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Policing

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Policing in England and Wales Future Operating Environment 2040

User guide – using scenarios to strengthen strategic planning

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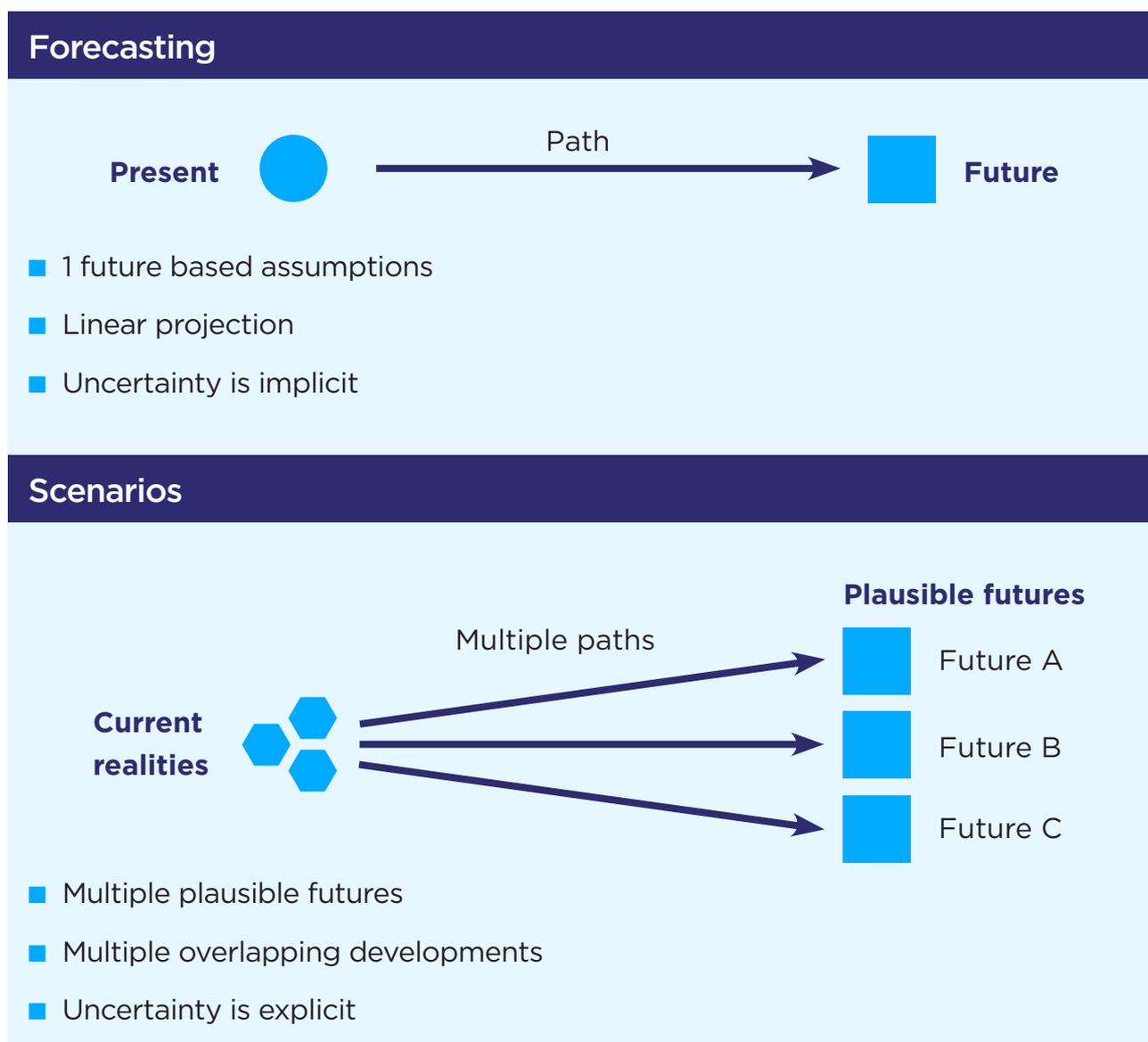
The purpose of this guide

This user guide has been designed for use with the scenarios set out in ‘Policing in England and Wales: Future Operating Environment (FOE) 2040’. It describes how scenarios can be used to strengthen strategic planning within policing, by supporting the development of long-term plans, policies, strategies and capabilities.

Introduction: what are scenarios?

Scenarios are descriptions of plausible alternative futures: they help us explore how certain trends, issues and uncertainties might play out over multiple pathways, as told through a series of short stories about the future. **Figure 1** illustrates how scenario thinking differs from traditional forecasting.

Figure 1: Forecasting versus scenario thinking



Thinking creatively about the future is often difficult because of the tendency for the recent past and current events to bias our assessments. Exploring scenarios which differ from each other can help us challenge assumptions we may have about the future, revealing new threats, challenges and opportunities that are otherwise difficult to detect.

Using scenarios in strategic planning is a bit like conducting a strategic fire drill – we learn to be forward-looking by ‘living in the future’, anticipating change, mentally rehearsing our responses and positioning ourselves to react quickly and nimbly.

How can scenarios strengthen strategic planning?

Scenarios provide vantage points from which to think more deeply about which driving forces are precipitating change and why change might take one direction rather than another. They are especially useful for highlighting previously unseen or unexpected aspects of the future.

Scenario thinking can support strategic planning in several ways.

1. Informing

Scenarios can help decision-makers anticipate and better understand the future context in which today’s decisions will play out. Considering multiple scenarios fairly and fully (rather than focusing on a ‘favourite’ or ‘most likely’ scenario) can help ensure that the decisions we take today are informed by a better understanding of the potential risks, threats, challenges and opportunities that could arise in the future. Scenarios can be used to inform decision-making in a variety of organisational contexts, including strategic direction-setting, workforce planning, product development and risk management.

2. Stress-testing

Stress-testing (sometimes called ‘windtunnelling’) is used to see how well the assumptions or objectives which underpin a given plan, policy or strategy stand up to a range of external conditions. Where a plan, policy or strategy exists already, the aim is to assess whether they are robust enough to deliver in a range of future contexts. It may be necessary to modify and adapt current strategy or policy in light of what has been learned.

3. Future-proofing

Alternatively, stress-testing may be part of the process for future-proofing a new plan, policy or strategy. The aim here is to assess the potential strengths and weaknesses of different strategic objectives or policy options before they are implemented – although it is important to remember that the future is never certain and that new strategies need to be flexible enough to adapt to unexpected changes. In the case of low probability scenarios these strategies may be seen as contingency measures.

4. Visioning

Visioning exercises are used to define and help achieve a desirable or preferred future state. They are common in strategic planning because they help create images that can guide organisational change. The outcome of a visioning exercise is typically a medium-to-long-term strategic plan (generally with a three-to-five-year time horizon). Alternatively, some visioning tools may be used to encourage discussion of future resource use and planning options, without the need to create an actual future-oriented document. Scenarios can support visioning exercises by providing a better understanding of future possibilities, risks and options.

The overall objective with each use is to think more systematically about the future and to use what is learned in organisational decision-making¹.

Background to the scenarios in FOE 2040

The scenarios in FOE 2040 were developed in two stages:

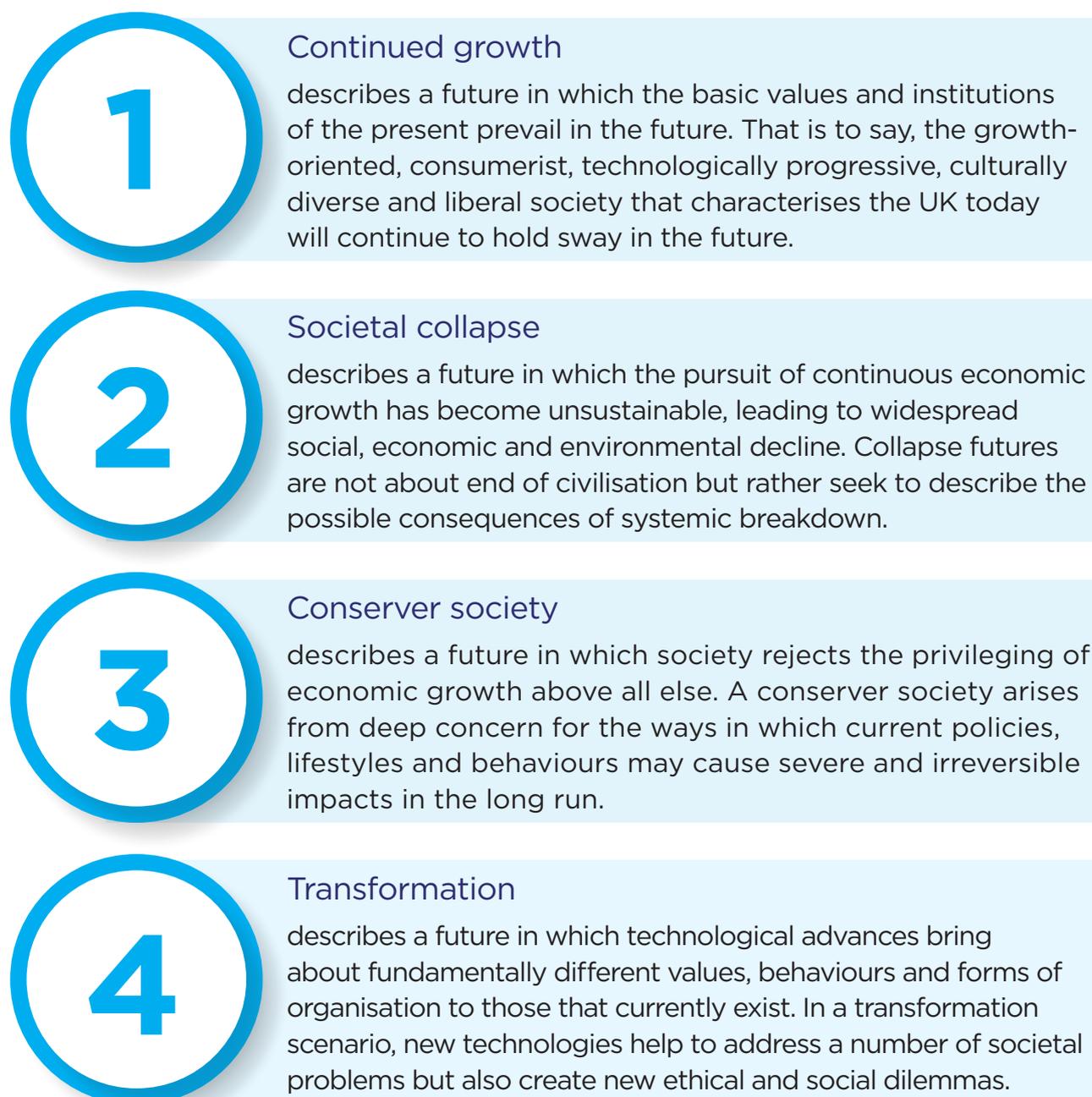
1. Data from stakeholder interviews were combined with the results of a literature review to construct four 'raw' scenarios for policing's operating environment out to 2040. The raw scenarios were guided by the concept of 'alternative futures', (see **Figure 2**) which uses the concepts of 'growth', 'collapse', 'conserve' and 'transformation' to imagine and construct four alternative future worlds².
2. To add depth to the raw scenarios and develop their narratives, a workshop with police officers, crime analysts, social scientists, 'futurists' and technologists was held. Participants considered which trends would be most influential in bringing each scenario to pass, what impact they might have on the UK (in terms of society, technology, the economy, the environment and politics) and what implications they might have for crime and policing. The workshop produced a number of outputs which were used to create the full scenarios described in FOE 2040³.

¹ Scenario thinking does not by itself constitute a strategic planning process. Rather, it is part of the 'strategic thinking' phase of strategic planning, where information (in this case about possible futures) is analysed and interpreted with a view to making sense of it for a specific purpose.

² See Dator, J. (2009) 'Alternative Futures at the Manoa School', *Journal of Future Studies*, 14(2), pp. 1-18.

³ It is important to note that numerous scenarios could have been created using the alternative futures framework. Different workshop participants may have emphasised different drivers of change, identified different impacts and crafted a different narrative. Some users may even wish to use the concepts of growth, collapse, conserve and transformation to inform the development of their own scenarios.

Figure 2: Alternative futures framework



Using the scenarios

The scenarios in FOE 2040 are not forecasts. Rather, they are stories about the future which we have designed to be both plausible and provocative, to engage your imagination while also raising new questions about what the future might look like.

Each scenario has been written in a way that differentiates it from the others. Yet they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In reality, the future that comes to pass is likely to contain elements of all four scenarios, albeit at different levels of intensity. It is also likely that some developments we have not imagined will prove significant over the period of the scenario.

Considering each scenario fairly and fully (rather than focusing on a ‘favourite’ or ‘most likely’) will help to ensure that the decisions we take today are rooted in a better understanding of the potential risks, challenges and opportunities that could arise in the future. The scenarios should be considered collectively, preferably in a workshop or other collaborative setting where participants are supported to think laterally, challenge their assumptions and build on the ideas and insights of others.

Principles for engaging with the scenarios

When reading the scenarios it is important to remember that the future doesn’t exist yet. Scenarios are designed to spark new thinking about the future – not predict it. It is therefore important to approach the scenarios with an open mind. In particular:

- consider each scenario fairly and fully – ask ‘what do we need to be prepared for?’ even if we think it unlikely
- focus on the overall direction and conditions each scenario creates rather than on the likelihood of specific details
- focus on the reasons why the scenario might happen and what it would mean for current police goals, strategies and capabilities if it did

Questions to ask when exploring the scenarios

The most important question when using the scenarios is ‘so what?’ – what would the conditions and developments in each scenario mean for our organisation or business area? While this is a broad question, it can help identify tangible risks, issues, opportunities and decision-points that may require action. Users may want to unpack the ‘so what?’ question by asking a combination of more specific questions. For example:

- what are the biggest threats and opportunities in each scenario?
- what values, capabilities and relationships are most important in each scenario?
- what might different actors (eg, citizens, criminals, partners, potential recruits) value in each scenario?
- which scenario best describes the future we are currently preparing for (whether implicitly or explicitly)?
- which scenario are we currently ignoring but shouldn’t be?
- what would we need to do differently in order to ‘win’ in each of these scenarios?
- if we were to ‘fail’ in each of these scenarios what would be the main reason?
- what threats, opportunities and emerging issues do we need to learn more about?

- which of our previous expectations need to be rethought?
- what might we need to start or stop doing or do more or less of?

The questions you ask should be closely aligned with the purpose and aims of your strategic planning activities.

Case study: A Force Fit for the Future

In December 2019 Surrey Police used early versions of the FOE 2040 scenarios to support the development of its 'Force Fit for the Future' strategy. The event (a workshop) had two main aims:

1. Ensure that Surrey's priority areas of leadership, capability, competency, governance and wellbeing were grounded in an understanding of the potential risks, challenges and opportunities that might face policing in the future.
2. Identify what decisions or actions needed to be taken now to influence the future.

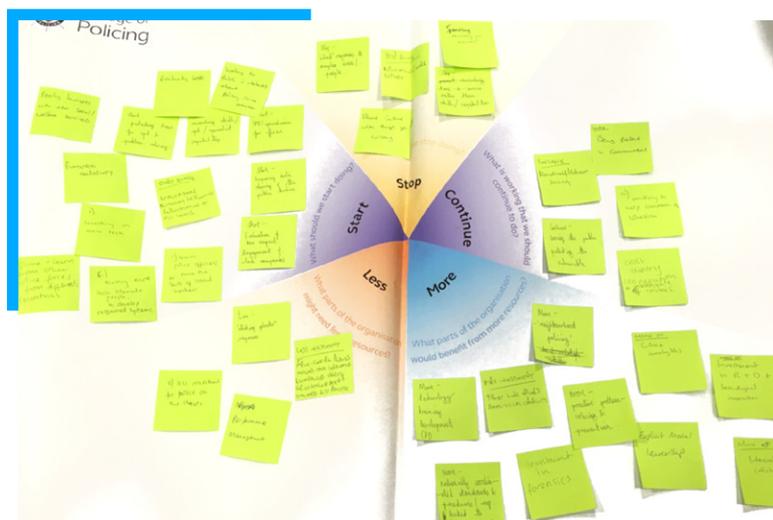
Participants were split into four groups and each group was allocated a scenario. The groups began by imagining the types of policies, events, controversies, crimes and other newsworthy issues that might occur in their scenario⁴. This helped participants immerse themselves in their scenario and gain a better understanding of its main features.

A Futures Wheel (see **Figure 3**) was then used to explore the implications of key developments in each scenario. For this exercise, each group selected an important trend, issue or event from their scenario (eg, the widespread adoption of artificial intelligence) and brainstormed its potential impacts across five key areas (society, technology, economy, environment and politics)⁵. The groups then moved on to consider how these impacts might affect Surrey's five priority areas – thus building the 'spokes' of the wheel outwards.

⁴ Key reflections were captured in the form of newspaper headlines from 2040.

⁵ Thus building the 'spokes' of the wheel outwards.

Figure 4: SSCML exercise



At the end of the workshop, insights from the four different groups, each group having worked with a different scenario, were reviewed to identify common themes – thus drawing out the actions and decisions that would most likely prepare the force for all four scenarios.

Additional resources

Toolkits

Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (2019) Imaginative Scenario Planning for Security and Law Enforcement Organisations.

Chartered Management Institute (2013) Using Scenarios. Checklist 230.

Future Motions (2018) Introduction to Strategic Foresight.

UK Government Office for Science (2017) Tools for Futures Thinking and Foresight Across UK Government.

Web resources

<https://www.bbvaopenmind.com/en/articles/futures-studies-theories-and-methods/>

<https://hbr.org/1985/11/scenarios-shooting-the-rapids>

<https://www.odi.org/publications/5213-strategy-development-scenario-testing-and-visioning>

<https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/futures-wheel.htm>

<https://online.visual-paradigm.com/diagrams/templates/futures-wheel/futures-wheel-template/>

https://retrospectivewiki.org/index.php?title=Start,_Stop,_Continue,_More_of,_Less_of_Wheel

About the College

We're the professional body for the police service in England and Wales.

Working together with everyone in policing, we share the skills and knowledge officers and staff need to prevent crime and keep people safe.

We set the standards in policing to build and preserve public trust and we help those in policing develop the expertise needed to meet the demands of today and prepare for the challenges of the future.

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