the serials industry? The November issue of the *Technology and Innovation Brief* describes the process as a four-question strategy:

1. What could the future be like?
2. What does this mean for me?
3. What should I do next?
4. Then what?

Foresight is not about predicting the future, but it is about anticipating what might be, and what might happen. So where now for UKSG? Please e-mail us your thoughts to uksg@dial.pipex.com. All your comments will be posted on our Web site, <http://www.uksg.org>

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