



Working with the department as a special adviser

You may end up working with officials more often than with your minister. How can you do that effectively?



I had particularly good special advisers, because they were good at making relationships very quickly with the civil service.

– Alan Johnson, Home secretary (2009-10)



You will need to work with the civil service to deliver your minister's objectives in government. Most of this engagement will be independent of your minister – reviewing briefings, [commenting on submissions](#) and meeting officials about policy priorities. This guide outlines some of the rules that govern your interactions with officials, how to build collaborative relationships and show your value while still maintaining your own priorities and avoiding work that should be done by officials.

1. Know the boundary between the special adviser and civil servant roles

Although special advisers (spads) are formally temporary civil servants, rules govern how they work with officials. The [Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010](#) makes clear that spads cannot authorise the use of public funds or directly line manage civil servants. The [special advisers' code of conduct](#) and the [cabinet manual](#) also state that spads cannot ask officials to do anything that contravenes the [Civil Service Code](#), including its requirements for objectivity and impartiality.

None of this means that you cannot work closely with officials, and the code of conduct shows how this works in practice. Spads can, for example:

- Convey ministers' instructions and priorities to officials.
- Request that officials prepare and produce briefings, data and internal documents.
- Discuss with officials the advice being given to ministers.

2. Work to build an effective working relationship with officials

Civil servants are key to achieving your priorities, and you will get the best out of them by building relationships based on trust and respect. Your private office can explain how the department works and identify the key officials responsible for different policy areas. Communication and consistency are key - set clear expectations for how officials should structure and submit work, how you will track progress and how you will give feedback.

Relationships will develop naturally over time, but regular check-ins with key officials will help you spot issues early. Aim to create an environment where officials feel able to raise concerns – civil servants will not challenge ideas or signal issues to you unless they feel comfortable doing so. As one former special adviser told the Institute for Government (IfG), “You need to have your network of civil servants who will trust you enough that it’s safe for them to surface an issue that can be dealt with safely.”



"I think being a civil servant and being a spad are much more like each other than either is like being a minister."

Lord Frost

Minister of state in the Cabinet Office
(2021)

3. Demonstrate your value to officials in the department

Previous spads have told the IfG that the key to building a relationship with officials and nurturing trust is demonstrating how spads add value to their work. Helping them understand the minister's perspective and the political context will allow them to improve the advice they provide. You will need to balance time in the department with other commitments, but being present helps you follow key issues, determine priorities and provide steers. You may also get involved in routine work – such as responding to parliamentary questions – that the minister has no capacity to lead.

Spads also play a crucial role in reviewing advice before it reaches the minister. Special advisers understand how to frame advice and evidence so that it is most useful for ministers, while also helping officials to understand when ministers have other priorities outside of the department. One former spad described how when the relationship works well, they can work with officials "as a united team to convince the minister if they need convincing".

4. Safeguard your minister's priorities

The unique nature of the special adviser role means that you will have an overview of departmental activity, your minister's priorities and wider government objectives. It is natural to want to oversee everything, but that is not sustainable. Many officials who are focused on their own areas of responsibility will not be able to see that overall picture. This means that you may sometimes need to act to safeguard your priorities. That can mean pushing back on work presented as 'urgent'. While you should listen to why an issue is considered urgent and carefully weigh any advice, your job is to balance this against wider political and departmental priorities.

5. You should scrutinise, but not duplicate, the work done by officials

Where work from officials is not adequate or where it is not geared towards a minister's preferences, it can be tempting for you to re-do it yourself. While spads can and should be present to help in the department, you should be wary of getting bogged down in work that should be done by officials. Your job is often less about writing and producing research notes or policy briefs as it is about shaping and framing work done by civil servant colleagues – you add value by providing guidance and comments on this work, not by doing it yourself.

If work needs improvement, return it with clear notes as this helps officials understand what ministers and spads expect. Ultimately, just as civil servants need to trust you, so you need to trust them – excessive micromanaging can sour relationships and make things more difficult in the long run.

Questions to ask yourself:

- Are you clear about what the relevant codes and pieces of guidance say about how you should work with officials?
- Do you know who the key officials are in your priority areas? How are you maintaining your relationship with them?
- Have you communicated with officials about how you plan to monitor progress and provide feedback on submitted work?
- Have you had conversations with your private office about how they can manage the flow of information to suit your priorities and how they can assess incoming work before it reaches you?
- Do you find yourself taking on work that should be completed by officials? How can you support the development of officials?

The IfG Academy:

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.