

# Supporting the public sector for 90 years

To mark Hāpai Public's 90th anniversary, *Public Sector* journal editor Kathy Young speaks with some of those involved in the organisation's history. Their reflections are compiled here, in the first of a four-part series, looking at Hāpai Public's most significant contributions.



**AUTHOR**  
Kathy Young

Born in 1936 as the New Zealand Institute of Public Administration, the organisation was formed to grow a professional and politically neutral Public Service. Hāpai Public has evolved and supported the growth of the public sector, adapting to changing times while staying true to its founding purpose: bringing public sector professionals together to learn, train, connect, and hence serve New Zealanders better.

A common thread from those I spoke to was how Hāpai Public has carved out independent, relevant roles that complement what is available to public sector employees. This has been its strength and touchpoint throughout its 90 years; existing to support the public sector, but at arm's length, as a critical friend of the public sector.

### Creating a sense of belonging

Kay Booth, Executive Director of Hāpai Public from 2022 to 2026, identifies developing a sense of belonging as Hāpai Public's most significant contribution. "It's helping public professionals to feel at home within the public sector," she says. "He tangata, he tangata, he tangata. It's all about the people. We were formed by public servants for public servants."

Over time, Hāpai Public has broadened its reach to include anyone involved in doing public service, including consultancies and not-for-profit organisations, recognising that valuable work happens across sectors. The organisation set up the New Professionals network in 2002, which helps build capability for those in the first 10 years of their career.

"This network has endured as a place for whanaungatanga, where the next generation of public servants can connect with one another,

and also connect intergenerationally with their peers," says Dr Claire Achmad, a former co-chair of the New Professionals and former Hāpai Public board member.

The organisation deliberately reinforced its people-first approach when it rebranded in 2025. "When we changed our name in February last year, it was a really significant shift," Kay says.



KAY BOOTH, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR 2023–2026

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(Kay Booth)

Deb Te Kawa, former board member of Hāpai Public, explains further. “Hāpai Public – the Institute of Public Professionals. The word hāpai in te reo Māori means to lift up or support others. We very deliberately changed it to be about the people.”

### Professionalising public administration

Beyond fostering community, Hāpai Public has played a crucial role in professionalising New Zealand’s public sector. The organisation helped establish New Zealand’s first tertiary qualification in public administration, the Diploma in Public Administration, with the first students graduating in 1941. Set up with Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington, this eventually led to the formation of the School of Government within the University.



LEN COOK, PRESIDENT 2009-2013

From its early days, education and training has been a key activity of the organisation. Another of its most significant early achievements was establishing the New Zealand Administrative Staff College in partnership with the New Zealand Institute of Management.

Len Cook, President from 2009 to 2013, attended the college in the early 1980s. He describes it as “a really important way of creating an integrated Public Service”. Participants from all areas of the public sector would spend three to six weeks studying alongside each other, creating what Len calls “a whole sense of a cohesive Public Service”. The college systematised management development across public sector agencies and private sector businesses, operating residential courses from the 1930s until the late 1980s. “You realised that it was a great way of creating a sense of where your issues fitted in the broader Public Service,” he says. It was the only management training of its kind at the time in New Zealand.

### Providing a safe space for critical thinking

John Larkindale, President from 2013 to 2017, emphasises another vital contribution:

“One of the things that was very valuable was the ability to offer a safe environment, a safe

space for discussion of issues which might be considered contentious or controversial,” he says. “Because we were politically neutral, we could provide that opportunity.”

Liz MacPherson, current President of Hāpai Public, agrees, saying that another achievement has been the fact that the organisation offers a whole-of-Public-Service perspective, and not just an individual agency perspective.

“We bring people together by connecting people and ideas from across all agencies and departments.”

### Celebrating excellence

In 1999 Hāpai Public established the Innovation Awards (later becoming the Public Sector Excellence Awards) to celebrate excellence in the public sector. Today run by Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission as the Spirit of Service Awards (since 2020), Liz describes them further: “They were an expression of bringing together the public sector to celebrate what was amazing about the public sector,” she says. The awards helped raise visibility for outstanding work, acknowledging that “while we work in the public sector as a system, the people bring that system together”.

### Building knowledge and influence

The *Public Sector* journal, launched in 1938, has provided nearly as much continuity as the organisation itself. Len describes it as documenting experiences and thinking that accumulate to a state of knowledge. The quarterly publication has provided a continuous platform for articles, commentary, and debate on public policy, administration, and management in New Zealand.

Hāpai Public launched the *Studies in Public Administration* publication series in 1953, contributing substantive research and thought



LIZ MACPHERSON, CURRENT PRESIDENT

“I describe us as a catalyst.”  
(Liz MacPherson)



JOAN SMITH, FORMER PRESIDENT AND CURRENT TREASURER

leadership to public administration in the country. Beyond publishing, Hāpai Public has shaped the sector through submissions on legislation, commissioned thought pieces, and influential conferences. The organisation also carried out significant management training in the regions in the 1970s, conducting one- or two-day courses across the country.

The organisation’s annual address (in which government ministers address the Institute) has helped set the agenda for Public Service excellence and national governance reform.

Today, numerous Hāpai Public events, webinars, newsletters, and social media continue the mahi of connecting public professionals with new ideas and critical thinking, alongside commissioned pieces in the *Public Sector* journal.

“Public Sector 101 is a fantastic starting point. It’s an online comprehensive introduction to the public sector, which you can work through at your own pace and time,” says Joan Smith, former President and now Treasurer at Hāpai Public, since 2013. The *Public Sector* conference, held periodically, seeks to offer both practical and strategic thinking to enable a deeply collaborative public sector that is adaptive and relevant.

### A quiet achiever

Hāpai Public is, as Alex Loo, current co-chair of the New Professionals network and board member of Hāpai Public, puts it, “a quiet achiever”. The organisation continues to connect people and ideas, build capability within the public sector, and support future good government.

As Liz summarises: “I describe us as a catalyst.” For 90 years, Hāpai Public has stood beside the people who make New Zealand’s public sector work – through crises and uncertainty, and through good times too – adapting, advocating, training, and building the professional, politically neutral, merit-based Public Service New Zealand relies on.