

Writing recommendations which stand the test of time

There's an art to crafting recommendations. They need to assist decision-makers in taking the decisions and then be turned into the official record of decisions made. This means they will need to be clearly understood to be implemented then, or in the future.

In this Masterclass we cover some of the principles for writing recommendations which stand the test of time.

Recommendations should stand alone

Recommendations are converted to become Council decisions or resolutions, so they need to be clear, unambiguous, and flow logically. There are two main reasons for this.

Firstly, they need to record the decision of the Council. It will be these decisions, which may be subject to public scrutiny or legal challenge. This means they need to be robust and cover all aspects of the decisions needed.

Secondly, they guide the implementation of those decisions. If they are applicable immediately, those responsible for implementing them will have the benefit of the paper supporting the recommendation, and the actual discussion at Council. So, will have context if needed.

Even then, we are sure most of us have had the experience that the resolutions don't cover all the necessary permutations once we're in the thick of implementing the new policy. 20/20 hindsight can lead us to the conclusion that the recommendations and resolutions could have been more clearly worded.

However, if they relate to a longer term change to policy or practice that needs to be implemented, then the resolutions need to stand the test of time. They become an important point of reference for future actions. In many cases, staff and Councillors may have changed so there will be no one to help interpret the original resolutions. Also, the original paper may not have been kept, or may be difficult to find.

Don't introduce new material in the recommendations

All the recommendations should be supported by material in the paper. And if very important in the Executive Summary as well.

They are the most important part of the paper

As the resolutions are derived from your recommendations they are the record of decision-making and so are the most important part of the paper.

Considerable care needs to be taken in drafting them and redrafting them to refine them further and make sure they do the job. They should also be a major focus for discussion within the team, with the manager signing the paper out, and for peer review.

For complex issues, it's often useful to get someone who only knows a little about the issue (as well as the experts) to review them to ensure they are clear and understandable, in addition to your normal peer review. A fresh set of eyes in other words.

Most Councils have governance support teams of some type – these people are often expert in drafting and editing recommendations, so they become a suitable record of decision-making. For trickier papers, use those people to help you draft and review the recommendations as part of finalising your paper.

Make sure the recommendations flow from the Executive Summary

The Executive Summary usually proceeds the recommendations in the paper. Care needs to be taken to ensure the recommendations flow naturally (See our Masterclass 2 on writing Executive summaries).

Many readers are pushed for time, they may only read the Executive Summary/Key points and the recommendations. So, they need to be able to understand the decisions proposed, their rationale, and the benefits and risks.

They are often used in a Council meeting to guide the discussion

The Chair of a meeting often uses the recommendations to focus the attention of the Councillors on the matters at hand, following a general discussion of the issues. This is often the key step before the decision is made.

Being very clear in the recommendations about the options, and the decisions to be made helps this process.

We've seen this taken a step further, when the recommendations of the paper are projected onto a screen in the meeting, so the resolutions can be crafted by the Councillors, and the secretary then and there.

Further legal robustness is required in some cases

Some sets of recommendations require an even higher standard. They must satisfy the requirements of the legislatively prescribed process and withstand legal challenge. The sorts of things that fall into this category include: rates setting; long term plans; and plan changes.

In these cases, there will be a highly prescribed format for recommendations and decisions for you to use – often honed following legal challenge in your area, or from cases decided in other areas of New Zealand. It's good practice to get a legal review.

Financial recommendations may require a particular format

Some Councils may require financial recommendations e.g. ones that propose expenditure or user charges to be in a particular format. These are usually related to the financial provisions in the Annual Plan, and may also include implications for the overall budget, rates or user charges. Make sure you know what is required for these things.

Writing the recommendations first, or last?

Some authors write their recommendations first (after the thinking has been done, of course). This then helps them structure the paper in order to support those recommendations.

Others prefer to draft the recommendations at the end, then check back to ensure that the structure of the paper works.

We don't have strong views about what is the best approach. Different approaches suit different people.

But whatever you do, it is helpful to map out the structure of the paper clearly (e.g. through storyboarding) and make sure it fits with the recommendations.

Set out options clearly

Decision-makers need to be able to clearly distinguish between the different options in recommendations. This gets particularly tricky with complex sets of options with multiple sub-variants.

How you set these out matters.

The best advice we've seen on this is from the Cabinet Office – the Cabinet Office records the decisions of Cabinet and Cabinet Committees. So are expert in this. They'll often re-word or re-format recommendations in papers preferred by Ministers and their officials in order to make sure they are clear.

The format they suggest is:

1 **EITHER** [supported by [xx] department]

1.1 agree to...

OR [supported by [xx] department]

1.2 agree to...

Further work required

Recommendations can be used to set out the further work required on an issue and when this work should be completed and brought back to Council.

In this case, make sure they are clear about what is required, by whom, and by when.

Make sure you don't propose deadlines which are unrealistic – that just puts you under pressure, and you may have to go back to Council and explain why you've missed the deadline. Of course, that may not stop decision-makers from giving you tight timeframes.

Minimise the use of noting recommendations

Lots of noting recommendations aren't helpful. They tend to repeat the Executive Summary/Key points and can easily be skipped over. Furthermore, the key decision-making recommendations can be lost amongst the forest of noting recommendations.

However, there are times when a noting recommendation is needed. These can help explain the most significant issues the Council took into account when making a decision and can provide important context for the decision.

A special case: documents for information

These are documents you are asking decision-makers to “note” or “receive”.

These might be research or evaluation reports, monitoring reports on projects or specific functional areas of Council (e.g. health and safety, HR, or dog control), or backgrounders on new issues.

But take care. This can be an over-used device and eat into scarce agenda time.

Make sure that the Council does need to know – or wants to know. Noting recommendations can give it a status of nice to know anyway, but make sure it’s not superfluous. There may be other ways to cover relevant, but not critical, information e.g. in a regular report from the Chief Executive.

It also raises the issue as to what “noting” or “receiving” means. Is it just that Council has got the report? or have they read it and will apply the knowledge to relevant future matters?

You can make this clearer by:

- Including more information in your noting recommendations so that specific items are noted and recorded in the subsequent resolutions e.g. “note in particular that.....”
- Adding “discuss” recommendations – if the document contains matters for discussion at Council or Council committees – it is better to say that and focus the cover paper on those issues. These can be specific or more general.
- Adding follow-up recommendations if you are intending further work or analysis on any points raised.

In summary

We leave the final word to the Cabinet Office:

“In summary, good recommendations:

- *identify all of the decisions needed;*
- *contain a minimum of noting recommendations;*
- *are accurate in every detail;*
- *don't leave any room for doubt about what is being decided;*
- *make sense independently of the paper;*
- *set out clear options for Ministers to decide between, if necessary;*
- *give clear instructions on the next steps or work required, identifying who is to do the work and by when;*
- *rescind earlier decisions, where necessary.”¹*

This paper was written by at NZIER, May 2018

For further information, please contact anyone from our policy advice team:

John Ballingall at john.ballingall@nzier.org.nz;

Cathy Scott at cathy.scott@nzier.org.nz;

John Yeabsley at john.yeabsley@nzier.org.nz

NZIER | (04) 472 1880 | econ@nzier.org.nz

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¹ <https://dpmc.govt.nz/publications/cabinet-policy-paper-template>