



A Report on contributions to 'THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE - collecting ideas'

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In our '*THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE - collecting ideas*' exercise we asked people to respond to two questions:

1. Thinking about your personal world (you, your family and friends, and your work/post-work circumstances) in two years' time and beyond, what changes do you think will have occurred and be occurring as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Thinking about the wider world (e.g. social, financial, political, environmental) in two years' time and beyond, what changes do you think will have occurred and be occurring as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Contributions came in over a period of nine weeks, varying from a paragraph to well beyond the one side of A4 guideline. As ever, the length of the contributions was not a guide to the originality or potency of the thinking.

In the brief interim report we made at the end of June, we said that there were two factors underlying people's thoughts about the pandemic and its effects: people were in broad agreement that the pandemic is:

- ▶ the principal cause of various developments, responses and actions;
- *and* it is,
- ▶ a mechanism that reveals and highlights, sometimes in a particularly brutal way, developments and behaviours that are already in place and underway.

We were surprised by the level of agreement across contributors regarding this distinction. We had thought that responses would be in terms of what people saw as issues primarily and directly perpetrated by the pandemic. Had we been a bit smarter, and thought about previous world events and their effects, then we would have been less surprised. As later contributions were sent in, there was a noticeable trend to be *less optimistic* about the handling of the pandemic and about its longer-term impact and influence. We suspect that this position will fluctuate considerably.

2.0 HOW THIS REPORT WORKS

Rather than write a report that just 'lists' changes and effects and then groups them within 'categories', we've decided to design an approach which is more like a 'grid', capable of reflecting the layers of thinking that have been the characteristic of the contributions.

When describing, analysing and summarising contributions we now refer to 'signals'. So, a 'signal' is a factor of the pandemic's effect that is distinctive and separately recognisable. Many ideas and strands of thinking cross over the signals; and, of course, many signals have contradictory elements. In all we have developed 40 signals from across the contributions.

We have now changed the idea of 'categories' of signal to headlined groupings of signals, to enable 'getting one's head around it' and to avoid the categories being thought of as too exclusive and separate one from another. In reality many signals really 'belong to' more than one headline group - which is fair enough and could lead to interesting discussion.

We distinguish between 'signals' in this way:


- ▶ **Strong Signal:** where the subject area is 'headline' stuff and is *often* mentioned across the contributions.
- ▶ **Moderate Signal:** subject areas *sometimes* mentioned by contributors, but not 'across the board'.
- ▶ **Weak Signal:** *rarely* mentioned subject areas - but maybe far more important than currently expected.

And we then rate each 'signal' in terms of:

- ▶ **Impact:** this is interesting, because although many people may cite an issue (so, a 'strong signal'), so it is much on people's minds, but this does not mean to say that they always rate it as significant, particularly in the long-term. It is often the case that less and rarely-mentioned issues are the ones that end up having the greatest, most disruptive, impact.
- ▶ **Likelihood:** this is used to reflect the inevitable uncertainty about whether proposed and thought-about effects may or may not actually occur. There is less agreement and clarity regarding 'likelihood' than about 'impact' and 'timeline'.
- ▶ **Timeline:** where people are thinking about the timeline for an effect and/or response to take place; so: 'short-term', 'medium-term', 'long-term'.

Finally, we thought that particularly powerful across the contributions were the expressions of anxiety and hope. So, when looking at the 'signals' we have indicated where there is some commonality regarding which signals seem particularly powerful in evoking these emotions. Sometimes there can be anxiety about the signal but hope that it might be mitigated by other factors.


So, 'the Grid' looks like this:


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| SIGNAL: strong | Mentioned  Often Sometimes Rarely | | |
| IMPACT – significant | LIKELIHOOD - unlikely | TIMELINE - long-term | ANXIETY FACTOR: HOPE FACTOR: **** |


In the coming few months we may publish some 'scenario stories' - fictional accounts that engage with some of the issues that have been raised by this 'futures exercise'.


3.0 THE RESULTS - the signals taken from the contributions


POLITICS


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| <p>SIGNAL 1: strong The pandemic will continue to put into sharp relief the qualities of politicians and the political system.</p> | <p>Mentioned:  Often Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - on-going</p> <p>ANXIETY FACTOR: ** HOPE FACTOR:</p> | |


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| <p>SIGNAL 2: moderate The required responses to the pandemic are characterised by party-politics and/or political short-termism. The ideas around key issues, such as social care, being 'de-politicised' won't happen.</p> | <p>Mentioned:  Often Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - on-going</p> <p>ANXIETY FACTOR: ** HOPE FACTOR: *</p> | |


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| <p>Signal 3: weak The pandemic has exposed central Government's deeply rooted mistrust of regional, local and community-level politics; not in terms of local and community competence but in terms of local and community competence actually undermining central Government's power and influence.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often Sometimes  Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - on-going ANXIETY FACTOR: * HOPE FACTOR:</p> | |

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| <p>Signal 4: moderate UK and some other countries' politicians are reacting to the pandemic with campaigns instead of management and governance.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often  Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - on-going ANXIETY FACTOR: ** HOPE FACTOR:</p> | |


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| <p>Signal 5: moderate The pandemic and its effects will become a proxy for right-wing and populist political regimes to progress their pre-pandemic existing strategies and policies.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often  Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - on-going ANXIETY FACTOR: *** HOPE FACTOR: *</p> | |


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| <p>Signal 6: moderate Political responses to the pandemic requires international co-operation but may in fact foster nationalism and protectionist and competitive behaviour.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often  Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - significant LIKELIHOOD - unlikely TIMELINE - medium-term</p> <p>ANXIETY FACTOR: ** HOPE FACTOR: *</p> | |


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| <p>Signal 7: weak Expectation management as a political tool will fail and the default position of giving simple answers to complex questions will be unsustainable.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often  Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - on-going</p> <p>ANXIETY FACTOR: ** HOPE FACTOR: **</p> | |


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| <p>Signal 8: weak Above all, the pandemic and what it reveals about politics and society will question ‘what is the purpose of politics in the 21st century?’.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often  Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - possible TIMELINE - on-going</p> <p>ANXIETY FACTOR: *** HOPE FACTOR: **</p> | |


SOCIETY


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| <p>Signal 9: moderate Responses to the pandemic has the potential to both divide or bring together different age groups; just as it has to enhance family life or disrupt it.</p> | <p>Mentioned:  Often Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - significant LIKELIHOOD - possible TIMELINE - on-going ANXIETY FACTOR: ** HOPE FACTOR: **</p> | |


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| <p>Signal 10: strong The pandemic has not been ‘the great leveller’ but has exposed and exacerbated many existing Inequalities; and its severest impact will be on the most financially and socially vulnerable.</p> | <p>Mentioned:  Often Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - on-going ANXIETY FACTOR: *** HOPE FACTOR: *</p> | |


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| <p>Signal 11: moderate The social and economic pressures brought about by the pandemic will challenge the libertarian principles of ‘no redistribution of wealth, paternalism or morals legislation’; and will prompt the requirement for more egalitarian approaches. So, the tension of individual freedom versus societal good will grow.</p> | <p>Mentioned:  Often Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - on-going ANXIETY FACTOR: *** HOPE FACTOR: **</p> | |


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| <p>Signal 12: moderate</p> <p>The scale of change required post-immediate pandemic will firstly test and then undermine existing social and political frameworks. Who becomes responsible for the required change is as yet entirely uncertain.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often</p> <p style="text-align: center;"></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Sometimes</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - possible TIMELINE - on-going ANXIETY FACTOR: **</p> <p style="text-align: right;">HOPE FACTOR: *</p> | |

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| <p>Signal 13: weak</p> <p>The pandemic's range of effects on the people's lives, resources and personal trajectories means that democracy could not be in a worse place to challenge political versions of evidence, truth and meaning.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often</p> <p style="text-align: center;"></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Sometimes</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - possible TIMELINE - on-going ANXIETY FACTOR: ***</p> <p style="text-align: right;">HOPE FACTOR: *</p> | |



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| <p>Signal 14: weak</p> <p>The pandemic and its effects demonstrate that local communities need more executive power and resources just at a time when they are being variously constrained and pushed in the opposite direction.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often</p> <p style="text-align: center;"></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Sometimes</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - significant LIKELIHOOD - possible TIMELINE - short-term ANXIETY FACTOR: ***</p> <p style="text-align: right;">HOPE FACTOR: *</p> | |


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| <p>Signal 15: moderate The combination of the nationalistic aspects of responses to the pandemic, further sown into the UK by the effects of BREXIT, will have a limiting effect on people’s understanding of other communities and societies in ways that social media will not be able to ‘fix’.</p> | <p>Mentioned:  Often Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - medium-term ANXIETY FACTOR: *** HOPE FACTOR: **</p> | |


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| <p>Signal 16: weak The pandemic and its effects and influences will show how it is science, the creative arts and education and not politics that hold the key to constructive internationalism and world unity.</p> | <p>Mentioned:  Often Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - possible TIMELINE - on-going ANXIETY FACTOR: HOPE FACTOR: ***</p> | |

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| <p>Signal 17: strong Foreign travel will become something that is undertaken mainly by either the very wealthy or the very adventurous. The majority of people will be increasingly cautious about foreign travel due to factors of anxiety, complexity and financial cost.</p> | <p>Mentioned  Often Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - medium-term ANXIETY FACTOR: * HOPE FACTOR: *</p> | |


TECHNOLOGY


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| <p>Signal 18: strong The pandemic and its outcomes will increasingly highlight the role, influence and conduct of the technology companies and social media.</p> | <p>Mentioned:  Often Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - on-going</p> <p>ANXIETY FACTOR: *** HOPE FACTOR: *</p> | |
| <p>Signal 19: moderate The pandemic's 'commissioning' of technology and social media could either destroy or entirely redefine people's thinking about collective self-help.</p> | <p>Mentioned:  Often Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - significant LIKELIHOOD - possible TIMELINE - on-going</p> <p>ANXIETY FACTOR: ** HOPE FACTOR: **</p> | |
| <p>Signal 20: moderate Responses to the pandemic will eventually demonstrate that technology and not the pandemic itself that will be the greatest influence on the human condition.</p> | <p>Mentioned:  Often Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - on-going</p> <p>ANXIETY FACTOR: *** HOPE FACTOR: *</p> | |


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| <p>Signal 21: moderate The increasing reliance of technology within education, emphasised by the requirements to control the pandemic, will expose and increase social and economic inequalities.</p> | <p>Mentioned:  Often Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - significant LIKELIHOOD - possible TIMELINE - short-term</p> <p>ANXIETY FACTOR: *** HOPE FACTOR: *</p> | |


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| <p>Signal 22: moderate As technology redefines 'geography and distance', alongside the pandemic's constraining effects, then human communications behaviour will become more rules-governed and natural sociability more pressurised.</p> | <p>Mentioned:  Often Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - on-going</p> <p>ANXIETY FACTOR: *** HOPE FACTOR:</p> | |


HUMAN BEHAVIOUR


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| <p>Signal 23: strong The suppression or compromising of child development communication needs, involving body language and sensory behaviour, will have profound effects on current the generation of children and redefine a 'new norm' for subsequent generations of children.</p> | <p>Mentioned:  Often Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - on-going</p> <p>ANXIETY FACTOR: ** HOPE FACTOR:</p> | |


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| <p>Signal 24: weak The combination of the pandemic instituting constraints on some of the fundamentals of human body language, together with technology's role in interceding in and reconstituting human communication, will profoundly influence how children are nurtured and supported at every stage of their development.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often Sometimes  Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - on-going ANXIETY FACTOR: *** HOPE FACTOR: *</p> | |

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| <p>Signal 25: moderate How people communicate, receive and interpret signs relating to friendship and trust evolves far more rapidly due to the pandemic and the incursion of technologies.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often  Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - significant LIKELIHOOD - possible TIMELINE - on-going ANXIETY FACTOR: ** HOPE FACTOR: *</p> | |




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| <p>Signal 26: moderate As part of a permanent adjustment to seeing that pandemics are an ever-present threat, understanding the nature of risk becomes a deeply important educational issue, crucial to mental health and resilient behaviour.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often  Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - on-going ANXIETY FACTOR: ** HOPE FACTOR: **</p> | |


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| <p>Signal 27: strong The constraints that the pandemic places on human behaviour, and the exponential infiltration of technology into lives, redefines people's sense of 'place': where is work; where is the community; where are the communal resources?</p> | <p>Mentioned  Often Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - on-going ANXIETY FACTOR: ** HOPE FACTOR: *</p> | |


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| <p>Signal 28: strong The pandemic will continue to recalibrate the levels of public acceptance of restriction on hitherto assumed freedoms.</p> | <p>Mentioned:  Often Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - on-going ANXIETY FACTOR: * HOPE FACTOR:</p> | |

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| <p>Signal 29: strong People will re-examine what they truly <i>need</i> in order to be human.</p> | <p>Mentioned  Often Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - possible TIMELINE - on-going ANXIETY FACTOR: ** HOPE FACTOR: **</p> | |


WORK


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| <p>Signal 30: weak Re-organising working practice due to the pandemic makes organisations more aware of the realities of the conditions of their workers. But this awareness exposes the variations in social responsibility across the organisations when it comes to positive action.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often Sometimes  Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - significant LIKELIHOOD - possible TIMELINE - on-going ANXIETY FACTOR: ** HOPE FACTOR: **</p> | |
| <p>Signal 31: moderate The pandemic's influence on the existing development of home-working will be profound, but will raise many problems regarding the amount and usability of available space in people's homes.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often  Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - medium-term ANXIETY FACTOR: * HOPE FACTOR: **</p> | |
| <p>Signal 32: moderate The combination of the pandemic's effects on the use of public spaces and retail services, and changes in the world of work, will constitute a 'perfect storm' in the demise and re-visioning of the use of town and city centres.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often  Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - medium-term ANXIETY FACTOR: * HOPE FACTOR: **</p> | |


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| <p>Signal 33: weak Organisations changing home-working for their staff from a temporary measure to a long-term one will have to develop far greater regard for the effects on mental health.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often Sometimes Rarely</p> <p style="text-align: right;"></p> |
| <p>IMPACT - significant LIKELIHOOD - unlikely TIMELINE - on-going</p> <p>ANXIETY FACTOR: ** HOPE FACTOR: *</p> | |


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| <p>Signal 34: weak The development of homeworking will further emphasise a sharp divide between the economic and social status of those whose work enables homeworking and those in work that doesn't.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often Sometimes Rarely</p> <p style="text-align: right;"></p> |
| <p>IMPACT - significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - on-going</p> <p>ANXIETY FACTOR: *** HOPE FACTOR: *</p> | |

ENVIRONMENT

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| <p>Signal 35: weak The pandemic's immediate positive influence on environmental issues (e.g travel reduction) will be short-lived as longer-term effects (e.g problems with public transport) and economic imperatives materialise.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often Sometimes Rarely</p> <p style="text-align: right;"></p> |
| <p>IMPACT - significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - medium-term</p> <p>ANXIETY FACTOR: ** HOPE FACTOR:</p> | |

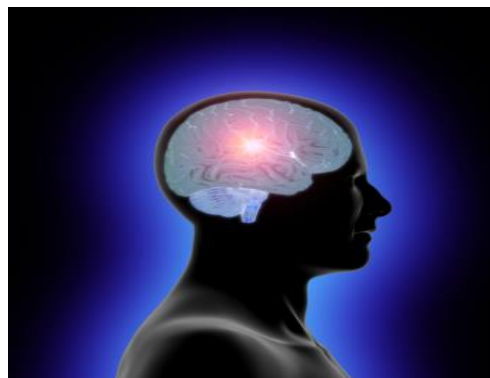
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| <p>Signal 36: moderate On-line-assisted home- working supports the achievement of environmental targets.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often  Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - medium-term ANXIETY FACTOR: HOPE FACTOR: **</p> | |

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| <p>Signal 37: weak The response to the pandemic and its economic and social focus is disproportionate compared with that required by the threat to the environment.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often  Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - on-going ANXIETY FACTOR: HOPE FACTOR: **</p> | |

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| <p>Signal 38: weak The pandemic’s influence in re-examining shorter supply-chains and higher degrees of ‘localism’ has the capacity to be mapped into responses to environmental issues, but will be understood by businesses and communities, not by politicians.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often  Sometimes Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - significant LIKELIHOOD - possible TIMELINE - long-term ANXIETY FACTOR: HOPE FACTOR: **</p> | |

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| <p>Signal 39: weak The pandemic's impact in placing greater focus on national health security and food security increases costs but benefits environmental care.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often Sometimes → Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - significant LIKELIHOOD - possible TIMELINE - long-term ANXIETY FACTOR: HOPE FACTOR: *</p> | |

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| <p>Signal 40: weak There will be climatic events on a scale that will make the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic seem comparatively minor and short-term.</p> | <p>Mentioned: Often Sometimes → Rarely</p> |
| <p>IMPACT - very significant LIKELIHOOD - probable TIMELINE - long-term ANXIETY FACTOR: *** HOPE FACTOR:</p> | |



4.0 FURTHER THOUGHTS

This 'experiment' has been very small scale. But the quality and range of the contributions has been remarkable – making it quite difficult to summarise and analyse the content. Had we had the resources to widen the 'survey', we would have had the ability to refine the analysis we've attempted. It would also have enabled us to seek out further thoughts – to explore further thinking and levels of consensus regarding significance or possibly significance, timelines, and impact. It would also have led to exploring scenarios related to those factors.

Thank you so much to those people who made contributions. And as a closing reflection, I thought that I would name those 'signals' (I am limiting it to just five) that *I think* may end up having the most significant, long-lasting and disruptive impact on our lives and the lives of our children and grandchildren:

Signal 7

Expectation management as a political tool will fail and the default position of giving simple answers to complex questions will be unsustainable.

Signal 13

The pandemic's range of effects on the people's lives, resources and personal trajectories means that democracy could not be in a worse place to challenge political versions of evidence, truth and meaning.

Signal 16

The pandemic and its effects and influences will show how it is science, the creative arts and education and not politics that hold the key to constructive internationalism and world unity.

Signal 24:

The combination of the pandemic instituting constraints on some of the fundamentals of human body language, together with technology's role in interceding in and reconstituting human communication, will profoundly influence how children are nurtured and supported at every stage of their development.

Signal 40

There will be climatic events on a scale that will make the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic seem comparatively minor and short-term.

Simon Mauger, Le Bruel, France 08.2020