The Policy Quality Framework
Quality Standards for written policy and other advice

The Policy Project

These standards will help you assess and improve the quality of your agency's written policy and other advice, and whether it is fit for purpose. The advice may be for a minister, Cabinet, or other decision-makers, and may be jointly provided with other agencies. Depending on the issue and the nature of the advice the paper provides, sometimes not all of the standards will be applicable. Oral advice should also meet the spirit of these standards, but not necessarily their detail.

Context
– explains why the decision-maker is getting this and where it fits

Purpose, context, priorities, and connections across government are clear

The paper:
- clearly explains its purpose
- makes clear why the decision-maker is receiving the advice now (e.g. a manifesto commitment, an emerging problem or opportunity, a Cabinet direction)
- specifies who else needs to be involved in the decisions
- is set in the context of the decision-maker's priorities, perspectives and current understanding of the issue
- is informed by a strategic view about what is important in the medium to long term (i.e. takes a stewardship perspective)
- makes connections, so decision-makers receive a whole-of-government perspective.

Outlines previous advice and history of the issue

The paper:
- includes or references previous decisions
- summarises key points in previous advice and the history of the issue (including impacts of previous decisions).

Analysis
– is clear, logical and informed by evidence

Clearly defines the problem or opportunity, rationale for intervention, and policy objectives

The analysis:
- for a problem: clearly identifies nature, scale and immediacy (including who or what is adversely affected, where, how much, and trends over time)
- explains the problem's root causes (the what, why and how)
- for an opportunity: clearly identifies what has given rise to it, its scale and how it can be leveraged
- explains the impacts of current policy settings
- provides a clear rationale for whether the government should intervene or not
- clearly identifies policy objectives that flow logically from the problem or opportunity definition.

Uses relevant analytical frameworks and methodologies

The analysis:
- identifies the analytical frameworks or methodologies used (e.g. cost benefit analysis, human rights analysis, living standards framework, te ao Māori analysis, the Pacific Policy Analysis Tool Kapasa, the gender analysis tool, systems analysis), and their relevance
- makes the underlying assumptions and any limitations of the chosen frameworks or methodologies clear
- is of a depth that is proportionate to the scale and importance of the policy issue.

Incorporates Treaty and te ao Māori analysis

Where relevant, the analysis:
- explains Māori concepts in an informed and understandable way
- identifies approaches to the issue or opportunity that are based on te ao Māori or would benefit Māori
- identifies how the problem or opportunity and policy options could affect Māori, uphold the Treaty of Waitangi and its principles, and affect Māori Crown relationships
- highlights relevant Treaty claims, settlement negotiations and commitments, Treaty jurisprudence and any litigation risks.

Is informed by relevant research and evidence

The analysis:
- is well informed (i.e by up-to-date data, evidence , knowledge, experience, and research from New Zealand and overseas)
- is unbiased, and does not skew the data to make a particular course of action seem more or less attractive.

Assesses options to make impacts clear and reveal workable solutions

The analysis:
- scopes a range of options for meeting the policy objectives including:
  - regulatory and non-regulatory options, and doing nothing
  - opportunities for partnership approaches (e.g. with Māori, business, and non-government organisations)
- explains why these are the options, why others have been excluded, and the consequences of these choices
- logically describes how each option would achieve the policy objectives
- identifies relevant criteria, their relative weighting, and assesses the options against these (e.g. effectiveness, efficiency, equity)
- identifies the potential impacts of each option on which people, organisations, and resources, by assessing the likely scale and distribution of:
  - benefits, costs, risks, and opportunities
  - economic, fiscal, social, cultural and environmental impacts
  - direct and indirect impacts
- identifies what is required for successful implementation by testing options with frontline staff, relevant users, regulated and other affected parties (e.g. through prototyping)
- considers relevant international obligations
- identifies any trade-offs between options (e.g. cost versus ease of implementation).

Makes any limitations of the analysis and advice clear

The analysis:
- honestly and candidly states the limitations of the analysis (e.g. as a result of the framework and methodology used, the information and evidence available, the engagement strategy used, or the limited time to produce the advice)
- states the implications of these limitations and constraints.

Reveals diverse views, experiences and insights and engagement approaches

The analysis:
- clearly identifies who has what interests in the issue (e.g. the public, Māori as the Treaty partner, specific population or other groups and communities, users or regulated parties, delivery agencies), and why
- documents any inclusive and appropriate engagement strategies used (e.g. public meetings, hui, co-design workshops, online surveys, submissions)
- is informed by the views, experiences and insights of diverse groups (in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, disability and other perspectives).

Advice
– engages the decision-maker and tells the full story

Enables a clear and informed decision or next steps

The advice:
- provides all the information required to make a decision, or take next steps
- demonstrates sound knowledge of the subject matter, and the problem or opportunity at hand
- clearly communicates the policy intentions and vision
- identifies a preferred option or options and explains that choice
- identifies the key judgements the decision-maker needs to make
- demonstrates awareness of the political context of the decision-maker and wider environment, without straying into political advice
- makes clear, stand-alone and action-oriented recommendations.

Is communicated in a clear, concise and compelling way

The advice:
- is presented in the format that best fits the situation (e.g. aide memoire, briefing paper, A3, slide pack, draft Cabinet paper) and the decision-maker's preference
- is as brief as possible
- contains clear key messages
- is structured in a way that makes decision-making easy
- includes relevant detail, without obscuring the key decisions
- is easy to read with simple sentences and short paragraphs
- uses tables, graphs and pictures, where these enhance communication
- is free from grammar, punctuation and spelling errors
- meets all relevant legal and process requirements (e.g. Cabinet Office or Treasury requirements).

Is free and frank

The advice:
- reflects an understanding of both what has been requested and what is required
- focuses on the decision-maker's objectives, and is frank, honest, apolitical and constructive about the best way to achieve them (even if this means challenging the decision-maker's understanding and initial preference)
- ensures decision-makers are alerted to the possible consequences of following particular policies.

Reflects diverse perspectives

The advice:
- reflects, where relevant, the views of stakeholders, communities, and Māori as the Treaty partner, and demonstrates how these were drawn on
- reflects the findings from engagement:
  - within the agency (at policy and delivery levels)
  - across the public sector (including with Crown entities and local government, where relevant)
- identifies different perspectives and conclusions, the reasons for these, and possible responses.

Outlines risks and mitigations

The advice:
- identifies the risks of the options (e.g. not cost effective, implementation difficulties, cost escalation, not acceptable to key stakeholders)
- identifies the probability that a given risk will eventuate, and assesses the size of the impact if it does
- is not unduly risk-averse and reflects that taking calculated risks may realise opportunities
- identifies how risks will be managed or mitigated (e.g. communications, monitoring trials, evaluation, exit).

Anticipates decision-maker's needs, next steps, and is timely

The advice:
- indicates when a decision is required and the consequences from delaying a decision
- anticipates likely questions
- addresses next steps and their timeframes
- has all the content needed to support next steps and avoid unnecessary follow-up
- where appropriate, attaches talking points, and includes a '25 words or less' argument, or other aids
- is provided in time for a considered decision.

Action
– identifies who is doing what next

Enables effective implementation

The paper:
- identifies any further engagement required with other decision-makers (e.g. other ministers, Cabinet), Māori or other stakeholders
- ensures those implementing decisions (inside or outside the public service) understand:
  - what needs to be implemented
  - by whom, when, where and why
- highlights if any further advice, decisions or report-backs will be required, by whom, and by when.

Explains how the solution will be monitored and evaluated

The paper:
- identifies which indicators will be monitored to show how well the solution is working
- describes whether, and how monitoring and evaluation will be undertaken (by whom, and when) and how this will inform future decision-making.