

Writing reports – an introduction

A report is an account of an **investigation** into a topic. A housing organisation – its officers, residents and committees – might need reports to inform or persuade:

- its governing body
- residents generally
- staff
- local authority councillors, government bodies or statutory agencies
- funders
- the general public.

Some reports, though written for a particular audience, might also be made available to people outside the organisation, such as the government regulator for social housing and other housing organisations.

Reports contain **facts and findings**, discussion, conclusions, recommendations. They are based on **evidence**, not personal opinions. Conclusions are drawn from an analysis of the facts and findings.

Reports should have a **neutral, formal style**, since they may need to be distributed to a range of readers. Formality doesn't mean stiff or complicated language – it just means being concise, clear, and dispassionate, without trimmings.

Reports can be a few pages or a few hundred pages long. They might be based upon new evidence or research, or might simply pull together facts and figures that have been available for a while. In either case, reports are usually there to make something happen, to lead to **action**.

Scrutiny reports are the result of an investigation into a particular aspect of the housing service.

What makes a good report?

Some of the most important features of a good report are:

It has a clear **purpose**. The reader understands from the start why they are reading it and what they are expected to do with it.

There is a **summary** which gives the reader a clear overview of the whole report.

There is a clear **structure**. The information is presented in a logical order, with distinct sections and headings.

The **language** is clear and appropriate to the subject. The right words are used for the best possible impact – so that the reader will understand fully.

The **layout** of the report is pleasing to the eye and easy to read.

The **information** contained in the report is appropriate to the argument, and is based upon solid evidence and research.

Sources are given for any information, so the reader can check its authenticity and relevance.

Any **recommendations** given in the report flow logically from the information and arguments given.

The structure of a typical report

Below we give as an example a typical format for a comprehensive report – e.g. to a board or management committee. In practice, the report structure will need to vary according to the scale of the subject matter and the intended readers.

Title page	Project name; date; author(s); contact details inside front cover
Contents list	List all section headings and appendices, with page numbers
Summary	<p>An overview of the report, and summary of key findings and recommendations.</p> <p>The purpose of the summary is to enable the reader to know at a glance what the report is about so they can decide whether they should read more of it.</p> <p>The summary should be able to stand alone, so that a reader can have an overview of the report even if they don't read the rest.</p>
Introduction	Brief description of the subject, the questions addressed and extent / limits of the investigation; what methods were used to collect and analyse the information.
Main body of report	<p>All the main information, usually organised around each of the evaluation questions.</p> <p>There may be a discussion about possible courses of action, with advantages and disadvantages.</p> <p>Do not include detailed information which could be better included in an appendix.</p> <p>Do not make recommendations in the main body of the report.</p>
Findings / Conclusions	An assessment of the value and/or success of the project; the key lessons arising from the evaluation

Recommendations	What you think should happen as a result of your investigation; what could be done to put the lessons into practice? (You might want to target different recommendations to different people / organisations).
Appendices	This is the place for back-up information which may be of interest to some readers, but which would be intrusive if contained in the main body of the report – e.g. detailed results of surveys; charts, diagrams, tables; copies of documents referred to in the report. Each appendix should have its own number, so that the text can make clear reference to it (e.g. <i>See Appendix 3</i>)
References	This is a list of documents, books or other reports that have been used in your investigation. State the author's name, title, publisher, date of publication, and, if possible, page reference.
Glossary	Present in full any abbreviations or acronyms (e.g. HCA) used in the text. You might include a list of the main technical terms used, with explanations.