

The long march to quality

It's all about keeping on keeping on.

Based on the book title by Alan Bennett.

Different Councils follow different tracks

At NZIER, we have assessed the quality of policy advice and assisted policy advisors in raising their game for many years. Looking back over our experiences, we are struck by the diverse course of the quality improvement process in different outfits. Many have striven to permanently improve their quality, but few have managed it.

Experience shows building a quality policy function is a long job

What have we seen?

While the process of improvement has been different for each organisation, none have been able to create a lasting quality output quickly. Even those who have achieved high scores have typically found it challenging to maintain the standards through time.

Nevertheless, we have seen a few examples of Councils where the policy and advisory teams have achieved sustained quality improvements. It has always been a lengthy and continued effort.

It's a unique problem

Advising on decisions is demanding. Each piece of advice has its own needs and story, and each set of decision makers – committee or Council or whatever – has their preferred presentation style.

The underlying demand to present a complex issue and its potential treatment in limited space using easily absorbed language and other presentation techniques is tough.

In the main, each example is effectively a new and specific problem requiring a specific solution. Attempts to use normal systematisation methods – like standardisation – have made limited headway except for regularly repeated tasks.¹ Previous work can be helpful in suggesting similar frameworks, presentation ideas and in providing history. Other jurisdictions can similarly suggest useful approaches. This is not surprising: good advice is handmade, tailored to the issue and the audience. So, it has a lot of made-up for the purpose of it.

In addition, there is often little available to give drafters a head start. Training and experience in other types of work do not generally set people up for this. Skills tend to be learnt on the job, with the guidance of senior experienced advisors.

So, for many issues, normal office practice of minimally modifying previous work is not required. On the other hand, best practice examples can be extremely useful – either from your own organisation or from others.

We consider the challenge of quality advising is frequently unique. No wonder sustained improved output is hard to manage and even harder to build into a shop.

¹ For example regulatory annual fee adjustments; and regular reporting on various delivery and corporate functions.

The setting – the New Zealand Local Government scene

Despite the common elements, such as the legal and organisational backdrops of the various Councils around the country, there is always a distinct feel to each Council and its policy advice function. This reflects the particular Council with its own history and specific priorities. We call it their culture. It seems long-lasting and beyond the control of any one person.

It is the background that shapes the unit's attitudes, actions and outputs.

We have long believed such 'cultural' effects can be influenced to give an advice group a quality production bias. This comes from examining the history of many groups we have worked with.

The successful policy units have improved the quality of their advice and typically modified the culture. When this happens key features of classy advice become part of the surrounding wallpaper: 'the way things are done around here'. In these groups, old hands relentlessly turn out good work, and new recruits absorb good habits quickly without realising there are options. These groups also attract great policy advisors, as they are seen as a good career experience. Their scores hover at high levels.

Other units struggle to create such a platform. Their assessments move up and down with no real pattern. The quality of individual papers seems random; the pieces are detached from one another rather than being products of the same team.

Policy advising is a craft...

You might have heard this before.

But 'craft' here has a specific meaning. It is a collection of practical skills that can be deployed to solve professional problems. And

the key is that these skills are learnt on the job – they come from experience. A degree of what might loosely be called theory exists (see earlier masterclasses²), but the key elements of the high-level policy advisor's kitbag are based on personal experience.

...so skills need to be supplemented by suitable experience...

There are courses in public policy, of course, which can be very helpful. So, acquiring advising 'tools' and knowing when and how they can be put into practice is about using as much learning as possible. Luckily, that experience can be second-hand – based on others' work, including their stories.

Good policy groups make this happen by using a range of methods. They will celebrate the best papers and processes, create a library of best practice, use formal workshops, seminars and debriefs and hold informal chats over morning coffee to build a strong culture. It will have ways to examine recent group experiences and identify what went well³ and what went badly.

Moreover, it will look outside the agency, discuss techniques with other successful groups, and borrow good ideas from everywhere.

...and great advising is a team game – drawing on wider strengths

Individuals can, on occasion, knock out high-calibre work. However, we have very rarely seen a paper that could not be improved by further input. Extra eyes often see possibilities the originator doesn't and even more frequently pick up slips that the writer missed.

Good organisations make ways for team members to contribute to improving their output. After all, a typical policy shop has a range of skills and backgrounds. These can be

² See for instance, Masterclass No. 1 Communication with Aliens
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_no_1_communicating_with_aliens.pdf

³ See Masterclass No. 22: Learning from things that go well
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_22_lg_learning_from_things_that_go_well.pdf

put to work to shed new light on challenging questions.

There is no one way to do this. It might be an open type of peer review, a reference to selected colleagues, or form part of a quality meeting. Wider consultations can be fruitful.

So, for demanding issues, it may be apt to look at other types of views within the agency – say, an operations/delivery focus – or to discuss matters with selected users. Again, for some problems, experts are useful and typically bring their own point of view.

What matters is that the opportunity to push the advice to another level by bringing in more horsepower is recognised as a vital and natural part of the system. One that is used often.

This type of process is not easy to set up and keep going. It involves public comments on other people's work.

To be acceptable, this must be totally accepted as the way things happen. Establishing that as normal is time-consuming and needs a supportive setting.

And the atmosphere most conducive to quality work is consistency...

All groups of policy advisors take their style to a greater or lesser extent from the standards used to approve the papers for sign-out. This process makes all advisors keen to have their workflow through the system to its goal.

When the whole shop is well informed about how a good paper looks (or doesn't), it becomes easier and more regular for quality work to flow.

Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet Policy Project

While not always relevant, but sometimes valuable as a source for material relating to general guidance, is the Policy Project website.⁴ This has a variety of interesting ideas related to standards and capability in a quality improvement setting. The advice has to be adapted, of course, to fit the local government need, but it provides a useful starting point.

Building long term

Elements supporting the success⁵ of policy units include:

- *Council support* – it's a key function for Councillors and mayors to help them do their jobs effectively. Regular engagement about what works and what doesn't is helpful. As is support for any quality improvement.
- *Chief Executive (CE) commitment* – CE understands the policy role and provides resources, including active support for the policy manager.
- *Strategic Direction and Priority Setting* – Unit knows where it is going and has explicit priorities.
- *Policy Unit Leadership* – Strong leadership/'champion' drives strategy and support systems.
- *Strategic Alignment Within Organisation* – Policy unit directions aim at and chime with organisational goals.
- *Key People* – Quality analysts (plus 'stars') build capability and create a reputation.

...sustained and reinforced over time

It is a long job to build a culture of self-sustaining quality. But the good news is there

⁴ <https://www.dPMC.govt.nz/our-programmes/policy-project/policy-frameworks>

⁵ The points in this section and the one that follows (including the diagram) draw on material in a useful piece from 1999, the SSC Occasional Paper No 22 High Fliers:

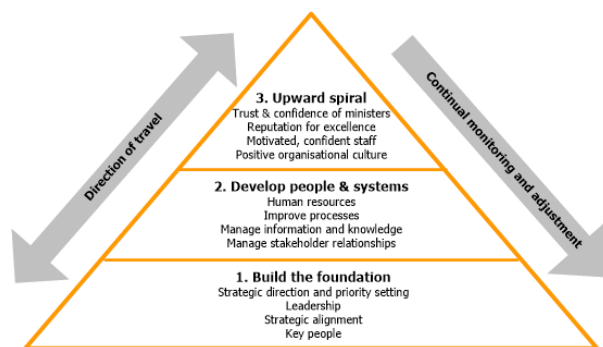
Developing High Performing Policy Units. It is a stages development model and we are using stage 1 and stage 3.

Local Government advice MASTERCLASS

are aspects of success that can create an upward spiral:

- *Trust and Confidence of Council and Senior Leadership* – Councillors look to the unit for advice, so the unit has ‘influence’.
- *Reputation for Excellence* – A reputation for excellence leads to wider exposure, like invited conference presentations and so on.
- *Motivated and Confident Staff* – Staff stay on with a ‘quality outfit’ and others want to join.
- *Positive Organisational Culture* – Staff ‘know what it takes’, embrace quality ideas and need less oversight.

Figure 1 The virtuous circle



Source: NZIER Based on SSC 1999

Reinforcement – these are not natural behaviours

The aim of *high quality work – every time*, is a stretch. Many of the actions that produce quality work are not usual practices (having others publicly critique your work) or require individuals and groups to undertake possibly uncomfortable functions.

For this ‘culture’ to last, it must go beyond self-consciousness. Analysts should not have to prompt themselves by asking what a quality approach would require. The correct action should just be ‘the way things are done around here’.

There are probably as many ways of getting to the desired outcome as there are Councils. But the route we have seen succeed is the ‘relentless reinforcement’ one. The whole management team is on the case at all times. They model the desired actions but seize opportunities to praise good work and suggest ways of improving poorer papers.

Constant managerial reminders show that good work is a priority for the unit. It’s vital to show that it is the bedrock – not today’s management idea to be dropped if there is a ‘panic.’ Quality outputs are important in fair weather or foul.

Making it happen – practical ideas

We have offered general advice here as it allows each policy group to evolve according to its own background and environment. To last, a culture has to ‘fit’ the unit.

A policy review panel

Turning to the more particular ‘how to do it’ side, we have seen organisations use a policy committee or panel to polish all outputs before they are signed out. But these processes are best saved for major pieces of work because they take time and aren’t appropriate for short turn-around pieces of work. These have often been built on the NZIER assessment reports or internal standards, which diagnose systemic weaknesses and highlight areas for improvement. (A complementary diagnostic tool NZIER can provide is the ‘deep dive’ technique, which examines the process and outputs.)

A network of policy quality champions

This can involve senior, experienced people in your organisation. They can help individual authors or teams deal with particularly tricky issues. This role needs to be explicitly recognised in those people’s work programmes to allow them the time to commit to supporting others.

A learning programme

Another tack is to build a programme using masterclasses on relevant topics, perhaps in workshops. These hone both individual and team skills and keep up a focus on improvement.

The important thing is to work on the business of providing policy advice and the actual provision of policy advice. Managers and other key leaders need to carve out time from their busy schedules to commit to this.

Other practical ideas we have seen that can be used to support a sustained push on quality:

- *Having standards* – including templates, style guides, etc. (these should be developed as group exercises to engage analysts – material to draw on is in masterclasses 3⁶ and 7⁷).
- *Good commissioning...* as far as it can be used, given oft-changing environments⁸

(*Robust peer review processes*⁹ and other thoughts in masterclass 21.¹⁰

- *Rigorous use of data and evidence* – including views of important stakeholders, other experts and international practices.¹¹
- *Being future-focused* – thinking about the future, being strategic, and getting issues researched and thought about that will need to be advised about in future.
- *Capturing and celebrating good practice* – See Masterclass 22.¹²

In summary, it's about putting quality improvement literally 'on the agenda'

Make quality improvement a regular topic in management, team and one-on-one meetings. They can be all too easily focused on the actual work and general admin matters. Make sure they go beyond the delivery of advice to work on quality improvement.

This paper was written by NZIER April 2024. For further information, please contact anyone from our policy advice team:

Cathy Scott at cathy.scott@nzier.org.nz
 Todd Kriebel at todd.kriebel@nzier.org.nz
 John Yeabsley at john.yeabsley@nzier.org.nz
 NZIER | (04) 472 1880 | library@nzier.org.nz

Masterclasses from previous years are available via our website <https://www.nzier.org.nz/learn/local-government>

While NZIER will use all reasonable endeavours in undertaking contract research and producing reports to ensure the information is as accurate as practicable, the Institute, its contributors, employees, and Board shall not be liable (whether in contract, tort (including negligence), equity or on any other basis) for any loss or damage sustained by any person relying on such work whatever the cause of such loss or damage.

⁶ Masterclass No. 3 Strengthening your papers
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_no_3_strengthening_your_papers.pdf

⁷ Masterclass No. 7 Better use of headings and subheadings
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_7_better_use_of_headings_and_subheadings.pdf

⁸ Masterclass No. 19 Commissioning
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_19_commissioning.pdf

⁹ Masterclass No. 13 QA practical ideas
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_13_ga_-_practical_ideas_1.pdf

¹⁰ Masterclass No. 21 Peer review vs QA
<https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/Brief%2021%20LG%20Peer%20review%20vs%20QA%20-%202022.pdf>

¹¹ Masterclass No. 8 Presenting evidence
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_8_presenting_evidence.pdf

¹² Masterclass No. 22 Learning from things that go well
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_22_lg_learning_from_things_that_go_well.pdf