

The top seven: Scoping the key skills

“New Zealand local government operates within a public policy framework which is inherently top-down in the approach it takes to the nature of government.” (McKinlay, 2016)

In the many – a few

Long experience (and a survey of the papers we reviewed last year) has convinced us that, while every piece of advice has its own wrinkles, there are a limited number of papers that cover the scenarios that must be prepared, including several standard reports.

This brief discusses the various sorts of papers; their differences and what they have in common. In a later brief, we will deal with the quirks and requirements of each type of report in greater detail.

Different strokes for different folks

While the implications of the way local government is structured via the LGA affects the distribution of paper types, it will also differ by council and by council type (regional, local or unitary). The drivers include: the natural work load, recent events, and the operational interests and preferences of the councillors. Other influences include history and the way individual councillors like to be supported.

Tools for using

Whatever your workload mix, it is worth becoming familiar with these examples. This will allow you to consider a wider field when thinking about which response framework to select.

Among the following there will likely be types of papers that individuals may not have had to draft. The brief descriptions here are to show the variety of styles that senior officers should have at their command.

The seven main papers you'll write

| | Type of paper |
|---|--|
| 1 | Policy brief: Introducing a new policy or changes to an existing policy. This report will typically identify and size a problem and propose a solution, with analysis, evidence and options. |
| 2 | Creating a decision process to be followed: Under the LGA, local bodies must be careful about due process. Providing a scheme to be followed – including possibly mandating a subcommittee, hearings panel or similar – is common. |
| 3 | Formal change within formal process rules (e.g. RMA): Many important issues local bodies must deal with are subject to tightly drafted rules about consultation and timing. These requirements call for detailed formal briefing papers to implement any changes. Often, such sets of decisions cover various facets which may have few common factors. |
| 4 | What's up? Regular standard report. Usually updated regularly, for instance the budget, or progress of a particular project. These updates deserve flair and care (like design ideas such as dashboards and infographics) to be crystal clear yet waste none of the councillors' time. |
| 5 | Following through: Large scale implementation typically means work stretching over considerable time. Thus, there will be reports on progress throughout the process, potentially seeking approval for modifications to a proposed scheme of work as information is gathered and tactics need to evolve. These have their own logic. |
| 6 | Making formal decisions: The big set pieces of council process like finalising the Budget, rates setting, and formal plans ¹ are usually a compilation of a cluster of small seemingly unrelated decisions that must be presented together. |
| 7 | Business case or evaluation: Logical analysis of a proposal or policy which will be a major project. In addition to a thumbnail sketch of the concept, and a more substantial analysis, these typically entail technical features that will need to be explained. |

¹ For example, Long Term Plans, Annual Plans, various plan changes and schemes under the RMA, although these may be grouped using some overarching objectives.

Of course, other papers occur occasionally, but these seven make up the bulk of those we see in our reviews.

Common threads

Whatever the type of paper that is being prepared there are core elements that need to be kept in mind or drawn on, as they apply in all the circumstances we are discussing.

First there are the obvious requirements like checking what the need is and driving towards it, or the value of clear writing. But further in our reviews we find shops still – at least from time-to-time – neglecting one or more of the following central advising principles or smart ideas:

- **Keep it as short as possible** – it does not matter whether it is a Plan change or an appointment to a minor committee; shorter is always better.
- **Stick to the rule: one paper one topic**² – unless the issues are so intertwined they cannot be separated it is always best to keep the presentation of the material straightforward and focused. It keeps the discussion on track and minimises confusion.
- **Make it a breeze** – Councillors are always pressured; and cram their reading into over-full days; some is going to be under bad conditions, like late at night. To do be effective, however gnarly the topic, the golden rule applies: the content of the paper must be as easy to absorb as an *airport novel*. No sentence should make readers backtrack; no diagram ought to require explanation. Strict peer reviewers should enforce and encourage this standard.
- **Think about the reader's next steps** – all briefs for the council are “raw material”. They are part of a larger process in which councillors are playing a role with a longer run object. Whatever this context, the drafter must consider where in the scheme of things the paper fits, and include support for the councillors’ next action in the sequence – if possible, in immediately useable form.
- **Make the piece self-contained** – the audience for briefs is always wide, as it is a group of councillors. It is thus impossible to fully know what previous context or information they have seen and retained. So, to work effectively without extra material the paper must speak for itself. Select just sufficient background to allow an informed decision and use clear, concise drafting.

- **Visual aids can make the piece** – shrewdly selected diagrams, charts or tables can compress information, make comparisons, or show the way a project is tracking, much more succinctly than a paragraph or so of good writing. But the golden rule still applies: if the meaning doesn’t leap out without explanation, it’s not working. A helpful peer reviewer is honest about this and will assist in finding the right method to get the point across.
- **Plot the story** – while we believe that the key points in all papers need to be right at the front, unless it is a formula paper, the unfolding of any more substantial content takes thought. Once the material is over a page it needs a beginning, a middle, and an end. In other words, it tells a [very short] story. Think carefully about this story before writing anything down, and check at the conclusion that it has been successfully caught on paper.

Learning the craft takes application

As we have already stressed in this series, top class policy advising is a craft that is perfected by practice, but which has elements that can be acquired second hand – drawing on the valuable experience of others and best practice examples.

The central principles set out above are a framework that all advisors should have woven into their work habits. We will supply more detailed ideas about the requirements of these different types of papers later in this series.

References

Department of Internal Affairs (2017) website information which covers the legal requirements for local government decision-making:

http://www.localcouncils.govt.nz/lqip.nsf/wpg_url/About-Local-Government-Local-Government-In-New-Zealand-How-councils-should-make-decisions#Decision-MakingPrinciples

McKinlay, P (2016) “Community Governance.” *Policy Quarterly* 12 (4): 36-41.

Office of the Auditor-General (2016) Reflections from our audits: Governance and accountability – has some useful information about roles of decision-makers, and therefore implications for what should be in papers.

Productivity Commission (2013) Towards better local regulation, Productivity Commission, Wellington.

² This rule obviously does not cover the omnibus papers that are frequently part of the officer’s requirements to deal with many amendments proposed for a plan, or a raft of changes to parking regulations.

Local Government Policy MASTERCLASS

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