



Working with private office as a special adviser

You will need to work closely with your own private office to establish how you can operate most effectively, and with the secretary of state's private office to present a united front to the department.

[The private office is] a team that doesn't get talked about enough, I think, in terms of their power and influence and really critical role in government.

– Former special adviser



Different departments have different private office setups, but special advisers will usually have dedicated support. Your dedicated private office plays a key role in enabling you to do your job by providing administrative support, advice and helping you to navigate the department. But you will also be working closely with your secretary of state's private office. This guide brings together practical tips on how to get the most out of these key relationships.

1. Agree with your private office how you want to work

Getting the basics right is important and your private office should adapt to align with your preferred working style. You should have regular conversations with private office about how you want the office to work and how things are going. While the nature of your work will vary depending on their specific role, some things to discuss could include:

- Making it clear what kinds of material you and your minister need to see; the parameters of what private office can handle independently and what you and/or the secretary of state's private office need to be informed about.
- Agreeing on a process for you to provide input into submissions or other pieces of work.
- How to prioritise and to assess the quality of work before it reaches you.
- Setting expectations around your schedule, such as when you have particular meetings or when you want to carve out time for box work or thinking time.
- How private office can set up processes to help you monitor progress on priority actions.



As I got more confident in the job, I realised that I needed a process to filter stuff out from the civil service [...] So, I wouldn't just react to stuff coming to me, meeting requests from civil servants, or use our team PA, to push stuff back and bring it to me in a structured way.

– Former special adviser



If you are not sure how private office can support you, ask the team about their experience of working with other spads(/teams). They can explain the pros and cons of different approaches. It may take time to discover what works for you. Revisit agreed ways of working regularly, and change course if something is not working.

2. Your private office can explain how government works and the landscape of the department

If you have limited experience of government or are joining an unfamiliar department, your private office can help get you up to speed. Private office can explain how things work within a department including key processes (like submissions or parliamentary questions), external responsibilities (such as around transparency requirements) and the division of responsibilities between officials (and spads) in the department.

Private office should have a good sense of what is happening across the department, which means that they can flag things that you need to keep an eye on including potential problem areas. They can also let you know where work is already being carried out to avoid risks of duplication – time spent doing work which could be done by officials is not the best use of your time, and private office can help identify areas where spads can add value.

This perspective also means that they know who is who – private office can help guide you through sometimes complex departmental structures and they can put you in touch with relevant policy teams, arm’s-length bodies and senior officials as well as key stakeholders beyond the department. Some ministerial priorities will require cross-government collaboration and your private office will be able to help establish contacts with departments across Whitehall.

3. You should establish how you will work with the secretary of state's private office

You and your private office will work closely with the larger private office that serves the secretary of state. The secretary of state should set out how they want their private office and special advisers to collaborate, but you will quickly need to build relationships quickly and establish how you will work together. This may include your involvement in discussions about the minister's diary or attending forward-planning meetings. One key relationship will be with the principal private secretary (PPS), who runs the private office – a successful relationship between spads and the PPS is one where you work together as one team with separate responsibilities.

Regular communication is essential to building a constructive relationship. Keep the wider private office informed about what you are doing and key conversations you are having. Similarly, involve the PPS in discussions with your minister so they can help communicate political priorities to the department. This helps avoid mixed messages and unclear lines of communication. You can also get involved in discussions about the minister's time to make sure that adequate time is being given to political and media engagements alongside departmental commitments. Presenting a united front to the wider department will help you progress your minister's priorities.

Questions to ask yourself:

- Have you had a discussion with the PPS about how you can work with the secretary of state's private office?
- Can you use your private office differently to get more out of the department?
- Have you been clear about how you want to work and have you set check-in points to make sure things are going to plan?
- Do you know how the department works and who your key relationships are – and can you get more information on this from your private office if needed?

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.

For more information about being a spad listen to '[SpAdCast: What is it really like to be a special adviser?](#)' which features interviews with former spads and ministers.