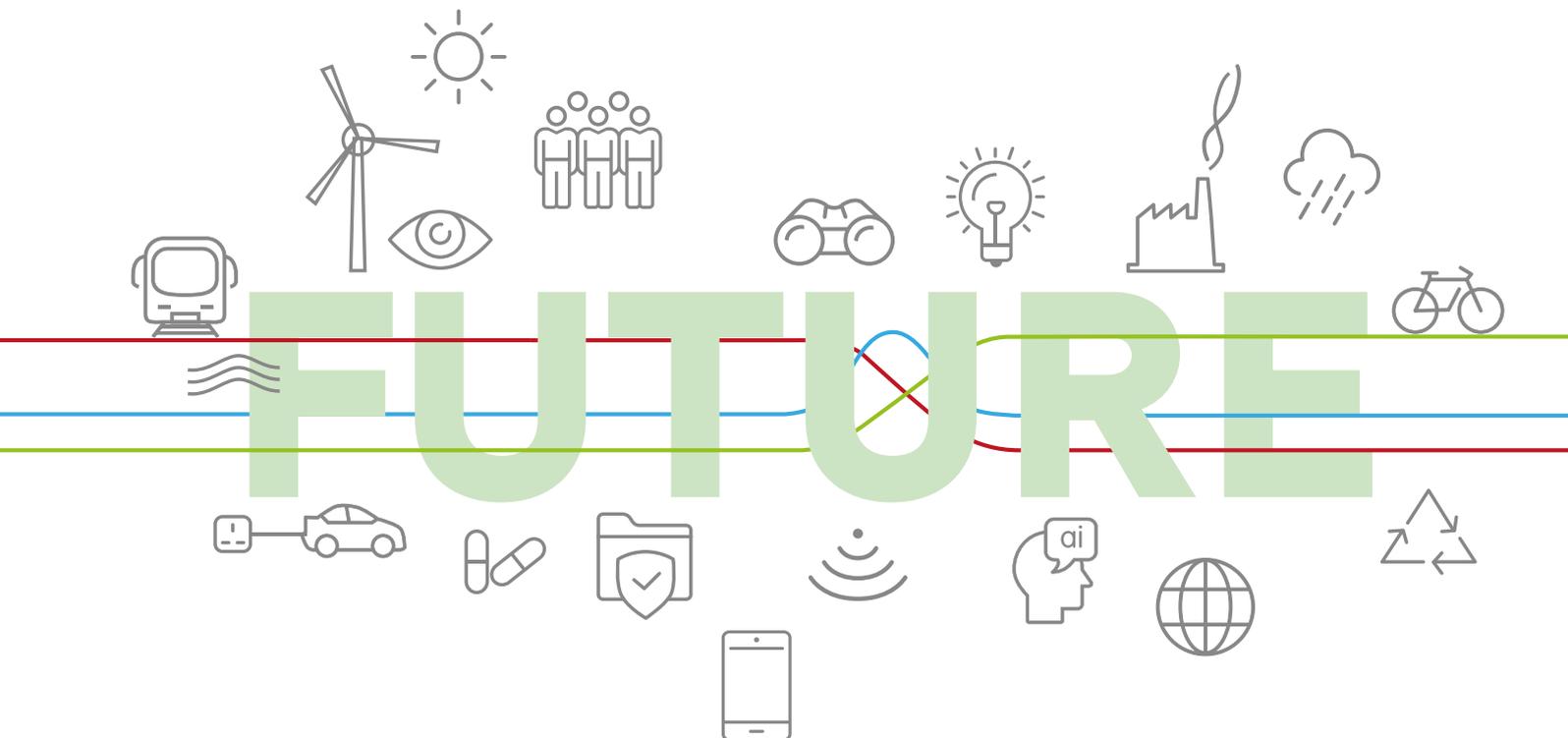


# Three horizons:

A toolkit to help you  
think and plan for the long-term



## What is the three horizons?

It is a framework that helps people to think and plan for the longer term rather than being so stuck in the here and now that they miss opportunities, don't spot risks or make decisions that don't stand the test of time.

### Who is this toolkit for?

Anyone who is involved in making decisions that need to consider the future and future generations, like public bodies in Wales with duties under the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

### Why would you use it?

To think about how and why the way things are currently done is not fit for purpose, in what ways emerging trends might shape the future, what an ideal future should look like and the kinds of visionary actions that are needed to get closer to that future.

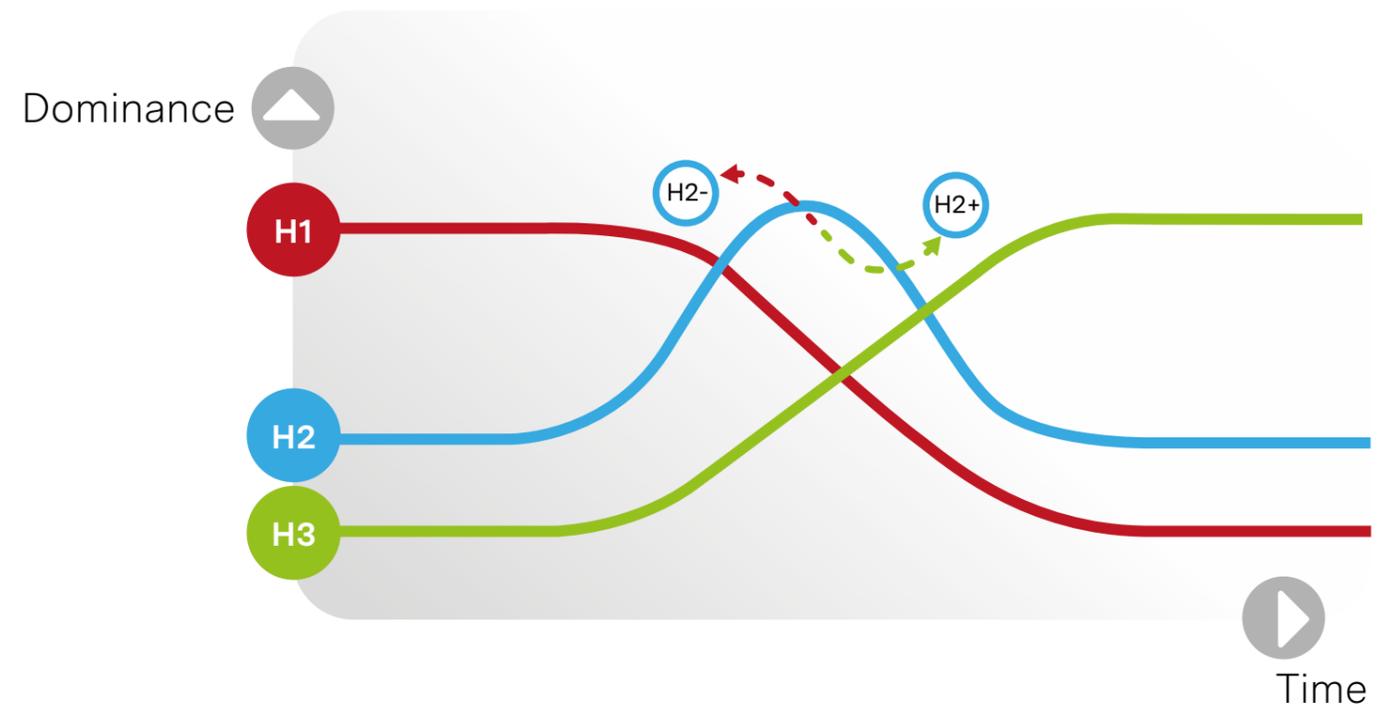
### What do you need?

The model is straightforward and intuitive. You can work alone or with a group. You can use this technique if you are short on time and have a shoestring budget, or you can use it for more in-depth discussions and workshops.

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## The three horizons model



### The model can be applied to any issue to help think about:

**The need for the current situation to change** (Horizon 1)

**A vision for the future** (Horizon 3)

**Ideas for how to get there from where we are now** (Horizon 2)

### It can also be used to think about how things may change over time:

**Horizon 1: right now, current trends and issues**

**Horizon 2: emerging trends**

**Horizon 3: trends that might dominate the future, competing visions**

### Or consider the different perspectives of stakeholders in any change processes:

**Horizon 1: the 'Power Holder'**

**Horizon 2: the 'Innovator'**

**Horizon 3: the 'Visionary'**

The model is particularly powerful **when used in a workshop setting** because it can draw together different knowledge and perspectives to build a shared vision of the future they want to work towards and the steps that are needed to get there. It can also help people to see the role that all three horizons can play in bringing about change.

**Often the process is more important than the product.** However, the model is also very visual and can be an excellent way to summarise an issue or illustrate a point about the future in a single image.

# How do I explain it?

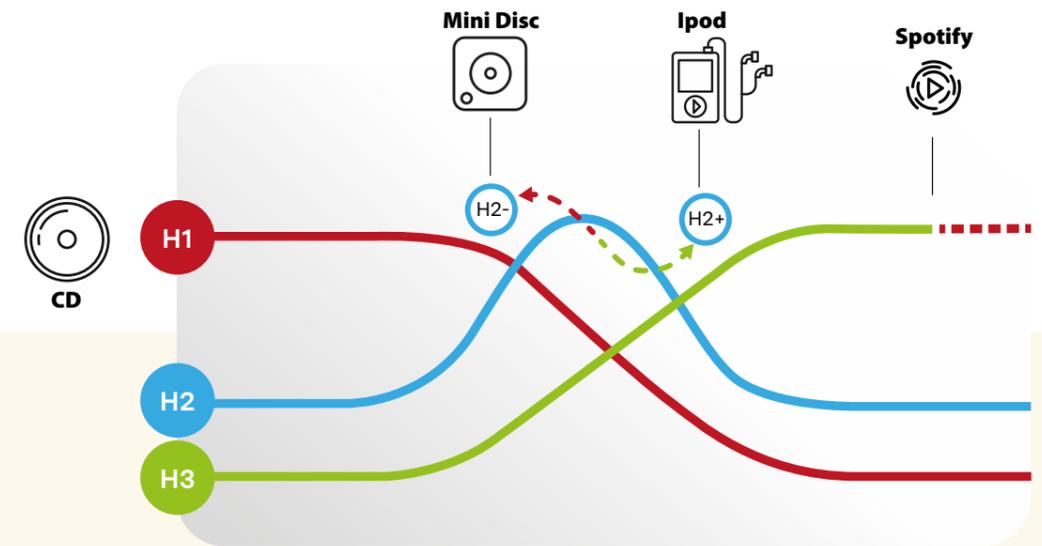
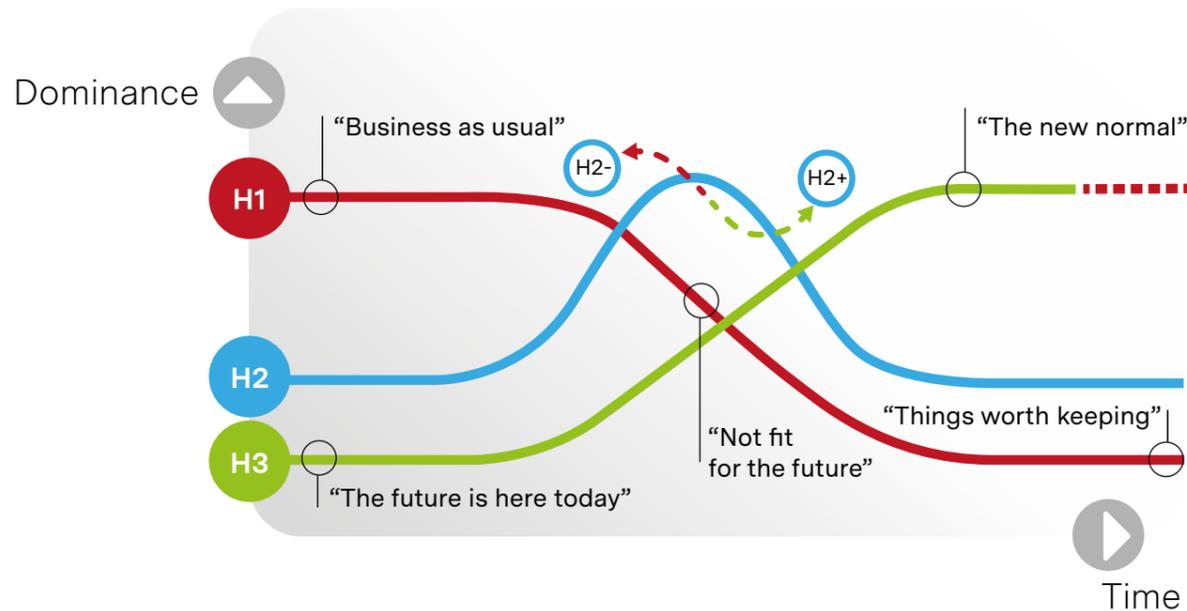
The model is essentially a graph that looks at how ‘dominant’ a way of working is and how that might change over time...

**Horizon 1** is the most dominant way of doing things right now – the current situation. The model assumes that this way of working cannot last. That the cracks are showing, that things will move on and it needs to adapt, or that it is already failing. The model shows this way of working declining over time, although there may be some bits of this old way of doing things that are worth keeping in the future.

**Horizon 3** is the way we want things to work in the future. This is the vision. It may be that pockets of this way of working are already happening on the fringes. The model shows how, over time, this becomes the new normal and almost everyone will be working this way. Eventually, though, it may also become the new Horizon 1 – the chances are things won’t stand still and the best way of doing things will need to adapt and change.

**Horizon 2** are the innovations that help make the shift from Horizon 1 to Horizon 3. There are always new ideas and ways of doing things being tested out. Sometimes these are just small experiments but sometimes, for a while, they can become the most common way of working.

There are two types of innovations. **H2+** innovations are those that genuinely move on from Horizon 1 and make Horizon 3 more likely. On the other hand, **H2-** innovations are the ‘sticking plasters’ that either just prop up a failing Horizon 1 or get absorbed into it and end up losing all their innovative power. Even great ideas can become H2- if they aren’t treated in the right way.



## Music on the move *example*

In this example it is still the early 1990s, and the **CD** is the most common way to listen to music on the move – it is **Horizon 1**.

But in 1992, the **MiniDisc** was first released. This was a **Horizon 2** innovation – it was smaller than a CD and was “virtually unshockable”, unlike the pesky CD player. For a (very short) while, this felt like the future of personal music.

But that feeling didn’t last long because another **Horizon 2** innovation, the **iPod**, was released in 2001. Suddenly music was fully digital and you could carry thousands of songs on a single unit.

We all thought that was it, until the first music **streaming services** started to appear, like Spotify in 2008 – our current **Horizon 3**.

Looking back we can see that the **MiniDisc** was an **H2- innovation** as it didn’t really change the system. Whereas the **iPod** was an **H2+ innovation** as it opened the door to fully digitalised music. But even then, how many people still use an iPod today?

And who knows how long it will be before **Spotify** becomes another **Horizon 1**?

## Worked examples and how to make your own.

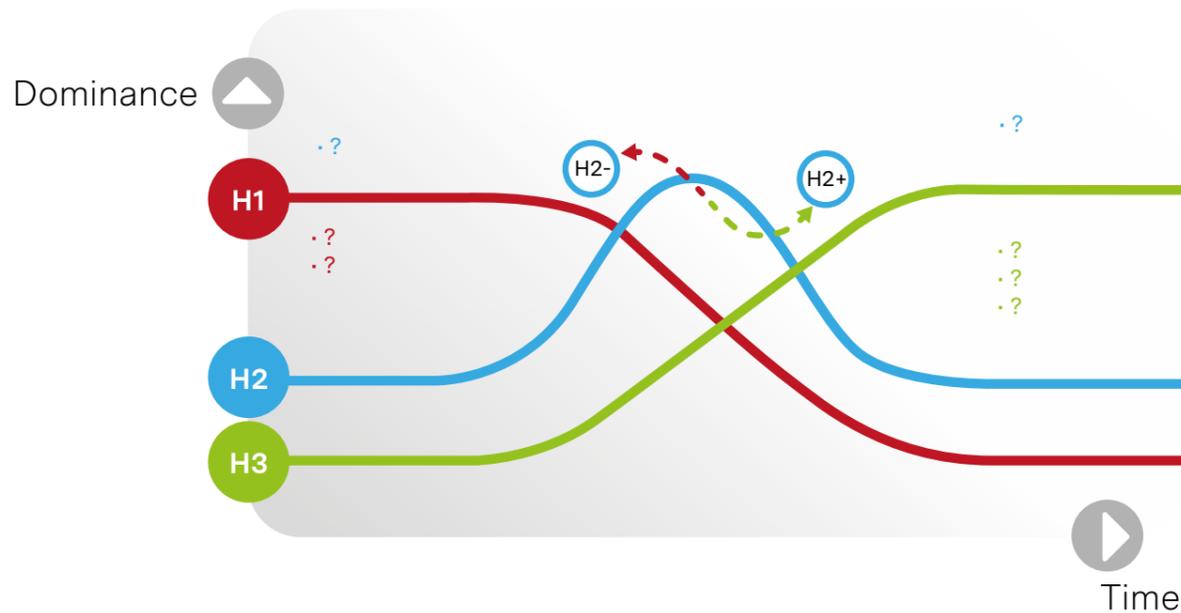
Illustrative examples like this can be great for helping people to understand the model by using examples from their world that they can relate to.

To make your own, all you have to do is answer three questions:

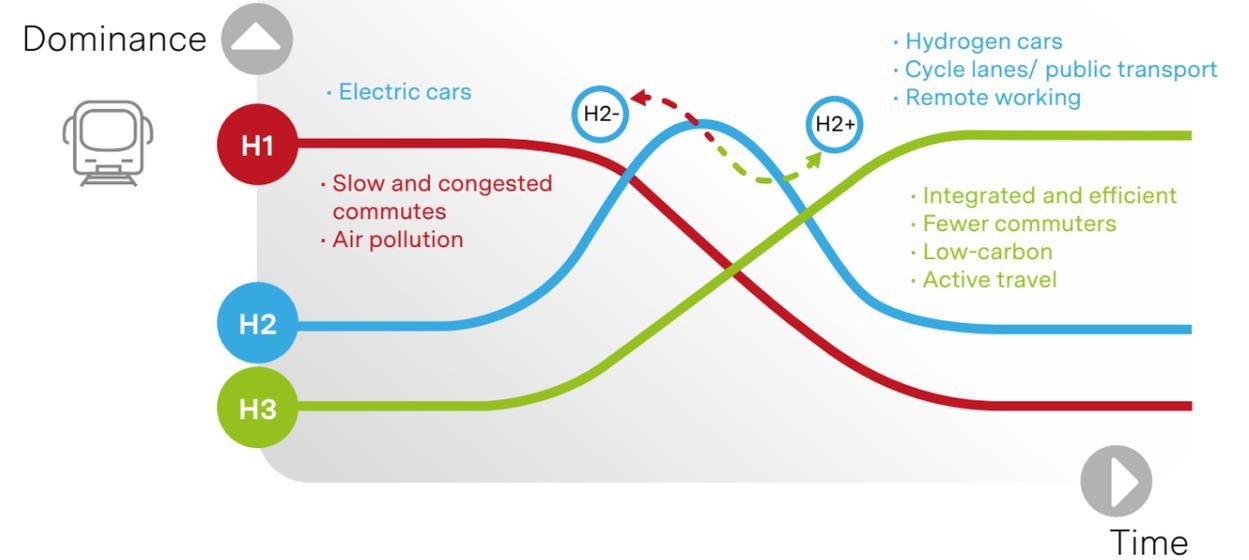
**Horizon 1** What points do I want to make about why the current situation needs to change?

**Horizon 2** What ideas do I want to pick out that I think are just sticking plasters (H2-) versus truly transformational ones (H2+)?

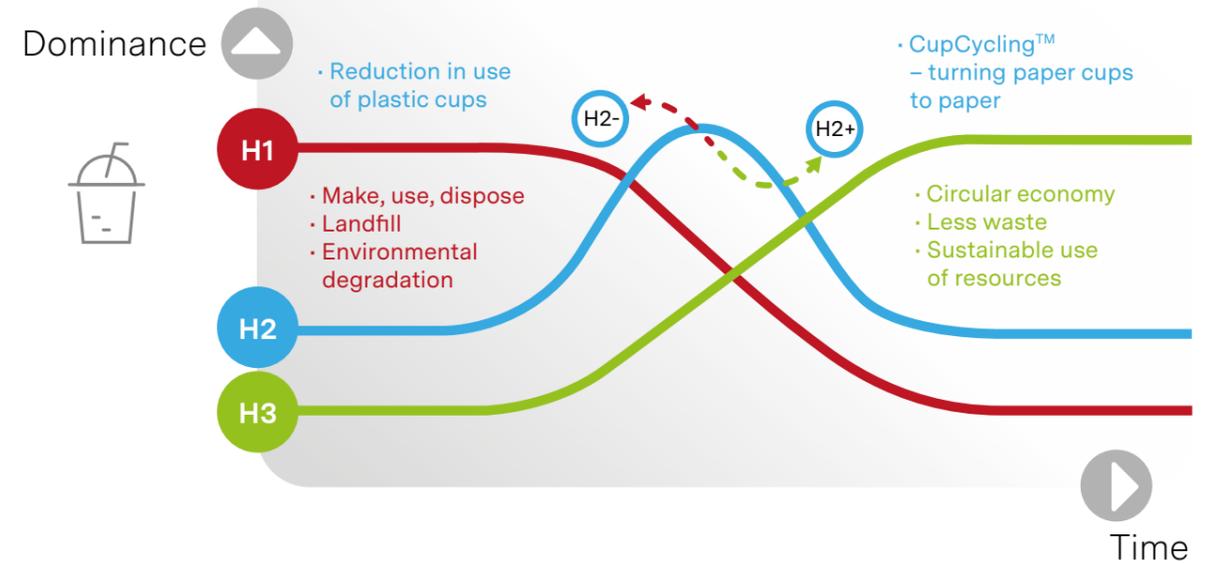
**Horizon 3** What do I want to highlight as elements of the future I think we should be aiming for?



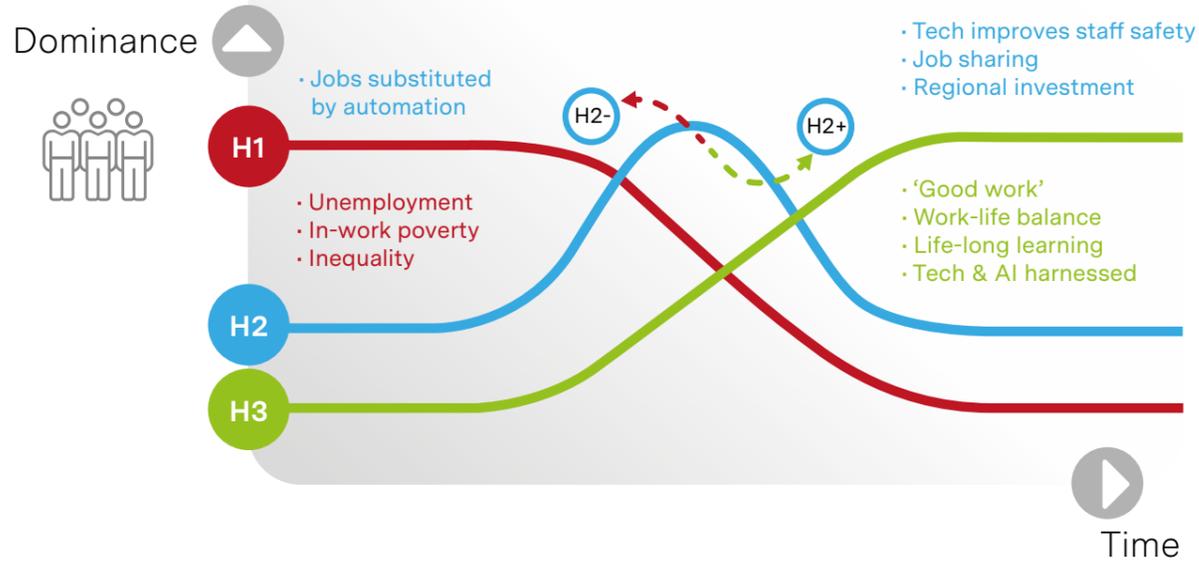
## Transport



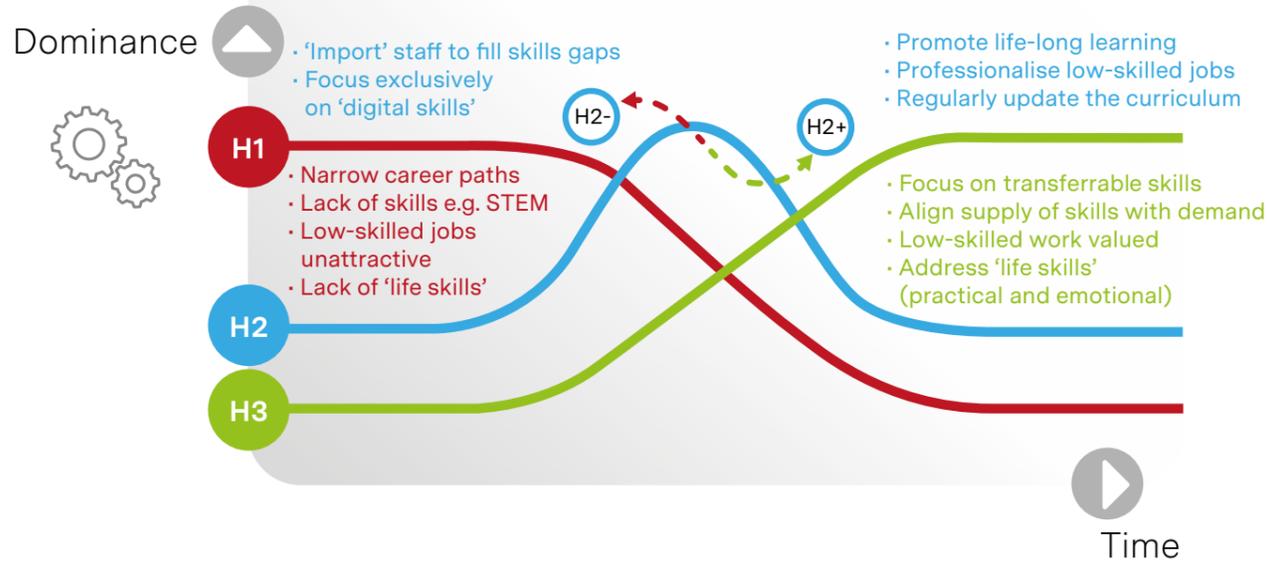
## Plastics



## Jobs



## Skills



## The 'voices' of the three horizons.

A completely different way to use the three horizons model is to imagine each of the horizons as having their own 'voice' or 'mindset'...

### Horizon 1 is the "Power Holder".

They are the ones in charge of how things are currently done. They are probably the ones holding the purse strings or making sure targets are met. The chances are they also feel pressed for time and resources; like they are constantly fire-fighting and have no head-space for anything else.

It is obvious **how quickly these voices could clash** but by better understanding the valid perspectives they bring it can be possible to **have more positive conversations** and make sure that the future needs are factored into today's decisions.

### Horizon 2 is the "Innovator".

They are the ones with all the big ideas and who can see how things could be better if only they were able to have a say. The problem is they just can't seem to get the funding or the space to reach their potential or make an impact on a big enough scale.

### Horizon 3 is the "Visionary".

They can picture a perfect world and are very passionate about trying to make that happen. Granted, what it will take is a complete overhaul of the way things are currently done – but it would be worth it!

If we want to make progress towards a better future, it is helpful to remember that **all three of these voices are likely to be found in every meeting room we walk into** – and even within ourselves! We may find ourselves drawn to a particular mindset because of our role, for example, or torn between different voices at the same time or in different circumstances.



## How can I use it?

The **three horizons model** can be used in a number of ways and with varying levels of detail...

It can be **great just to use on your own**. It can help you to quickly visualise an issue into the long-term, interrogate whether your efforts are focused in the right place to affect change or to help make a point in a presentation or report ([see page 6](#)).

However, it is important to remember that populating the model is a very subjective exercise. For example, whether an idea is H2+ or H2- is a decision you have to make and justify. That is why the model is **most effective when used by a group** - in a workshop, for example ([see page 11](#)).

At best, using the model as a group helps create a shared understanding of the current problems, desirable future and steps to get there. At worst, it flags up differences in opinion about the status quo, or what initiatives are the best to achieve change – or even different ideas of what ideal future they should be working towards.

The model can also help us to **better understand the perspectives** of others, so that we are more likely to be able to achieve consensus and agree what action is needed ([see page 14](#)).

Finally, it can also help to collectively identify the **trends that may shape an issue into the future**, rather than just those whose effects are already playing out. This can help build consensus around the need to take pre-emptive action ([see page 20](#)).

The model is a valuable tool because of the way it **provokes high-quality conversations**. This is likely to be of more enduring value than spending too long trying to produce a comprehensive, annotated version of the model.



**Workshops to explore the future** and plan how to get there.

A three horizons workshop can be held by asking the four questions below.

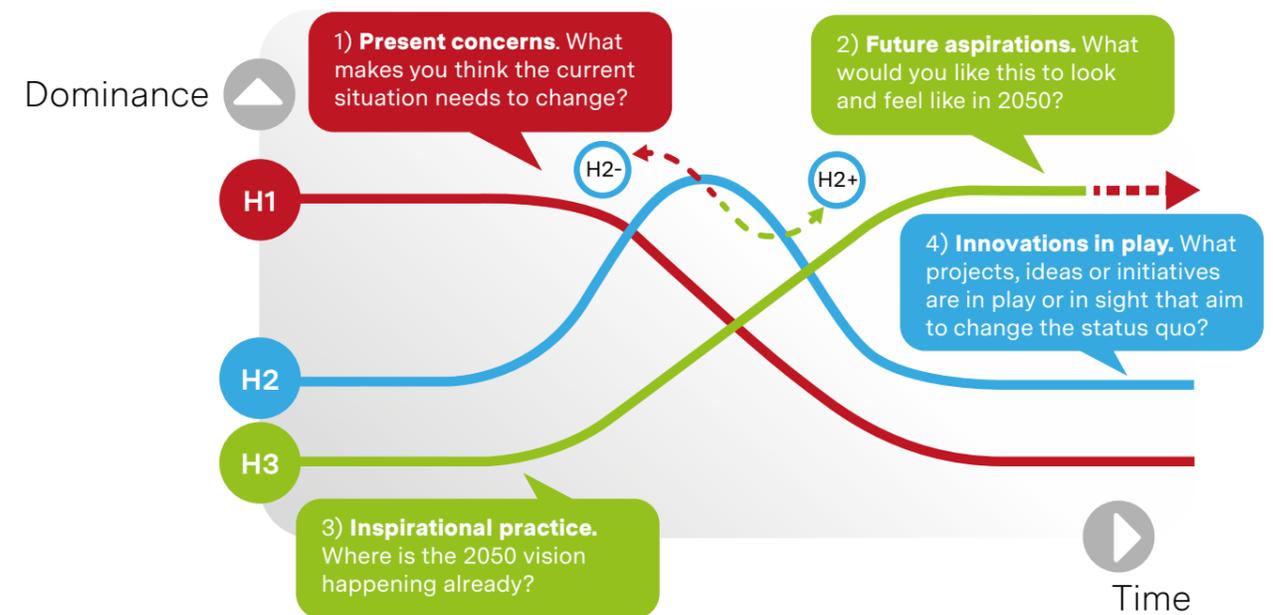
This type of workshop **can be done in as little as 30 minutes** (5 minutes for each question and 10 for feedback). This will only give you something very high-level but it will still be informative for you and engaging for your audience.

Alternatively, if you want something more detailed, you can leave groups to discuss each question for longer and/or provide evidence and materials to inform their discussions.

You could also use the model to **ask additional questions**, for example:

- What elements of Horizon 1 should we keep in the future?
- Is this innovation H2+ or H2-?
- What trends may influence Horizon 2 and 3 that could take our plan for change off-course?

An example of **how to tailor the questions** to a topic is [on page 12](#) using skills. The materials you will need are described [on page 13](#).



## How do I tailor questions to a topic area and use them in a workshop setting?

The below gives an example of how the questions could be tailored to explore the future of skills.

1) **Present concerns.** What makes you think the current situation needs to change?

2) **Future aspirations.** What would you like this to look and feel like in 2050?

3) **Inspirational practice.** Where is the 2050 vision happening already?

4) **Innovations in play.** What projects, ideas or initiatives are in play or in sight that aim to change the status quo?

Identify **three key trends** that make you think that the situation in Wales related to skills will need to change and next to it explain **why** that makes you think things **need to change**.

Can you give some **specifics** about what the situation related to skills would **ideally look like in 2050** – perhaps referencing the trends you identified.

Identify **one or two examples**, from anywhere in the world, where the **2050 vision is happening now**, even in just a small way.

In **Wales** only, identify **three projects in progress** at the moment that aims to improve the current situation.

## What materials will I need?

Because the model is very visual, having things **in the right colours** can really help people to get into it and make for a good output.

You will probably want:

- Flip chart paper or similar, for drawing on.
- A thick red, blue, green and black marker pen to create a grid, something like the image below on the flip chart paper ready for people to complete.
- Three colours of post-it notes, ideally orange or pink (for H1); blue (for H2) and green (for H3).
- Thinner black marker pens so people can write legibly on the post-it notes.

**Fewer words on fewer post-it notes is best** – try to keep it tight. That way a photo of the output can go straight into a report.

You may want to consider using the ‘Pixar storyboard’ method for getting groups to feedback on their discussions. This involves filling in the blanks in the following...

Once upon a time...

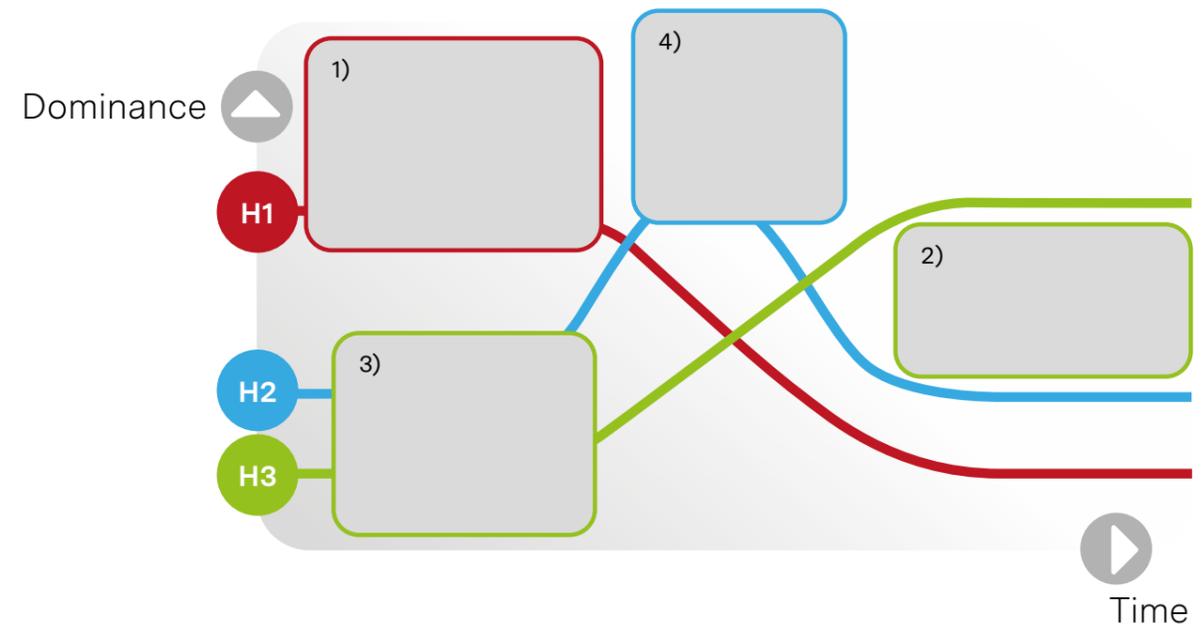
Every day...

Then one day...

Because of that....

Because of that....

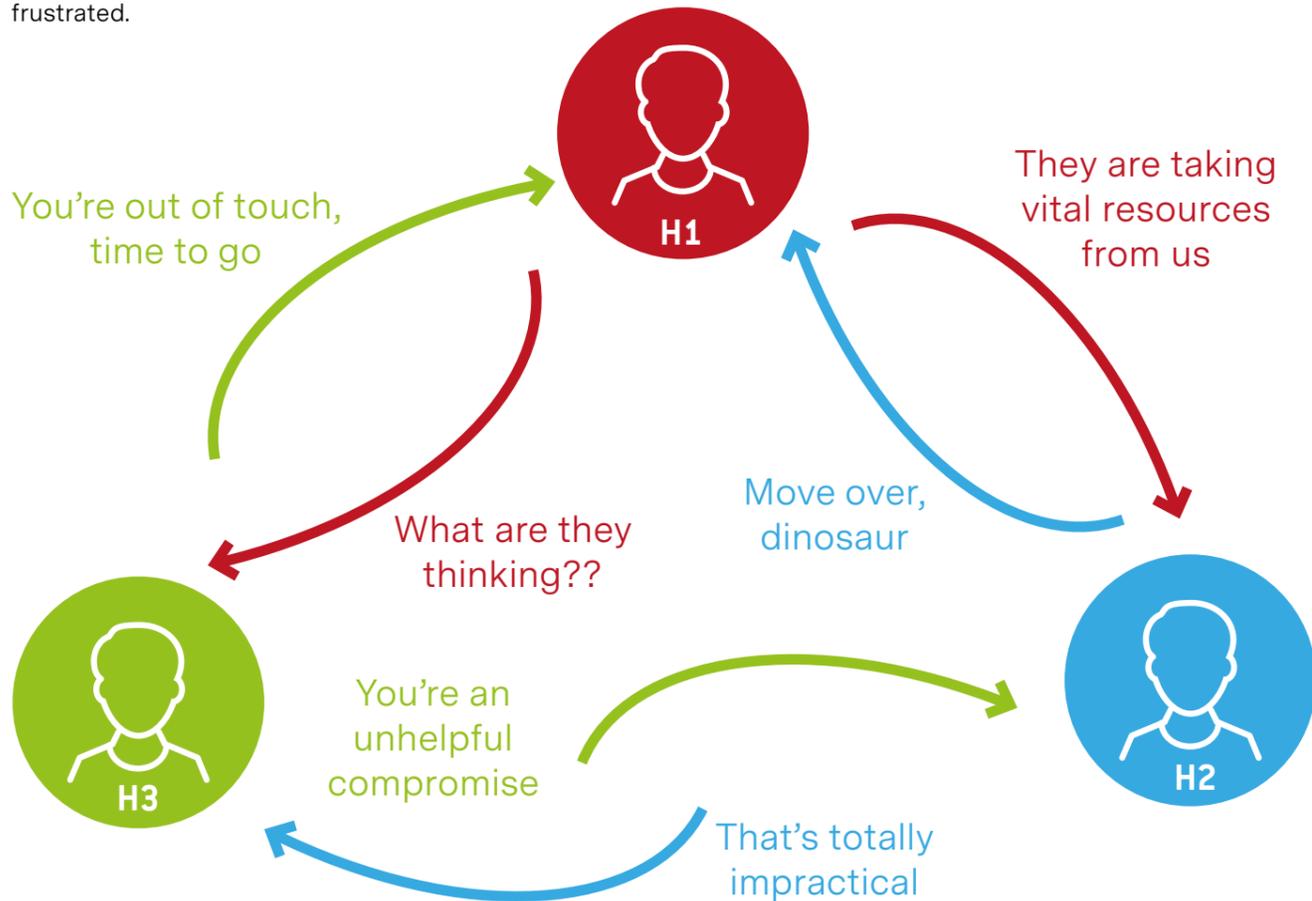
In the end...



## Role playing: the voices of the three horizons in conversation

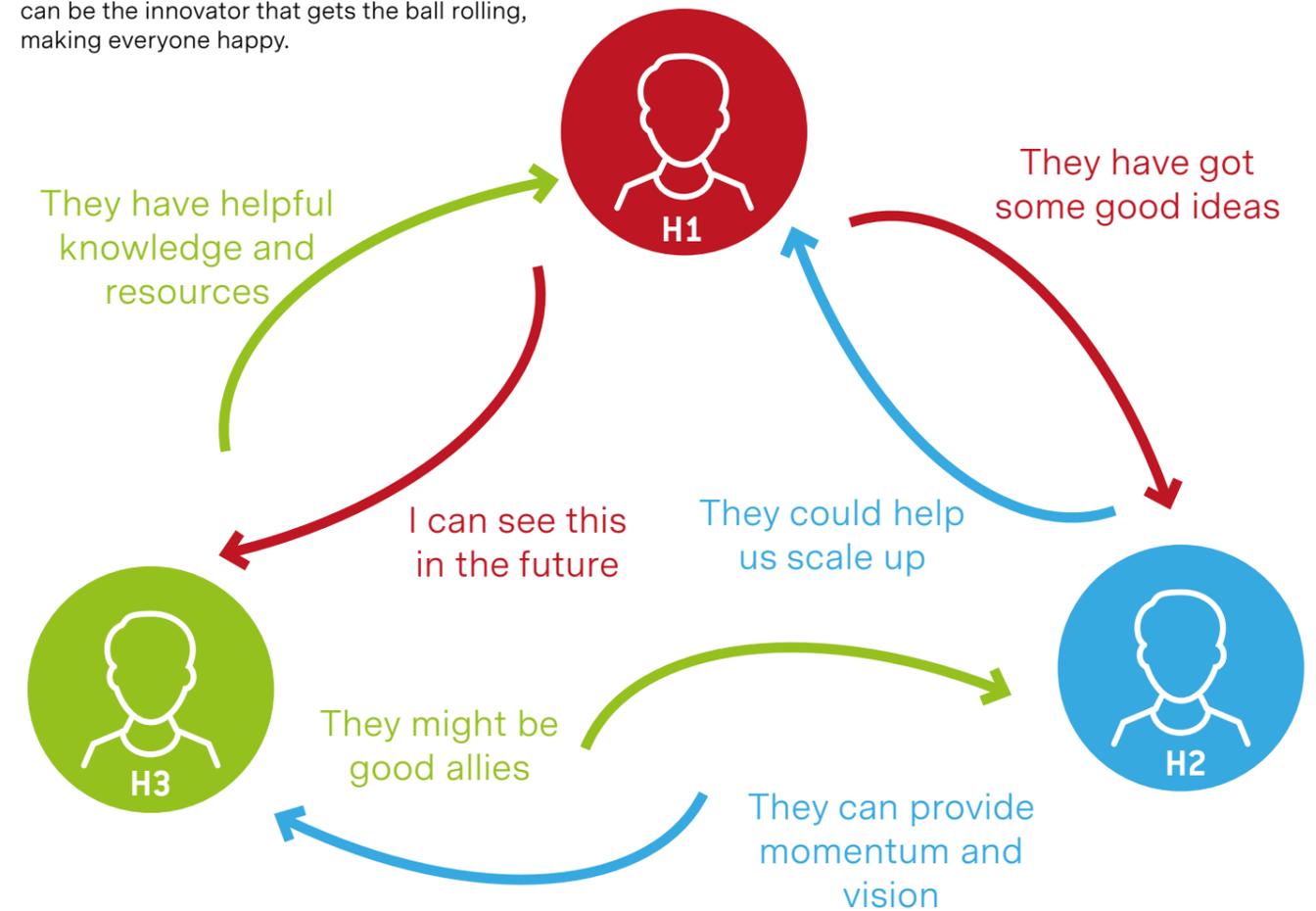
### A negative conversation...

In this version of the conversation, everyone is talking at cross purposes and fails to see the validity of each other's points of view. The outcome is that the power holder doesn't change their mind, the innovator is starved of resources and the visionary feels completely frustrated.



### A positive conversation...

In contrast, with a bit of effort, each of the personalities can help get the best out of each other. The power holder can give a bit of its resources and harness the ideas and energy of the innovator and the visionary to help think and plan for the longer-term. And while the visionary may be clear on the ultimate goal, it can be the innovator that gets the ball rolling, making everyone happy.



**There are two main ways** you can use the three horizons personalities in a workshop or breakout session. In both methods it is best to start with the negative version of the conversation and end with the positive version.

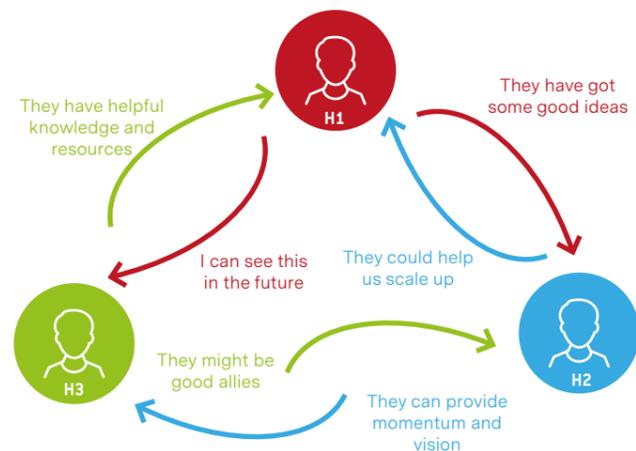
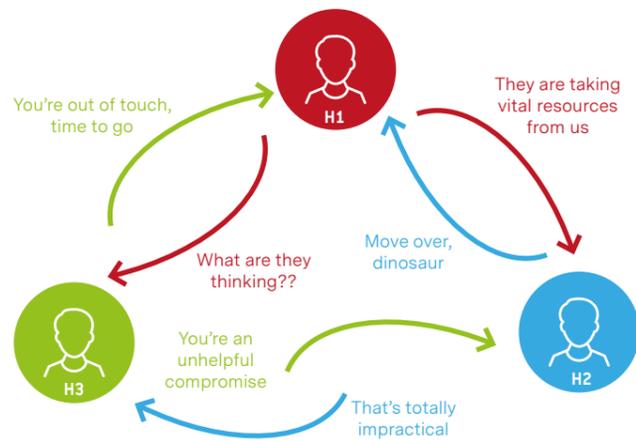
You can either:

**1) Ask people to act out or watch a scripted three horizons conversation.**

This requires a little more preparation as you will need to have developed the scripts in advance. This means being able to at least give examples of what Horizon 1, 2 and 3 looks like, and how the voice of the 'Power Holder', 'Innovator' or 'Visionary' might be expressed. You will want to try and exaggerate the ways that the different horizons personalities interact with each other, positively and negatively, in order to make the point obvious – and keep the script entertaining to listen to!

**2) Ask people to take on the voice or mindset of one of the three horizons and discuss a topic with their group.**

You will need to make sure that at least one person from each group takes on each 'voice'. In this version everyone gets a chance to participate but some people may find it hard to think of what to say. You may want to try and get people to choose the voice or mindset that they think best reflects their current role, or instead to try a different horizon on for size and see things from a different perspective.



## An example script...

### NEGATIVE conversation

**H1:** Hello, I'm the first horizon. I'm in charge of all the transport in Citiesville.

**H3:** Hey, great to meet you, I'm the third horizon. Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me (finally...). I know it has taken a very long time to get this meeting in the diary but I'm really glad you have finally been able to make some time.

**H1:** Yeah, about that... I've got about 10 minutes. Well probably more like 5 actually. And I thought that you and sorry, I didn't get your name...

**H2:** The second horizon, hi.

**H1:** Yeah, the second horizon, seemed to be talking about the same sort of future wish-list stuff so I asked them to come along as well. Two birds one stone and all that. Anyway, I haven't got long as I really need to get back on with what I was doing. I have planning and targets and budgets coming out of my ears at the moment. But yes, anyway, come in.

**H3:** Oh well, um, thank you, I guess? Er, second horizon, is it? I guess it would probably be helpful to know a bit more about you before we start. But then I can tell you all about me and my great ideas for the future of transport in Citiesville.

**H2:** As I said, I'm the second horizon. What I bring is innovation. Let that sink in. I'm talking about electric cars, hydrogen cars. They are going to revolutionise the way people get around Citiesville and turn it into a truly green city.

**H3:** More cars? That's hardly revolutionary! We should be trying to move away from cars as much as possible. The petrol ones are nasty and polluting and so old

fashioned. Even electric and hydrogen ones come with problems – most electricity is still being made by burning dirty fuels somewhere, right? And different cars is still cars causing traffic jams. Fast, convenient, low-carbon and easy to use public transport is the way we should be heading, with plenty of room for people to walk and cycle. That's going to make for cleaner air, quieter and safer roads and healthier people. Job done.

**H1:** Are you nuts third horizon? Do you have any idea how much doing all that would cost? Plus everyone has a car – that's how 85% of journeys are made in Wales – so my focus needs to be on making that better. And trust me, I have my work cut out – you should see the complaints I have about potholes and traffic jams. All my money is going to be spent on that, thank you.

**H2:** That and electric cars though right? I mean, I get what you're saying about channelling everything into public transport and cycling being a completely ridiculous, far-fetched idea – but let's be honest, we are always going to need cars but petrol cars have no future – they are just too polluting. Transport alone contributes to 13% of our greenhouse gas emissions – and that sort of air pollution is unhealthy for people to be breathing in, let alone what it is doing to the planet in terms of climate change. It's time to move wholesale to electric cars – that means electric charging stations in place of petrol stations for a start.

**H1:** Waste the limited resources I have on going electric? I don't think so.

**H3:** Weirdly, I can't help but agree. Electric cars are just an unhelpful distraction. We can't waste time and money funding new infrastructure that is ultimately going to be out of date again soon. We have developed a car-dominated society and we need to move away from this; we need to stop people using cars as much as possible and embrace flexible working, active travel and the wider decarbonisation agenda. That's the only option for our future.

**H2:** Literally everything you said is wrong. I guess that's what happens when you live on a different planet.

**H1:** As far as I'm concerned you're both nuts. I'm calling this meeting to an end so I can get on with some real work in the real world.

### POSITIVE conversation

**H1:** Hello, I'm the first horizon, currently responsible for all the transport in Citiesville. It is great to meet you, thanks so much for coming.

**H3:** Hello, the third horizon, great to meet you as well first horizon. I have to say I was slightly shocked when you agreed to meet with me so quickly, but I'm so glad you seem to be as interested as I am in making decisions that will stand the test of time and can meet today's demands whilst also preparing for how things will and need to change.

**H1:** That's exactly it. I wanted to get a chance to speak with you so that I could get a better understanding of where we should be trying to get to. I also asked the second horizon along as well

**H2:** Hello!

**H1:** As I felt they might have a lot of interesting ideas to add into the mix.

**H3:** Brilliant idea. Nice to meet you second horizon.

**H2:** And you. I have heard lots about you and I really think that some of the new technology and innovation going on might really help pave the way to where you are trying to move us to. Perhaps you can start off our discussion with what your ultimate vision for the future is?

**H3:** Certainly, thank you. Well, essentially we need to try and move away from petrol cars and invest more in public transport and active transport. This would reduce air pollution, which we know can be very damaging to human health, as well as be fairer, because not everyone in Wales can drive - about a quarter of families in Wales don't even have access to a car. It would also provide people with the opportunity to walk or cycle more safely, which is better for health as well. We know that young people in Wales are less likely to want to use a car to get to work and the World Economic Forum has said that children born today may never drive a car. We need to start preparing for that new reality and be able to meet people's expectations.

**H1:** I can definitely see that what you're talking about would be a good long-term goal. What I'm struggling with a little bit is how to get there because I'm under pressure right now to address our traffic flow problems and meet air pollution targets. The infrastructure overhaul you're talking about would help but it will take a huge amount of time and money that I just don't

have - and that's before we even start thinking about changing the behaviour of people who currently drive everywhere.

**H2:** Perhaps I can help with some of that. If its air pollution that you're worried about, electric cars can provide some of the answer. If you put a bit more investment into charging points then more people will think about going electric, and that could make a huge improvement to air quality.

**H3:** I agree, electric or hydrogen cars would be a good start and will help move things forward, but we need to make sure we are thinking about the bigger picture as well. Electric cars are still cars on the road - that won't help your congestion problem, H1, and that won't mean more people are walking, cycling or using public transport. And poor access to public transport has so many wider implications - for example, 1 in 5 young people who are out of work can't get to job interviews at the moment because they cannot afford public transport, or don't have access to it. And poor public transport in rural areas is a big contributor to loneliness and isolation in older people. No doubt you have targets to do with youth unemployment and loneliness, H1, that this could really help with?

**H1:** Yes, you are absolutely right, I hadn't really thought about that.

**H3:** So maybe while you're investing in electric cars, there is also more you could be doing to reduce the demand for cars and improve provision for people who want to get the bus or cycle? Take Amsterdam for example - it has invested in over 750km of cycle paths and as a result nearly 60% of people over 12 in Amsterdam cycle every day, racking up 2 million km! Imagine if we could do that in Citiesville!

**H1:** Fair play, those stats are pretty impressive! And I think your suggestion about trying different things in parallel is a great plan. How about we try and do something to reduce car numbers - like, I don't know, a campaign to encourage and incentivise lift sharing and supporting more people to work from home? And at the same time, build up our infrastructure for cycling, buses and electric vehicles. What do you think?

**H2:** Sounds great to me. Plus we have some fantastic tech that can help support people to work remotely and find people who they could lift share with. I'm pretty sure we can work on affordable electric buses too. I can see that all working out really well.

**H3:** That sounds really positive. We would be able to move towards a better future for transport that is low carbon, gives us cleaner air, is more accessible to everyone and encourages people to use active forms of travel while addressing some immediate concerns and building on the structures we already have in place. What's not to like?

## Thinking about issues and trends over time.

You can also use the three horizons model as a bit of a **timeline to categorise trends** and think about **when to act**.

**Horizon 1** trends are already evident and are what is shaping the current situation.

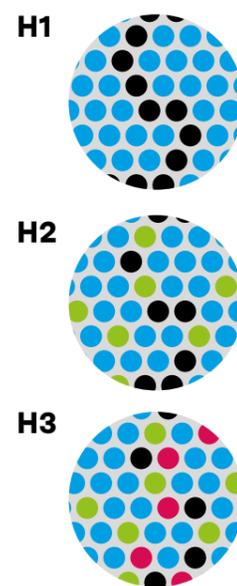
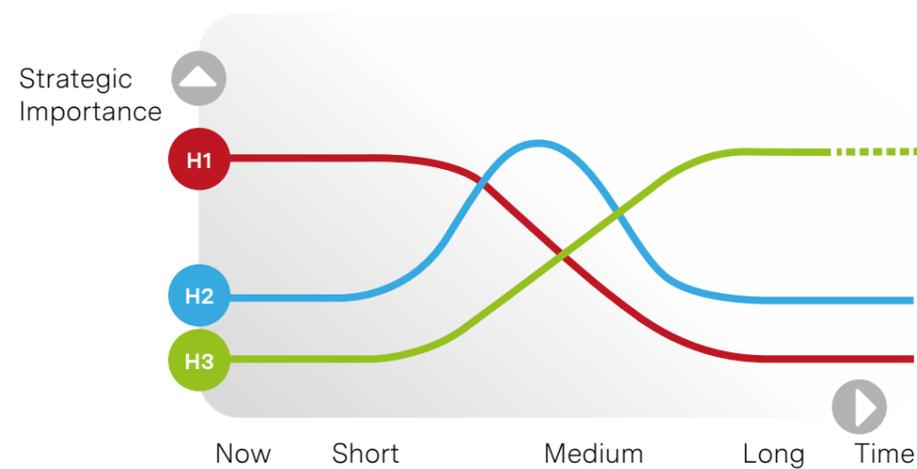
**Horizon 2** are emerging responses to the H1 issues and H3 opportunities. They are evident at a low level or in isolated pockets but may become more influential over time. In the long-term many will peter out as a few are widely adopted to become the new H3.

**Horizon 3** trends are the 'weak signals' (see the 'S' diagram below and how the S is most obvious in H1, is less clear in H2 and can only be seen in fragments in H3). These H3 trends are present now but are very hard to pick out and it is very uncertain how, or even if,

they might develop. But these trends may be the ones that present the most significant opportunities and challenges in the future.

In a workshop setting, you can invite people to **position trends on the model** based on whether they think it is a Horizon 1, 2 or 3 trend. (This is likely to follow a prioritisation exercise, so you just look at the trends that might have the biggest impact). **It is the quality of the discussion, not the ultimate placement of the trend that is key.**

You can follow-up by exploring **when you may need to take action** in order to take an opportunity or avoid a risk presented by that trend. Are there some medium and long-term trends that actually need action or further exploration now?



## 5 things to remember

- 1) **All three horizons** are present right now
- 2) **There are** no right or wrong answers
- 3) **The process** is more important than the product
- 4) **Use examples** people can relate to
- 5) **You can use it** on your own, but it's better as a group

## Other useful resources

If you are interested in finding out more about the 3 Horizons model and how you could use it in your work, a good place to start is the [International Futures Forum's website](#):

[An outline of the approach](#)

[A kit you can purchase to help facilitate a 3 horizons conversation](#)

[Examples of applying the model in practice](#)

[More presentations, books and papers...](#)

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Bill Sharpe, Graham Leicester and the International Futures Forum for the development of the three horizons model as a framework for thinking about long-term change, and for their advice and input on this toolkit.

