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CASE STUDY: ESPAÑA 2050

CONSIDERING SPAIN'S APPROACH TO LONG-TERM
NATIONAL STRATEGY THROUGH A REVIEW OF ESPAÑA 2050

JUNE 2025

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About the Fellowship

The Heywood Fellowship is a visiting fellowship created in memory of Jeremy Heywood, Cabinet Secretary from 2012 to 2018. The purpose is to give a UK Civil Service Permanent Secretary the opportunity to explore issues relating to public service and policy outside of the immediate responsibilities of government duties.

The Heywood Foundation and the Blavatnik School, University of Oxford, established the Heywood Visiting Fellowship with support from the Cabinet Office. The Fellow is associated with Hertford College, Lord Heywood's former college.



This year's Heywood Fellowship sets out to examine how governments come to a national view of what really matters over longer time horizons, the ways governments can best confront and tackle future problems, and how the configuration, mechanisms and capabilities of the state can best enable the pursuit and delivery of long-term outcomes for citizens.

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The Fellowship Team

Lucy Smith is the 2024-25 Heywood Fellow. She is supported by a small team.

- **Lucy Smith** — Heywood Fellow. Lucy was previously Director General for Strategy at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and for UK Governance Group at the Cabinet Office. She was Constitution Director and Principal Private Secretary to Nick Clegg as Deputy Prime Minister.
- **Zainab Agha** — Visiting Practitioner. A Director in the Cabinet Office, Zainab has 20+ years' experience working in senior public policy and economist roles across the UK civil service and internationally including in Namibia, Ghana, Tanzania and Pakistan. Her most recent roles have focused on devolution and intergovernmental working.
- **Philip Bray** — Visiting Practitioner. Philip is a civil servant and has worked at six different UK government departments in roles ranging from digital delivery to international negotiations to legislation. He specialises in strategy and data-led delivery; most recently he was Deputy Chief of Staff at Defra and led the creation of the department's Delivery Unit.
- **Benjamin Clayton** — Visiting Practitioner. A Deputy Director at the Ministry of Defence, Benjamin was previously a Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and Chief of Staff at the British Government's National Infrastructure Commission.
- **Alex Downing** — Visiting Practitioner. Alex is a civil servant with policy and private office experience in the Cabinet Office and Department for Education. He was Head of Office to the Chief Executive of Government Communications and Senior Private Secretary to the Education Secretary. Before that he worked in a range of DfE teams, primarily on schools and academies.
- **Marius Ostrowski** — ESRC Research Fellow. Dr Marius S. Ostrowski is a social scientist, modern historian, and policy thought leader. His work specialises in UK and European geostrategy, the role of skills in political economy, how to make democracies more resilient against social threats, and the ways society shapes how we think.

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In a nutshell

- The Heywood Fellowship conducted a review of Spain's España 2050 to understand the approach taken to national strategy and explore what lessons it offers to the UK.
- España 2050 is a collective intelligence and strategic foresight exercise which aimed to improve understanding of the challenges and opportunities Spain will face in future decades, and to generate a shared future vision for Spain. The exam question for España 2050 was *what would we have to do in the next 30 years to catch up with the highest performing EU countries?*
- Our review found lots of things to celebrate from España 2050, including:
 - A strong connection between **foresight and strategy**
 - Broad and deep engagement with over 100 **experts outside government** on key strategic questions, which resulted in a **rigorous** and **evidence-based** report
 - A real sense of **ambition and hope** characterised by a tangible vision grounded in comparative strengths and weaknesses
- Spain's experience also gives others seeking to run a similar exercise a number of points to consider, including:
 - Getting **government and the state behind the strategy** is vital, especially for delivery and spending.
 - Transformational strategies need to make bold choices, and the **trade-offs** made need to be explicit.
 - **It takes time to build new practice, process and cultures in government and beyond.** Consistency and tenacity are key.
 - To gain widespread legitimacy and ultimately succeed in the long term, strategy has to build some form of **settlement or compromise**.

Introduction

The 2024-25 Heywood Fellowship sets out to examine how governments come to a national view of what really matters over longer time horizons, the ways governments can best confront and tackle future problems, and how the configuration, mechanisms and capabilities of the state can best enable the pursuit and delivery of long-term outcomes for citizens.

A key element of this project is exploring how international competitors to the UK develop and pursue effective strategy at a national level. We are interested in how

governments take a long-term and outward-facing view of the national interest; how governments set ambition and objectives; examples of governments taking key judgements or 'big bets' in the face of uncertainty; or examples of where they have changed an underlying assumption, making a strategic pivot when faced with a new exogenous challenge. We are also interested in understanding the underlying government practice – the governance, processes, methodologies, capabilities and culture – that supported these key judgements, decisions and the effective pursuit of strategic goals.

This paper considers Spain's approach to long-term national strategy through a review of España 2050,¹ which sought to develop a long-term vision and strategy for Spain from its publication in 2021 to 2050.

Our rationale for and approach to the review

Spain is one of several countries we chose to examine to understand different approaches to long-term national strategy. We chose to focus on Spain because:

- España 2050 is a concerted effort at long-term national strategy in a country with no recent history of this practice. España 2050 therefore presents a valuable opportunity to review how a country can move to the development of long-term national strategy and of long-term strategy practice, and to explore the impact of this approach to date.
- Despite having different electoral and parliamentary systems, Spain and the UK have relatively adversarial political cultures that affect the degree to which productive political consensus is achieved. As sustained commitment over political cycles is a key element in agreeing and sticking to long-term strategic objectives, it is important to consider what the UK can learn from countries with strong strategic practice due, at least in part, to the design and character of their political systems.
- There are broader parallels between the UK and Spain, including similarities in their past that impact their respective places in the world and approach to foreign affairs, and that both states face challenges from individual nations or regions for greater autonomy and independence.

Our review of Spain's España 2050 project comprised of two stages.

Stage 1: desk research, including a review of the English translation of the full España 2050 report.

Stage 2: semi-structured interviews with the Spanish Government's National Office of Foresight and Strategy, who developed and are responsible for España 2050 and its delivery, and with seven relevant experts, the majority of whom directly supported or contributed to the development of España 2050. Interviews took place in February 2025.

Our objectives for the review were to understand the approach taken to develop España 2050, consider its impact since its publication in 2021, and to explore what lessons the project might offer to the UK for the development and delivery of long-term national strategy.

The sections below outline our findings and reflections from the review. To preserve the anonymity of colleagues we spoke to these findings are generalised. The reflections included within this paper are representative of this team alone, based on our experience of and findings from the review. We are grateful to the individuals and teams we spoke to for their honesty and knowledge.

What is España 2050?

The National Office of Foresight and Strategy (the Office) publicly describes España 2050 as,

“a collective intelligence and strategic foresight exercise that pursues two goals:

- To improve our understanding of the social, economic and environmental challenges and opportunities that Spain will face in the coming decades
- To generate, through a multi-stakeholder discussion, a shared vision of the country we want to become in the future, so we can set priorities, coordinate efforts, and guarantee the prosperity and well-being of our citizens in the coming decades.”ⁱ

The origins and purpose of España 2050 are rooted in Spain's recent history. The España 2050 report explains that over the last 30 years Spain progressed from being a relatively poorly performing country in the European Union to meeting and in some cases exceeding the EU average in many areas. Building on this progress, the question set by the Office for España 2050 was “what would we have to do, in the next 30 years, to catch up with high performance countries?”

The Office engaged and worked with over 100 experts with different backgrounds, perspectives and areas of expertise to develop España 2050. In its own words, the España 2050 report provides:

- “A diachronic and forward-looking analysis of nine major challenges that Spain will have to overcome between now and mid-century in order to draw level with the most advanced countries in Europe;
- 200 policy actions to achieve this; and
- A dashboard of 50 quantitative goals and indicators for designing lines of action, taking specific measures, and monitoring progress over the coming years.”

The development of España 2050 was divided into two phases. In the first phase, the Office examined previous trends in Spain and Europe and used foresight techniques such as megatrends analysis, scenario planning and horizon scanning to project possible future trends to create “a range of future scenarios... to serve as a basis for reflection and strategic conversation.” The Office developed two core scenarios on which to base discussion and planning: a **baseline** scenario which assumes past trends continue into the future; and a **desired** scenario that assumes changes that enable Spain to meet its objective of catching up with high performing EU countries. In the second phase, the Office used backcasting (a method to consider how a desirable future can be reached by work backwards from the desired future to the present) to develop a roadmap that would allow Spain to progress from its current state to its desired scenario. Building on this roadmap, the España 2050 report sets out the key challenges currently facing Spain and, for each challenge, puts forward a set of goals and indicators to drive improvement that together would enable Spain to reach the desired scenario.

Following the launch of the España 2050 report, the Office led a programme of public engagement called *The Dialogues on the Future* which took place in late 2021 in each of the 17 Autonomous Communities of Spain. These regions function similarly to federal states in other countries, with authority over areas such as education, healthcare, and cultural policy. The Dialogues were designed to promote conversations about the opportunities and challenges that Spain and the EU will face in the future. The Dialogues included a broad range of Spanish and EU officials, representatives from business, academia, trade unions, civil society and the public. They were reportedly followed by more than 25,000 people in-person or online, and the Office stated that ideas expressed through the Dialogues were incorporated into the agenda of the European institutions and used to guide the public policies of the Government of Spain.

What we found

1. The rationale for and origins of España 2050

Our desk research and conversations indicated that, prior to the creation of the National Office of Foresight and Strategy in 2020, there was no recent practice of foresight or published long-term national strategy within the Spanish government, although foresight had been used by the Government of Spain at points in the second half of the twentieth centuryⁱⁱ and long-term strategies had been developed for specific sectors and issues (e.g. [Estrategia de Descarbonización a Largo Plazo](#)ⁱⁱⁱ, or [Plan Nacional Integrado de Energía y Clima](#)^{iv}). This lack of existing practice within government appeared to be one of the drivers for the Office's creation, and for its initial structure and composition as a small unit of experts with diverse backgrounds and perspectives, the majority of whom were recruited from outside government. The Office sits within the Moncloa structure (President's office,

equivalent to the UK's No.10) and was established and operates with the direct support of Pedro Sánchez, the President of Spain.

The Office described their purpose as combining foresight with strategy in order to uncover challenges and opportunities that Spain may face in future and to inform the development of strategies in response. The Office particularly emphasised the importance of their role in helping government look beyond the short term, using 2050 as a lode star, and in helping to open new narratives and ways of thinking.

España 2050 was undertaken in the context of the Covid pandemic that was at its peak in Spain (and globally) during España 2050's development in 2020-21. Colleagues at the Office reflected that this context, with Spain feeling pessimistic about the present, highlighted the importance of thinking about and creating hope for the future, and to consider what Spain would need to do to better navigate and mitigate the effects of future crises.

2. The approach to España 2050

Beyond the description in the section above, the following points stood out from conversations with the Office and contributors.

In phase 1 of development, the Office made a clear choice to reduce the range of working scenarios to describe Spain in 2050 to two: a baseline scenario, and a desired scenario. The Office felt that reducing the number of scenarios would make the exercise clear to the public and make the choice between action and inaction more obvious.

It was clear that the external experts engaged by the Office played a significant role in the development of España 2050. The Office engaged a broad range of external experts, the majority of whom were academics as opposed to civil servants or from other organisations and backgrounds. These external experts were engaged specifically for España 2050 and worked ad honorem. The Office was keen to ensure a strong mix of experts in terms of background, expertise and perspective. Some individuals reflected that although there was a good mix of experts there were a larger proportion of economists than other disciplines. Individuals we spoke to felt that on balance a strong and diverse group of experts had been recruited.

Once recruited, experts were arranged into groups for each of the nine challenges covered in España 2050. Each group was coordinated by the Office. Each group used online meetings to discuss their respective area and to develop and review sections of the strategy, which had been drafted and were refined by the Office. Individuals involved in this process felt that it worked well and enabled high-quality discussions that contributed to development of the report and its proposals.

Colleagues generally reflected that the quality of collaboration and discussion within groups was positive, but that there was some variation between groups depending on its composition and size. In the case of one of the groups we heard

that the entrenched difference of perspectives of the participants, due to the respective organisations they were representing, led to greater conflict of views and less progress was made on arriving at a consensus view than could be achieved otherwise.

The Office itself was instrumental in developing España 2050. Notably, the Office worked closely with experts to develop a relatively mature draft of the report *before* engaging wider government. This approach is perhaps reflective of the Office's origins and composition, as well as the context of development during the Covid-19 pandemic with less natural opportunities for wider engagement. It was also clear that the Office (working with and to elected officials), rather than the contributing experts, made final decisions over the content of the strategy. On this approach, the Office reflected that there were a range of factors that influenced how they worked with the expert groups, including the differing nature of subject areas, the inherent human bias towards a focus on short term challenges, and the difficulty of imagining public policies that address issues 10 or 20 years from now.

The Office clearly approached development of España 2050 seeking to create a comprehensive and holistic strategy that sought to identify and put in place plans to address the key challenges facing Spain. It did not appear to seek to resolve difficult trade-offs in the immediate term, but to facilitate a conversation about what would be required within the 2050 horizon. This deliberate choice in scope appears to have had a bearing on the project's outcome and impact to date, discussed below.

Linked to the above point around scope, it was notable that the report almost entirely covered domestic issues, and did not engage significantly with challenges facing Spain due to geopolitics and global issues. The clear exception to this were of global issues with significant domestic impacts like climate change and demographic change. Several individuals we spoke to reflected that the strategy's domestic focus could be linked to the strong national consensus around Spain's membership of the European Union, which may have the impact of large-scale international and geopolitical issues being left to this forum.

It is interesting that the Dialogues on the Future were scheduled after completion of the full report, rather than conducting public engagement before or during development of the strategy. Furthermore, the España 2050 report (p. 48) indicates that there would be a final step following the Dialogues, where the final National Long-Term Strategy is presented, but we could not see any formal record of this.

3. The impact of España 2050

This review has not been designed to produce a comprehensive assessment or judgement on the impact of España 2050. Furthermore, isolating the tangible impact of any foresight exercise is always a challenge, and trying to complete any such assessment after such little time has passed since publication would not be

useful. Rather, this section includes our reflections on impact based on what we heard from individuals we spoke to during the review.

Outputs

España 2050 was a success in that it produced a clear, comprehensive and evidence-based product. The report put forward a clear vision — for Spain to catch up with the top eight high-performing EU countries by 2050 — supported by a rigorous analysis of its current position, including relative strengths and weaknesses, and the key challenges it would need to resolve to get there. Although individuals we spoke to had different perspectives on the final report, particularly regarding its scope and level of ambition and pragmatism, the majority considered it to be a well-evidenced and comprehensive document.

Short-term/ immediate impact

It appeared that the publication of the report and the engagement process that followed through the Dialogues on the Future received a relatively significant level of public awareness and engagement. However, some individuals felt that the project was not well-received or accepted by political stakeholders and audiences outside of the Government: the polarised and adversarial nature of politics in Spain led to the report being seen as overly partisan and representative of the current government and President, rather than leading to greater cross-party discussion and potential consensus on the key challenges facing Spain and actions to take in response.

Medium-term impact

There were a mix of views regarding the project's impact following its publication and the Dialogue.

Some felt there had been little public follow-up to the initial launch and discussion of España 2050. Although this was primarily attributed to Spain's current political climate, there was a sense that the Government hadn't sought to publicly follow-up on or update the strategy to maintain awareness, support and relevance.

Furthermore, several individuals noted that although España 2050 provided a high-level roadmap to achieving its long-term vision, it did not include nor was followed by a more detailed delivery plan or any details on funding for the policies put forward. The lack of perceived public or tangible progress could be due to the lack of clear delivery and funding plans to support the strategy.

In addition, several individuals noted that the development and publication of España 2050 linked to or coincided with several other projects and publications from the Spanish Government, most notably the Spanish *Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan*. Although these are different projects and products there are some areas of overlap or similarity, which may contribute to how some view España 2050's impact to date.

The Office explained that following publication of *España 2050* they turned their focus to working with and within the government system to embed these approaches in government ministries, as well as working on a key set of more focused projects about Spain's future. The Office reflected that the direction set through *España 2050* was very much still being worked towards by government, and that the delivery metrics and targets set out in *España 2050* continued to be measured and reviewed within government, including by the President.

The Office also noted that *España 2050* was never intended to come with specific funding for its implementation. It was instead designed to serve as a guiding framework for medium- and long-term public policy, applicable to both the current government and future administrations, while offering a holistic view of the challenges ahead. It was a deliberate choice to blend strategic foresight and long-term planning to create *España 2050*, rather than producing a short term and/or sectoral-focused strategy that tend to be the norm for most governments. The Office did mention, however, that several specific strategies and legislative proposals adopted by the government since the publication of *España 2050*, which do include funding plans, are aligned with its spirit and guiding principles.

Discussion: what can others take from España 2050?

España 2050 is an ambitious project that arose from a key moment for Spain during the COVID-19 pandemic, and at a time when the Government of Spain had no current practice or ecosystem to support foresight and national (cross-government and cross-sectoral) long-term strategy making. Despite that, a small and expert Office was created quickly, bringing a new skillset and perspective to government, and they quickly engaged a broad range of experts to develop a genuinely new, forward-looking, well-evidenced and logical proposed strategy for Spain.

Although there are outstanding questions regarding the long-term impact and legacy of *España 2050*, its short-term impact — i.e. production and publication of a rigorous and comprehensive attempt at a long-term national strategy, a national-level dialogue on the strategy and the broader future of Spain, and the creation of a new Office for Foresight and Strategy that supports the government's ability to look ahead and consider new perspectives current issues — is important not to overlook.

The sections below outline our reflections on what stood out from our exploration of *España 2050*, both in terms of strong practice and significant achievements that should be celebrated and that others seeking to conduct a similar national strategic exercise should look to replicate, and points for others to consider in order to learn valuable lessons from Spain's experience and context.

Things to celebrate

Spain's National Office for Foresight and Strategy creates a strong connection between foresight and strategy, which appears to better enable the insights that can come from foresight to be joined up with the practice of strategy, compared to systems that separate or engage one of these functions. Other countries with established long-term strategy practice, such as Singapore and Finland, also follow this model.

España 2050's broad and deep engagement with over 100 experts outside government on key strategic questions is impressive and clearly contributed to a comprehensive and rigorous product, grounded in accurate diagnosis of the challenges Spain is facing and its progress over recent decades.

España 2050 conveys a real sense of ambition and hope characterised by a tangible vision grounded in comparative strengths and weaknesses. There are examples of other long-term national strategies that are too general and non-specific, which limits their value, whereas España 2050 uses its clear and comprehensive analysis of Spain's current position to put forward a clear and ambitious vision for the future.

España 2050 seems to be a genuine attempt to change the psyche of the Spanish Government — thinking more strategically and with the long term in mind.

Points to consider

For any strategy to effectively set the direction of the state over an extended period, government needs to:

- sustain an appropriate level of dialogue with the public and key groups on the strategy to maintain sufficient awareness of and support for the strategy and its deliverables; and
- continue demonstrating impact through the delivery of the strategy's choices and priorities.

Governments therefore need to consider how the strategy can effectively transition into delivery, including ensuring necessary funding is secured and that there is a suitable institutional framework in place to enable delivery. One way of supporting and publicly demonstrating delivery of long-term strategic objectives, and of continuing engagement with the public on the future, could be through a cyclical strategy process that contains regular points to review and refresh the strategy. This is a concept we will explore in more detail in future.

Transformational strategies need to make bold choices and trade-offs need to be explicit. A strategy that attempts to cover everything or puts off choices therefore may not be seen as credible or feasible. Although one of España 2050's strengths is that it provides a holistic view of the domestic challenges facing Spain and puts forward plans to drive progress in every area, in our view the lack of deep

consideration of choices and trade-offs regarding which areas to deprioritise placed constraints on its impact as a strategy.

It takes time and effort to establish new or change and strengthen existing practice, especially if you're up against long-standing issues and habits within a large organisation or set of organisations i.e. government and the architecture of the state. Consistency and tenacity is key, particularly in the first 5-10 years. The National Office for Foresight and Strategy therefore has clear strengths as it brought a multidisciplinary, expert team into the heart of government, had the clear sponsorship of the President, and was able to act quickly, nimbly, and in an outward looking way, to produce España 2050. It now faces the more painstaking task of embedding this within a system of government. Anyone setting up such an exercise should think about the right balance between nimbleness, openness and extent expertise, and ownership by Ministries and the wider government system.

To succeed in the long term, effective national strategy should build some form of settlement or compromise. Without it, any strategy may last only as long as the political leader who lends it authority. During our conversations, many colleagues expressed that although much of España 2050 was high quality, the relatively insular way in which it was developed, with little shared public and political ownership of the final report and through the outcome of the Dialogues on the Future, meant that political groups not supportive of the government were not incentivised to meaningfully engage with or support the strategy. Furthermore, although the Dialogues were clearly a valuable exercise, it doesn't appear there was any scope within this process to understand the public's support for the strategy (e.g. through polling or similar). In the context of España 2050, therefore, any government seeking to carry out a similar exercise may wish to consider how it can build a greater sense of collective support for, and ownership of, the strategy and its key objectives, to increase the probability that they endure over multiple political administrations.

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- ⁱ Gobierno de España (2021). *España 2050*. [Online] Available at: https://futuros.gob.es/sites/default/files/esp2050/pdf/en/Spain_2050.pdf [Accessed 26 February 2025].
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