

Writing policy position papers

Introduction

Influencing policy makers requires that you are able to make a compelling case. This may not always be done through written documents, but writing a document will help you to think about the messages and the logic, even if you only then use it to refine a spoken argument. You may find that you are seeking to influence through presentation and discussion, but it is good practice to support your position with a written document.

The audience

The primary audience for your policy position paper is public sector policy makers – who will likely comprise Ministers, influential Parliamentarians (such as Chairmen of Select or Parliamentary Committees) and senior civil servants. Other stakeholders, including business and trade associations, the media, NGOs, the general public etc, may well be interested, may support your position, and may ally with you to seek change, but the ultimate purpose of your paper is to influence policy makers.

The purpose

In practice, policy position papers need to achieve two objectives:

- They need to communicate, clearly and concisely, the position taken by your organisation in relation to a specified policy area, which could be quite narrow or fairly broad.
- They need, also, to influence policy makers, ideally so that they act in accordance with your wishes, but otherwise so that they adopt a position that is close to yours (or closer than it might have been had you not attempted to influence them).

Policy position papers are not the only means of communication or influencing, but they are crucial as they will be the only written explanation of your position. You may choose to articulate your policy position in a research report, but then it becomes more than just a research report. Whilst your research may imply an approach and a policy position, it is good practice to keep them separate, not least because you may wish to share the research with a range of stakeholders, before you have an agreed policy position. A policy position paper prepared by a business association will need therefore:

- To describe an issue or problem faced by public policy makers and, if appropriate, the implications for business and other stakeholders;
- To explain the current policy of the government (which will require an understanding of the policy imperative);
- To describe the possible options for addressing the issue; and
- To recommend a public policy approach which will minimise the impact on business.

The position

This brief is about writing policy positions and assumes that you have already worked with the board, membership and other stakeholders to formulate a position.

This is likely to be an iterative process in which you start with an analysis from your research. Then staff or a working group draft a position. This is then tested and refined through consultation – perhaps through surveys, meetings, workshops – with your members. It is important that the final position is shared by the vast majority of your members since otherwise they will undermine you when you start to advocate the position to government.

The paper

The objective of a policy position paper is to bring the reader round to your way of thinking – so the argument needs to be clear, succinct and persuasive, backed up with appropriate evidence.

Bear in mind that the content will depend on the point at which the policy has reached in the policy formulation process. If a public policy already exists, and you want to change it, then you will need to look at the policy, and its impact, in detail. If it is a proposal for a new public policy, in the form of a 'white paper' for instance, then you have something concrete about which you can argue. But if the proposal is at a very early stage, perhaps the setting up of a committee to look at an issue, then you may want to attempt to influence the scope of the review, in an effort to lessen the potential impact. These will all require a different approach.

A policy position paper should summarise the proposals you wish to advocate. It should be based on the research you have undertaken and the consultations you have had with your members and other stakeholders and which provides the supporting, detailed evidence for your arguments.

Here are some ways you can ensure the quality of the final policy position paper:

- Be clear about the purpose of the paper. Keep it focused. Keep it simple. Think clearly what message you want to communicate – and do so succinctly.
- Keep the main report short – the ideal is no more than four A4 pages, which can then be printed as a single, folded A3 sheet. If there is a need to provide detailed evidence, then use appendices.
- Ensure that you take the reader logically through the argument and ensure that the conclusions flow logically from the evidence. Use new paragraphs for each new idea or proposal.
- The research to which you refer in your paper needs to be thorough and rigorous so that your policy proposals flow logically from the evidence.
- Have a mix of types of evidence. Include precise statistics showing the individual or global impact, but also include case studies or stories to personalise the impact. If you quote from other reports, remember to cite your sources fully and accurately.
- Do not rush it. Ask colleagues and members to read drafts. Check spelling and grammar. Check that everything makes sense. Check that your conclusions follow from the evidence.

The content

The following checklist will help you to think about the structure and the content:

- Summary: start with an opening paragraph which goes straight to the point, summarising the issue and summarising the recommendation(s) – like a good press release, you should aim to grab the reader's attention straight away and encourage them to want to read on;
- The issue
 - Statement of the issue: explain the issue, using relevant data and statistics, including financial, environmental, cultural and political aspects and consider whether the 'correct' issue is being addressed;

- History: if there is a public policy already in place, explain the policy and what the government was trying to do and why it now wants to do more, or why you now want it to do less;
- International comparison: this will not always be necessary, but there may be occasions (for example, international product standards, or protecting intellectual property, or international trade issues) when it is worth looking at the approach taken by other countries to the same issue;
- Stakeholders: identify and state all the stakeholders with an interest in the issue;
- Impact: describe the (potential) impact of current (or proposed) public policy; consider the consequence of the government doing nothing and why there is a need to address the issue now;
- Policy options
 - List the possible options, including the 'do nothing' option, to address the issue;
 - Consider each option (or explain why some options have been omitted) in terms of costs and benefits, and in terms of implications for business;
 - If there are constraints on the choice of option, including political constraints, these should be explained;
- Recommendations
 - Policy recommendation(s): specific recommendations should be offered;
 - Justification: make the case in support of your recommendation(s) including financial, technical and political aspects (see below);
- Implementation: it is not normally necessary to make proposals for implementation, but there may be some instances where it is necessary to provide a plan or a timescale or to identify the responsible people
- Monitoring and evaluation: you may want to make suggestions for particular activities to be undertaken by the government to monitor implementation, to monitor and evaluate the impact of the policy and to review the policy in due course.
- Appendices: you should include a bibliography (if you haven't included citations as footnotes) and may wish to include (some) supporting evidence, or else, you may simply cite your own, more detailed, research report(s).

The justification

A justification, or an argument, makes the case in support of your position and recommendations. Argument can use both narrative and quantitative information.

In his book, "The Secret Language of Leadership", Stephen Denning describes the 'old' approach of defining a problem, analysing a problem and recommending a solution. He suggests that, since different people may draw different conclusions from the same facts, there is merit in using a different approach, based on narrative. He suggests the use of a different three steps:

- grab attention, through the use of 'negative' stories;
- stimulate a desire for a different future, through the use of 'positive' stories designed to achieve action;
- reinforce with reasons, perhaps neutral stories, explaining what, when, how and why.

Quantitative analysis can add facts, figures and statistics, derived from your research perhaps about the number of businesses affected and the way in which they are affected, to reinforce the argument.

Argument does not prove or disprove – though the evidence may. Argument is not a quarrel between proponents and opponents. Argument should identify areas where there is agreement – and those areas where this is disagreement. The areas

of agreement may provide scope for forming coalitions or alliances. But they may also indicate the scope for negotiation and compromise, which can satisfy all parties. Focusing on the disagreements may provide insights into the reasons for the disagreement and may also assist in delineating the constraints.

Demonstrating an understanding of the positions taken by other stakeholders, and being willing to adopt elements that are acceptable, may assist in encouraging others to take seriously the position that you are espousing.

In advocacy, at least, argument provides reasons and leads those whom you wish to influence through the steps which inevitably lead to acceptance of your recommendations.

Most arguments will be explicit – but the fact that the government wants to do something is to argue implicitly that they believe that they have a role in the issue – and you may want to question that.

The argument needs to present facts, assumptions and interpretations from which the recommendations follow. Do not assume that the reader will understand or accept your argument – spell it out clearly.

Be clear about the problems that are addressed by your solution(s).

The presentation

Ensure that the report looks good.

- Think about the formatting. If you are publishing a number of documents, then think about adopting a “house” style which makes it easy for the reader to find their way around the document.
- If you want to include information about your organisation, put it in a side box, so as not to detract from the key messages.
- Most people find it easier to assimilate data if it is presented graphically rather than in a table. If you use Excel to prepare charts, then develop your own style (don't use the default, which is not very good); be consistent in the use of charts and graphs.
- If you quote figures, then do not imply greater accuracy than actually exists; avoid decimals, and round up (to tens, or hundreds, or even thousands) as appropriate.
- Check that the report has no spelling mistakes.

Conclusion

Writing a position paper may help you to organise your thoughts and secure agreement from your membership. A well written position paper will be clear, succinct and persuasive. It does not substitute for oral presentation, but does provide a written summary of your position that policy makers can consult if necessary, and can also provide the core of a good speech or other presentation. It may also provide policy makers with material that they can incorporate directly into their own working papers or policy papers.