Policy advice MASTERCLASS

Brief 34

Joint papers

Joint papers have always been a key feature of policy advice. Many problems cut across agency responsibilities, and the only way for Ministers to get good advice is for a joint paper to be done.

It can be hard to write joint papers

It's hard enough to write a good paper on a tricky issue, let alone with:

- people you aren't used to working with….
- agencies which have different processes and approaches to writing and signing out papers….
- advisors who use different frameworks or approaches to the problem.

The job is even harder, if agencies have different views about the issues and solutions.

But, the resulting advice still needs to meet quality standards in order for Ministers to be able to absorb and understand the advice easily, and then make an informed decision based on it.

Poor joint papers are among the worst papers we see

Things that characterise poor joint papers are:

- **Different writing styles** in different parts of the paper – this makes it obvious that different parts of the paper are written by different people/different agencies. This can lead to confusion if different jargon or acronyms are used, or used differently.
- **Different look and feel** in different parts of the paper, e.g. different approaches to headings/subheadings; different styles of numbering; different formats. This makes a paper clunky, and harder to read than it should be.
- **Too many adjectives** – in papers where there are opposing views being expressed there seems to be a tendency to add amplifiers to arguments in an attempt to make these arguments stronger. For decision-makers, this is irritating at best, but at worst undermines the arguments being made.
- **Repetition** – we see examples of agencies desperately trying to make a point repeating it in several different parts of a paper. But this usually backfires. Repetition doesn't strengthen an argument; it just means that readers skip over what might be an important point.
- **No logical flow** – papers can be disjointed, making the arguments harder to follow, if the structure isn't carefully planned.

These are all things to watch out for and avoid!

Decision-makers will still be looking for clear useable advice

No matter the difficulties of the process for officials, Ministers will still expect the output to meet the same high standards as usual. The swan analogy is a good one here – officials are paddling like mad under the water, and the Ministers only get to see the swan gliding along (i.e. a smooth elegant easy-to-read paper).

Remember that different Ministers might have different levels of understanding about the issue. You'll need to make sure the paper caters for this, just as you would with a Cabinet paper or a paper to a group of Ministers. So:

- Avoid jargon. If technical terms are necessary – define them carefully, and consider adding a glossary.
- Add additional background information in an attachment if needed, rather than in the main body of the paper.

But, they will be prepared for joint papers to be in a slightly different template from normal – if you are using another agency's template as the basis.

They'll also be prepared for split recommendations (although some may prefer officials to reach a consensus or compromise position). But, they will expect different points of view to be clearly and dispassionately presented so that they can get to grips with the rationale behind the different recommendations.

The normal quality standards remain important

A well done joint paper can provide decision-makers with a variety of perspectives on a problem, a range of creative solutions, and a full assessment of the options.

The normal quality standards as set out in the Policy Quality Framework[1] should apply.

Fundamentally, the paper needs to fairly reflect different perspectives

Good guiding principles, particularly when advice is contested, is the PQF standard on Advice: reflects diverse perspectives:

" • reflects the findings from engagement: – within the agency (at policy and delivery levels) – across the public sector (including with Crown entities and local government, where relevant)

• identifies different perspectives and conclusions, the reasons for these, and possible responses."

This should be held on to carefully by all those involved, authors, contributors, managers and those responsible for signing the paper out.

Attitude is important

There is a need to put aside a singular focus on the objectives of your agency, and your Minister, and focus on a whole of government view.

Of course this sort of thinking underpins the new Public Service Legislation Bill[2] – currently before Parliament.

David Bromell,[3] citing some recent research, offers some advice on the attitudes and capabilities that policy advisors and their managers need to have to work together successfully. These include being open-minded, patient, trustworthy, respectful, diplomatic and have a sense of humour.

A robust options analysis allows different perspectives to be presented and the trade-offs weighed

The best way of clearly outlining different points of view and the benefits and risks of each is to use a systematised options assessment. We recommend these are good practice anyway.[4]

It's also consistent with the new PQF standards.

Key to this sort of analysis is to:

- Develop criteria to assess options – you can use some standard criteria like cost, legality, ability to implement, timing etc. But other criteria need to be derived from the specific policy (or opportunity) problem faced.
- Identify a wide range of different options – go from a long list to a short list that still covers all bases.
- Fully analyse the options against the criteria.

This sort of analysis allows the trade-offs between options to be crystallised, e.g. speed of implementation versus accuracy; impact versus cost etc.

1 https://dpmc.govt.nz/our-programmes/policy-project/policy-improvement-frameworks/policy-quality

2 http://www.legislation.govt.nz/bill/government/2019/0189/latest/d795037e2.html

3 The Art and Craft of Policy Advising, 2017, Springer, p168.

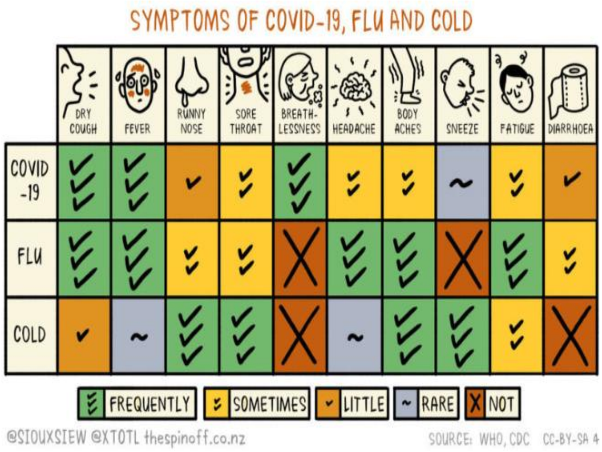
4 See our Masterclass 27 on options analysis from 2019.

This is particularly helpful in joint papers when different agencies have different views on the option. It's most likely to be about the different weights they put on the assessment criteria.

As per our Options Masterclass, a simple way of summarising this is in a traffic light table. There are examples in our Masterclass.

You may have noticed that Dr Siouxsie Wiles from Auckland University has been using one of these tables to describe the differences in symptoms between a cold, flu and Covid-19[5]. This is one of the best examples we've seen recently.

Figure 1 An example of an options analysis table


SYMPTOMS OF COVID-19, FLU AND COLD

	DRY COUGH	FEVER	RUNNY NOSE	SORE THROAT	BREATH-LESSNESS	HEADACHE	BODY ACHES	SNEEZE	FATIGUE	DIARRHOEA
COVID-19	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	~	✓✓	✓
FLU	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	X	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	X	✓✓✓	✓✓
COLD	✓	~	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	X	~	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	X

✓✓✓ FREQUENTLY | ✓✓ SOMETIMES | ✓ LITTLE | ~ RARE | X NOT

@SIOUXSIEW @XTOTL thespinoff.co.nz SOURCE: WHO, CDC CC-BY-SA 4

Source: WHO, CDC CC-BY-SA 4.0

A solid process will help you through

Good communication, and an agreed process will help you through. This is something to be agreed at the planning and commissioning stage.

We suggest:

1. Nominate a lead author and support

This person is responsible for pulling together the contributions of others, and developing a paper consistent in style, formatting etc.

This person needs to be 'working' for all the agencies, not a representative of their own agency. This neutral type of attitude will help to ensure the paper fairly reflects diverse views.

[5] Dr Siouxsie Wiles, thespinoff.co.nz, March 2020.

The lead author should use their own agency's template and style guide to ensure consistency (as well as ease, as these will be embedded in their own systems).

At the same time sort out who is going to do QA and peer review. Remember peer review isn't the same as getting agency comments on a paper,[6] it's a different process. But, you might want to consider using a peer reviewer from each of the main agencies involved.

2. Agree the sign-out process early

Different organisations have different sign-out processes. For some there can be many steps involved, and therefore they will take more time than others.

Book times in diaries and make sure those people are available.

Sort out the actual process of getting signatures, e.g. will this be in hard copy, or virtually using electronic signatures?

You want to avoid simple last minute glitches as much as possible.

Also, sort out the process for getting the paper to the various Ministers. Liaise with your Minister's Office to do this – sometimes each agency will send it to their Minister individually; alternatively one Minister's Office may take responsibility for getting it to each Minister.

3. Plan

It's fine for one person/agency to take the lead – that may even be the author.

But there is a need to agree on the commissioning brief, and the plan for completing the work. The plan would need to include the data or information required, a process for working through the issue, options and assessment criteria, and the timetable.

In most cases you'll need to leave more time in the final stages for discussion/negotiation on critical issues and for sign-out processes in multiple agencies.

Assemble and brief the team. Make sure everyone knows what is expected on them, and by when.

[6] See our Masterclass on peer review https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_8_surviving_and_thriving_peer_review.pdf

And for those who've been allocated a task, stick to the timeframe. It can lead to frustration and unnecessary conflict if people or agencies don't deliver in the agreed timeframes.

Work out what the decision escalation path is, if things can't be resolved by the officials working directly on developing the paper. It may be a senior officials meeting or one-on-one.

4. Jointly develop key pieces of the analysis as much as possible

Try and agree the problem definition. All evidence about the problem and possible solutions should be shared.

Use one of the on-line sharing tools for this purpose, e.g. Dropbox, Basecamp, SharePoint.

This will help to bring all of the team up to speed, and to help understand different perspectives.

Work together to agree the criteria for assessing options, and the long list/short list of options together. This can be done through workshops, traditional meetings, or even online. This will help flush out where agencies agree and where they disagree. It's all standard policy stuff!

This will provide valuable material for the lead author to consolidate and include in the paper.

But if it gets tricky or there are divergent views – consider using a facilitator, or one of the standard processes, e.g. those in the Treasury Better Business Case methodology[7] such as investment logic mapping, or the Economic Case options workshops.

5. Share drafts for comment at several stages

Once is unlikely to be enough. You might want to consider sharing an outline of the advice, a good draft, and a final draft before the sign-out copy is produced. Plan this in at the beginning, but be prepared to add in an extra stage, and take a bit more time if there are significant disagreements that need ironing out.

Each agency needs to take responsibility for circulating drafts within their own agency for comment, and coordinating those responses. The lead author will welcome a combined response from each agency, rather than numerous disparate views. Sort out how you will manage comments. Best practice would be something like SharePoint so everyone can see each other's comments. It's useful to have a process of showing how you have responded to comments. This helps to assure others that their concerns have been taken into account, and to explain how (and why).

6. Brief up

Each agency needs to take responsibility for appropriately briefing others in their own organisation throughout the process, including those who will be responsible for signing the final paper out.

There's nothing worse than reaching agreement, then to have someone further up the chain have a different view.

7. Be prepared to be flexible

Joint papers can be among the trickiest anyone has to develop.

If it's not working, be prepared to change the approach and agreed plans – with agreement of course.

[7] https://www.treasury.govt.nz/information-and-services/state-sector-leadership/investment-management/better-business-cases-bbc

It takes practice, call on more experienced analysts for help

These processes can be daunting. Once you've done them a number of times you'll get better at them and your confidence (and that of your agency) will improve.

There'll be plenty of old hands in your agency who will have experienced any number of these – good and bad. No doubt they'll have some wisdom to offer.

At the end of the process – it's worth a review to identify what went well, and what didn't, and therefore what you might do differently next time.

This paper was written at NZIER, April 2020.

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