

## Ten top tips for DPH Annual Report writing

Trawling through 75 Director of Public Health (DPH) Annual Reports may not be many people's idea of an interesting job - but it certainly gives you an insight into what makes a good report, and what makes a bad one.

Since 2004 the Association of Directors of Public Health (ADPH) have held a DPH Annual Report Competition hosted by ALPHA. The aim has been to improve the effectiveness of the reports. As Director of ALPHA one of my jobs, both fascinating and rewarding, is to shortlist the best reports to allow the full panel of judges (high profile Public Health professionals from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines) to choose the winners.

The Annual Report is important for DsPH; a way of showcasing the health of their population and highlighting health issues. The ADPH in their leaflet: "The Role of the Director of Public Health" list "producing an independent annual report on the health of their population" as one of the essential tasks. The Faculty of Public Health guidelines on DPH Annual Reports list the report aims as the following.

- Contribute to improving the health and well-being of local populations.
- Reduce health inequalities.
- Promote action for better health through measuring progress towards health targets.
- Assist with the planning and monitoring of local programmes and services that impact on health over time.

They go on to say that it is "the DPH's professional statement about the health of local communities, based on sound epidemiological evidence and interpreted objectively". It should be "publicly accessible".

That is the theory, but in practice the Annual Report is a vast undertaking swallowing a large amount of time and cost. It is essential, particularly in the current financial climate, that the report gives value for money. This means that it must do its job of helping to improve and protect the health of the population in the most efficient way possible.

I have seen the best and the worst, with nearly all reports showing some area of good practice. So, what have I learnt? What follows are my top ten tips. The list is not exhaustive and reflects my personal priorities, but it is also based on comments made by the judges and so carries some authority.

- 1 Objectives – why are you writing this report? There are huge time and resource costs involved in producing and disseminating the DPH Annual Report so make sure you have explicit worthwhile outcome objectives. Write them in the foreword and check for yourself that the report will address them.
- 2 Audience – there are two sets of people who form a report audience. Those who will read your report (the communities who you want to get your messages across to) and those who will use it (probably the professional who will use the report to enhance their work or sell their messages). Does your report meet both their needs? Too often I have rejected an entry because it falls between the two audiences, in the end catering for neither. It can be done with judicious use of appendices, CDs, inserts or separate versions.
- 3 Style – relate the style and format to your audience(s). But remember that people take in information in different ways so use a range of media (words, pictures charts etc). Don't forget the kinaesthetic learner – make the look and feel of it interesting too. If you want people to use it throughout the year then it must be durable.

Avoid jargon. One example is from an otherwise very good 2004 report under Transport:

"Table 12 shows the modal split taken from a three-year cycle of urban area peak period counts".

Is this really publicly accessible?

- 4 Make partnerships explicit. Get a Local Authority colleague to write a preface or introduction. If possible get contributions from Local Authorities, Voluntary groups and the public as well as colleagues within the NHS. But do let your contributors know the objectives and who the anticipated audience is so that their piece will fit in.
- 5 Graphics and pictures should be meaningful, to clarify and enhance the text – not merely to break up the page.

Make pictures local, it adds to the appeal as well as the credibility. Last year exactly the same picture was used by two reports from different ends of the country. The particular picture showed someone wearing an identity badge from a Trust from a third region. Why?

Make graphics interesting. One report this year had graphs pictured on relevant objects (eg obesity prevalence on the cardboard top of a foil take-away tub). Brilliant. However, please don't use three dimensional pie-charts, they skew the representation.

- 6 Use the results of analysis to make a point or get a message across and not just because the figures or graphs are available. Think about added value and keep referring back to your objectives and your audience to make sure that you are not straying from your original intentions. You can always go into more statistical detail using a CD or on your web pages.
- 7 You should recommend appropriate actions for your different audiences. However, vague aspirational statements will not lead to action. Make recommendations SMART (Specific; Measurable; Achievable; Realistic; Timely) and be explicit about WHO should do WHAT and WHEN. How else are you going to show how you are improving?
- 8 Do include the breadth of Public Health – the three domains of Health Protection, Health Improvement and Health & Care Services – even if this year you are focussing on one major topic or particular issue.
- 9 Show progress on current and past priorities – be proud of what you have achieved. The reader will then realise that you intend to follow up your recommendations. It is important for credibility and to justify the resource put into producing the report.
- 10 Evaluation – this doesn't necessarily mean a completed form. Use a few representative individuals (with differing perspectives and different learning styles) and ask each of them to 'pilot' the draft report. Taking note of their responses will ensure a better finished product. Use another similar set to evaluate the final report – asking them to give you honest feedback. And make sure their messages are taken on board for the next year!

My final point is less a tip and more a plea for moderation. Not too long, not too wordy, and especially for those of us whose eyes are not what they were, not too small a print!

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