



## Introduction to private office: a guide for new starters

Private office plays a crucial function in government, connecting ministers to their departments – and vice-versa – to help ministers achieve their agendas while in post.

In private office, you will need to liaise between very senior civil servants and politicians, work at pace and engage with a wide number of policy topics. But the fast-paced nature of private office work means that there is rarely time for a full induction into the role. There are some foundational things you can do to set yourself up for success during your time in private office.



**Your working relationship with private office is fundamental to everything that you do and your success. They act as the bridge between the minister and the department.**



**Hilary Benn**

Secretary of State for the Environment, 2007–10

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## Get to know your minister

To do your job effectively, you will need to understand your minister, their motivations and [how they like to work](#). Some of this will be quite basic, like whether they prefer to be addressed by their first name or by their title. It will also be useful to understand what drives them – their policy priorities, their political positions (including any language or phrases that they like or dislike), and their approach to their parliamentary role. And beyond their ministerial role, recognise that they are a human being too – find out if they have any personal commitments or needs that could affect your work.

Ministers receive a lot of information and face many competing demands on their time – by understanding more about them you can filter things out and prioritise well. It is unlikely that you will be able to find out all of these details from the minister directly in your first days in the job, so make sure to ask your colleagues.



**Your private office is the thing that you rely on every minute of the day. They're running your life, and so you need to be very clear about what you do want in your life and what you don't want.**



**Patricia Hewitt**

## Get the basics right

These are some core functions that private office performs:

- Diary management
- Preparation for and support during meetings and public appearances
- Helping ministers get the information they need to make decisions, via submissions
- Ensuring correspondence is in line with what the minister expects

There is much more to the role, but getting these tasks right is hugely important for your minister and for the department, to keep the work of government going. Find out how the private office team already runs and be clear about how you contribute to that – what your role is, what you will be responsible for – and how you will work closely with others. The way these core functions are done will be shaped by your minister, so make sure that your work reflects their preferences.

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## Work out the rhythm of your day and week

Private office is often a very busy place to work and your minister will be keen to make progress on their agenda. By figuring out the regular deadlines that you need to meet, you can manage your time effectively and avoid being caught on the back foot.

There are some elements of the weekly schedule that may structure your work:

- What time does the box need to be ready?
- What regular internal or external meetings does the minister have?
- How far in advance of a meeting or external appearance will the minister want to be briefed?
- When does the minister go to their constituency?



**We also produced a document which we used for any kind of engagement that I was doing, which set out... all these sorts of details that actually mean that, before you walk into a room, you've got a visual idea of what's expected of you... will there be questions at the end?**



**Caroline Dinenage**

## Find out the most important events you need to know about

As well the day-to-day, you should also be aware of the key milestones that your minister will need to be prepared for. This could be a major public engagement like a keynote speech at a conference on a priority issue. It could be a parliamentary appearance – whether taking through legislation, facing a select committee, or responding to questions. Or there may be a white paper or other significant policy document that your minister is working on.

For these important events in the calendar, you should make sure that you are well-equipped to support your minister with their strategic priorities. Identify the range of teams and interests that will be involved in major events, which will affect the support your minister requires. They might need additional briefing about the detail of a policy area, or – particularly if they are [a new minister](#) – you might need to explain to them how to get things done in government, such as the stages of the legislative process.

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## Identify the key relationships you need

Private office depends on strong relationships, so that you can get the right advice to your minister and manage their time effectively. These relationships might include:

- Policy teams working on your minister's priority areas, in your department and elsewhere in government
- Correspondence and parliamentary teams in the department
- Senior civil servants' and other ministers' private offices – in the department and across government (including No.10 and the Treasury)
- Special advisers in the department
- Your minister's parliamentary and constituency offices

You will need to work out the respective roles of each of these groups – what they can offer you, and what you can offer them. They can help deliver your minister's priorities and act as a network of support for you and your team. It is best to develop these relationships in 'peacetime', before you need to ask something of them.

**“ The private office had to be double agents. They are your eyes and ears... they tell you what the department is really up to... And of course, at the same time, I have not the slightest doubt, they tell the department what the secretary of state is really up to.**

**Kenneth Clarke**



Private office is a unique role in government. Spend some time identifying what areas of the role you think you will find most challenging and seek out support. You might find it useful to speak to your line manager, or colleagues elsewhere in the department with private office experience. Policy teams, or other teams in the department could also offer other kinds of support, like informal guidance or an overview of the history of a policy area to date.

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## Questions to ask yourself

- Do I know what the minister's priorities are?
- What is my office's daily rhythm and how do I contribute to it?
- What are the key moments coming up in the next 12 months that I should be aware of, and do I know what I need to do to prepare for them?
- Who are the key people I will need to work with in this role and what are my relationships like with them? How could I develop these?
- Do I know who to go to if I need support in my role?

## The IfG Academy

The IfG also provides dedicated training for private office – from a more detailed induction to your role (which can be found on the government learning framework) to more bespoke sessions to suit teams and individuals. If you'd like to find out more about our support, you can contact us at: [ifgacademy@instituteforgovernment.org.uk](mailto:ifgacademy@instituteforgovernment.org.uk)