Guidance on writing Plant Health Centre reports

Authors should provide the PHC manager with a Word version of their report along with any graphics and a photo/s for the front cover. We will arrange the formatting of the output.

Reports should aim to be a maximum of 20 pages of text (30 pages including tables and diagrams but excluding appendices and references), written in sections, each with a section heading, and subheadings. All outputs must be submitted to PHC before the specified deadline.

The guidance below is to aid the preparation of reports but is flexible. Projects often have different needs to reflect different audiences. Reports should include:

1. A **title** as specified by the Centre.
2. A **policy summary** that will also be published as a separate report. The policy summary should be no more than two pages (maximum) and include:
   - The **key research question.** This should clearly say what your work sets out to achieve and why.
   - **Main policy-relevant findings** from your work. For example, 'this research demonstrated…illustrates…clearly shows. How does your research inform current policy? Do your findings suggest the need for a policy change?
   - **Recommendations** (if needed) and next steps.
3. An **executive summary.** The executive summary should be no more than four pages (maximum) and include:
   - **Background**, give a brief explanation of the issue, why it is important, and why it needs to be examined. What is the starting point for the research?
   - The **key research question.** This should clearly say what your work sets out to achieve.
   - **Research undertaken**: Please add a summary of what you did, the general methods or approaches.
   - **Main findings and recommendations** (if needed) and next steps.

4. **Table of contents,** showing section headings and subheading.
5. The main body of the report including **introductory and concluding** sections (ensure conclusions are accurately reflected in executive summary).
6. **List of references.**
7. **Appendices** (where appropriate).

Authors should also provide:
   - **Suitable photograph/s for the cover page** of the report with acknowledgements (e.g. photos courtesy of ….).
   - The **names of the research team and contact details.**
   - The **logos** of research organisations involved.
   - 200 words **lay summary** of the key project findings for the PHC website and newsletter.

Style Guidance

PHC outputs are put directly into the hands of policymakers who often want to use them immediately to inform policy decisions. Outputs for PHC must be written in a clear, concise and readable style. It is particularly important that the main findings are clearly presented in the policy and executive summary. Outputs must be impartial.

All draft outputs should be sent to PHC in the first instance. PHC will arrange for its review prior to being seen by policy.

How to write for PHC

- **State the question**: All reports should start by setting out the question. The report should then answer this question directly.
- **Keep it simple**: Report should be accessible to a non-expert audience and written in plain English. Specialist vocabulary needs to be explained, and a glossary provided if the report has extensive use of this.
- **Keep it accessible**: Make sure your report looks attractive and readable. Break up the text with sub-headings, and bullet points where possible. Use graphics.
- **Keep it short**: Research reports should normally be no more than 20 pages long (excluding references, glossary and any appendices). They should include a policy and an executive summary.
- **Keep it professional**: Do a final proof-read. Make sure there are no spelling mistakes/unintentional ambiguities/waffle in the final version. Also check your work is relevant, factually accurate, impartial and readable.

Tips

1. **Keep your sentences short:** 15-20 words in a sentence. Most commas can be replaced by a full stop.
2. **Use active verbs:**
   - X   A review of the plan will be undertaken by government next year.
   - Government will review the plan next year.
3. **Use 'you' and 'we':** Be as personal as you would be if you were speaking to your reader.
4. **Use words that are appropriate for the reader:** Using everyday language and terms does not make your text less credible, it makes it more accessible.
5. **Avoid nominalizations:** Use a verb instead of making it into a noun:
   - X   The introduction of the scheme was successful.
   - Introducing the scheme was a success.
6. **Don't be afraid to give instructions:** If you want the reader to do something specific don't say that they 'should consider', say that you want them to.
7. **Try not to sit on the fence:** If possible be clear about consensus on a topic, and say there are dissenters.

*If in doubt, please ask contact Info@PlantHealthCentre.scot