Producing a local social policy report

Reports can be a useful tool to help change local policy. Local authorities, MPs, Assembly Members and local media are always interested in issues that affect local people, and a report is a useful and respected way to pull together their stories. It also provides you with a perfect backdrop against which to present your case for change. Launching a formal report not only adds gravitas to your argument, but can provide a springboard for other activities that will help realise your recommendations, for example media interviews or meetings with decision makers.

Report writing is time consuming, though, so before you get started you need to be sure it's the best way to achieve what you want. For example, is it worth producing a weighty report for a few very busy people? Could just one or two powerful individual case studies be as effective? See other guidance in this series for help to you make these decisions: 'Planning a local campaign' and 'Convincing campaigns: using hard evidence'.

This guidance sets out some good practice guidelines for planning, writing and publishing a report on a local social policy issue.

Planning and timings

Don't underestimate how long you can spend producing a report! It can be hard to decide when to stop analysing evidence and concentrate on actually writing the document. The key is to focus on the main issue, and resist the temptation to explore interesting side matters.

The writing stage might seem like the easier part in comparison, but you'll still need to allow a decent amount of time for consultation and editing to eliminate any factual errors and stylistic inconsistencies. However, remember that a long gap between the collation of evidence and the final report might invalidate your conclusions. And if your report relates to a recent development, the longer it takes to be released, the less impact it will have.

The following table sets out a sample timeline for a report.

5 January	Planning meeting to look at evidence, agree broad outline of report and allocate tasks
19 January	Results of wider research and detailed analysis to author
9 February	First draft to working group for comments
16 February	Draft circulated to specialists for consultation
2 March	Closing date for comments
9 March	Amendments and final edits made by author
10 March	Working group meeting to approve final draft and plan distribution
17 March	Report to printers
24 March	Report distributed to key contacts
30 March	Press release issues, launch event and wider distribution

When drawing up a timeline, make sure that key people will be available when needed, for example check that the specialists you want to consult with aren't on holiday during the consultation period.

Format and layout

Reports can take a variety of forms. This is one fairly standard model:

1) Title page.
2) Contents page (either this or the title page should contain a couple of paragraphs which describe your agency and the service it provides).
3) Executive summary – essential if your report runs to more than half a dozen pages. Many people will only read this section so it must contain key arguments and recommendations. You might also produce this as a separate document.
4) Introduction or background; this sets the scene and outlines the problem.
5) The problem in detail, illustrated with evidence from service users, surveys etc.
6) Conclusions and recommendations; summarise your argument and make clear your recommendations for change, including to who or what they are directed.
7) Appendices – attach a copy of any survey form and include a bibliography as well as other sources of supporting evidence quoted.

Style tips

- Include page numbers on the contents page to aid navigation.
- Number paragraphs for easy reference in longer reports.
- Bullet points of various designs are helpful for breaking up large chunks of text.
- White space between headings and paragraphs makes text easier to read.
- Consistent use of heading styles helps readers keep track of where they are.
- Graphs and diagrams can powerfully illustrate facts from the text.
- Footnotes can be used to reference evidence on the same page it's quoted.
- 12pt is the minimum easy-to-read font size.

Consulting with specialists

For the content of the report, you will usually need to draw on other people's specialist knowledge, if not for the drafting of it then to check it for factual accuracy at the very least. Be clear, however, that the final report and its content will ultimately be your responsibility.

Whoever you wish to consult with, check in advance how much time they will need to read and comment. Insufficient time means inadequate checking – and mistakes. Also explain clearly what feedback you require, otherwise you risk getting inundated with content suggestions, for example, when all you really want is for it to be given a 'clean bill of health'.

Editing

Writing is a skill and having an overall editor for your report will ensure it's written well, and in a consistent style. Asking individuals to write a section each can work, but if you use this approach allow time for editing to iron out stylistic variations.

It is helpful for the draft to be read by someone who has not been involved in its production. They should not be an expert on the subject, so that they are more likely to spot unexplained jargon and assumptions. But remember, if someone other than the author or outside of your 'working group' is going to edit your report, you will need to invest time in ensuring they are fully briefed on the issues involved, otherwise they may inadvertently take it off course.

Whether to 'name and shame' is one matter that requires careful editorial consideration. Not naming offenders can make the report appear lacking in substance. There is no point in producing a report on problems with your council, for example, unless you name them and any contractors, such as bailiffs, that may be involved. However, naming offenders can leave you open to accusations of unfairly singling out some and not others.

Printing

The standard and style of your final report should take account of the intended audience. To have any impact on busy officials, MPs and decision makers you need a professional appearance: a snappy title, effective use of images, your logo and the like. This does not necessarily mean that it has to be expensive, but it does require careful thought. Your national network may be able to help on this front.

Production styles range from black and white pages which are photocopied and stapled together 'in house', to professionally printed reports with coloured illustrations and bound covers. In most cases, something between the two is appropriate. See 'Professional publications: introducing the design and print production process'.

Distribution

How you circulate your report depends on many factors including your budget and intended audience. You will need to draw up a circulation list in advance of distribution so that you know how many copies to print. The list below gives some suggestions but it will obviously vary with each case.

If your report receives wide media attention, you may be surprised how many requests you receive for copies. Make sure you have spares in order to be able to respond to such requests.

Following the publication of one report, the local Chamber of Commerce promised in a newspaper to "ensure that every member will receive a copy". They then asked the agency for 200 copies of the report!

Example distribution list:

- local MP, MEP and Assembly Members
- Leader and other key members of local council
- Government department(s) responsible for the issue
- local or national organisations with an interest in the issue
- news media (newspapers, magazines, journals, radio, TV)
- funders
- your trustee board
- local library (who will also archive it for posterity).

Costs can be reduced by asking others (e.g. partner organisations) to help distribute your report. You can also circulate to lower priority contacts by email as a pdf or ask enquirers who would prefer a hard copy to send a stamped addressed envelope.

Launching the report

If you are planning a formal, public launch for your report, ask yourself the question: 'What are we trying to achieve with this launch?' Are we seeking to raise awareness of our work? Are we seeking an initial response from those we aim to influence? The style of launch should be determined by your answers to these questions. See also 'Top tips for a smooth running stress-free event'.

Send your report to the key people you want to influence and ask for a specific response. Give careful consideration to the wording of an accompanying letter, as well as the questions of who it should be addressed to, and who it should be signed by.

Prioritise distribution of the report to those who you wish to respond. If you are calling on your local authority to change policy, it is unhelpful for them to hear about this first from a journalist, asking for their response. Send a copy of your report and press release to arrive at least a day before publication, and let them know who else will see the report.

This approach brings two benefits. Firstly, the organisation concerned will appreciate having time to prepare a response to any media enquiries. It is more likely to enter into meaningful dialogue with you if you treat it with consideration. Secondly, by preparing for potential media interest, they will have read the report!