

Policy Leaders Summit 2026

Opening speech



Ben King

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

**E nga mana, e nga reo, e nga hoa e wha
Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.**

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 together senior policy leaders from across the Public Service 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
- 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.



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 sit 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.

Ultimately 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 latter 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 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 with 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 a total of 18 years as Chiefs of Staff.

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's 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 as we work.

Regardless of the election outcome in 2027, 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 the day and to provide good-quality evidence-based advice.

As part of our day-to-day role, it requires a commitment from senior leaders – and 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.

