

Dealing with attachments

Lots of papers have attachments. And they can be used for very different reasons.

In this Masterclass we describe the different types of attachments and provide guidance on how to make sure they still integrate well into the paper.

Papers should stand alone

Our general principle is that a reader should be able to get a high level understanding of the key issues without reference to the attachments.

A reader pushed for time will focus on the Executive Summary, then on the paper itself, and only then, if time allows, the attachments.

So, don't rely on attachments to make the case.

However, the detail can be very important. So, cover papers need to direct decision-makers to the critical points in the attachments.

Make sure the attachments add value

Remember decision-makers are dealing with large quantities of paper (or the electronic equivalent). Attachments can often be numerous and lengthy.

So, make sure that they are necessary. And apply the same rules to them as you do to papers – keep them succinct, written in plain English as much as possible,¹ clearly structured, and well laid out so that they are easy to read and digest quickly.

They can be used to display information in different ways recognising that different people absorb information in different ways e.g. including maps and photos; or a detailed data table with the summary graph being included in the cover paper.

Add value in the cover paper too

Don't just repeat clunks of text of the attachment in the paper, or in the Executive Summary.

Similarly, don't do a content free cover paper. You may as well not have bothered.

Assist the busy reader by highlighting the particularly significant points of the attachment and their implications.

You can do this by directly referencing paragraph numbers in the attachments, or by hyperlinks (if you are using electronic papers). Of course, hyperlinks can be used as virtual attachments too – by referencing other background material, previous papers on the matter etc. within the paper. But remember to apply the same principles as with hard copy attachments – make sure you note the salient points of the attachment in the paper itself.

Make sure any actions required of decision-makers are covered in the paper itself – including when those actions need to be completed.

There are different types of attachments

And they need to be dealt with a bit differently.

The types we usually see are:

Traditional appendices

These contain additional more detailed information. Some of which is nice to know and some, which potentially covers off obvious next questions about the substantive content of the paper.

They might be read by a particularly interested reader but are not essential to supporting the arguments in the paper itself. They might include extra data, maps, full details to support evidence cited,² lists of stakeholders consulted, detailed timelines etc. They help to keep the paper itself succinct which is always appreciated by a busy reader.

But, they must be clearly referenced in the paper, including explaining how they fit in or add to the arguments in the paper. Also, they must be important and useful. Otherwise, it's best to leave them out as they add unnecessary bulk.

Consider using hyperlinks to refer to other documents,³ rather than physically attaching them.

¹ We know some attachments will be technical reports, and plain English can be a challenge. A good Executive Summary, or set of key points, with the technical report will help.

² See Local Government Masterclass No 8 Presenting evidence.

³ See Local Government Masterclass No 9 Going electronic.

From what we see in reviews, these are generally handled pretty well. But perhaps, more things could be pulled out of papers and put into appendices to make the papers snappier.

Substantive documents for decision or approval

These are very common in the samples of papers we review. They might be related to Plan changes; rates setting, annual plans, long term plans, or sets of by-laws.

The common feature is that they are substantive documents that you are seeking Council comment on, (when in draft form) or approval to. These traditionally have a short cover paper.

In these cases, the cover paper should include:

- Not just a summary of the content of the attachment, but a quick precis of the logic and arguments.
- An explanation of how it fits with the overall strategic direction, any relevant strategies, and the Long Term Plan.
- A road map of the contents of the substantive document.
- A short description of the development/sign-off process for the document i.e. whether it has had legal sign-off, been reviewed by experts, who have been consulted in its development and what they said. However, this might be an attachment in its own right.
- Identification of any risks and how these are to be mitigated.
- Next steps.
- Supporting communications material.

Remember to clearly reference the cover paper to the substantive document through page/paragraph numbers or use hyperlinks to specific parts of the attachments.

And, make sure any points you make in the paper are consistent with the information in the attachment. This is something to look for in the final QA process.

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. 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?⁴

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.
- Adding follow-up recommendations if you are intending further work or analysis on any points raised.

To get the best out of these attachments the cover paper should focus on succinctly presenting the key points from the attached document. A short set of dot points can work well. Focus on what the Council needs to know, and the implications for the strategy and operation of the Council.

⁴ We intend to cover more on these matters in an upcoming Masterclass on writing recommendations.

Executing instruments

These are documents that the Council need to agree to and empower a small group of councillors, the Mayor or the Chief Executive to deal with in some way.

The recommendations of the paper are usually about approving and signing the attached document. For example, annual accounts, submissions to government on key matters, contracts and agreements, and other legal notices.

In these cases, the cover note needs to cover:

- The significant points in the document.
- An explanation of its purpose.
- Any risks or issues that might arise.
- Next steps.

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