

## Thriving on peer review

One of the most daunting tasks in preparing advice is subjecting yourself to critique from your colleagues. But it is one of the best ways to improve the quality of your own advice papers, as well as lifting the quality of all of your Council's advice papers.<sup>1</sup>

This paper provides tips on how to ask for, and make the most of, peer review.

Peer review is one of the key processes by which professional standards are upheld and improved upon.

### A spirit of collegiality

Peer review works best when there is a reciprocal expectation – a culture that supports continuous quality improvement.

Think of **peer review as a gift from a helpful colleague** – a donation to help your advice meet the professional standards you expect of yourself and your colleagues (and which the senior management and Council expect, every time). The reputation of your team, your manager and often, of all of the Council staff, depend on the quality of all its outputs, so helping each other improve benefits the whole shop.

### Set up your reviewers early

At the time your work is commissioned, identify who is best placed to provide peer review; this means carefully considering the trickiest and most demanding aspects of the assignment and who might be best at assisting with their assessment.

**Involve the peer reviewers in the commissioning**, or brief them early so that they have the context and provide their views on the key factors. Deadlines move but arrangements are vital – especially if time is short. So, book time for the peer reviewer to look at your paper, plus a meeting to receive feedback, while leaving

sufficient space for remedial or improvement action. In a larger piece of work, several peer review stages are sensible: at the beginning to check scope and framework; once you have framed your arguments and evidence to ensure the story works; and then a wrap up overview on the final report.

### Decide what kind of reviews you need

When briefing peer reviewers, be clear on your expectations. Depending on the scale and complexity of the job, you may want multiple reviewers. Work out if you want:

- A general review against your quality standards.
- A review from a colleague who is familiar with the context and the on-going stream of advice.
- Technical/scientific peer review e.g. legal or financial analysis.
- Investigation with a specific focus on selected aspects (e.g. presenting the engagement results; or the set of options analysed).
- A trusted wise colleague who knows little of the issues but can step back from the detail and give a reality check – is the whole piece working, with robust arguments?

Several of these options may be appropriate on the same piece of work.

Peer review can be sourced internally or externally **External peer review helps in situations where you expect intense scrutiny** and you want added confidence that your work is robust – on occasion it can be cited to provide support to claims of quality, or about meeting professional standards.

<sup>1</sup> Bromell, David (2017) The Art and Craft of Policy Advising, page 145

## Keep roles well-defined

Consultation or engagement (even to the extent of co-design<sup>2</sup>) with stakeholders will help improve your advice and mitigate some risks, but it is not peer review.

Proofreading, or simple quality assurance, is important but can be a distraction to a peer reviewer. It's difficult to think about frameworks, risk, and being focussed on the decision-makers' requirements, when you're getting irritated by typos and formatting glitches. We **recommend making proofreading a separate – final – task.**

Equally, peer review is not sign-out by your manager, or your manager's manager. It should be done before it reaches the person responsible for sign-out. Your aim as an author should be to get the paper in the right shape for your manager to sign-out with complete confidence. Peer review supports this.

However, there are always situations where your manager might want to refine the paper to ensure that it hits any hot issues or concerns of decision-makers. But don't expect managers to be peer reviewers or do standard quality assurance. It's a bad sign if papers get all the way through to them with issues remaining unresolved.

## The core expectations of a peer review

Whether you have in-house quality standards or not, peer review should cover as a minimum:

- Is the problem definition clear and scoped?
- Is the framework logical and fit for the purpose?
- Have the alternatives been fully identified (as required by the Local Government Act) and then assessed clearly?
- Has it met the requirements of your significance and engagement policy?
- Have risks/mitigation been spelt out?
- Is there a good 'close' to the paper? (e.g. next steps, or recommendations)
- What more could be done/removed to sharpen the messaging?
- What's not there that should be? (we often focus only on what's in front of us).

Peer review can sometimes also include determining whether all the relevant technical sign-offs or internal consultation requirements have been met e.g. legal, financial.

However, this equally can be included in the "sign-out" process instead.

Three **model peer review checklists are appended** to this note, each for a different type of review.

## Make time for consideration

If you have asked for peer review, set aside time in the project to accommodate it. Deadline pressures may be looming but keep an open mind about having to make changes. Remember that this is all about continuous improvement and avoiding costly and frustrating re-work after the fact.

Decide if you want to receive peer review comments face-to-face. If they meet with you as a group, it allows interaction and may deal with any conflicting reviewer opinions.

**Do not rely on your sign-out manager to provide last minute peer review.** Managers focus best on whether you followed good process and the paper is fit for purpose. Managers will want to know how you handled peer review.

## How to receive and process feedback

To get the most out of the peer review process, be demanding of your peer reviewers. Listen with an open mind, make sure you understand the message and question them on alternative solutions.

Assess the value of the feedback and decide what to do with it. **You can accept it or reject it but make sure you have a good reason if you plough ahead.** It helps to annotate your decision against written peer review so you can recount later how you handled the feedback.

Be prepared to explain your decisions to your colleagues and your manager. Often these are judgement calls rather than being utterly right and wrong.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.aucklandco-lab.nz/> for more information on co-design.

Have a debrief with the peer reviewer after the paper has gone out and reflect on, what worked well, what could have been done better, and tease out any differences in perspective. It's all part of a reciprocal improvement process.

## How to give feedback

Helpful feedback is always referenced against the objective of the advice. Feedback covers whether the author is on track, or needs to make adjustments.

Remember **you are reviewing the work not the person**. Start your critique with praise where you can. Avoid attributing motives. Own your feedback – it is your professional opinion.

Helpful feedback is:

- Specific
- Tangible
- Positive
- Actionable
- User-friendly.

There are a number of feedback techniques you can deploy to be effective and maintain a spirit of collegiality – find what works for you, but formulas we have tried include:

- I heard..... I noticed..... I wondered.....
- I can see what you are doing here, but it might work better for the reader if.....
- If you..... then you.....
- The impact is..... the consequence is..... the alternative is.....
- Have you considered..... because it would.....
- A table [or other device] is a great idea to use here because it will....

## Use the technology

There's always a fine line between helping someone learn and improve by re-shaping papers themselves, and just providing the precise substitute wording yourself to short-circuit the process and get the paper away.

Tracked changes and use of 'comment bubbles' allow you to be specific in your comments. When time is short they can be a quick way to suggest possible changes for consideration.

## Cultivate your network

It takes practice to develop your skills in giving and receiving peer review. In the spirit of collegiality and professional development make sure you volunteer to be a peer reviewer. See it as an honour to be asked. **The golden rule applies – 'do as you would be done by'.**

## Embed a culture of peer review

We've seen a lot of different approaches to formalising peer review in organisations. As well as having the right attitude, some of the things that work are:

- Requiring a sign-off by the peer reviewer as part of the overall sign-out process, before the paper gets to the manager.
- Recognising and rewarding peer review as part of the job of analysts through including it in job descriptions, performance agreements.
- Establishing a peer review panel across the organisation – individuals on it are experienced, perhaps have some training, and able to be called on for different types of peer review.
- Getting peer review done from outside your immediate team leads to cross fertilisation of ideas, techniques for advice and presentation, and helps to improve overall quality

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## Model Peer Review Checklist: Rapid appraisal

<b>Commissioning author</b>	
<b>Subject</b>	
<b>Date due back with author</b>	
<b>Peer review criteria</b>	<b>Reviewer comments</b>
Is the problem definition clear and scoped?	
Is the framework logical and fit for the purpose?	
Have a full set of options been identified and analysed? (LGA requirements)	
Have risks/mitigation been spelt out?	
Is there a good 'close' to the paper? (e.g. next steps)	
What more could be done to sharpen the messaging? And presentation?	
Does the Executive Summary capture the key elements of the paper?	
What's not there that should be?	
General comments	

**Peer reviewer:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date completed:** \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

### Model Peer Review Checklist: Standard appraisal

<b>Commissioning author</b>		
<b>Subject</b>		
<b>Date due back with author</b>		
<b>Peer review criteria</b>		<b>Reviewer comments</b>
<b>Customer focus and contextually aware</b>		
Anticipation	Does the paper address the likely next steps and timeframes? Is all the necessary content to support next steps included (e.g. talking points)?	
Risk & mitigation	Has the paper included the key risks, and are mitigation steps provided?	
Purpose & context	Is the objective of the briefing stated clearly and early? Is there enough background to shape the discussion? Does the paper make linkages to wider matters, such as strategy, long term drivers, related objectives or other parts of the system?	
<b>Credible and rigorous analysis</b>		
Problem definition	Is there a clear problem definition? Is the scale and scope of the issue clear?	
Framework & options	What evidence or logical approach is there to support the analysis? Is there a clear framework that provides criteria for analysis? Are there clear reasons for options and to dismiss credible alternatives? What consultation/engagement/expert advice has been undertaken? Do the recommendations flow logically from the discussion?	
Data & evidence	Is the paper clear about the strengths, sensitivities, and limitations of evidence? Have the numbers been double checked for accuracy? Is there good use of examples or international comparisons to show mastery of the subject?	
Implementation	How much confidence is there that the advice can be implemented? What comments are included from those that would implement the advice?	
<b>Presentation and communication</b>		
Language	Is the paper in plain English with minimal jargon? Does the paper use short sentences and paragraphs to make the reading task easier? Does the paper need a proofread to reduce clutter, eliminate typos and fix grammatical errors, or other slips?	
Structure	Is the paper concise, and does it avoid duplication or unnecessary clutter? Is there good use of subheadings as signposts and do they tell a logical story? Is the Executive Summary actually that – not an introduction or context section?	
Format	Has the best medium been selected (report, poster, presentation, one-pager) to fit the situation? Are the tables and charts easy to understand and read?	

Peer reviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Date completed: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

## Model Peer Review Checklist: Turbo appraisal

<b>Commissioning author</b>	
<b>Subject</b>	
<b>Date due back with author</b>	
<b>Peer review criteria</b>	<b>Reviewer comments</b>
<p><b>What's the point?</b> Are you absolutely clear what the Council is looking to achieve here?</p>	
<p><b>What's it got to do with Council?</b> Is the case for Council intervention and its exact role absolutely clear and compelling?</p>	
<p><b>Who made you the expert?</b> Is your evidence up to date and will it withstand expert scrutiny?</p>	
<p><b>Is your advice predictable?</b> Are you offering something Council can't figure out on their own?</p>	
<p><b>Will it work?</b> How have you tested your advice with those that will implement it and those that may use it?</p>	
<b>General comment</b>	

Peer reviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Date completed: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Based on *The Policy Tests*, UK Department for Education, 2012