



Preparing for a new minister



“Your private office is the reason you’ll succeed or fail.”

Maria Miller
Secretary of state for culture, media and sport (2012–14)

The arrival of a new minister to a department, whether as part of a new government, a reshuffle or as a single new appointment, is always a particularly busy time for private office teams. You will need to prepare for getting them up to speed with the specifics of the role and the department (with little notice, in the case of reshuffles), and make the transition as smooth as possible both for the minister and the wider department.



The experience of being appointed and the transition into their new role will have been a whirlwind period for the minister themselves – even if this is not their first ministerial job. They may not know much about your department and will have had relatively little time to prepare for the change. Your new minister may not have been expecting the appointment, and in some cases might even feel ambivalent about it – perhaps because they were hoping to be appointed to a different position, or because they wanted to stay in their previous role.

No two ministers will be exactly the same, in style or personality. However, there are some key ways that you as a private office team can prepare for a new minister and set the scene for a good working relationship.

Before the new minister arrives

Once you know that your current minister will be leaving office, you should:

- **Get the basics right:** these range from removing all traces of the 'old regime' – updating door name plates, staff email signatures and official correspondence templates – to making sure that IT, passes, security clearance and office space are in place for the new minister (and their special advisers if relevant).
- **Plan intro meetings:** think about which officials and external stakeholders the minister should meet in their first days and weeks, and schedule meetings accordingly. But naturally be prepared to be flexible around these if the minister wants to approach them differently.
- **Prioritise briefings:** liaise with the department, including the permanent secretary's office, to prepare the key policy briefings on the minister's portfolio, and have a suggested order of priority ready. The minister may have different priorities once they are in office, and will not have time to read every page of the briefing anyway, but it is important that you have a view on order of importance.
- **Identify key processes:** there may be particular aspects of government process that a new minister will need bringing up to speed on quickly, depending on what work is currently in train in the department. Will they be taking legislation through, for instance, or conducting international negotiations? Will they be appearing before a select committee soon after taking office? Take these into account when thinking about where initial priorities should lie, and think about any training that might be needed.
- **Do your research:** once you know who your new minister will be, read up on his or her background, experience and views on relevant policy to get a sense of their motivations and what they might be most interested in. This won't be a substitute for conversations and time with the minister once they arrive, but it can give you a head-start.

 **I was struck by how much care the civil service had taken to prepare for the incoming government, even the extent to which the two speech writers who were assigned to junior Treasury ministers had analysed my speeches and my speech patterns and the phrases I liked to use.** 

Mark Hoban

Minister of state for work and pensions (2012–13)



Once the minister is in post

Once your new minister has arrived, and bearing in mind they will be very busy, there are some steps you can take to ease the transition:

- **Explain the logistics of ministerial life:** for first-time ministers, lots of elements to the job can be confusing. And even if they have been a minister before, there may still be differences in their new role. Ministers don't always feel that they can ask for processes or other aspects of the job to be explained – especially when officials and others around them seem to take them for granted. Make sure to walk your minister through the 'nuts and bolts' of the role, including:
 - The ministerial code, and its implications for their work and behaviour
 - The roles and responsibilities of private office team members
 - How the submissions and write rounds process works
 - How correspondence is dealt with
- **Liaise with the minister's parliamentary/constituency office:** get in touch with the minister's parliamentary office staff and work out how to co-ordinate with them on the minister's time. Make sure channels of communication are as open as possible. This will help to prevent diary logjams, and balance the minister's departmental, parliamentary and constituency work. Most ministers only have their government job because of their work in getting elected, and for many relations in their party will continue to be the most important consideration. Ensuring they have time to talk to MPs and carry out their constituency duties will help ministers balance these competing pressures, and it will also be helpful for getting the department's business done in parliament
- **Get to know the minister's special advisers, if they have them:** make contact with your new minister's SpAds, and find out the role that the minister is envisioning for them. Some special advisers may be working in government for the first time, so you might also need to explain to them how the private office team works and how SpAds relate to that structure. Special advisers can be really valuable allies in understanding what the minister wants and enforcing their priorities both in the department and in cross-government work, so it is worthwhile setting the tone for a collaborative relationship with them at an early stage.
- **Discuss preferred styles of working:** talk to your minister about how they would like work to be presented to them and how they

would like you to manage their time. Do they have preferences about length or format of briefings, or length and size of meetings? Do they have family commitments or caring responsibilities that affect the organisation of their work? Some ministers (especially those in their first ministerial job) will not be completely clear on what their options are for ways of working, so have some suggestions ready of different ways that things can be done, or to explain why things are currently done the way that they are.

- **Ask about policy priorities:** as the minister familiarises themselves with their new portfolio, ask for direction from them about their key policy priorities. Some will already have clear ideas about these when they arrive in office, and others will take time to figure them out – but if your team know what they are, you can not only prioritise the minister’s time more effectively, but also communicate them to the wider department.

 **I consider myself very lucky in my first ministerial job to have had a private secretary who was pretty experienced in having worked with other ministers beginning the role and provided me with the sort of guidance on [the] process and what a submission was and how the correspondence was dealt with and how you might go about agreeing or not agreeing to do a particular event. All things which, if you didn’t have somebody to explain to you, it would be pretty opaque actually in terms of the way that government works. So having a private secretary in the private office that are able to support you through that is really, really helpful.** 

Jacqui Smith
Home secretary (2007–09)

Questions to ask yourself

Before the new minister arrives:

- Do I have a clear sense of what I think the priority meetings and briefings are for a new minister?
- Has as much of the administrative and logistical set-up for a new minister as possible been completed?

Once the minister is in post:

- How can I help the minister work out what they want?
- How can I ensure we are adapting to what the minister wants and not just doing things the way they have always been done?
- Are we as a private office team working as effectively as we can with the minister's other support staff – i.e. their parliamentary/constituency offices and their special advisers?

Find out more

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

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