The Background – getting it just right

Enough, but not too much

Most conventional papers lead off with a Background section. This follows the Proposal, an Executive Summary/Key Points and the Recommendations. It's the beginning of the main body of the paper.

Poorly done it takes up lots of time and space. It can resemble a long build up in a novel or a play – with the action then coming very quickly before the end. This can lead to it being skipped over by a busy reader.

However, it is an important context-setting piece. Without it, readers can wander off on the wrong path, and then question the conclusions and recommendations of the paper.

Context has several different sides and they all influence the way the Background should be approached. First there is the **place of the paper in the reader's scheme** of things. **Why** is this being placed in the reading pile?

Then there is the **information necessary to understand** the issue. **What** has happened or might happen?

Finally, it provides the practical superstructure to position this advice in terms of limits to its coverage, previous relevant doings (particularly major decisions) and connections to wider (especially strategic) policy. **Where** does it fit?

Think about who you are writing the paper for and what they know already

The key is to write this section so it just does its job – not too much and not too little.

And the critical aspect of that is to tailor the material to the audience.

As with all other factors associated with advising, the trick is to provide the exact amount of information to allow a quality decision.

Remember who you are writing for, as this will change the nature of a Background. If it is a well-informed Council Committee, for example, which is up to date on the issue it can be very short, with references or appendices available for further information, if needed. However, if it's going to the whole Council (some of whom may have dealt with the issue before, and for others it might be new) you'll need to cover more of the basics to ensure they are all starting from the same place.

The Background section sets the foundation for the paper

It is the place to explain the rationale for the paper.

This may already be set out to some extent in the Purpose statement. But the Background is the place to provide more information, if needed.

If it has been requested, explain the request and what sits behind it. This should have been part of the commissioning process.[1] It's always worth setting out the detail here, as you can't necessarily expect that busy Councillors will remember exactly what was asked for – after all, there might be a month between meetings, and other issues have taken more priority over that period.

Of course, the usual advice applies. If the original request isn't that clear – then get further information from the commissioning manager, or the senior manager/s supporting that Council Committee, other Officers in attendance, or the Committee Secretary for example.

Other papers might be generated from the organisation itself. In this case explain to the Council what lies behind the paper, and why it's coming up now; what they need to do, and by when.

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[1] https://nzier.org.nz/static/media/filer_public/d9/4d/d94d8d88-85b6-4e91-ada1-91eb68843f1f/brief_19_commissioning.pdf

So, examples include:

- A standard process, e.g. annual levy adjustments.
- A regular report, e.g. quarterly monitoring reports.
- An emerging issue – remember to explain the reasons for urgency or otherwise.
- The next step in an ongoing process, e.g. advice following an engagement process; bylaws following earlier policy decisions;[2] or part one of a package of papers on different aspects of the same issue.
- Part of a previously agreed work programme.

Explain what's in scope and what's not

Sometimes a paper will only answer part of the issue, e.g. in the situation where further data or information might be needed to fully address the issues raised by Council, or as one in a series of papers. This is the place to explain just what's included and what's not. And then, when a further report is expected and what its coverage will be.

Reference previous and related decisions and advice

This is critical. It puts clear markers in the ground about what has gone before, explains the starting point of the analysis, and assumptions behind the current advice.

Remember to reference earlier Council decisions fully. Use hyperlinks so that Councillors can easily access earlier or related advice.

You need to use your judgement about the level of detail in this part of the Background.

On one hand, if there is a long history to the issue, it is worth including an appendix which sets out the timeline[3] and impact of previous decisions, with just a short summary in the Background. Similarly, you could use an appendix to list in detail prior decisions.

At the other end of the spectrum, if it's a topical issue that the Council knows well and has dealt with recently, then you can be very succinct.

Explain linkages to wider strategies or priorities

Explain how this particular issue fits with the Long Term Plan, other key planning documents, strategies and priorities. This will help decision makers to get a sense of where it fits, and its overall priority in the scheme of things.

Consider including a 'road map' in longer complex papers

A quick paragraph or series of dot points setting out what is going to be covered in the body of the paper, and in what order is a useful addition to the Background.

We refer to this as a 'road map'. It not only helps to give the paper a clear structure, it also improves readability.

The road map comes into its own in complex longer papers. But isn't needed in shorter papers.

In a shorter paper, the Background may contain the problem definition

In a short paper on a relatively simple issue we often see the 'problem definition' in the Background. That's fine if it is simple and can be expressed succinctly.

But, even in those cases, make sure it stands out from the rest of the section. Using a clear subheading would do the job.

If not, it can easily be skipped over and missed by a busy reader.

However, if it's a substantive problem or opportunity, then it deserves a section on its own.

Check it again

Authors often start with writing the Background. It's often relatively straightforward, and gets the writing juices flowing.

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[2] We have already sent you a Masterclass on a series of papers and how to best integrate that stream of advice.

[3] Consider using a timeline tool, e.g. one of the templates in Microsoft Office https://templates.office.com/en-us/timelines

It's even easier if this was well covered in the commissioning stage of the project.

But always remember to go back and review it at the end of the writing to make sure it matches the final paper, and the commissioning brief, as this can change during the project.

Remember to cover it in peer review

Background is often a section that is skipped over by busy readers when pushed for time.

But it does serve an important purpose. It sets out what the paper is about. Therefore, it establishes reader expectations. If it doesn't match the analysis and conclusions in the paper, or line up with the original brief, the paper itself is going to fall at the first hurdle.

A key question for peer review is whether the paper does what it said it would do.

In summary, the 'three Ws'

Use this as a reminder:

- **What?** – what is the paper about? (and what it's not about)
- **Why?** – and why is the Council getting it now?
- **Where?** – where does it fit with previous decisions? And wider Council priorities?