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Templates for policy advice

We're often asked what makes a good template and whether we've seen any examples of best practice.

This is always a hard question to answer – so here's our best shot on templates.

We have mixed views on templates

They have positive features. But they can act as a straight jacket if rigidly enforced. They can involve shoving a square peg in a round hole or not allowing for innovation, both to the detriment of the advice being provided.

A balanced and nuanced approach is required.

Templates help achieve a common look and feel

One of the major benefits of templates is that they give the agency's advice a common look and feel. This helps decision-makers know what they are getting and how it will be framed and ordered. It's really useful for a busy reader.

They also, hopefully, make good use of best practice in design (e.g. formatting consistency, plenty of white space, easy to read, etc.). The Comms teams in agencies usually have more expertise in this sort of thing than the policy analysts. So, their input is useful.

But they do need regular refreshes to make sure they reflect best practice.

Templates help to make sure all critical aspects of advice are covered

Having some standard headings or guidance about the content within the template means that key matters won't get forgotten, e.g. having a section on risk or implementation as standard.

The instructions within templates can be an opportunity to link to best practice examples, too.

This type of approach is used in a detailed way in some very specific types of papers, e.g. Regulatory Impact Statements,[1] and Better Business Case Guidance,[2] when specific requirements need to be covered.

But do make sure these helpful hints are not easy to leave in place. We see a regular stream of papers with the 'helpful' draft content and instructions still present in the 'final' draft submitted to the decision-maker.

Moving to a standard is often something agencies do early in the policy quality improvement journey

They are an easy, quick win.[3] They can improve the overall quality of advice, especially if an agency has a variety of templates in play.

Templates need to be easy to use

We've all had experience with beautifully designed table or diagram templates, which are extremely hard to use and with formatting beyond that of the average policy analyst. This is hugely frustrating and a time waster.

Keep the templates simple.

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1   https://www.treasury.govt.nz/information-and-services/regulation/impact-analysis-requirements-regulatory-proposals

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

3   Masterclass No. 40 The long march to quality https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/Brief%2040%20The%20long%20march%20to%20quality%202022.pdf

Have a number of templates

A single template isn't a good idea – given the range of advice offered by the typical agency a single template will make fitting all kinds of advice into it awkward.

It would be best if you had a handful to reflect different types of papers, e.g. a standard decision paper for your Minister, an information paper (e.g. an aide-mémoire), and a super-short paper, at least.

There's also a standard template for Cabinet paper available[4] – but in our view, it needs a bit of modernisation and updating.

However, the Cabinet Legislative Committee templates are good examples.[5, 6] They help to make sure all the formal requirements for regulations or legislation are met.

We haven't seen templates work very well for A3s and slide packs, as these tend to be individually tailored and at their best when creative and fresh.

Specialised templates work well for regularly repeated reports

For regular reports (e.g. weekly reports, quarterly performance reports, regular reporting on specific projects, appointment papers), templates can be particularly helpful.

Because you use these reports often, you can invest in design, which is more efficient and effective than creating a one-off report each time. Examples might be updated charts or updated tables, infographics, and progress indicators like traffic lights.

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[4]   https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/publications/cabinet-policy-paper-template

[5]   https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/publications/cabinet-paper-template-introducing-bill

[6]   https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/publications/cabinet-paper-template-submitting-secondary-legislation-executive-council

Start well – the first page or two counts the most

We recommend starting with:

- A clear Purpose statement
- An Executive summary or Key points section
- Then recommendations.

This means that the essentials are all at the very beginning.

It makes things much easier for a busy reader.

We've done masterclasses on all these elements before.

Allow for the use of active headings and subheadings

Templates need to allow for the use of active headings, subheadings, and storylining techniques.

Standard headings like Comment, Analysis, or Options add no value. Avoid them.

We see two broad approaches to this:

- Just using active subheadings within standard high level headings.
- Allowing the use of active headings and subheadings throughout the paper – as long as all the standard content is provided.

We'd prefer the latter approach as it makes for a more tightly structured paper. But it does take some confidence and capability.

One way of ensuring all aspects are covered is to develop a simple checklist of key components that can be used by authors and peer reviewers.

Try to balance the size of different sections of the paper

We often see the same size headings covering the bulk of the analysis, as well as a wide range of more minor issues.

This can make the critical analysis and advice text heavy and hard to read. Conversely, it

also tends to give more prominence to minor issues – which is not the impression you want to leave with the decision-maker.

More use of active headings and subheadings, as well as grouping up minor issues, prevents this.

Don't go overboard on compliance issues

We're starting to see a longer and longer list of compliance matters or mandatory headings at the end of the paper.

We know these things can be important. But they can also make the paper longer and harder to read.

As we've said before, papers with many compliance matters at the end tend to fizzle out a bit, and a reader will quickly lose interest and skip over them. We've always suggested finishing with a conclusion.[7] They help to bookend the Executive summary/Key points section and reinforce the key messages.

Think about trying to simplify the ever-growing list of compliance matters. Perhaps using a table or checklist. We've seen a few examples of this – the Dunedin City Council uses a one-page checklist called "Summary of Considerations" to make sure all these compliance factors and legal requirements are covered.[8] The Gisborne District Council uses a similar approach.[9]

Encourage the use of visuals and other formats to provide information and advice

We know we go on about using visuals[10] within standard papers, but if done well, they can make a significant difference to the quality of a paper. Make sure your templates provide for this – encourage it even.

Similarly, different ways of providing advice can be useful. A3s and slide packs haven't lost their currency.[11,12]

Be flexible

Don't rigidly adhere to the template if it's not working for the advice you are preparing. Encourage innovation.

The main aim should be to communicate clearly, succinctly and compellingly. Not to rigidly stick with a template.

Ensure this is well understood by authors, managers, and those involved in QA (often Ministerial services teams). We've probably all had experiences of trying to do something innovative only to have it dialled back and forced into a bland template by others.

There are lots of great examples easily accessible on the internet

Now that agencies tend to release their briefing papers to Ministers and Cabinet, it's easy to find a variety of examples. Of course, you're likely to see them in the general course of interagency work.

[7]   Masterclass No. 14 Finishing with a bang
       https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%
       20Government/brief_14_finishing_with_a_bang.pdf

[8]   See DCC
       https://infocouncil.dunedin.govt.nz/Open/2024/04/CSC_
       20240424_AGN_2683_AT_WEB.htm see Appendix A"

[9]   See GDC
       https://www.gdc.govt.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0029/7
       3955/Agenda-Council-14-March-2024.pdf See Appendix
       B.

[10]   Masterclass No. 47 Infographics
       https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%
       20Government/Brief%2047%20Infographics.pdf

[11]   Masterclass No. 19 Getting the best from A3s
       https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%
       20Government/brief_19_getting_the_best_from_a3s.pdf

[12]   Masterlcass No. 23 Experimenting with PowerPoint
       reports
       https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%
       20Government/brief_23_powerpoint_slide_pack_1.pdf

Another place to look is papers produced for local authorities – for Councils. The vast majority of these are published on individual Council websites. They are worth a look. In our experience, these tend to have more graphics and design features than in standard central government papers.

Review your templates regularly

Refresh and update.

Make sure they work for the specific decision-makers you are advising.

Try new things and check on whether they work.

Appendix A Summary of Considerations example from Dunedin City Council

SUMMARY OF CONSIDERATIONS

Fit with purpose of Local Government

This Ōtepoti Dunedin Housing Plan promotes the social, economic, and environmental well-being of communities in the present and for the future.

Fit with strategic framework

	Contributes	Detracts	Not applicable
Social Wellbeing Strategy	✓	☐	☐
Economic Development Strategy	✓	☐	☐
Environment Strategy	✓	☐	☐
Arts and Culture Strategy	☐	☐	✓
3 Waters Strategy	✓	☐	☐
Spatial Plan	✓	☐	☐
Integrated Transport Strategy	✓	☐	☐
Parks and Recreation Strategy	✓	☐	☐
Other strategic projects/policies/plans	✓	☐	☐

The Ōtepoti Dunedin Housing Plan aligns particularly with the DCC's Zero Carbon Plan and Te Taki Haruru – Māori Strategic Framework.

Māori Impact Statement

For Māori, housing is about more than economic outcomes and material security. Housing cuts across many aspects of Māori wellbeing, such as whānau health, acquisition and use of te reo Māori, care of whenua and the environment, the ability to provide sustenance and hospitality for themselves and others, and many aspects of wellbeing that are unique to Māori culture. There are a number of large multidisciplinary and multi-agency research projects working alongside Māori communities to empower Māori in the housing sector and developing the knowledge needed to address severe housing deprivation, homelessness, social housing, affordable rental options, ownership, and papakainga development. The DCC's Corporate Policy and Māori Partnership teams are across a number of these large research projects, to develop relationships and exchange information to inform the Council's Strategic Refresh project and Te Taki Haruru - Māori Strategic Framework, and to enhance understanding of Māori aspirations for wellbeing.

Sustainability

Sustainability has been identified as a key issue through ongoing consultation with the community and stakeholders.

LTP/Annual Plan / Financial Strategy /Infrastructure Strategy

This work is in line with the Annual Plan 2023-24.

Financial considerations

This work is line with the Annual Plan 2023-2024.

Significance

This report is considered of low significance in terms of the Council's Significance and Engagement Policy.

Engagement – external

External engagement with stakeholders across the city is ongoing.

Engagement - internal

Internal engagement and alignment across the DCC continues to be a focus of work undertaken to implement the Plan.

Risks: Legal / Health and Safety etc.

There are no identified risks.

Conflict of Interest

There are no known conflicts of interest.

Community Boards

Actions in the Plan will include Community Board areas.

Appendix B Assessment of significance – Arotakenga o Ngā Hiranga

ASSESSMENT of SIGNIFICANCE - AROTAKENGA o NGĀ HIRANGA

Consideration of consistency with and impact on the Regional Land Transport Plan and its implementation
Overall Process: Low Significance
This Report: Low Significance

Impacts on Council's delivery of its Financial Strategy and Long Term Plan
Overall Process: Low Significance
This Report: Low Significance

Inconsistency with Council's current strategy and policy
Overall Process: Low Significance
This Report: Low Significance

The effects on all or a large part of the Gisborne district
Overall Process: Medium Significance
This Report: Low Significance

The effects on individuals or specific communities
Overall Process: Low Significance
This Report: Low Significance

The level or history of public interest in the matter or issue
Overall Process: Medium Significance
This Report: Low Significance