



Working with your private office



“ The private office had to be double agents. They are your eyes and ears... they tell you what the department is really up to. That is how you discover what is happening and what is not happening. ”

Kenneth Clarke
Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State
for Justice (2010–12)

Who are your private office team? What do they do?

After accepting your new role, the first person you speak to is likely to be your **private secretary**, the most senior official in your **private office**. This is the small team of civil servants in charge of helping you to manage your time, paperwork and correspondence, and offering advice on day-to-day responsibilities. Private office staff manage your meetings, sift the paperwork that comes to you from the rest of the department and chase other officials for things you want done.

Your private office holds a unique position within the department, and will be absolutely crucial to your effectiveness as a minister – if it isn't working well, it will be much harder for you to get things done. Private offices are focused on their minister's needs, and will respond best to a minister who is clear and decisive about what they do and don't want.

But they will also be dealing with heavy demands from the department and others for your time and attention.

How to work effectively with your private office?

1. Communicate your policy priorities

Your private office can help you use your time well if they understand what your main policy objectives are. They will be able to prioritise briefings and meetings in line with these, as well as communicate to the rest of the department where you want its attention to be focused. Whether your priorities differ from those of your predecessor in the role, or you are continuing with some established objectives, make sure you are clear with your private office staff about your priorities.

 **But 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
Secretary of state for health (2005–07)

2. Take control of your work

In the absence of clear direction from you, your private office can easily fill your diary with meetings that they judge to be necessary but may not quite align with how you want to be spending your time. Similarly, they can bombard you with pieces of paper that you don't have time to read. It is, of course, a good idea to hear your private secretary's advice on who it would be useful to meet and when – particularly when first getting to grips with the role – and to read the introductory briefing on your new portfolio.

But be clear with your private office staff – especially your private secretary and diary secretary – about what works best for you in terms of diary and workload. Some useful questions to think about are:

- Do you prefer your working week to be arranged in a particular way?
- Do you prefer to go through your 'red box' of departmental advice and decisions during the day or in the evening?
- Do you want particular time allocated to spend in parliament so you have time to meet colleagues?

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- Do you have any family or caring responsibilities that might have an impact on the structure of your week?
 - How often do you want meetings with particular groups or individuals?
 - Do you want specific meetings to have certain cast-lists?
 - Do you want briefing and advice to be a maximum of two or four pages?



If so, say so – and push back if the diary starts to fill up with meetings that are not helpful or if briefings are not useful.

3. Ask questions

Private office will be able to give you guidance on the ministerial code and explain the mechanics of the role of a minister, from the submissions process to how correspondence from other ministers, MPs and important stakeholders is dealt with. If you are unsure about an element of the role, especially if it seems something that everyone else takes for granted, ask your staff to clarify it.

This also applies to topics that are specific to your department. If you want to get a sense of recent parliamentary activity, the current concerns of major stakeholders, or progress on relevant manifesto commitments, for instance, your private office can arrange for this to be provided.

Your private office staff can also give helpful insight into what is going on in your department. Make it clear that you want channels of communication to be open and honest, and that you want to hear about bad news as well as good news.

 **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.** 

Jacqui Smith
Home secretary (2007–09)

Questions to ask yourself

To ensure you are able to work effectively with your private office, consider the following questions:

- Have you explained your main policy objectives to your private office team? If so, are those priorities reflected in your meetings and written advice?
- Have you asked your private office team to make changes to the format or frequency of your briefings and/or meetings? Have those adjustments been made?
- Do you feel clear on the ministerial code and how it applies to you?
- Do you have a good grasp of the mechanics of your role? Are there any processes or structures within the department that you are unclear about?

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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