



## Working with the department as a special adviser



“ I had particularly good special advisers, because they were good at making relationships very quickly with the civil service. ”

**Alan Johnson**  
Hom secretary (2009–2010)

You may liaise with officials even more than you speak to your minister and most of your engagement with the civil service will be carried out independently of your minister. This ranges from working with your minister’s private office, to supporting policy teams, to reaching out to other departments on cross-governmental priorities.

### 1. Work with civil servants “as a united team”

Civil servants will look to you to provide a sense check on work as it progresses and before it reaches the minister. You will be in a good position to provide guidance on how advice and evidence should be framed to be most useful for the minister, as well as giving officials a sense of what is politically salient. This is most effective if you consider spads and officials as a team – one former special adviser described how they could work with officials “as a united team to convince the minister if they need convincing”.

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It's wise to create an environment where officials can raise problems – civil servants will not challenge ideas or signal issues to you unless they feel comfortable doing so. As one former special adviser told the IfG, "You need to have your network of civil servants who will trust you enough that it's safe for them to surface an issue that can be dealt with safely."



**I think being a civil servant and being a spad are much more like each other than either is like being a minister.** – Lord Frost



## 2. Safeguard your priorities

You will have an overview of all departmental activity, your minister's priorities and wider government objectives. But many officials who are focused on their own areas of responsibility will not be able to see the whole picture. This means that civil servants will sometimes send you 'urgent' issues or advice about their particular issue. While you should listen to why it is urgent and carefully consider any advice, you need to balance this against wider political and departmental priorities.

Ultimately, it is for you to judge whether something is urgent or not – and you should be comfortable in pushing back when it is not. Your private office will play an important role in managing the flow of information that officials direct to you. You will also be in a good position to communicate your minister's political priorities to policy officials and help them frame policies as responding to political needs. Use your understanding of broader government priorities to explain how different policy areas interact and fit within the government's broader political platform.

## 3. Help with the day-to-day work of the department

Your work will not always be specifically 'minister-focused' - you have an important role in supporting the day-to-day work of the department. This can include keeping track of how issues are progressing and using your position to provide steers or to make decisions. You are also well-placed to oversee routine work – such as responding to parliamentary questions – that a minister will not have capacity to lead.

## 4. Let your private office know how you want to work

Your private office will differ depending on your department, but they usually provide support by triaging information, organising your inbox and managing your diary. Getting the basics right will help you do your job more effectively. Speak with your private office to let them know how and what you want to prioritise in terms of meetings and commitments.

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Think about how you use your time: do you have routine weekly meetings; do you set aside a specific period of time to do box work; who are the key officials and stakeholders to meet to advance your priorities? Diaries are never set in stone, but keep your private office informed so they can best support you.

## **5. Support the wider private office to organise your minister's time**

Your minister should clearly set out how they want their private office and special advisers to work together, but it is best to view the relationship as one team with separate responsibilities. One key relationship will be with the principal private secretary (PPS) who runs the private office. Work with the PPS to help manage and prioritise the flow of information intended for the minister, but make sure to use your time wisely – it is not your role to try and compile your minister's box yourself, or to be the first to review all the output from a completed box.

Be involved in diary discussions to help make sure that their time is being used effectively and adequate time is being given to political and media engagements alongside departmental commitments.

Bring the PPS and the private office team into key conversations with your minister so that they can support you in communicating immediate and longer-term political objectives to the department. You can lean on the private office to help you navigate the department. They can draw on established relationships to put you into contact with key officials for relevant policy areas.

### **Questions to ask yourself**

- Do you have a clear sense of your priorities and have you communicated these to your private office?
- Have you had conversations with your own private office about how they can work to support you?
- Are you clear on the division of responsibilities between special advisers and the minister's private office?
- Do you have good relationships with the key officials in your priority areas?

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## Find out more

If you would like to discuss any of the above in more detail, or talk about potential training we can offer on this topic, please get in touch via [ifgacademy@instituteforgovernment.org.uk](mailto:ifgacademy@instituteforgovernment.org.uk)

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