Policy Research Topics Suggested by Government Agencies
For Fellows in Aotearoa New Zealand 2024

New Zealand government departments are consulted each year about what they consider their priority policy topics. These are the topics they would be particularly interested in having an Axford Fellow research. Each agencies list is dated to indicate when the most recent policy priorities were received./

Please note that this is not an exhaustive list of possible topics of enquiry for an Axford fellow but instead should be treated as a general guideline for key agency priority topics. You are welcome to suggest topics outside of this list, however this would be subject to the approval the individual agency.

Where possible, the Ian Axford Fellowship will assist you in identifying a relevant individual at your prospective host agency to discuss your potential project. In order to assist this process, please send your CV and a copy a brief outline of your intended research topic to fellowships@fulbright.org.nz. Please note that identifying a relevant contact can be lengthy, and therefore we recommend you begin this process at least three weeks prior to the application deadline to avoid disappointment. Unfortunately, the Ian Axford Fellowship is unable to guarantee assisting in finding a relevant contact at every agency.

Oranga Tamariki | Ministry for Children

True as of February 2023
- **Entrusting community organisations to deliver services:** What is best practice when delegating decision-making authority to community organisations to deliver child care and protection? What are the issues and risks? How do state-run systems compare with systems run by the community/NGOs?
- **Empowering front-line staff in the child care and protection system:** What is best practice for organising and supporting front-line staff in a child care and protection system? How do we strike the right balance between management oversight and front-line responsibility? What are the most effective investments that can be made in the child care and protection workforce?
- **Enhancing system supports**: How can government best support the child care and protection sector with the right information and performance systems, infrastructure and resources to facilitate locally-led innovation and improvement?
- **Improving out-of-home residential care:** What is best practice for the care of children with high and complex needs in residential care facilities staffed 24/7 (as opposed to foster care placements)?

Te Tari Taiwhenua | Department for Internal Affairs

True as of April 2022

- Regulating for future technology trends: legislation to regulate activity in areas like gambling and media content classification has traditionally been structured around exiting technologies. Increasingly, legislation of this nature needs to be able to be applied to as-yet-unknown technologies to avoid regulatory gaps. *How can policy-makers design durable legislative regimes that both foster the opportunities and manage the risks of newly emergent technologies in well-established sectors?*
- What are the barriers to a thriving, transparent and well-governed not-for-profit sector with strong public support?
- What are the best settings for funding, legal structures, tax incentives, and the role of regulators to help support the effective use of not-for-profit resources?
- Low voter turnout: In 2010 turnout was 49% and it has continued to decline to 41.4% in the recent 2019 local elections. Low voter turnout is often a symptom of low public engagement/interest in local government. *How do we reverse this decline and reengage citizens with local representation?*

Te Manatū Waka | Ministry of Transport

True as of January 2023

- What is the impact of transport network connectivity on economic productivity?

- What are the anticipated impacts of climate change on the transport system? What adaptation solutions can be best used to minimise these impacts?

- From a climate change perspective, how to enable and improve decision making as it relates to investment and disinvestment? More specifically, to consider (1) the prioritisation of mitigation vs adaptation, (2) the appropriate way to communicate and engage in decisions to invest/disinvest (particularly disinvest), and (3) the framework for coordinating decisions to invest/disinvest.

- How are people's perceptions, attitudes and values changing and what impact will they have on the transport system?

- How can we improve information on and understanding of Māori needs from, view and use of, and involvement in transport?

- How can access to public transport in rural communities be improved? It would be particularly pertinent to engage with individuals living in rural communities to assess the current limitations and needs for using public transport.

- How can we improve disabled people's access to, and use of, public transport?

- How can we improve the value chain of our supply chain and freight movements?

- Who should pay for what in the land transport system? What is the impact of different revenue models on revenue sustainability and other transport outcomes?

- What are the primary drivers of demand for travel in private vehicles, and how much of the demand for travel in private vehicles could be met through other, low-emissions modes of transport?

- What is the influence of infrastructure type and availability on active travel?

- What are the impacts prescription drugs, including medicinal cannabis, have on safety outcomes in the transport sector?

- What are the sources and types of health impacts from transport? How do we quantify the cost to human health?

- What impacts do transport mode choice and transport journey times have on mental health outcomes?
- What are the future technologies that could change the way the transport system operates and what impact (including unintended consequences) might they have?

Tāhū o te Ture| Ministry of Justice

True as of January 2023

- Considering the operation of solutions-focused courts and therapeutic judging in the justice system, and their impact on offenders, victims, community safety and legitimacy.
- Considering how justice systems can work harmoniously with indigenous systems of values/laws, using case studies to illustrate. Could use Te Ao Mārama as a case study.
- Consider the contribution of the rule of law and/or human rights to the economy.
- Consider how other jurisdictions have found ways to make economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights legally enforceable, including accessible complaints mechanisms and their application to the administrative actions of government bodies.
- An analysis of the effect of disinformation on the legitimacy of government action. What does that suggest for interventions to reduce the impacts of disinformation and promoting trust in government?
- An analysis of voter disengagement. What do we understand about the causes of voter disengagement, and what is the impact of voter disengagement on the legitimacy of the laws made by Parliament?
- The links between social exclusion and extremism, and how to counter them.

Manatū Kaupapa Waonga | Ministry of Defence

True as of January 2023

The Ministry of Defence is New Zealand's civilian defence agency, and provides advice to Government to support well-informed decisions about the defence of New Zealand and its interests.

Defence Assessment 2021: he moana pukepuke e ekengia e te waka/a rough sea can still be navigated was released in December 2021, and provides the Ministry's perspective on New Zealand's strategic environment and its implications on New Zealand's defence policy settings.

The Assessment concludes that the dual challenges of strategic competition and the impacts of climate change, particularly in the Pacific, will have the greatest impact on New Zealand's security interests in the next 20 years. These interests are:
- A secure, sovereign, and resilient New Zealand;
- A stable and secure region in which New Zealand has the freedom to act in support of shared interests and values;
- A strong international rules-based system, centred on multilateralism and liberal democratic values;
- A strong network of international security relationships, partnerships, and alliances.

To respond to the more challenging strategic environment, the Assessment recommended that New Zealand should adopt a more proactive defence policy approach.

The Ministry is interested in any research or analysis on the key themes explored within the Assessment, and on how New Zealand's defence policy should be shaped to best promote and protect New Zealand's security today and into the future. In particular, researchers may wish to focus on:

- The impacts of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on New Zealand's security interests;
- The impacts of increased tensions across the Taiwan Strait on New Zealand's security interests;
- Strategic competition in the Pacific, and its intersection with other security challenges, including climate change;
- The impacts of climate change in the Pacific and its intersection with other security challenges;
- The role of space, cyber and military capabilities when considering strategic competition, particularly in the Pacific and Indo-Pacific;
- The impact of technologies on New Zealand's security interests, particularly in the Pacific and Indo-Pacific.

Te Manatū Whakahiato Ora| Ministry of Social Development

True as of January 2023

The Ministry of Social Development is the Government's primary source of advice on social development. The Ministry supports Ministers across seven portfolios – Social Development, Disability Issues, Seniors, Youth, Revenue, Veterans and Employment.

Topics of interest for research are:

- Improved understanding and modelling of labour market challenges and future economic risks (including recessions automation, low productivity, lack of job security and modest wage growth) for people requiring employment support from the government.
- Improved understanding of the barriers to employment and the factors influencing them. What is the impact of housing and transport issues, childcare, access to income support, lack of education and training, and discrimination? How do these barriers impact individuals with a disability or health condition?
- Approaches to better partner with Māori to address ongoing disproportionate adverse social outcomes, including unemployment, low pay, and lower life expectancy.
- What do the income trajectories of New Zealanders look like and how do these vary by family structure, disability or health condition, and ethnicity across lifespan? What approaches could be taken to tackle intergenerational poverty and poor social outcomes?
- How well does the income support system provide income protection for people in new forms of work – casual, non-standard hours, zero hours contracts, 'gig' economy work, self-employed?
- What factors influence the need for housing support and how have these changed over time? How do these factors vary in different areas and for different groups?
- Understanding the relationship between accessing housing support, income support, and employment support. Exploring the degree of interdependency between each of them and how to ensure better outcomes for people accessing them.
- How can technological innovations support new and innovative approaches to the way New Zealanders receive social services (including income support)?
- Approaches for using and building on existing social development networks and resources to support long-term community, regional and economic development.
- New approaches for supporting older people to maintain a full range of social and economic participation in community and civic life.

- How is social cohesion changing over time in NZ, what is driving these changes and how can we build social cohesion among people who are socially isolated? How does Te Tiriti and/or Te Ao Māori underpin social cohesion?
- What has been the impact of COVID-19 on material and social wellbeing outcomes, and how is the resulting economic environment (with high inflation) impacting on in-work poverty?

These are complex issues that will not be resolved by one agency working in isolation. Sustainable, long-term solutions will involve cross-agency work from a number of government agencies as well as greater partnerships with other players, including service providers, community groups, iwi, Māori organisations and employers.

Te Kawa Mataaho | Public Service Commission
True as of February 2023

The Public Service Commission's mission is to deliver high performing State Services working as one to achieve priority results for New Zealanders. They are very interested in comparative work on the direction of change in public management in New Zealand and a United States jurisdiction (or jurisdictions).

- Methods for **organising around the specific needs of a local community** (i.e. place-based initiatives) within the context of organisations with varying levels of devolved hierarchies (e.g. national level government departments, local government, and/or NGO/private sector).
- Methods for **organising around the needs of individual complex cases** that span multiple service areas (e.g. health, social, education, justice), including how central government can promote and enable (goal directed) networks, support data and informational needs, and share and diffuse lessons.
- Exploring agencification and the use of **arms-length bodies** (e.g. Crown Entities, State-Owned Enterprises): performance advantages/disadvantages of arms-length bodies versus departments of the legal Crown; the relationship between governance practices (particularly board governance) and performance; and navigating the balance between autonomy and alignment with government direction.
- How can government **promote public service** as an exciting and noble profession? Despite having one of the best regarded and highest performing public sectors in the world, survey data suggests most New Zealanders would prefer to work in the private and/or NGO sectors. How can we be more attractive to New Zealanders who want to make a difference?
- A permanent **politically neutral** civil service. New Zealand's State Sector Act requires a politically neutral civil service that provide free, frank and full advice to Government. These provisions have reportedly become eroded in some comparable jurisdictions, and some commentators fear they may be under threat in New Zealand. This project would explore the advantages/disadvantages of a permanent politically neutral civil service delivering free and frank advice, and policy options relating to this question (including legislative reform).
- **Cross-agency governance**. New Zealand has used various cross-agency governance arrangements to manage crosscutting issues for over 15 years, with varying success. We are currently pursuing various options for collective accountability and consensus decision-making. We would be interested in any research project that would advance our understanding of how to set effective governance arrangements, decision-rights, resourcing, and accountability, for problems that span agency boundaries.
- Options for **managing fragmentation** of the public service. New Zealand has a relatively large number of government departments (currently ~30); this means some problems require up to a dozen departments to work together. New Zealand has used a variety of cross-agency governance arrangements to manage these problems, but there would be some benefit in

considering alternate models. This could include fewer, larger department; tiered arrangements (senior versus junior ministers and department chief executives); subsidiary departments, etc. *(This topic would suit a shorter, 3-5 month Fellowship)*.

- **Leadership development and deployment**, including methods for providing leaders with a variety of leadership experiences. New Zealand has a relatively decentralised model of leadership development (compared to, for example, the Senior Executive Service model used in Australia and elsewhere). There have been various attempts at encouraging the identification of high-potential leaders and deploying them where they are needed, or where they will be exposed to development opportunities, but these currently compete with the incentives for departments to hold onto their best talent.
- Approaches to facilitating **public participation** in government policymaking and service design that have been successful internationally (e.g. representative deliberative processes) and how these might be adapted to the New Zealand context, including potential challenges or barriers to implementing these in New Zealand and how this might be overcome.
- Implications of **centralisation vs decentralisation** of back-office functions (e.g. human resources, property, information technology) within civil or public services internationally. We would be interested in how centralisation (e.g. managed centrally or through strong central controls) or decentralisation (freedom for individual departments or agencies) affects performance, and how possible downsides of each approach can be managed (e.g. mechanisms for increased discretion/coordination).

Manatū Taonga | Ministry for Culture and Heritage

True as of January 2023

Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage supports the arts, heritage, media and sports so that culture in Aotearoa New Zealand thrives.

- It is the government's principal advisor on the cultural system.
- It funds, monitors and supports a range of cultural agencies
- It invests in the wider cultural system to support a sustainable sector, capability and skills, and innovation
- It directly delivers a range of high quality cultural products and services.

A thriving cultural sector in 2040 will look like this:

- Culture is inclusive and reflective, supporting people to connect and engage with each other, their community and society.
- Māori culture is recognised, valued and embraced by New Zealanders.
- People can access and are participating in cultural activities and experiences.
- Cultural activity is valued, supported and nurtured.
- The cultural system is resilient and sustainable

Priority topics for 2024:
- Sustainable funding... and sustainable sector – regulating and supporting the gig economy
- What does a resilient sector look like in a post-pandemic world?
- What does an inclusive cultural system accessible to all look like in New Zealand in the 21st century inclusive of digital and physical components? What is equitable access?
- What is the comparative global context of cultural systems embedding an indigenous world view and practices? What can New Zealand learn from this?

- What is effective collaboration in the cultural system and what features of collaboration deliver better outcomes for the sector and New Zealanders?
- The value of arts, culture and heritage – what is 'value', and how do we know?
- How can public policy stimulate innovation in arts, media, heritage sectors? What works and what should be avoided?

Hikina Whakatutuki | Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment

True as of January 2023

- Transitions:
    - what transition pathways can best foster progress towards a high wage, inclusive, sustainable, resilient, and low emissions economy?
    - how to design and implement policies that help mitigate, and at the same time allow business, communities, and Treaty of Waitangi partners to adapt, to the effects of Climate Change?
- Partnership with Māori – how can government agencies best partner with Māori to support Māori iwi-led or co-designed solutions?
- Regulatory stewardship – how can the use of data, insights and intelligence be enhanced to lift regulatory systems assurance and performance?
- Business dynamism and wellbeing – from a wellbeing perspective, how do we think about New Zealand's many small, old, low-productivity firms (especially in regions)?
- Firms and workers in the digital age – what is the effect of digital technologies on firms and workers, including new technologies such as blockchain?

Te Tai Ōhanga | The Treasury

True as of April 2022

- A project looking at the rise of wellbeing-oriented impact assessments in key jurisdictions, and what lessons could be applied to the development of the Cost-Benefit Analysis machinery in NZ. This could be focused on natural capital, or other domains as case studies.
- The role of high urban land prices driving housing unaffordability, and how it is affected by different supply and demand policies (eg, local government incentives, infrastructure supply, mortgage finance etc).
- How NZ could replicate the USA as the only country that enables local governments to issue both revenue bonds and general obligations debts that are truly separate to the satisfaction of credit rating agencies.
- How might climate change affect macroeconomic stability and how can we adapt our macro frameworks now to be able to effectively deal with climate change in coming years.
- What are the macroeconomic effects of social unemployment insurance and macroprudential policies (e.g. how do these policies alter the contribution of shocks to macroeconomic variations)?
- How have macroeconomic policies performed during COVID – including the way in which fiscal policy responded and whether the monetary policy dual mandate led to different outcomes than a mandate focused solely on price stability?
- Building our evidence base on supply chain resilience. This would take the vulnerable supply chains analysis from Australian Productivity Commission and apply the framework to NZ data. It would assess at HS6 level the extent to which NZ's exports and imports are concentrated in particular markets. Further lenses to apply are the extent to which these products are 'essential' and 'critical'. The latter could include engagement with agencies and external stakeholders. This is a quantitative exercise and would need someone comfortable with working in the data, as well as engaging with MFAT, DPMC and other interested parties.

- Understanding the distributional impacts of the fiscal and monetary policy response to COVID. This project would produce a report that reviews the global and NZ evidence on how fiscal and monetary policy that aimed to reduce the economic impacts of COVID-19 altered income and wealth distribution after the pandemic. It would require engagement with the OECD, IMF, academics, and policy makers to develop a framework to assess the effects, review the evidence to date and signal where future effort should be focused.
- International comparison/review of **studies around the interactions between wages and low-emissions economies**. NZ is driving towards a high-wage, low-emissions economy – what evidence is there around the world of how these goals are complementary to one another and where, in international experience, have barriers been identified. To what extent have solutions been identified to these barriers and how effective are they?
- **Quantifying the physical impacts of climate change (scoping development of a damage function for NZ climate impacts)**: We expect to see a wide-ranging set of physical impacts from a changing climate. How could we quantify what these impacts may be or, at a high-level, develop a structure for the structural impacts of these changes on the economy in a way that reflects heterogeneity in regions and sectors?
    - This could be supported by a scan of how 'economic climate damage functions' are being developed in relation to individual countries, drawing on international example. 'Damage functions' are a hallmark of integrated assessment models and support IPCC modelling, but when it comes to a specific country, is there something we can say about the structure of the impacts on the economy that might be unique to NZ.

Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga|The Ministry of Education
True as of April 2022

The Ministry of Education is interested to see research that addresses excellence and equity in the education system. It is important that scholars learn about Te Tiriti o Waitangi and apply this to their research.

In the early learning sector
- How can we identify and measure the quality of teaching and learning in ECE services? What are useful measures of quality? What does good teacher practice look like? How do they contribute to long term wellbeing outcomes?

In the schooling sector
- What are the characteristics of useful partnerships with parents to provide quality teaching and connections in the schooling sector? How do schools and teachers achieve these partnerships?
- New Zealand has one of the highest rates of bullying behaviours in international studies. What interventions have the greatest success in reducing these types of behaviours and what can we learn from other countries' experiences?
- What makes school governance more effective at raising the quality of teaching and learning? Does our current approach to governance reinforce inequities in this system and if so, what can be done to improve it? Can co-governance models with indigenous communities' help?

Across sectors
- How can our education system successfully incorporate a diversity of knowledge systems, especially indigenous knowledge systems? What can we learn from other countries? What are we doing well already and what can we improve on?

Addressing workforce challenges

- What is international best practice around supporting access to a broad curriculum and appropriate expertise across the breadth of New Zealand schools, particularly thinking of low decile, small and rural schools? Can we learn from other countries how we can incorporate blended learning to provide this expertise?
- How can teachers be best supported to connect to the identity, language and culture of children? How will we measure the value of the support to understand whether it is making a difference?

Building resilience using the COVID experiences

- What does effective, high quality online learning look like in schooling and/or tertiary education? How can/should government policy and sector practice shift to reflect international best practice?
- How do we improve student engagement (not just attendance) following COVID and longer term into the future? How does opportunity to learn interact with this?
- How can the design and use of school spaces contribute to reduced infection transmission and provide better health and learning outcomes? Areas of focus could include ventilation, temperature, lighting, space, and acoustics to improve learning environments

Transitions between school, tertiary education and employment

- What models of partnership between tertiary education institutions and employers are most effective at preparing students for success in the workplace (particularly success as Māori) and at meeting employers' skills needs, with a particular focus on Māori learners and learners underserved in education and training?

Te Papa Atawhai |Department of Conservation

True as of January 2023

A key priority for the Department of Conservation is the **improved understanding and prioritisation of nature-based solutions as part of our New Zealand's climate adaption policy.** Research areas within this could include:
- Spatial analysis of NZ ecosystems (on and off PCL) and an assessment of potential:
  - climate adaptation (NbS) and mitigation opportunities;
  - climate impacts of ecological restoration;
  - biodiversity implications of different management options for post-retreat land; and
  - social and cultural impacts of climate change and adaptation measures, including public access and amenity
- Analysis of national and international best practice for nature-based solutions for climate change adaptation

Research in this area would require GIS analysis and therefore would benefit from collaboration with other key agencies (such as Land Information New Zealand, Ministry for the Environment and Victoria University of Wellington).

- **How does the relationship between income poverty and material hardship vary for priority groups, including tamariki Māori, and children in Pacific and disabled households?**
  - Why are disparities evident on material hardship measures, but not after housing cost measures of child poverty, for some priority sub-populations?
  - Is there any evidence that particular targeted interventions can help to reduce material hardship rates for certain groups?
  - What do people who live in material hardship say would make the biggest difference to exiting material hardship? (qualitative research project)
- **How do income increases impact material hardship rates?**
  - What policy-modifiable factors (incomes, in-kind supports etc) make the biggest difference to material hardship rates?
  - Can the impacts of income supports and other policies on material hardship rates be robustly modelled, in the same way that income poverty rates are currently modelled?
  - How does the relationship between income and material hardship vary for different groups?
- **Refining the measurement and monitoring of child poverty and socio-economic disadvantage**
  - What are the statistical properties of the DEP-17 measure? Does this measure continue to be reliable, unidimensional, predictively valid etc?
  - How and to what extent are measures of material wellbeing/ material hardship biased by inflation perceptions?
- **Social and emotional skills**
  - What is best practice in supporting the development of social and emotional skills?
  - What emerging practice shows promise?
  - What measurement constructs could help us understand progress in the development of social and emotional skills?