Choosing the right type of peer review

We've written several masterclasses on peer review – from our first set of masterclasses in 2016 to the most recent series[1] – there was even one sent to you earlier in 2024.[2]

In our view, peer review remains the most important tool in improving the quality of advice as it is being developed.

We often hear the comment that there wasn't time for peer review. We know people are under pressure, and there are often short time frames – but without it, an opportunity to improve the paper is lost. Even a short, sharp peer review can add considerable value.

This masterclass provides a simple way of thinking about peer review and the type best suited to particular papers.

Of course, the basics of peer review should always apply

Peer review is about providing practical and constructive advice that improves the advice. It's not a 'once-over lightly' look or ticking the compliance boxes.

It needs to be approached thoughtfully – with a good understanding of what was required initially (the commissioning) and the audience's needs.

It needs to be planned – so reviewers can make themselves available and authors have enough time to respond to comments.

But it doesn't have to take a significant amount of time (see our masterclass on turbo peer review[3]) – an hour of reviewing and a bit of time to make the adjustments can still add significant value.

Reviewers need to be given a clear brief on what they are required to do.

The nature of the advice should help determine the type of peer review required

This simple way of thinking about peer review classifies policy advice pieces by two characteristics which help to determine the type of peer review required:

- **Urgency** – the timeframe for doing the analysis and preparing the advice.

- **Complexity** – whether it is a relatively simple problem (or well-known one) or complex. It can also be worth considering the significance or importance of the problem within this general construct, e.g. one which has attracted significant public interest.

Of course, these two dimensions simplify the nature of various pieces of advice. There will be a continuum along these dimensions. But it's a good starting point.

These factors help to determine the level of peer review required. Figure 1 summarises the two concepts using a traditional two by two matrix.

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[1]   See the following masterclasses: Peer review (no. 6) – which gives a general introduction; Turbo peer review (no. 24) for short turn around papers; and one on the differences between simple QA and peer review (No. 21) https://www.nzier.org.nz/learn/local-government;

[2]   Masterclass No. 39 A *fresh set of eyes*.

[3]   Masterclass No. 24 *Turbo peer review*.

Not urgent, not complex or significant: a standard peer review process can be used once the author/s have completed the work and before the sign-out process. Often, these are standard reports – possibly templated. Examples are regular reports on programme delivery and standard decisions guided by existing regulations/policies.

Not urgent, but complex or significant work: these projects are typically longer term, well planned, and staged. This means that peer review processes can be included in the project/ programme plan and carefully scheduled. It also might mean that a range of different peer review techniques can be used, e.g., reviews by external experts, technical reviews, and a standard review to ensure the advice is fit for the audience.

Figure 1 Types of peer review
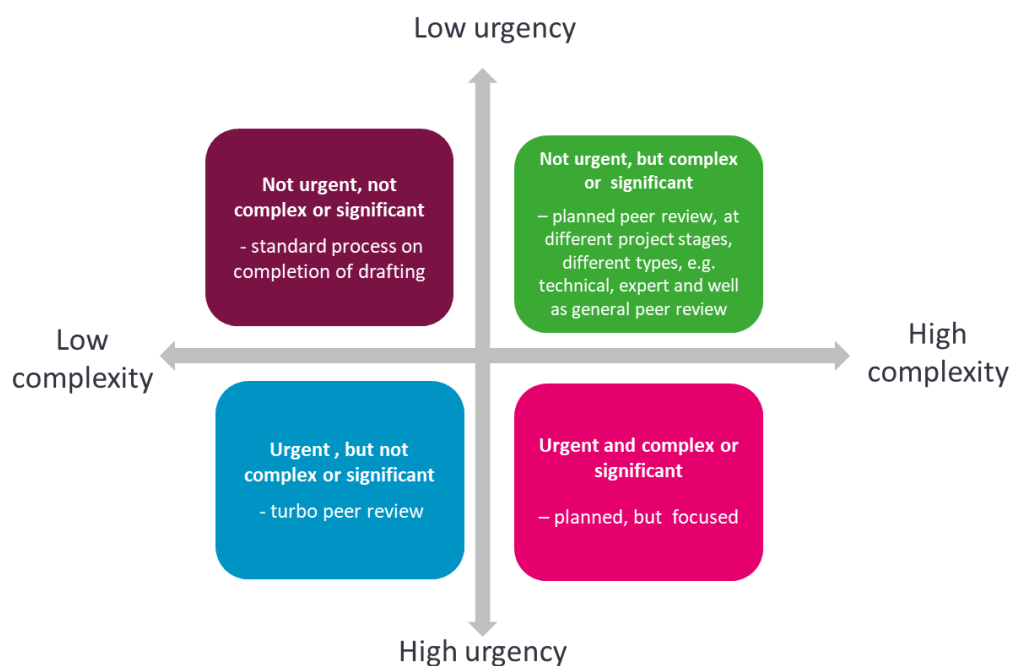
Source: NZIER

Urgent, but not complex or significant: this sort of advice is usually responsive – either to a request from a Council or in response to something unexpected in which there is a need to brief the Council. Councils often have standard processes to respond to these sorts of urgent requests. This is when turbo-peer review needs to come into play. A quick peer review is what's required.

Urgent and complex or significant pieces: this is the most challenging. Fast planning is critical, including lining up peer review. A turbo peer review works. But for assurance, you might want to involve several peer reviewers with different backgrounds and experience in the issues. These papers will likely require more management input. So, integrating that with peer review might be helpful – e.g. a combined feedback session with the manager, peer reviewer and the author. These sessions can agree on changes and prioritise them – in case they can't all be done within the timeframe, i.e. which will add the most value versus those nice to have or able to be dealt with in follow-up advice.

In conclusion

This matrix tool helps to set out a common language for peer review to limit mix-ups.

Make sure you pick the best type of peer review – given the situation.

Brief the peer reviewers clearly to ensure you are all on the same page about what is expected.