REPORT WRITERS' GUIDE

1.   Introduction and Communication Standards

Communicating and engaging with others is a key competency for all managers within Rotherham Borough Council, and report writing is an important element of this.

Reports are used within the council to support the work of officers; externally to communicate the position or view of the authority to partner or other organisations/groups; to inform and assist elected members in carrying out their duties, and to support the system of governance through Full Council, Cabinet, Delegated Powers, Overview and Scrutiny Select Commission and other elected member meetings.

They can be used to summarise lengthy issues; translate complex or technical information into a language and format that is easily understood by the target audience and put forward recommendations to facilitate the decision-making process.

In addition, the style and content of reports (including spelling, grammar and punctuation) can impact positively or negatively on the reputation of the Council.

There are a number of key principles that officers should adopt when writing a report. Every report should adhere to the standards laid out below. *In effect, these principles should apply to ALL written communication including briefing notes, correspondence, emails and website information).*

- Accurate, open and transparent. Unless there is strong justification for taking a different approach, the council is committed to openness and transparency and undertaking its business in the public domain (see Section 2 below).

- Clear – using plain English and free of any jargon that is unlikely to be understood by the target audience. Sentences are short and concise.

- Corporate – using the official template in place for the particular meeting or forum in which the report is to be considered and complying with style and branding guidelines. Messages should be consistent with the accepted values of the council.

- Consistent – information and messages contained within the report should be consistent with those that have been communicated through other channels, such as reports to other meetings, press releases, information on the Council's website.

- Integrated - the information communicated in the report is complementary to that which has been shared elsewhere on the same subject or issues.

- Timely – the report arrives in time to be appropriately circulated and the information/messages contained within it are being communicated when they are needed and relevant to the target audience.

- Support a two-way flow of information – provide contact details for when additional information is required, or for the reader to provide comment or feedback

- Targeted – the right information and messages reach the right audience at the right time.

2.   Questions To Ask Before Drafting A Report

With ever-increasing demands on their time, managers may find it helpful to run through the following questions to assist in producing a report that fulfils its objectives and is "right first time".

i)   *What is my target audience?*

This should always be the first question posed by the manager preparing to write a report. The answer to this question will inform all subsequent judgements on format, content and timing. Managers should ensure that elected members, who may not have detailed knowledge of a subject area, are provided with the appropriate background and context, and sufficient detail to support any decision-making required. In particular, managers more used to writing for a technical audience should ensure their reports use plain English and are free of jargon.

More information is available in the Council's Plain English Guide.

ii)   *Do I need to write a report?*

This is always a judgement call. Some meetings will require a formal report to be presented. Where the issue in question is non-contentious; requires no further debate or consideration, or is simply an update, a short briefing note may suffice. Each individual elected member may have a personal preference for how they receive their information.

If submitting a paper to an Overview and Scrutiny Select Commission, contact the Scrutiny and Policy Manager or adviser, who will offer guidance.

The Council's standing orders should also be consulted.

iii)   *How will my report support the decision-making process?*

Formal decisions can only be made once, so reports which support decision-making should be targeted at the appropriate meeting eg if within the remit of a Cabinet Member, then it should go to their Delegated Powers meeting. Decisions requiring Cabinet approval should be presented at that meeting. Cabinet Members should always be briefed appropriately in advance of the report being presented.

If a view is being sought from an Overview and Select Commission on an issue, recommendations may need to be framed differently. Overview and Scrutiny do not have decision making powers, therefore it may not be appropriate to submit the same recommendations to O&S as to Cabinet.. Due consideration should be given to the question being posed and why e.g. "Scrutiny members comments are sought on the attached consultation response" or "Scrutiny members agree the recommendations and forward to Cabinet for their consideration".

iv) *How should I structure and lay-out the report?*

Reports should follow the standard report format for the meeting in question. More information about compliance is available in the Council's document Guidelines for Reports to Members. Where the report covers complex policy, legal, financial or technical issues, then a one paragraph executive summary should be provided.

v) *How long should the report be?*

There are no firm rules around the length of reports. They should always be kept as concise as possible and as a general rule, three pages or less in length. However, they should always include any key information required to support decision-making.

They should clearly set out the pertinent issues for consideration in reaching a decision, along with any financial, legal and policy issues which may impact.

All reports should carry a clear recommendation for action and not be left open-ended. For example "Members consider how best to proceed" would be unacceptable.

vii) *Is there a particular style I should use?*

It is understandable that each manager will have their own style of writing, but there are some common elements which should run through each report. For example, formal reports should be written in the third person (ie avoid "I" and "We") and should refer to "the Council" rather than RMBC. The names of individual officers and members should not be given, but they should be referred to by their post title.

viii) *How do I decide if my report is to be considered in open or private session?*

The default position is always that reports to elected members are always considered in the public domain, to demonstrate the Council's commitment to being open, transparent and accountable for its actions and decisions. This helps to instil and maintain public confidence in the way we do business. However, there will be occasions where it is appropriate or indeed required that a report is considered in private session – for example, where information is commercial in confidence. Professional colleagues, such as Legal, Democratic Services or HR Managers, can advise where required.

ix) ***How do I know whether my report needs to be considered by the Strategic Leadership Team (SLT)?***

SLT is now increasingly focused on the significant strategic issues affecting the Council, allowing managers to concentrate on managing their own service and business areas efficiently and with maximum value for money. As a result, only reports covering issues of significant political, legal or financial importance will need to be considered by SLT. Judgement should be based on whether SLT can add value to the process by considering the report. Managers should seek advice from their Strategic Director if in doubt.

Cabinet reports are no longer automatically presented to SLT first. If a Cabinet report does need to be considered by SLT, it should be drafted in the appropriate style for Cabinet.

3.   **Other Supporting Documents**

The Council has a number of other reference documents which managers may find helpful when drafting reports. For example:-

- Plain English Guide
- Guidelines for Reports to Members

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