

Supporting your newly elected members: things to think about in writing reports for them

You'll now have a mix of seasoned elected members and those new to the job

We've written about the sorts of things report authors need to think about in writing for new Councillors and Mayors before.¹

No doubt you have done induction packs, briefings and helped with any training for all the newly elected members by now. And they'll all be in a rapid-learning space – understanding processes, legal obligations, and the actual issues.

But you'll also need to consider how having new decision-makers changes how you write your standard papers – especially for issues that have been going on for some time. New elected members will need some more detailed background information. But this needs to be added in a way that doesn't detract from the report's usability.

This masterclass focuses on practical considerations for writing reports for these newly elected members.

It's always hard writing for a group

You are writing for a number of people with different interests, perspectives, ways of absorbing information, and very different levels of knowledge about the issues. But reports have to be written so that all elected members can understand them and use them as a basis for informed decision-making.

People's different experiences and training mean that they use different frameworks to think about issues

In an earlier masterclass, we discussed these learning and comprehension preferences.² Even though elected members are making decisions together, they have very different backgrounds.

In our experience, we've found that elected members' professional backgrounds and experience often colour the way they 'process' information and analysis.

For example, lawyers tend to prefer standard written papers.

Accountants are quite comfortable with financial statements (of course) and tables and graphs. Some prefer tables showing the raw data, while others prefer graphs and charts.

Some will be comfortable with scientific data and evidence – some less so.

People also have their own preferred style for absorbing information

There is much in the educational literature about learning styles that could broadly apply here; e.g. written, visual, auditory or more practical learning are the dimensions often discussed. A variety of different techniques may well be needed.

The appendix provides more detail on different ways of presenting information and advice that could be used.

¹ Masterclass no. 31 2022 Election special
<https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/Brief%2031%202022%20Election%20special.pdf>

² Masterclass no. 1 Communicating with aliens
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_no_1_communicating_with_aliens.pdf

At the moment, it will be harder than normal to get the pitch right, as knowledge levels will be varied

There will be an obvious difference in knowledge and understanding between experienced councillors and those newly elected.

But even within that, some may know a lot about it because of previous roles and responsibilities, while others will find it completely new.

More background information will be needed in most reports. But care is needed not to make papers too long and too dense by just adding this in.

Ways of adding more background or context that can be useful are:

- Personalised pre-briefings for new Councillors on upcoming issues – particularly those issues which have been considered previously or which are part way through a decision process.
- Appendices with more detail on the background to the issue, the process followed to date, and a history of the decisions made. This means that more background can be provided without overloading the core report. And the experienced, knowledgeable elected members won't have to read all the extra information.
- More emphasis on council workshops as a process for going through issues and decisions.

Of course, all the usual principles of clear communication apply

Take care with your drafting and presentation. We know issues can be complex, but the art is in explaining them clearly and succinctly.

Figure 1 Key things to consider



Source: NZIER

Peer review is very helpful

Peer review with a fresh set of eyes³ to test your 'pitch' becomes even more important.

An experienced peer reviewer with limited knowledge of the issue can be particularly important in considering what information and analysis might be needed for those councillors not familiar with the issue.

³ Masterclass no. 39 The value of a fresh set of eyes
[https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20](https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/Brief%2039%20Fresh%20set%20of%20eyes.pdf)

[Government/Brief%2039%20Fresh%20set%20of%20eyes.pdf](https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/Brief%2039%20Fresh%20set%20of%20eyes.pdf)

Accessibility needs to be considered

Whenever we write about using visual techniques, we need to sound a note of caution about accessibility.

Here are a couple of references to help you out:

From MSD <https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/accessibility/accessibility-guide/index.html>

From Whaikaha: Ministry of Disabled People <https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/accessibility/accessibility-charter/index.html>

The Government web standards <https://www.digital.govt.nz/standards-and-guidance/nz-government-web-standards/web-accessibility-standard-1-2>

Get some feedback from elected members

It's always helpful to get feedback from elected members on what's working and what isn't, and then adapt accordingly.

We've seen some councils do this through formal surveys of elected members or a series of interviews with them.

But an easy way to do this is to get some feedback on the pack of papers as a closing part of the meeting – it could be part of a wrap-up agenda item, for example.

This paper was written by NZIER, September 2025. For further information, please contact anyone from our policy advice team:

Cathy Scott at cathy.scott@nzier.org.nz

Todd Krieble at todd.krieble@nzier.org.nz

John Yeabsley at john.yeabsley@nzier.org.nz

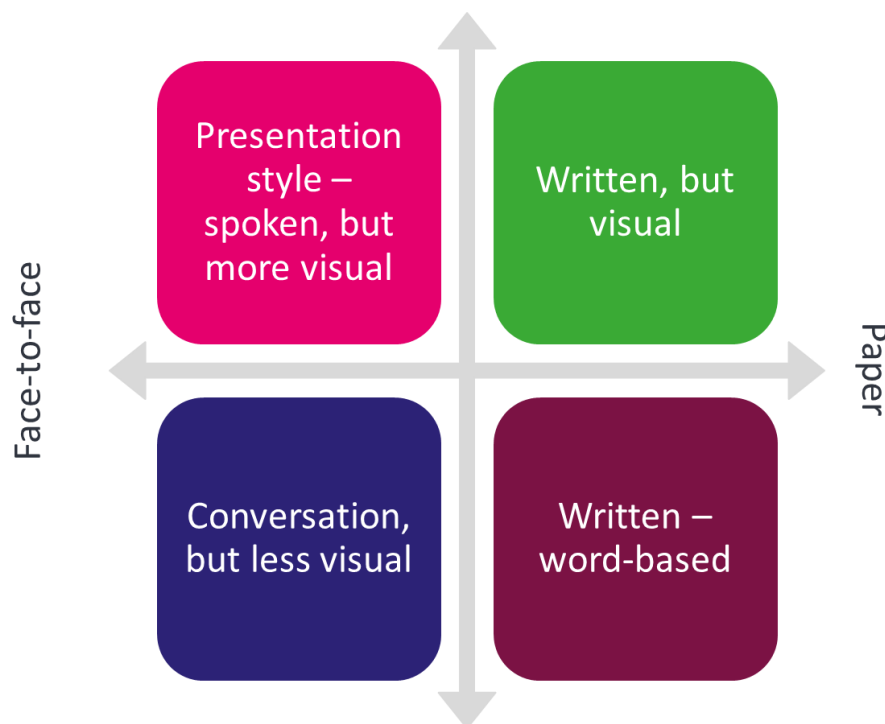
NZIER | (04) 472 1880 | econ@nzier.org.nz

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Appendix A Different ways of absorbing information

Figure 2 Ways of presenting advice



Source: NZIER

Presentations: this may not be a formal presentation (although we've seen these used), but can involve visual material that is then talked through, e.g., a slide pack or handout, or, for something different, a site visit.

Conversation, but less visual: council workshops are ideal for this, as there are more opportunities for detailed discussion outside the formal meeting structure. Good preparation is needed – including research, clear objectives and a structure that succinctly frames a story about what you are saying.

Written, but more visual: might involve A3s⁴ or slide packs.⁵

Written – word-based: these are traditional reports or aides-mémoire. Of course, they still have to be well-written and succinct.

There is a continuum between the two types of written advice mentioned above – from largely written papers to ones which include graphs, diagrams, tables, and infographics, through to an A3 or slide pack.

⁴ Masterclass No. 17 Trying something different: using A3s to best effect
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/local_government_brief_17_a3s.pdf

⁵ Masterclass No. 26 Experimenting with PowerPoint reports
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_26_lg_powerpoint_slide_packs.pdf