

# Unleashing the power of data

## A conversation with Liz MacPherson

When Liz MacPherson was 10 her headmaster father was forced to pack up his young family and move to another school because his own children tipped the school roll over the number he was graded to teach. Even at that young age Liz was aware that the rules were ridiculous, that policies made in Wellington could have a big impact on people's lives, and how important it was those policies were well founded.

Today, as Statistics New Zealand's Chief Executive and the Government Statistician, Liz tells *Public Sector* writer ROSE NORTHCOTT why good data is at the heart of good policy-making, and how data can add to New Zealand's social and economic wellbeing.

### How important is Statistics New Zealand in the big scheme of things?

It is often said that trusted official statistics and data are as critical to democracy as freedom of speech. It goes to having the ability for there to be really good quality, evidence-based decision-making and trust in good government. We've seen what's happened overseas in countries like Greece when there has been an undermining of trust in official statistics.

### What value do you add?

Almost every day you'll see something in the news that is using our data as the basis of a story – from the latest employment figures to how connected and satisfied we are with our lives. We are increasingly looking at how we can provide better quality information and data that helps us understand who we've been, who we are and who we are becoming. The value we add is huge.

While people know us best for the census, we collect, manage and distribute a vast range of statistics. People might think our work is dry until they consider the con-

sequences of not having that information. Key indicators of economic growth are used by investors to weigh up if New Zealand is a good place to invest; the CPI reaches right into your life and has an impact on your mortgage or savings and is also used by the government for benchmarking welfare and super payments. Labour market statistics help identify skills gaps and where investment might be needed. Companies use our stats to decide where to base their business and what their customers are looking for.

### It's vital the government understand demographic changes. What are some of the key trends?

The changes are speeding up. Our population has tripled in the last 87 years. The median age has increased by almost 10 years since 1981. The population is growing, but the most rapid growth is in older ages, and the regions are aging much faster than the cities. A big issue as a nation is that we are becoming far more diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture and country of birth. Twelve percent of the population are now in the broad Asian ethnic groups and that's increased by 33 percent since 2006.

The Auckland growth story has been really dominant and that's expected to continue to be important. Auckland is a diverse and changing place. Already parts of it have majority Pacific populations and in a few years some local wards are expected to have majority Asian populations. Ethnic diversity and diversity of distribution of ethnic groups across New Zealand is shifting. Regions, especially rural regions, are also feeling the effects of a people shortage already.

Families are getting smaller but at the same time are getting more complex, and there is an increasing demand on us to understand families both in and beyond households – blended families, extended family arrangements and the large rise of one person households.



Net migration remains volatile. At the moment we are seeing increases in both new migrants coming here but also New Zealanders choosing to come back and choosing not to leave. It's something that as a country we are going to have to continue to focus on and which will require us to plan with the best information we have available to us. We help with that with our population estimates, but at the same time we are aware of external factors and the impact of what's going on globally can have on migration patterns.

### How can government agencies use your data?

The people we [government agencies] are providing services to are changing. We need to understand them and their needs and use the data to look at ourselves and how we respond. For example, more ethnic diversity in our young means challenges for education, and the changing ethnic mix of elderly has implications for aged care.

A good example is the way in which the police have used our demographic data to improve their services and think about their workforce strategy. They took our demographic data and looked at what was happening at the community level in Auckland and asked what their workforce needed to look like to reflect that. In terms of police services, it's also about being conscious that some new migrants, for example, may have a very different experience of law and order in their countries from what they might experience here.

## Tell us about the transformation Statistics New Zealand is undergoing.

Several years ago we realised the world around us was changing very fast and we were at the centre of a data revolution. We recently looked at our strategy direction and vision and said that what we are about is unleashing the power of data to change lives. Until the data is taken and used and turned into knowledge it doesn't have the power to help New Zealand improve and change lives. Part of that is asking, how do we get this data out there to be used and are there other things we can do beyond statistics? We are focused on taking a more customer-centric approach and working in partnership with government departments. New initiatives range from working with other government agencies to improve their data and the way they use it, to creating new tools to allow people to access data and statistics more easily.

One of the really important roles we are increasingly playing is around provision of statistics for evidence-based decision making and policy. It's around what works – if the government is putting money into something, does it work or not?

We are also increasingly helping other government agencies improve the effectiveness of their services through integrating data. We take the data we get from surveys and the data other agencies collect as part of their day-to-day working and we integrate that together. This helps government to identify and look at ways of

addressing complex social issues, such as crime and vulnerable children.

## You sound passionate about your job.

I love my job and the potential it has to make a real difference in people's lives. I also relish being able to think system-wide. It's an incredibly exciting place to be. I feel privileged to be leading an organisation that has such a big role to play in actually using evidence to innovate and to help New Zealand achieve greater economic and social wellbeing.

## What path did you take to reach Head of Statistics New Zealand in 2013?

I did a diploma in horticulture and grew and exported strawberries for a short time, then did degrees in English and Geography. That got me started with a real passion for telling stories with data – actually being able to draw out stories of everyday lives. It also made me realise the importance of digging behind the 'symptoms' to what was really going on. I joined the public service after finishing my Masters, working in a number of different government departments. My background is largely in labour market and economic policy.

What I think was most critical in terms of shaping me as a public policy expert is that I had the opportunity or put my hand up for some pretty large and complex policy and operational projects. From early in my career I was involved in things like cross-sector work on welfare reform, in education and training issues, immigration issues, and 'the wall of wood'. I've always had a really key focus

on the criticality of evidence; really making sure you understand your problem properly. Hence my grabbing the opportunity to come to an organisation I thought was absolutely critical in underpinning evidence-based decision-making.

## What does it mean to be a female public sector CE?

Being the first woman Government Statistician, I do think about what will be my legacy, apart from the fact I will be the first female photograph downstairs. One of the reasons I'm in this role today is that I could see other female CEs around the public sector who were able to be authentic women leaders. They didn't need to adopt a male leadership style. I think it's important for me to role-model that, and to give women across the public service the confidence to know that you can do these roles and that you can also choose whether you want to do it. I've had and have a family and elder care responsibilities. I took time to decide if I wanted to take that next step. I think it's entirely possible to look for opportunities to extend your career and to get to a big GM or a deputy secretary role and think 'I will wait and learn my craft here' as opposed to feeling pressure to take the next step. Being a woman leader also makes me think more about diversity in general. Ensuring we have diversity across the organisation and in leadership levels, not just women but people from different cultures, experience and backgrounds. That diversity is critically important to effective decision-making. ■

## Interested in continuing your career in public sector policy?

### Our ideal candidate:

You will have demonstrated experience in policy development, advice and analysis in a complex environment and an understanding of the regulatory and legislative processes of government.

### What's in it for you?

- Attractive remuneration packages
- Ongoing professional and personal development
- Values based work environments
- Flexible work options; and
- Opportunities to develop your leadership capability by coaching and mentoring others

To discuss your options please contact **Kirsty Brown** at [kirsty.brown@h2r.co.nz](mailto:kirsty.brown@h2r.co.nz)

**Policy Contractors** – We are working with a variety of government agencies who are seeking experienced policy contractors to lead and be involved in significant policy programmes. If this sounds like you, or you would like to have a confidential conversation about considering contracting roles, please contact **Georgina Makarios** at [georgina.makarios@h2r.co.nz](mailto:georgina.makarios@h2r.co.nz)



Kirsty Brown



Georgina Makarios