

## Paper 64

### Quick start – commissioning quick turnaround papers

This Masterclass focuses on turning advice around in a short timeframe. It builds on earlier advice on how to write a quick turnaround paper<sup>1</sup> and how to review one.<sup>2</sup> This is about fast commissioning.

#### The need for fast-turnaround papers has always been there

It's probably a bit more common these days as the new government wants to get on with things quickly. But, it was also common during the COVID-19 response, for example.

Fast turnaround papers can typically be the result of:

- A Minister/Cabinet seeking more detailed information or a different analysis of an issue they have already been briefed on. In this case, you'll know a fair bit about the topic.
- A briefing initiated by your agency on a rapidly developing issue – in this case, there'll be people inside your agency who have information, although it might not be a complete picture.
- A Ministerial initiated briefing on an emerging issue – this might be something that has been raised by a stakeholder, another Minister, or something your Minister is interested in. You may have some information on this, or you may not.

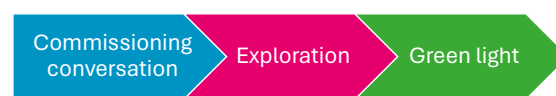
#### The Start Right phases still apply – but they all need to be streamlined

The DPMC Policy Project's<sup>3</sup> commissioning phases are a useful place to start – the process just needs to be quicker and slicker.

So, follow the same stages – but scope them down to fit the time available and the nature of the issue.

Everything will need to be done under time pressure.

#### Figure 1 Phases of the Start Right process



Source: Adapted from DPMC Start Right Guide, 2018

However, within the standard Start Right process, there are some factors you need to take into account when doing a Quick Start. These are discussed in turn below.

#### Commissioning may involve more uncertainty than usual

The 'conversation prompts'<sup>4</sup> in the Start Right tool are useful. But many may not be able to be answered. Often, you'll have to proceed with a fairly ambiguous briefing.

Others may have heard the request, i.e. others attending the Minister's meeting or other meetings where the request arose.

<sup>1</sup> Masterclass No 31. Fast papers  
<https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2031%20Fast%20papers%20-%202022.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Masterclass no. 32 Turbo peer review  
<https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2032%20Turbo%20Peer%20Review%20-%202022.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dPMC.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2019-08/start-right-guide-may21.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.dPMC.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2021-05/start-right-commissioning-conversation-prompts\\_1.pdf](https://www.dPMC.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2021-05/start-right-commissioning-conversation-prompts_1.pdf)

This might include your department's private secretary seconded to the Minister's office. It could be worth triangulating with them, too.

### Be clear about the timeframe

Timeframes are likely to be clear. However, there may be some flexibility. It's important to nail this down first – and use it to plan and guide your work.

Plan back from the deadline – it helps you determine and allocate your useable time. This back planning also needs to factor in time for your own review of your work, peer review and sign-off. What's left is how much time you've got to think and write.

Make sure all those involved know about the plan and their deadlines. This can be particularly important for those who are critical contributors to the advice but are not taking the lead, e.g. people involved in QA or experts you need to involve. Good practice is to warn them and get them to put aside time in their diaries to make their contribution ahead of time.

Try to stick to the timeframes once they've been sorted.

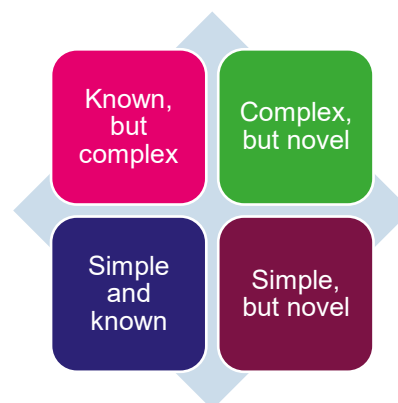
### Seek a streamlined sign-off process

Get clear at the beginning what the process will be and how long it will take – as that significantly impacts the time available to do the work. It may be that you are shortening the usual process with agreement. That's worth doing.

### Nail the 'type' of issue early – as this helps to define the work required

Consider both how complex the issue is and how much is already known about it.

Figure 2 How complex is the issue?



Source: NZIER

Obviously, it's easier when dealing with a **relatively simple task that you know quite a lot about**. Something like this can probably be answered quickly and efficiently. Many agencies use a one-pager<sup>5</sup> for this sort of briefing. Apply the 'just do it' principle. And don't leave it until the last minute. It makes life easier all around.

You might be able to solve a **simple issue that's new** in a short period. But you might not be able to if further information or analysis is required, and it will take time to pull together. The approach should then cover what you know and don't and perhaps a framework for thinking about the issue. Also, a clear timetable for resolving the issue should be set. But maintain the pace – go for a relatively quick turnaround on the follow-up advice.

**Known, but complex issues** are often Ministers seeking more information or another layer of depth of analysis on something you've already been working on. If you already have the information and the framework you are using is clear, this should be amenable to a tight turnaround. But if you need to do further modelling or engage with stakeholders again, then it will take longer. So, if an immediate response is required, explain how you will fill in the gaps and how long (but

<sup>5</sup> Masterclass No. 54 One-page papers  
<https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2054%20One-page%20papers.pdf>

still with a focus on quick turnaround) it will take for a final answer.

The hardest type of issue to deal with is one which is **both complex and largely unknown**. In this circumstance, you can only propose a clear way forward.

But, whatever you propose, focus on trying to move the issue along the best you can.

### Quickly find out what has been done before

Many issues come back time and time again. New Ministers, in particular, won't be aware of previous work on the issue. Newer staff might not be either.

Do your best to find out what has been done before. It's never a good look to give different advice on the same matter if circumstances remain the same.

A quick brainstorming session with colleagues is a good idea. Go wider than just your immediate team – try and identify others who've been around a while and might remember earlier work.

Interrogate your organisation's knowledge management system – the 'files' are an advisor's friend. There may well be papers available on this topic or similar topics.

### Look out for ways similar issues were handled

There may well be examples in which issues with similar characteristics were dealt with. These sorts of examples can give you a good steer on what to do in this circumstance.

It may be worth a quick international scan – are other places grappling with the same problem? What have they tried?

### Think before you write

Remember the 50/50 rule.<sup>6</sup> The essence of the rule is to think before you write.

It's all too tempting to just get something down – given time pressure. But in our experience, it's much easier to write about something when you've already worked out what you will say.

### Be clear about the limits of the analysis

The Policy Quality Framework includes a relevant standard under Analysis – "*Make the limitations of the analysis and advice clear*".<sup>7</sup>

It's even more important to do this when you have time limitations. Be clear about what you know and what you don't. Also, explain the limits of the analysis you could undertake in the timeframe (or access from previous work) and discuss what would be good to have that you haven't been able to do within the timeframe.

This will help frame further work on the issue and whether decisions are taken now or later.

This also makes the risks clear to decision-makers. Identifying risks is a critical element of free and frank advice.

### It can be stressful

Some people thrive on deadlines, others don't. Some like certainty, but others are happy in a very fluid situation. This applies to both managers and analysts.

Take care of everyone contributing. Remember, producing high quality policy is a team game.

### There are some major mistakes to avoid

**Rehearsal problem** – one we often see is papers that are heavy on background and light on actual advice. This is like a book or a play, which spends too long setting the scene and then has to wind up abruptly in order to reach conclusions within the 'time limit'.

<sup>6</sup> Masterclass No. 53 Fifty-fifty rule <https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2053%20Fifty-fifty%20rule.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2021-12/policy-quality-framework-full.pdf>

This can be caused by spending too much time researching the problem and not having enough time for answers and next steps. It might also be caused by leaving the writing until the last minute.

**Too simple**, with a solution that sounds good, but doesn't stick.

These papers are often well-presented and easy to read. But they don't cover the fishhooks in what is being proposed, e.g. what you don't know or what could go wrong. They can lead to major disappointment down the track.

**Too long** – yes, it might be complicated, but it's still important to present a succinct, clear paper. If it's being asked for in a hurry, time is usually tight all around. This means your Minister will also have little time to read, decide and act as well. So, a long paper with substantial appendices won't meet the brief.

**Not being flexible enough** – what you can do in the available time might differ from what you initially thought once you get into the work. For example, data you expected to be able to access was not forthcoming in the timeframes, or key experts were away. If this is the case, check with the commissioning manager. You'll need a Plan B.

It's also possible that there will be external changes, e.g. the situation is continuously evolving, or the Minister may have further thoughts on the issue. So, rethinking and replanning is always likely.

You'll need to be flexible to accommodate changes and stick to your plan and timeframe – quite a balancing act.

### **Above all, do what you can in the timeframe**

In other words, cut your coat to suit your cloth. This principle is key.

You may not be able to solve the issue in the time available in one paper – even if you'd like to.

Try to manage your ambition. Of course, we all want to do a good job. But the impossible is just that.

But, you still need to move the issue along, even if you can't fully solve it.

It's best to get something sensible, if limited, up – rather than not deliver or deliver something that misses the mark.

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