Local Government
MASTERCLASS

Brief 23

Quick turnaround papers – responding to urgent requests

Needing advice quickly is more common in a crisis

In normal business there is always the occasional need for quick turnaround advice. Things have a habit of happening which are outside the normal work programme and need an urgent response!

But more so in a crisis. Mayors, Councillors, Chief Executives and other key staff e.g. local Civil Defence Controllers need advice fast, on issues they may not have confronted previously.

Some of these issues will be in your playbook – either you will have come across similar issues previously; or planned for, and practiced these types of contingencies.

Unfortunately, over the last few years we've seen many examples when fast advice is needed e.g. the various Canterbury earthquakes, the Mosque shootings, the White Island/Whakaari eruption, and the current COVID-19 outbreak. Not to mention local events such as the drought in Northland, or flooding and road washouts on the West Coast.

This puts pressure on policy advisors

Quick turnarounds are always difficult. You have to clear time in your diary, change your headspace, and make sure others who might need to be involved can also respond quickly (e.g. those doing QA, peer review, sign-out, or supplying key inputs like data or communications advice).

Of course, it's much easier if you already know a lot about a topic. Many of the best papers we see are those written in a hurry, by an expert. The best ones are very clearly written, are streamlined to focus on the most important issues, and are highly tailored to ensure the recipient gets what he or she needs in the precise situation of the moment.

But it's exponentially harder in a new situation, or one which is developing rapidly. This is where advisors need to fall back on all their skills – rather than a knowledge of the topic.

Here's what we think is important, and not so important.

Think before you write

This is the key to all good advice. But is even more important in this situation.

We frequently talk about the 50/50 rule, i.e. half your time thinking about the issue and how to solve it; and half your time thinking about how to present it, and then writing it up.

Key steps are:

- Plan your time carefully (and that of others involved in the process).
- Take some time to assemble the facts. Kick the tyres as much as time allows. There can be conflicting stories, different information, and changes in the data as you go along.
- Track down any experts who can provide data, or advice on the matter. They might be people who have encountered similar situations, or have direct expertise that will be useful.
- Think and analyse.
- Spend some time on a whiteboard, pieces of paper, or a sketch type app on your tablet to get the structure of the advice, and the key points sorted.
- Then test this with others – a quick stand-up type meeting will do.
- Then write.

Uncertainty abounds

Often in these situations, the problem, let alone the best solutions, have a degree of uncertainty.

That's just about always the case with policy advice – especially when we are working at the cutting edge with new problems or new solutions.

So, make sure you warn Councillors about that uncertainty in the evidence, the fast developing situation or the workability of the solutions. One of our earlier Masterclasses proposed a way of thinking about the quality of data and evidence for use in normal advisory processes.[1] While more complex than you need in this situation, the principles are still useful.

Decision-makers are used to balancing uncertainties. While they might be frustrated, they'll still understand.

But you can manage that uncertainty by the way in which decisions are implemented. For example:

- **Building in a review period** – appropriate to the issue at hand. This was used to good effect with the recent COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme – which was fine-tuned within days of launch.
- **Allowing for further fine tuning**, as more evidence becomes available. A good example of this has been the recent discussions on what is an essential service; or what different Alert Levels actually mean.

Make sure it's easy to read at pace

While we always say this, it's even more important in these circumstances.

So, remember the basics:

- **Plain English** – take care with jargon (make sure it's defined and used consistently if you can't avoid it) and acronyms (best avoided in these circumstances).
- **Short sentences** – avoid long multi-clause sentences (freight train sentences).
- **Short paragraphs** – one idea per paragraph.
- **Active subheadings** – to help tell the story and emphasise the key messages.
- **Include a summary –** if the paper gets to four pages or more.

Do check for readability in QA and peer review.

1 https://nzier.org.nz/static/media/filer_public/4e/5c/4e5cf48e-00f6-4e91-b6c8-c2594fc2432c/brief_8_presenting_evidence.pdf

Keep it short

Work hard at keeping the paper succinct and as streamlined as possible.

We know it can be harder and it takes more time to write a short paper. But keep length front of mind as you plan and as you write the paper.

Consider using dot points for the entire paper. We've often seen some great examples of this for simple issues, and for fast response advice. Even to the extent of writing the whole of a short paper in dot points. They remove some of the formality, and seem to be naturally more succinct.

Use other presentation devices with caution. A good table or graph can work wonders. But an overly complicated one can slow you, and the reader, down.

You should use the motto, 'if in doubt throw it out', or at least put it in an appendix, in order to keep the paper streamlined.

Watch out for fishhooks

There are always some things that can trip us up. In our experience, things to watch for are:

- **Legal issues** – what law is relevant? Under what legislation are we doing this? Any issues with Privacy? Any inconsistencies with existing Long Term Plans or current strategies? It's often handy to have legal advice on tap – but it needs to be short and sharp too.
- **Implementation issues** – make sure it can be done under current conditions. Check with those responsible for actually doing it about the requirements and how they are going to be managed, e.g. systems, staffing, volume management, and impacts on important business as usual. Get those responsible for implementation involved early – they may need some time to think through a workaround or a quick fix.

Full consultation or engagement isn't expected

Significance and engagement policies recognise the need for decision-making in urgent and emergency situations, and don't require that the general rules are followed.

However, if you do have relevant information on hand (e.g. as a result of an earlier engagement process) then by all means include it in the analysis.

Sometimes we are lucky enough to have an established working group on the topic who may be able to have some quick input. Similarly, you may need to talk to key stakeholders, but this will be limited by available time. Hopefully, you'll have existing relationships with some key advisors from peak bodies to provide feedback on the hoof.

But, do remember to consider other possible perspectives on the issue, even if you don't have the ability to actually consult.

Make it very clear in the paper about the exact extent of engagement you've had with others. This is one of those uncertainties that decision-makers will want to know about.

You will be forgiven some typos and formatting errors…

Papers aren't expected to be perfect in these time-constrained situations.

Of course, you'll be forgiven for typos and grammatical errors – but not so many that it becomes hard to read.

Similarly, with formatting errors. But we suggest you use a very simple template for such advice. Hard coded complex templates are a burden for quick turnaround papers as any gremlins that emerge take too much time to fix.

…but not for mathematical errors

They can be critical. So, make sure the numbers add up.

Get your QAer to focus particularly on the numbers. So make sure you choose a person how is numerate and quick.

They should look for:

- Consistency.
- Accuracy – when compared to the base data.
- Making sure the numbers add up.
- Presentation – to make sure tables/graphs etc. are easy to read and not confusing.

Appropriate caveats are mentioned if there is uncertainty.

Make time for peer review and QA

This isn't the time to do away with peer review and QA. The same reasons driving urgency create the need to be accurate.

A quick QA can make a big difference to readability. Focus it on just that.

Peer review helps test the thinking, as well as the presentation. But use a turbo peer review process – the subject of an upcoming Masterclass.

A streamlined sign-off process

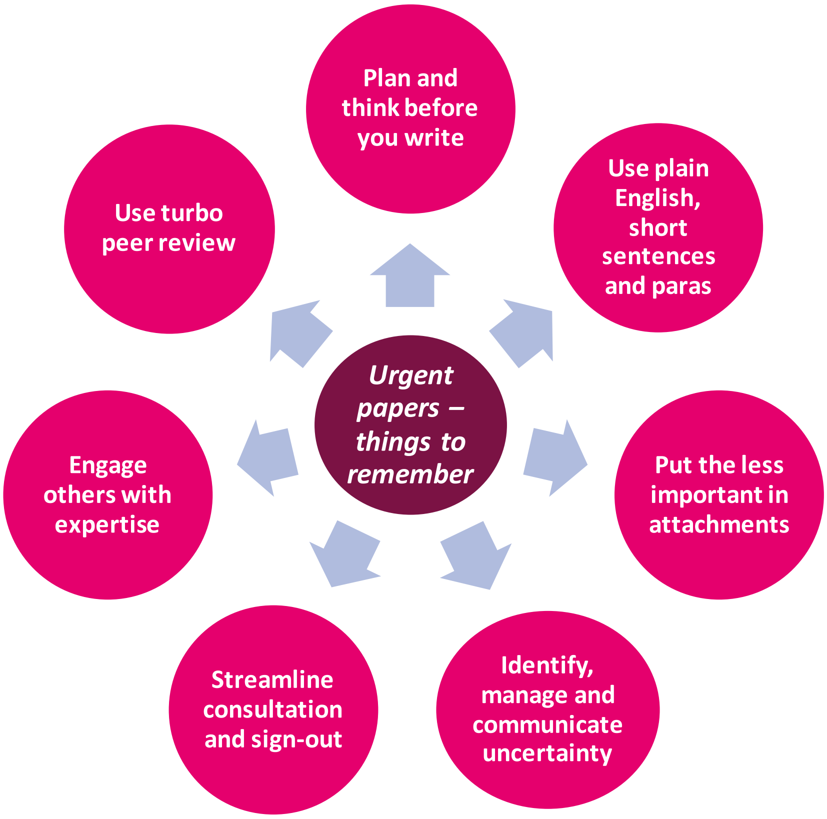
Make sure you have a simple and clear sign-off process. This is likely to mean missing some of the usual steps – because of the circumstances.

Get that clear and agreed at the beginning (or even perhaps as part of any crisis protocols). Otherwise you'll be taking up precious thinking time in going through a convoluted sign-out process.

Think about ways of giving those responsible for sign-out an early heads up on your thinking. So that they don't just see it at the end, when there is no time for their input. A quick email on progress, or a super-short stand-up meeting perhaps?

In summary

Figure 1 Things to think about when responding at pace



Source: NZIER

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