



25 March 2026

Ref: OIA-2025/26-0533

Tēnā koe [REDACTED],

Official Information Act request relating to the Policy Project seminar

Thank you for your Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) request, which was received by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) on 24 February 2026.

You requested:

I understand that the Policy Project sponsored or convened a seminar on free and frank advice. If possible, would you be willing to release the relevant information or materials relating to that seminar (for example, programme details, presentations, or publicly available summaries)?

Information being released

At the current time there are no publicly available resources that were used by the Policy Project for the seminar on free and frank advice. Please find copies attached of the documents listed below, some of which were part of the resources used at the seminar. A small amount of information is withheld under section 9(2)(a) of the Act, to protect the privacy of natural persons.

Item	Date	Document description	Decision
1	11 February 2026	Policy Leaders' Summit slides	Release
2	11 February 2026	Policy Leaders' Summit Event pack	Release, some information withheld under section 9(2)(a)
3	11 February 2026	Policy Leaders' Summit Agenda	Release
4	11 February 2026	Chief Executive speech	Release
5	February 2026	Intranet article – summary of insights	Release

Item [5] is an article that was published on the DPMC internal website which helps employees of DPMC stay up-to-date and share key information.

In making my decision, I have considered the public interest considerations in section 9(1) of the Act. No public interest has been identified that would be sufficient to outweigh the reasons for withholding that information.

You have the right to ask the Ombudsman to investigate and review my decision under section 28(3) of the Act.

This response will be published on DPMC's website during our regular publication cycle.

Typically, information is released monthly, or as otherwise determined. Your personal information including name and contact details will be removed for publication.

Nāku noa, nā

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Lisa Daniell', written in a cursive style.

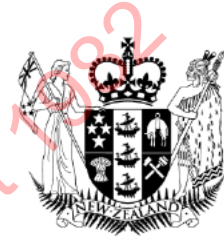
Lisa Daniell

Acting Deputy Chief Executive, Policy and Delivery Unit



**The
Policy
Project**

Responsive today,
shaping tomorrow



**Te Kāwanatanga
o Aotearoa**
New Zealand Government

Policy Leaders Summit

11 February 2026

Released under the Official Information Act 1982



Ben King

Secretary of the Department
of the Prime Minister and
Cabinet and Chief Executive

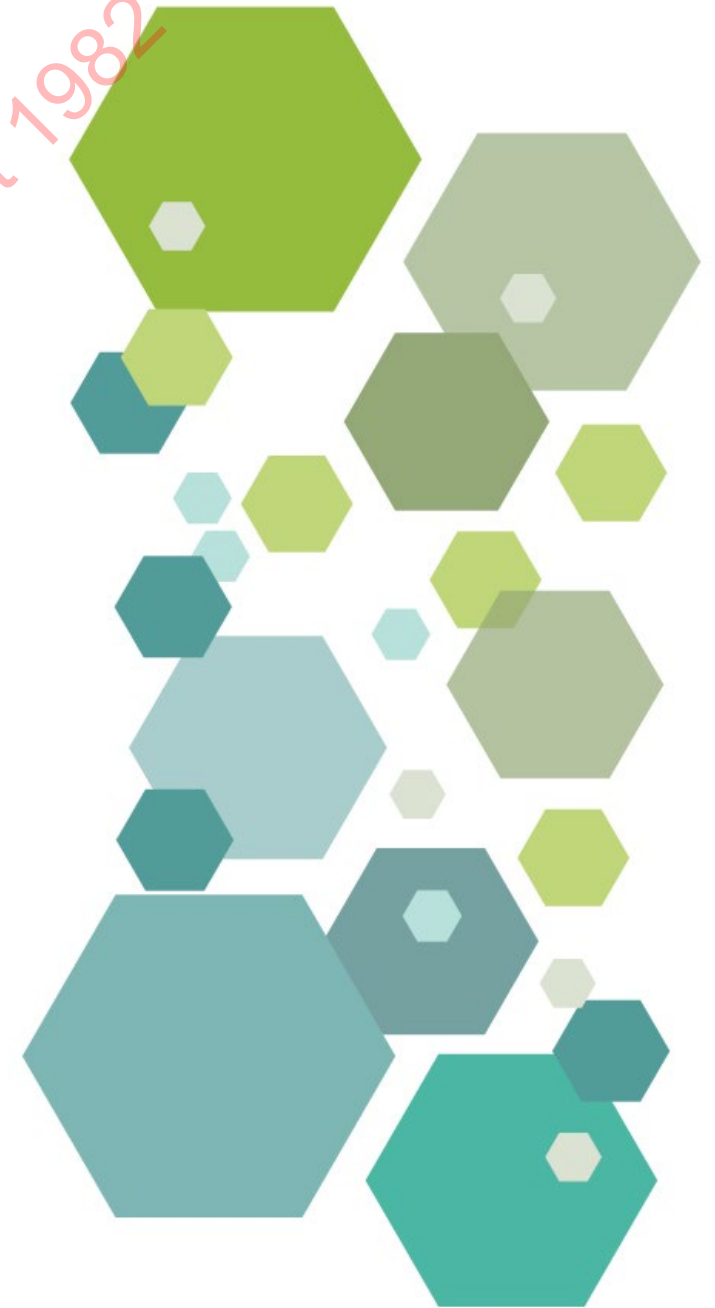
Released under the Official Information Act 1982



Panel Session #1

The importance of free and frank advice

What doing it well looks like
and why it matters



Released under the Official Information Act 1982



Hon Chris Bishop

The art of great advice

Released under the Official Information Act 1982





**The
Policy
Project**

Responsive today,
shaping tomorrow



**Te Kāwanatanga
o Aotearoa**
New Zealand Government

Policy Leaders Summit

Released under the Official Information Act 1982

Panel Session #2

The 9th floor view

The realities of political
decision making

Released under the Official Information Act 1982





Rt Hon
Christopher Luxon,
Prime Minister

Closing address

Released under the Official Information Act 1982



**The
Policy
Project**

Responsive today,
shaping tomorrow



**Te Kāwanatanga
o Aotearoa**
New Zealand Government

Policy Leaders Summit

Released under the Official Information Act 1982



The Policy Project

Responsive today,
shaping tomorrow

Policy Leaders Summit Event pack



Released under the Official Information Act 1982

February 2026



**Te Kāwanatanga
o Aotearoa**
New Zealand Government

Purpose and contents

The purpose of this event pack is to clarify the key event information, agenda and logistics for the Policy Leaders Summit.

When: Wednesday 11th February, 9:00am – 1:00pm

Where: Banquet Hall, Beehive

In this pack you will find:

- Key event information
- Key messages
- Agenda
- Suggested panel questions
- Speaker biographies

A version of this event pack has been provided to speakers, panel chairs, and panellists and will be used for The Policy Project's reference. The suggested panel questions for each session were provided to relevant panellists.

Contacts

Name	Position	Telephone	1 st Contact
Ben King	Chief Executive, DPMC	Mobile: s9(2)(a)	
Janine Smith	DCE, Policy and Delivery, DPMC	Mobile: s9(2)(a)	
Craig Salmon	Manager, Policy Project, DPMC	Mobile: s9(2)(a)	✓
Jayne Foster	Principal Advisor, Policy Project, DPMC	Mobile: s9(2)(a)	

Background

This Policy Leaders Summit provides an opportunity to bring together public service leaders to discuss key issues facing policymakers. This event is the first of its kind, and if successful, may be established as a regular keystone policy event.

This Policy Leaders Summit is about free and frank advice – what doing it well looks like and why it matters. Delivering free and frank advice is a function that is unique to the Public Service and directly elevates policy performance when done well.

This summit will:

- reaffirm the critical role of policy leaders in delivering free and frank advice to the integrity of the policy profession
- explore how senior officials must lead by example to set the standards for the quality and clarity of advice provided to ministers
- share practical approaches and insights into delivering free and frank advice and how to do it well.

Key messages

The key messages that we expect the audience to hear from those speaking at the Summit include:

- **Free and frank advice underpins policy performance and is a critical skill for policy leaders.**
High-performing governments depend on honest, evidence-based advice to enable informed decisions, manage risk, and deliver on priorities.
- **Policy leaders play a key role in setting expectations about what good advice looks like and communicating this within their agencies.**
High standards from policy leaders about what constitutes free and frank advice can influence how advice is developed across their agency.
- **Building and maintaining trust is the foundation of effective advice.**
Trust is built through confidentiality, responsiveness, and an ongoing understanding of ministerial context.

More information including advice, guidance for practice, and resources, is available on the Policy Project's [Free and frank advice](#) page.

Agenda

Policy Leaders Summit

9.00 am	<p>Arrival and registration</p> <p>Policy Project staff will meet attendees after they have passed through Beehive security. Tea and coffee on arrival.</p>
9.30 am	<p>Welcome and karakia</p>
9.45 am	<p>Introductory remarks</p> <p>Ben King, Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and Chief Executive</p>
10.00 am	<p>Panel session #1: The importance of free and frank advice</p> <p><i>What doing it well looks like and why it matters</i></p> <p>Chair: Janine Smith, Deputy Secretary Policy, DPMC</p> <p>Panellists:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Audrey Sonerson, Director General, Ministry of Health ❖ Peter Mersi, Commissioner, Inland Revenue ❖ Ray Smith, Director General, Ministry of Primary Industries
11.00 am	<p>Keynote speech: The art of great advice</p> <p>Hon Chris Bishop, Minister for Infrastructure, Housing, Transport and RMA Reforms and Leader of the House</p>
11.15 am	<p>Morning tea</p>
11.45 am	<p>Panel session #2: The 9th floor view</p> <p><i>The realities of political decision making</i></p> <p>Chair: Ben King, Chief Executive, DPMC</p> <p>Panellists:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Heather Simpson, Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, 5th Labour government ❖ Wayne Eagleson, Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, 5th National government
12.45 pm	<p>Closing address</p> <p>Rt Hon Christopher Luxon, Prime Minister</p>
1.00 pm	<p>Closing remarks and karakia</p> <p>Ben King, Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and Chief Executive</p>

Panel questions

Session 1: The importance of free and frank advice (10.00am – 11.00am)

Chair: Janine Smith

The opening question will be asked to the panel, and each member will have five minutes to speak to it. The others are suggested follow-up questions that could be asked if the discussion is relevant to them.

Panellists are encouraged to draw on practical examples on when free and frank has gone well, but just as importantly when it has gone wrong.

1. Key skills: What does free and frank advice 'done well' look like?

In my own experience, being able to watch leaders in front of ministers has been invaluable in terms of my own career development.

I think everyone in the room would be interested in hearing what you think is important when delivering free and frank advice, including where you may have made some mistakes or got things wrong.

Audrey, I might start with you, what does free and frank done well look like?

2. Lessons learned: what are the challenges?

As senior leaders, there are always going to be times when you need to deliver messages to ministers that they may not want to hear. It would be great to hear some real examples of where you've done that and where things may not have gone as planned.

Ray, I will start with you on this one, what's worked for you when fronting up to ministers with things the minister may not want to hear?

3. Delivering free and frank advice in an election year

There will be a lot of people in the room today who are in front of ministers on a regular basis. As we head into an election year, we want policy leaders to give their first best advice. What are the key things you think people should have top of mind when engaging with ministers as we head into election season?

Peter, I think this one is for you: is there anything different you think people need to bring more focus on in an election year?

Session 2: The 9th Floor View (11.45am – 12.45pm)

Chair: Ben King

1. The importance of free and frank advice

The public service does not hold the monopoly on the advice the government receives, but the public service, unlike others, has the unique duty to deliver advice that is politically neutral and free and frank.

What did you see as the key value of free and frank advice in your role as chief of staff?

2. The bigger picture – the importance of the Ministerial and departmental relationship

As chief of staff, you get a unique view of both how ministers operate as well as the public service as a whole.

Taking that bigger picture view, what key things did you observe about how the public service was delivering advice and supporting ministers? What did you see work well?

Additional question: Did you ever see any breakdown in the relationship between Ministers and the public service that could have been avoided?

3. Lessons learned - effective operating models

The role of the Chief of staff is often referred to as the busiest job in the Beehive and I'm sure there would have been times things went well between Ministers and departments, and not so well.

If you had your time again is there anything you would have done differently, in terms of the type of support you would have asked from senior leaders in the public service?

How can public servants provide more courageous and impactful advice to ministers?

4. Election year changes – building new relationships

A date has been set for the election of 7 November. Regardless of the outcome for parties, elections always bring some form of change and new ministers in portfolios.

When building relationships at the outset between ministers and officials, what do you think is most important at the outset? How can ministers and officials build trust in their working relationships?

Additional question: What would be some good objectives for an early discussion with a new Minister?

5. Keeping Ministerial Offices in the loop

Ministerial office staff play a crucial role as the "eyes and ears" of the minister, ensuring effective communication between the minister and their department. We have the 'no surprises' principle' which is part of delivering free and frank advice.

What are the types of issues where senior policy leaders should be ensuring the minister's office and Minister is well-informed, and what have you seen go wrong when this hasn't happened in a timely way?

6. Adapting to Changing Priorities

Policy programmes are not static and need to be adjusted as circumstances change.

In your experience what are the best examples of Ministers and officials working together to reprioritise and adapt to emerging challenges?

7. Building Policy Capability

As Head of the Policy Profession, I'm keen to see the public service maintaining the highest standards when it comes to policy advice. But I do think everyone plays a part including Ministers?

What can ministers do to help support better policy stewardship and capability building?

Additional question: What providers of policy advice, ensuring that advice is high-quality, actionable, and aligned with strategic goals?

Speaker biographies

**Rt Hon
Christopher
Luxon**

Prime Minister of New Zealand
Minister for National Security
Minister Responsible for Ministerial Services
Leader of the National Party

Rt Hon Christopher Luxon is the 42nd Prime Minister of New Zealand. He entered Parliament at the 2020 election as the MP for Botany and was elected Leader of the National Party in November 2021.



**Hon
Christopher
Bishop**

Minister of Housing
Minister for Infrastructure
Minister Responsible for RMA Reform
Minister of Transport
Leader of the House

Hon Chris Bishop is MP for Hutt South and was first elected to Parliament in 2014. Prior to entering Parliament, he worked as a researcher for the National Party and later served as an advisor to Ministers in the fifth National-led government.



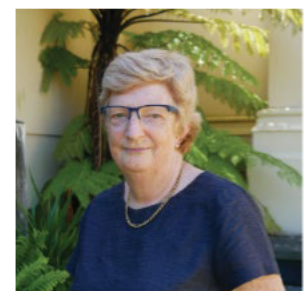
**Wayne
Eagleson**

Former Chief of Staff to PM, 5th National-led Govt
Wayne Eagleson served as Chief of Staff to Prime Ministers John Key and Bill English during the fifth National-led government (2008–2017). He now sits as Director of the Wellington National Airport Ltd, and Thompson Lewis, a specialist consultancy for government relations.



**Heather
Simpson**

Former Chief of Staff to PM, 5th Labour-led Govt
Heather Simpson served as Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Helen Clark during the fifth Labour-led government (1999-2008). Heather has continued to work on complex public policy challenges both internationally and in New Zealand. She is a Director of Ferry Holdings Ltd and Antarctica NZ.



Ben King

Chief Executive of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
Head of the Policy Profession

Ben King is the Chief Executive and Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. He was previously the Deputy Chief Executive of Policy at MFAT, New Zealand Foreign Ambassador, and a Foreign Policy Advisor in the Policy Advisory Group at DPMC.



Janine Smith

Deputy Chief Executive, Policy and Delivery

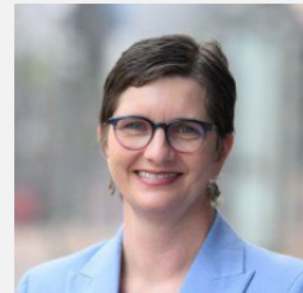
Janine Smith is Deputy Chief Executive of Policy and Delivery at the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. She plays a central role in stewarding policy across government, serving on the Policy Profession Board.



Audrey Sonerson

Director-General, Ministry of Health

Audrey Sonerson is the Director-General of Health, appointed in April 2025. Audrey is a seasoned senior public servant, with prior leadership roles including Chief Executive at the Ministry of Transport, and Deputy Chief Executive at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Ministry of Justice.



Peter Mersi

Commissioner, Inland Revenue

Peter Mersi is the Commissioner and Chief Executive of the Inland Revenue Department. He joined the role in July 2022, bringing public service leadership experience from Chief Executive positions in Ministry of Transport, Land Information New Zealand and Department of Internal Affairs.



Ray Smith

Director-General, Ministry for Primary Industries

Ray Smith is Director-General and Chief Executive of the Ministry for Primary Industries. Appointed in 2018, he brings public service leadership experience, serving as Chief Executive of the Department of Corrections and as a Deputy Chief Executive in the Ministry of Social Development.



Policy Leaders Summit

11 February 2025

Beehive Banquet Hall, 9.00am to 1.00pm



9.00 am	<p>Arrival and registration</p> <p>Policy Project staff will meet you after you have passed through Beehive security.</p> <p>Tea and coffee on arrival.</p>
9.30 am	<p>Welcome and karakia</p>
9.45 am	<p>Introductory remarks</p> <p>Ben King, Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and Chief Executive</p>
10.00 am	<p>Panel session #1: The importance of free and frank advice</p> <p><i>What doing it well looks like and why it matters</i></p> <p>Chair: Janine Smith, Deputy Secretary Policy, DPMC</p> <p>Panellists:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Audrey Sonerson, Director General, Ministry of Health ❖ Peter Mersi, Commissioner, Inland Revenue ❖ Ray Smith, Director General, Ministry of Primary Industries
11.00 am	<p>Keynote speech: The art of great advice</p> <p>Hon Chris Bishop, Minister for Infrastructure, Housing, Transport and RMA Reforms and Leader of the House</p>
11.15 am	<p>Morning tea</p>
11.45 am	<p>Panel session #2: The 9th floor view</p> <p><i>The realities of political decision making</i></p> <p>Chair: Ben King, Chief Executive, DPMC</p> <p>Panellists:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Heather Simpson, Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, 5th Labour-led government ❖ Wayne Eagleson, Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, 5th National-led government
12.45 pm	<p>Closing address: Rt Hon Christopher Luxon, Prime Minister</p>
1.00 pm	<p>Closing remarks and karakia</p> <p>Ben King, Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and Chief Executive</p>

Speaker biographies

**Rt Hon
Christopher
Luxon**

Prime Minister of New Zealand
Minister for National Security
Minister Responsible for Ministerial Services
Leader of the National Party

Rt Hon Christopher Luxon is the 42nd Prime Minister of New Zealand. He entered Parliament at the 2020 election as the MP for Botany and was elected Leader of the National Party in November 2021.



**Hon
Christopher
Bishop**

Minister of Housing
Minister for Infrastructure
Minister Responsible for RMA Reform
Minister of Transport
Leader of the House

Hon Chris Bishop is MP for Hutt South and was first elected to Parliament in 2014. Prior to entering Parliament, he worked as a researcher for the National Party and later served as an advisor to Ministers in the fifth National-led government.



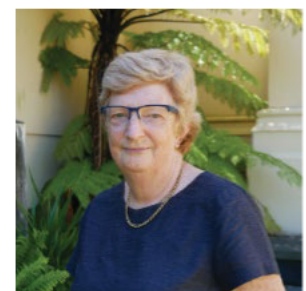
**Wayne
Eagleson**

Former Chief of Staff to PM, 5th National-led Govt
Wayne Eagleson served as Chief of Staff to Prime Ministers John Key and Bill English during the fifth National-led government (2008–2017). He now sits as Director of the Wellington National Airport Ltd, and Thompson Lewis, a specialist consultancy for government relations.



**Heather
Simpson**

Former Chief of Staff to PM, 5th Labour-led Govt
Heather Simpson served as Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Helen Clark during the fifth Labour-led government (1999-2008). Heather has continued to work on complex public policy challenges both internationally and in New Zealand. She is a Director of Ferry Holdings Ltd and Antarctica NZ.



Ben King

Chief Executive of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
Head of the Policy Profession

Ben King is the Chief Executive and Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. He was previously the Deputy Chief Executive of Policy at MFAT, New Zealand Foreign Ambassador, and a Foreign Policy Advisor in the Policy Advisory Group at DPMC.



Janine Smith

Deputy Chief Executive, Policy and Delivery

Janine Smith is Deputy Chief Executive of Policy and Delivery at the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. She plays a central role in stewarding policy across government, serving on the Policy Profession Board.



Audrey Sonerson

Director-General, Ministry of Health

Audrey Sonerson is the Director-General of Health, appointed in April 2025. Audrey is a seasoned senior public servant, with prior leadership roles including Chief Executive at the Ministry of Transport, and Deputy Chief Executive at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Ministry of Justice.



Peter Mersi

Commissioner, Inland Revenue

Peter Mersi is the Commissioner and Chief Executive of the Inland Revenue Department. He joined the role in July 2022, bringing public service leadership experience from Chief Executive positions in Ministry of Transport, Land Information New Zealand and Department of Internal Affairs.



Ray Smith

Director-General, Ministry for Primary Industries

Ray Smith is Director-General and Chief Executive of the Ministry for Primary Industries. Appointed in 2018, he brings public service leadership experience, serving as Chief Executive of the Department of Corrections and as a Deputy Chief Executive in the Ministry of Social Development.



Greeting

- E nga mana, e nga reo, e nga hoa e wha
- Tēnā koutou, Tena K, T K K.

Welcome, thank you and opening remarks

Thanks Craig and Rito. Welcome everyone to the Policy Leaders' Summit. My name is Ben King, Secretary and Chief Executive of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and Head of the Policy Profession.

It's in my capacity holding both these roles that I have the privilege of hosting you all for this inaugural Policy Leaders' Summit.

Objectives of the Summit

The purpose of this summit is to bring senior policy leaders from across the public service together to discuss the contemporary challenges and opportunities that come with our roles.

For this first Policy Summit we've chosen the theme of "free and frank advice – what doing it well looks like and why it matters".

It's a topic highly relevant to the policy profession, particularly as we navigate an increasingly complex operating environment where we navigate:

- increasingly tight operating budgets;
- heightened public scrutiny and greater expectations from citizens around government services and the quality of their engagement with the public service; and
- a political environment which looks likely to deliver coalition governments for the foreseeable future.

So today is an opportunity to reflect on the challenges and opportunities that come from this more complex operating environment.

We have also deliberately structured the agenda so you have an opportunity to network together - so please use the morning tea to say hi to a few people you haven't met.

Why good quality policy advice is important and why free and frank advice matters

As the Head of the Policy Profession, I place the utmost value on the quality of policy advice we provide to ministers.

We all represent the profession collectively every time just one of us metaphorically puts 'pen to paper', or when we meet with Ministers and talk them through your policy advice.

Political neutrality and the provision of free and frank advice sits at the heart of good quality advice, and it's what sets us apart from any other information Ministers receive.

We know Ministers receive advice from a wide range of sources. Some of this advice will be well-informed. (And some of it may not be).

We know that almost all of the advice will have an angle. It will be advocating for one outcome; or one set of interests – often at the expense of another.

As public service policy advisors, we have the privilege of taking account of all of these views. We assess all the data, the evidence, and understand different perspectives. And then we integrate it all and present it to Ministers, identifying risks, opportunities, and surfacing trade-offs.

And ultimately – and this is *very* important – we present Ministers with a recommendation – a point of view. We let Ministers know what their choice sets are, and put our penny down with a recommendation, and an explanation of why we have suggested that approach.

Under the Public Service Act 2020, New Zealand's Public Service is entrusted with a clear mandate to be the stewards of free and frank advice. We are politically neutral and professional as we carry out our role to serve the government of the day. The public service census results last year 71% agencies confident that their organisation is free and frank in advice to Ministers, which shows there is still work to do.

As senior leaders we are the stewards of free and frank advice. This means we set clear commissioning expectations for the quality and clarity of advice and continue to convey the political context to staff. It

also means as policy professionals we need to guide our staff to make sure advice is balanced and evidence-based.

Two pillars supporting us to put the principle of free and frank advice into practice are - the standards of integrity and conduct and the policy quality standards. The later being the standard against which all policy advice is measured annually.

However, the art of good advice as you all know, is how its delivered - sitting within the political context and time considerations, and delivering on what has been commissioned by Ministers.

There's no point in delivering Ministers with an elegant piece of advice that's too late to shape a decision or outcome.

And there's no point in developing exquisite advice that doesn't take account of the views of a key stakeholder.

Or advice that provides Ministers with a summary of information, but doesn't have a clear recommendation on a path forward.

This summit provides us with an opportunity to remind ourselves about what free and frank advice done well looks like and hear from those who have years of experience working with Ministers.

Key highlights for the Summit

Today we look forward to hearing from the Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Christopher Luxon, and the Honourable Christopher Bishop, Minister for Infrastructure, Housing, RMA Reform, Transport and Leader of the House. Minister Bishop will shortly provide his perspective on the art of good advice, and the Prime Minister will provide closing remarks on the role of free and frank advice to enable Cabinet to make well-informed decisions.

My colleague Janine Smith, Deputy Chief Executive, Policy and Delivery Unit at the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, will chair a panel of chief executives who have worked over a number of years with across key public service agencies.

They will share their key insights and experiences when delivering free and frank advice. Importantly, we'll be discussing what they have seen work well and how they've managed any challenges. We'll also discuss the skills and practices needed to deliver timely and effective advice, especially in the fast-paced environment we operate within.

After morning tea, Wayne Eagleson and Heather Simpson will provide that unique rare 9th floor perspective on the realities of political decision-making. Wayne and Heather both served Prime Ministers for nine years – collectively, that a total of 18 years as Chiefs of Staff. I'm very much looking forward to that session.

Role of senior leadership to foster free and frank advice, especially in election year

Whether you've had years of experience at the most senior level, or you're a newly minted Tier 3 or 4 in the policy space, it is worth continually reminding ourselves and our staff what good quality free and frank advice looks like in the real world.

2026 is a year like no other, in that it marks the end of the first term of New Zealand's first three-way coalition government.

This has been a unique model of governing, and the public service has navigated the challenges it has thrown up quite well.

It's been a key test for us as public servants, often being asked to develop policy advice that will land unevenly across party lines, or even across factions within parties.

As challenging as it's been, I expect the pressures will intensify over the course of the year, as the government focusses even more intently on delivery of its coalition agreement, and coalition parties look to differentiate themselves to the electorate.

The need for high quality, timely, free and frank advice will be a pressing as it has ever been. It's also important that we understand and face into the challenge, which is one of the reasons we've got this cohort together at this juncture. As a system, we are well placed to rise to this challenge – and we need to reassure ourselves of this as we redouble our efforts to ensure we provide Ministers with the advice they need to make good decisions over the course of the year.

None of us are alone – we can and do work together well, and we need to support each other this year in particular as we work

As as we think ahead to 2027, regardless of the election outcome, there will always be new ministerial relationships and new political priorities. Within that reality our commitment as a public service is to serve the government of day and to provide good quality evidence-based advice.

As part of our day-to-day role, it requires a commitment from senior leaders, from you and I, to create the environment where free and frank advice is prioritised. This includes ensuring our teams understand all the variables that feed into the provision of advice and the ongoing context we're operating within.

This also means giving our senior staff opportunities to see advice delivered in action and know what it looks like in practice to build and maintain the trust of Ministers. This Summit is another opportunity to reinforce and pass back those messages within our respective agencies.

So thank you for taking the time to attend today and prioritise this opportunity to connect with senior policy colleagues and hear from our experienced speakers and panellists.

Hand over to Janine for first session – panel discussion with Chief Executives

On that note, I'd now like to handover to Janine Smith who will chair the panel discussion on Free and Frank advice and why it matters.

Released under the Official Information Act 1982



Building policy capability across the Public Service – free and frank advice

As we head into an election year, it's particularly important that we as policy professionals are giving first best advice and maintaining our reputation as trusted advisors.

The Policy Project within DPMC recently supported the Head of the Policy Profession, Ben King, to host the inaugural Policy Leaders Summit as part of its work to strengthen policy capability across the Public Service.

The Summit provided an opportunity to bring together Public Service leaders to discuss key issues facing policymakers, with a focus on free and frank advice – what doing it well looks like and why it matters.

Why free and frank advice matters

Free and frank advice underpins policy performance and is a critical skill for policy practitioners. High-performing governments depend on honest, evidence-based advice to enable informed decisions, manage risk, and deliver on their priorities.

The Summit heard directly from ministers, current public sector chief executives, and former chiefs of staff for their insights on creating and delivering free and frank advice. Their perspectives provide valuable guidance for policy staff striving to deliver impactful and effective advice.

Policy advice should be:

1. Aware that ministers value honesty, clarity, and courage in advice, even if it challenges their views.

Prime Minister Christopher Luxon also emphasised the importance of free and frank advice, encouraging bold, ambitious options supported by clear execution strategies. "Execution beats strategy every day of the week," the Prime Minister stated. He stressed the need for monitoring and evaluation, urging policy leaders to "know your numbers" and keep track of what policies are working.

Minister Chris Bishop outlined his "Three Cs" of effective advice: credibility, clarity, and courage. Credibility is built on trusted relationships with ministers, clarity ensures advice is actionable, and courage involves being honest about trade-offs and gaps in information.

2. Politically neutral, evidence-based, and focused on actionable solutions.

Heather Simpson, former Chief of Staff to Helen Clark, and Wayne Eagleson, former Chief of Staff to John Key and Bill English, shared insights on political realities, from their combined 18 years of experience in the Prime Minister's Office.

They noted that post-election transitions can be challenging, as incoming ministers are still building subject expertise and clarity. It takes time to understand what they're asking of you and how advice can be delivered in the clearest way.

Above all, they emphasised that free and frank advice must focus on execution – ministers need to understand real-world impacts, supported by clear delivery plans and ongoing evaluation. New Zealand has room to improve in this area, putting greater focus on a practical delivery plan and monitoring and evaluating the impact.

3. Built on trust, confidence, and a clear understanding of the minister's needs.

Audrey Sonerson, Director-General of the Ministry of Health, highlighted that advice must be more than "thoughts and reckons." It should be supported by concrete evidence and strong explanations. For complex issues, deep technical expertise is essential to provide confident, well-informed answers.

Ray Smith, Director-General of MPI, advised public servants to focus on what is "relevant and real," aligning advice with ministers' priorities. This requires a strong relationship of trust and understanding between ministers and policy leaders.

Peter Mersi, Commissioner of Inland Revenue, encouraged policy professionals to "advise fearlessly and implement enthusiastically." He noted that while ministers may not always accept advice, public servants must continue to work with them to achieve their policy objectives. Honest advice, even when unfavourable, is a fundamental responsibility of policy professionals.

How can policy professionals improve their capabilities?

The Policy Project supports policy professionals through training and resources. Workshops on policymaking fundamentals and developing policy advice are available to help lift policy quality across the Public Service.

To stay connected with the Policy Project, you can do so through their training resources and online engagement:

Training and resources

- Leading workshops on policymaking fundamentals with our policy frameworks (on Policy Quality, Policy Skills and organisational Policy Capability)
- Peer reviewing action plans
- Running skill-building sessions

Stay connected:

- Website: [The Policy Project](#)
- Sign up to the Policy Project newsletter to stay up to date with our latest workshops, publications, and events: [Sign up for Policy Project Newsletters](#)
- LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/company/the-policy-project-nz](https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-policy-project-nz)