

Ministers' ways of working

A guide for private office





“ The weirdest question I’ve probably ever been asked in my life is when I showed up in a department and the civil servant in my private office said ‘How do you like to work, minister?’ ”

Jeremy Wright
Attorney general (2014–18)

Ministers' ways of working

New ministers often come in with little idea of how they can set up effective ways of working with their private office – and they may like to consider how they can improve systems when they move role or department.

This resource for private office teams is a guide for a conversation with your minister about how they want things to work in the office. It sets out key questions to ask your minister, and includes examples of how previous ministers have chosen to operate – drawing on the IfG's conversations with ministers and private office teams – that you can offer as possible options.

This guide offers a wide-ranging overview of ministers' ways of working, which could be used as part of several early discussions with the minister. We have also highlighted the key questions to ask in the first week, to lay an initial foundation.

When discussing changes to how things work with your minister, it is worth bearing these principles in mind:

- Explain the implications of ministers' choices for the private office team and the wider department.
- Try things out – if it doesn't work, you can change it.
- Check in regularly about how things are working – with the minister, but also with the wider private office team and (if relevant) special advisers.
- Speak to the minister's parliamentary and constituency offices – they may be able to give advice about the minister's needs and preferences.
- If the minister has moved from another role, ask what worked (and what didn't work) for their previous private office set-up.

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Diary management

1. How do you want to structure your diary so you can focus on your priorities?

Examples:

- Consolidate the week into blocks of time – e.g. three afternoons a week for external meetings
- Divide the day into 15- or 30-minute segments
- Weekly meetings with private office about upcoming commitments
- Set aside time at the beginning of each day for private office to be able to pop in
- Breaks between meetings to reflect or prepare for the next meeting

2. How do you want to set aside time to think strategically?

Examples:

- Regularly scheduled time for thinking and reflecting
- Regular forward-planning strategy meetings with private office (and special advisers)
- Carve out time to think politically with special advisers about any concerns, upcoming commitments, media coverage

3. How do you want to set aside time for your commitments in parliament and in your constituency?

Examples:

- Schedule time to spend in parliament during the week
- Assume that ministerial commitments should not be scheduled on Fridays, unless it is unavoidable
- Private office gives adequate notice and clear details if you will need to do box work on the weekend

4. What regular personal commitments should we be aware of, that might affect the times you're able to start or finish work?

- Are there any other personal circumstances, or constraints on your time, that we should be aware of?



Minister of State
(Development)

Secretary of State for
Culture, Media and Sport

Secretary of State for Energy
Security and Net Zero

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Meetings

1. When would you prefer a meeting to a written submission or briefing?

Examples:

- To get regular updates on policy issues
- To go into the detail of a submission
- To prepare for external engagements and visits
- To prepare for appearances in parliament

2. Who do you want to include in internal meetings?

Examples:

- Include specialist civil servants, who may be more junior, to discuss the details of policy issues and advice
- Limit meetings to no more than 10 attendees
- Establish larger meetings for “a more consultative approach”
- Weekly ‘open door’ slots for officials to drop in to discuss any issues

3. How do you want departmental officials to update you on your priority areas?

Examples:

- Short weekly update meetings with teams running priority projects
- Monthly meetings with each division for forward-planning

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- Short written updates on routine issues, with oral briefings for priority areas and more detailed topics

4. How do you want to schedule regular meetings with public bodies and other organisations?

Examples:

- Strategic meetings every Monday, rotating topics on a four-week cycle
- Monthly meetings with chairs and chief executives of arm's-length bodies
- Regular meetings with key sector representatives or other stakeholder groups

5. How do you want to be briefed ahead of external meetings, visits and parliamentary appearances?

- What would you like to know in the briefing? How far in advance would you like to be briefed?

Examples:

- A template document setting out: what the minister is expected to do, how long they are expected to speak for, whether there will be questions from other attendees, details of attendees and the venue
- Regular meetings to prepare speeches
- Schedule preparatory reading each morning for meetings later that day



SECRETARY OF STATE
HOME OFFICE



The ministerial box

1. Do you want to have a digital or paper box?

2. How would you like to schedule box work during the day?

- When during the day would you like to receive submissions from officials?
- How much box work would you like to take home?

Examples:

- Set aside an hour or two hours of box time during the day so you can discuss the brief with the relevant official
- Establish an 'in-tray' and review submissions as they come in
- Receive short written briefings throughout the day
- Use time between meetings to do 15 minutes of box work
- Schedule time for box work each morning, before the day's meetings
- Receive the box in the afternoon
- Stay in the department until box work is finished
- Take the box home in the evenings
- Establish a limit on the number of submissions that can be taken home

3. How would you like your box to be prioritised?

Examples:

- A cover sheet outlining the contents of the box and highlighting key areas of interest, including decisions that need to be taken
- Put important issues at the top of the box
- 'Forward look' notes about important things happening in the department

4. (where relevant) How should special adviser input be incorporated?

Examples:

- Each special adviser has the opportunity to review every submission
- Allocate submissions by policy area
- One special adviser reviews each submission and delegates to other special advisers on relevant policy areas

5. Do you have any preferences in the way correspondence is written?

- Should any areas of correspondence be handled in a particular way?

Examples:

- Short letters with accessible language
- Officials consider the kind of reply they personally would expect to receive
- Fast-track correspondence about priority areas
- Short, straightforward responses to positive correspondence, rather than providing an in-depth explanation of the department's work



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Submissions

1. Do you have any preferences about the way your submissions are written?

Examples:

- Any preferences to use (or avoid) particular words or phrases
- Use of numbers and statistics
- Use of technical terminology
- Bullet points or numbered paragraphs

2. How much detail would you like in your submissions?

Examples:

- A summary of main points in the submission and attaching extensive appendices that you can choose to examine
- A maximum of three sides of paper, with oral briefings for more detailed issues

3. At what stage in the process would you like to receive submissions?

Examples:

- Receive submissions later in the process, with a wide range of input (including any areas of disagreement) from the department
- Receive submissions earlier in the process to make decisions more quickly
- Receive short, routine updates

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- Private office sends submissions back if they aren't in line with what you expect

4. What do you want us to include in your box notes?

Examples:

- A one-sentence summary
- A summary of key points
- Highlight key decisions that need to be taken and their deadlines
- Comments from special advisers and private office to reflect how submissions fit into the context of the department or the views of other ministers





Leading the department (for secretaries of state)

1. How do you want to ensure that the wider political team is working towards your shared objectives?

Examples:

- Weekly political team meetings with ministers, special advisers, parliamentary private secretaries and whips
- A half-hour political meeting on a Monday morning, straight after a wider meeting including the permanent secretary, communications teams and private office
- Updates from one minister each week to talk about their work, as part of a wider meeting
- Occasional social activities

2. How do you want to keep track of your junior ministers' areas of responsibility?

- Who will keep you up to date – junior ministers or special advisers?
- How will they update you – written notes, meetings, or both?
- How frequently should they provide these updates – on a regular basis, or ad hoc urgent briefings on matters of importance?

Examples:

- An early one-to-one meeting with each junior minister about the secretary of state's priorities for the department and their portfolios

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- Weekly one-to-one meetings about what the junior minister is working on, their understanding of potential risks, anything they want to flag with the secretary of state
 - Project-based meetings on key policies and projects
 - Receive weekly update notes from the junior minister on a Friday, followed by a one-to-one meeting early in the following week
 - Special advisers report back routine updates
 - Monthly meetings with junior ministers to go over their portfolios and progress in different areas
 - Joint meetings with the relevant minister and officials, where you and the junior minister probe the department's progress





Three-month check-in

While it's important to check in regularly with the minister and those they work closely with about how things are working, this may be a useful guide for a discussion with a minister three months into their appointment, to reflect on their ways of working.

How have you found the balance between your ministerial role and your other responsibilities?

Are you getting enough time to focus on your priorities? If not, what can be adjusted to help you do so?

Do you feel you have the right opportunities to think and reflect during the week?

Do you feel like you receive the right amount, and the right quality, of information in your submissions?

Do you feel up to date about what the department is doing to make progress on your priorities?

Do you feel that you are able to meet the right people, on a regular enough basis?

Do you feel those meetings help you work towards your objectives?

Do you feel the way responsibilities are divided between the private office team works for you?



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