

Report Writing



Introduction

The IMCA can make representations, offer feedback, raise concerns and challenge decisions at any point in the decision making process.

However the IMCA is required to produce a written report which the decision maker must take into account (IMCA General Regulations 6(6)).

Most reports are called 'pre decision' reports - meaning the report is submitted before the decision is made. This is so the information contained within the report can be used by the decision maker.

Introduction

The MCA Code of Practice does not make specific requirements of what should go into the formal report. It does however suggest the IMCA should consider providing written submissions that can take a number of formats including:

- emails highlighting issues that need to be taken into account
- bullet points identifying the person's needs and wishes
- longer written reports which may, in addition to providing information relevant to the decision, provide details of other issues which may need attention in relation to the person's support.[1]

The aim of the report

The primary aim of a report is to represent the person so that their individual needs and unique personality are central to the decision. A great report will capture the person and clearly show what is important to them.

A report should be the story of the person, their likes/dislikes, feelings, preferences and outcomes. Where these cannot be established, the report should try to capture their likely feelings and thoughts about proposed decisions, options being considered and how they might impact on the individual.

The report also provides the IMCA with opportunity to raise any concerns and challenge decisions where the IMCA feels they do not promote the best interests of the person, fails to consider their views or contravenes their human rights.

The primary aim of a report is to represent the person so that their views, experiences, needs and unique personality are central to the decision

What makes a bad report?

Wordiness

One common problem with reports is the overly complex use of words to communicate information that could be explained simply. Wordiness makes a report go from 2 pages to 10 pages – which can be really offputting to the reader. It also makes it harder for the reader to pick out the most salient points – important information can be lost or ‘sandwiched’ between waffle.

What makes a bad report?

No structure

Having no structure can be problematic for the reader. Current templates encourage lengthy writing without much clear direction. This makes the reader wonder what is coming next, the significance of content and what the most salient points are.

We recommend a very simple structure:

- beginning (where you summarise the decision)
- middle (where you put forward your findings)
- end (where you make points for consideration)

What makes a bad report?

No evidence

Be careful that statements you make are not only true but backed up by evidence. Points should always be followed up with an explanation of how you have come about the information – for example this could be using direct quotes from the person, or information sourced from people who know them.

IMCA reports that contain no evidence for the key points, will always fail to have the impact they need.

What makes a bad report?

Provides the wrong story

An IMCA report is not a story of what actions the IMCA took, nor is it a set of case notes recording who the IMCA spoke to and what records they accessed. IMCAs do not need to justify their actions throughout the report – remember the aim of the report is to provide an overview of what is important to the person. It is not a description of what the IMCA has done and why.

The report has to be a story about the person, their individual needs and make sure their uniqueness is at the centre of the decision being made.

What makes a bad report?

Fails to provide relevant and cohesive story

Poor reports will fail to answer the 'so what' test: which can be described as being clear about **why** you are including the information. When you make a statement (such as 'Bill becomes anxious when he has to wait for the doctor') make sure you make the 'so what' point (such as 'Bill becomes anxious when he has to wait for the doctor so could adjustments be made to reduce any potential waits? Care staff who know Bill well, believe that he would be much calmer if he saw the Dr straight away or if the Dr could see him at home').

So what makes a good report?

What makes a good report?

Brevity and Plain English

Experts generally agree that the average sentence should be between 20 and 30 words. Anything more and the sentence generally becomes difficult to digest. This is not the same as robotically limiting sentences to the same length. Varying sentence length is good. It can create a change in pace which makes content more interesting for the reader. Neither is it a rule never to go over 30 words. You may need a very long sentence to explain a complex idea or complicated point. But take care that your average sentence length is between 20 and 30 words.

What makes a good report?

Plain English is also valuable. Even subject experts prefer to read things in plain English. The reason for this is when people have high volumes of reading – like many social workers and Doctors – they appreciate reports that get to the point. You don't want key information to be hidden away amidst dense text.

Consider the following paragraph based on a real IMCA report:

The Independent Mental Capacity Advocate (IMCA) visited Sara on 04/04/2017. The IMCA introduced herself, explained the IMCA role and also went through the advocacy information pack including confidentiality policy. Sara didn't quite understand everything that was explained but was willing to talk to the IMCA so the IMCA stayed and talked about the proposed move. Sara said "for the moment it is alright here" but told the IMCA "I would like to move out soon if I could". The IMCA used non instructed advocacy principles and the watching brief method in order to gather more information.

What makes a good report?

The important information in this paragraph is that Sara thinks that where she lives is okay but would like to move out soon.

Everything else in the paragraph adds very little for the reader. The danger is by writing so much around Sara's comments, these become important details that are lost.

Say what you want to say.

What makes a good report?

Write from the perspective of the decision maker

Unlike most reports which potentially have multiple readers, IMCA reports are specifically written for one person - the decision maker. If you want your writing to have impact on the decision maker, give them a report that is written for them.

Decision makers want to read reports that are lively, bring the person alive, interesting and useful to read.

You may want to consider what they know already – there is little benefit in including a detailed description of a conversation you have previously held with the decision maker. They will already know what they have told you so don't waste their time in writing it down for them. If there are important points to include you may wish to summarise these.

What makes a good report?

Before you write, decide on the points you want to make

Reports need to communicate clearly and succinctly important information about the person and what needs to be considered when working out what is in their best interests.

Before you write the report, spend some time identifying the 2 or 3 main points that you want the reader to know about the person you are supporting. What are the headline points you want to make... what is the single most important point you want to make?

Write these down before you write the report. You want to make it easy for the Decision Maker to find out what is important about the person so have these clearly in your mind before

Suggested structure of a report

What should go into your report?

We suggest that your report is structured in three sections: the beginning, the middle and the end. We do not believe you need various headers and sub headers.

Before you write your report, try to sit quietly and think about the person you have been supporting. Ask yourself what are the most important things to this person that this report HAS to communicate. What other big points do you need to express - what does the decision maker need to know. Keep this as a checklist to double check your report does a good job at conveying them.

Report - beginning

The beginning of any report needs to set the scene. Within IMCA reports, we believe it is efficient for this section to record the following information:

- Name of the person (and possibly DOB for identification purposes)
- Date of instruction and date of report
- Decision maker (as this is the intended reader)
- Type of decision and any options identified

Report - middle

This is the body of the report where you can put forward your findings, explore information, raise concerns and emphasise information the decision maker needs to know about the person when making the decision.

Within the body of the report, it is recommended you adopt the following format:

- Make your point (ie "Joan wants to go home")
- Provide your evidence (ie how do you know Joan wants to go home? "Joan consistently asks when can she go home, 'I miss home. I want to go home'" or you might say "carers report that Joan asks to go home")
- Relate it to the issue by giving it meaning (ie Has the decision maker considered a return home? Has an OT assessment been arranged?)

Report - end

Commonly referred to as Conclusion or Summary

A common mistake found within IMCA reports, is the author making recommendations or attempting to make the decision. Avoid statements such as 'It is in Mrs Hodgkinson's best interest to move into supported accommodation'. A statement like this is the best interest decision! And this is not the role of the IMCA.

It is much more effective for the IMCA to summarise important information – a favoured approach to this is framing these as 'Points for Consideration'.

Report - end

'Points for Consideration'.

Consider the following recommendations and note how crudely they instruct the decision maker as what decision to make.

It is in Dorothy's best interests to have a general anaesthetic so the dentist can conduct investigatory work.

Although Peter has expressed he does not wish to live in this care home, the DoLS are in his best interest as they are the only way to keep him safe

The above statements are expressly outside of the IMCA role – it is not for the IMCA to make such judgements. Rather, the IMCA should concentrate on putting forward relevant information. If the IMCA has evidence there is general consensus that one option is preferred over all others, at best the IMCA could say 'I do not wish to challenge the decision for Dorothy to have the general anaesthetic.

Report - end

Even fairly 'safe' statements, when written as recommendations, risk meandering into the decision making role:

A contingency plan must be put in place should the care package break down.

This could be phrased with greater impact as a point for consideration:

The care team and social worker remain concerned that Mr. Parks will successfully return home, however have suggested this could be the preferred option which is least restrictive of his rights. Could a contingency plan be implemented to respond to any potential breakdown in care?

Report - end

Avoid statements that are so obvious they have minimal impact. Statements such as:

The care package must reflect Mr Shahin's needs

...offer very little help to the decision maker. Of course the care package must reflect the person's needs – what else would it do! If the IMCA is concerned things are being missed, or the care package is not relevant, say so. If you want to highlight specific needs in the care package then be specific.

Report - end

Other recommendations, which tell the decision maker what they must do, such as:

Respite care/day care should be incorporated into the care package

Would have a much stronger impact if they are framed within a language of human rights:

Mrs Pittaway has a right to full assessment of her care and support and needs. She has expressed an interested in accessing x services. Could the decision maker ensure that any respite and day care options are incorporated into the care package?

In summary....

Make sure your report:

- captures the person and what is important to them
- presents key information clearly and easily to find
- puts forwards relevant information (such as benefits and burdens)
- raises any concerns or challenges very clearly

Please return to your
e-learning for the
next section of
learning

