



Handling submissions as a special adviser



“ A secretary of state has so much to read and so many submissions and the substantive points they are making have to be well and clearly argued and set out. You have to hit the ground running every time you start reading a fresh submission.

Lord Mandelson
Secretary of state for business
(2008–10)

A lot of your time will be spent helping manage the flow of information to the minister. Dealing with submissions is central to this. Submissions are drafted by officials and they provide formal evidence and recommendations to ministers. They are submitted as part of a package of documents, including decisions that need to be made, delivered to your minister in their 'box'.

Submissions provide a formal record of a minister's decisions that can be referred back to if necessary. Spads can increase the quality of submissions by reviewing and adding their own comments to them before they are ready to go to the minister – you will want to agree with your secretary of state about how you will feed into submissions.

1. Triage submissions according to your minister's priorities

You will have limited time to review submissions before they go to your minister. Multiple boxes may arrive on a given day containing scores of submissions – one former special adviser told the IfG they could receive between 30 and 50 submissions a day. Private office should help triage submission work by sifting between submissions that require immediate sign-off by the minister, long-term priorities, and submissions that are overdue a decision.

In some cases, a minister may delegate submissions that sit outside their priorities to you, junior ministers or other officials. Work with your minister and private office to find out what you should be focusing on and delegate submission work more broadly.

2. Don't try to be an expert on everything

You will be looking at diverse policy issues and it may be tempting to try to get on top of all the detail. But it is generally not your job to be an expert on the entire remit of the department – remember that officials will have often been working on a submission for weeks or months. The way you can add value is by anticipating the minister's questions, flagging omissions that the minister expects to be included, and providing an important political perspective on submissions that sits outside the remit of officials. You are well placed to expand the range of options being offered to ministers and consider how they fit with the government's overall objectives.

When thinking about submission work, it is worth thinking about whether a minister with limited knowledge on a policy area will be able to digest the core message of the submission quickly.

3. Develop a sense for what your minister thinks that will allow you to 'pattern match'

While you may not be an expert on every policy issue that you deal with, you will become (or may already be) an expert on your minister. As you start out, you will be reading and commenting on submissions, observing how your minister reacts and gaining greater insight into how they work and their priorities. Over time, you will get a sense of how your minister responds to certain issues which will give you an indication of how they may approach a similar issue in the future – as a former spad described to the IfG, you will learn how to 'pattern match'.



There's like 80 decisions to be made a night ... so you then begin to build it up by kind of reasoning and then you can be quite lazy at the end and just pattern match and be like, 'Oh, this is a bit like that sub[mission] that came up three months ago. Well in that three months ago sub, [the minister] said X, so therefore it's likely they are going to say X again.



– Former spad in the Cabinet Office and Treasury

4. Work with officials to feed into the submission process

Work with officials to feed into the process to help shape advice before it goes to ministers. For priority submissions, check in with officials and meet with the relevant policy team so that you can address problems early. If you think something is missing or that a recommendation requires further justification, address this at an early stage. Agree a process with the private office to ensure that submissions receive sufficient scrutiny – in some cases this may simply be that a submission does not go to a minister without a special adviser approving it.

Do not be afraid to delay a submission if it requires more work, and if submissions do get delayed or other issues arise, you are in a good position to explain the situation to the minister. This will help maintain the quality of the submissions when they do reach you and officials will be grateful for some leeway if things are not going exactly to plan.

You will develop a keen awareness of what your minister expects from submissions. Some will want short pieces of advice while others will want more detailed documents. Knowing this is something that comes from working with your minister over time – use this information to support officials as they draft submissions. You will also be able to think about submissions from a more overtly political angle – this is something that officials cannot bring to the table. Work with the private office to organise documents and agree in advance when you will be able to review material.

5. Add value by using insights gained from external stakeholders

You will find yourself in lots of meetings and with access to key stakeholders and experts with different views on policies – use these opportunities to inform your submission work. One former special adviser told the IfG how they developed a network of stakeholders who could be relied on to sense check policies before decisions were made. Your minister may not have the capacity to engage with external voices to the same level, so bringing in a range of feedback and views will allow you to complement the advice of the civil service.



So I think that people who work for Labour ministers... need to make the gear shift from thinking that their job is principally media focused and logistics focused to thinking about how they are going to supplement and amplify the political outcomes that that government is trying to achieve.

– Former spad in Defra



Questions to ask yourself

- Have you agreed on a process with your minister and private office for prioritising and delegating submission work?
- Do you have a clear idea of what your minister expects from a submission, and can you articulate these expectations to officials?
- What knowledge or analysis can only you add to aid the minister's understanding of the submission?

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

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