

Local Government advice Masterclass



Paper 3

Making a great paper

In our reviews this year, we saw some great papers. They were based on robust analysis, were well written and focussed on the needs of decision makers. We think that you can learn from the great papers and apply some of those lessons to other papers (as well as learning from the ones that didn't go so well!).

The table below outlines how the weaker, adequate and stronger papers approached various key aspects of policy advice. It's based on what we saw in the reviews, plus our experience of what makes a great paper.

It can be used as an easy reminder when writing papers to push through and improve the paper. Or in the peer review process to provide concrete feedback.

Compare and contrast papers

Features	Weak papers	Adequate papers	Strong papers
Problem definition	Hidden in middle of report; not sized; source of problem not explained	Stated early but not sized; status quo inadequately explored	In the Executive summary; data used to show consequences of inaction
Strategic focus	Donkey deep in detail and process; can't see the wood for the trees	References to previous resolutions but not explicitly linked to Council goals	Clearly aligned with Council or community priorities; politically nuanced
Extent and use of consultation material	Māori and other stakeholder consultation noted but not clear how feedback used	Statements of stakeholder perspectives; but not balanced out to feed into options analysis	Used and critiqued to refine options in an iterative way; responses to feedback presented; business and community views included
Risk analysis	Largely absent, or tacked on at the end as an afterthought	Financial or operational risks presented; little on community/stakeholder risks, environmental risks	Dedicated risks and mitigations section in options analysis covering a wide range of potential risks
Decision making framework for options analysis	Opinion or advocacy without any evidential support	Pros and cons presented – often in bullet points – but trade-offs not easy to see; some logic behind preferred option	Options compared against assessment criteria in a table; scores presented; discussion of criteria weighting; preferred option falls out simply and logically

Features	Weak papers	Adequate papers	Strong papers
Communication	Text only; full of legal/planning jargon; long, dense paragraphs; no subheadings or visual tools	Plain English; occasional table; diagrams in attachments; some functional subheadings	Crisp drafting; active voice in short paragraphs; tables and diagrams used to reduce reliance on text; subheadings with verbs that develop the narrative
Executive summary	“Here’s a report, we recommend you receive it”	Potted summary but implications not spelt out, so reader still needs to plough through whole report	Extracts most salient aspects for issue at hand; presents both sides of argument; explains how material will be used to inform decisions

Source: NZIER

This paper was written at NZIER, February 2016.

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