

# SPECIAL ADVISERS AND MINISTERIAL EFFECTIVENESS

# Contents

<u>About the authors</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>Acknowledgements</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>1. Introduction</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>2. Special advisers in practice: positives and pitfalls</u>	<u>7</u>
<u>3. Making it work: advice and practical guidance</u>	<u>19</u>
<u>4. Recommendations</u>	<u>20</u>

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We would like to thank a number of colleagues for their help over the course of this research project. Their comments on both this paper and guides and also our submission to the Public Administration Select Committee in May this year, which fed into these two publications, were immensely useful and valuable.

Zoe Gruhn and Felicity Slater

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Aims

Special advisers were first introduced in 1964 under the Wilson government.<sup>1</sup> However, their roles and functions have evolved to the point where special advisers are now seen as an essential part of Cabinet ministers' operations. Although advisers have attracted attention from the press and public due to sporadic controversies and scandals, the vast majority of special advisers can – and do – make a significant contribution to ministerial effectiveness. Appointed as temporary civil servants, yet exempt from the obligations of impartiality and objectivity, they provide political support to ministers that the permanent Civil Service cannot.

This research builds on our knowledge and expertise from working with special advisers and ministers. With it, we seek to improve clarity about how their roles have developed and what their contribution to a secretary of state's effectiveness. In particular, we explore the impact of support, management and operating environments on their ability to perform their roles effectively.

This paper is published alongside practical management guides for secretaries of state and for special advisers on their roles and relationships. In this paper, we set out the evidence base for our advice given in the guides along with other recommendations.

## 1.2. Method

For this piece of research, we conducted over 30 interviews with current and former special advisers, ministers and senior civil servants, and academics, and gave evidence at the Public Affairs Select Committee (PASC) inquiry into political special advisers<sup>2</sup>. We drew on other evidence given at the PASC inquiry, alongside evidence from the Leveson Inquiry and earlier research we had undertaken on the role of special advisers. This all builds on numerous insights and analyses gained through the Institute's research to date.

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed history of special advisers, see Andrew Blick, *People Who Live in the Dark*, Politico's, 2004. Also, for information on what special advisers go on to do after leaving their post, see: Anna Sellers, 'An Examination of the Careers of Special Advisers after Leaving Post and the Emergence of a New Policy Actor in Whitehall', MSc Dissertation, Department of Government, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Public Administration Select Committee Inquiry into Political Special Advisers, May-June 2012. For more information and our written submission, see:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/public-administration-select-committee/inquiries/parliament-2010/political-special-advisers1/>

### 1.3. Context – building on our work to date

In 2010, the Institute published *Oiling the Machine*<sup>3</sup>, a short guide for new special advisers. We are carrying out continuing learning and development work with special advisers and opposition shadow ministerial teams. Most recently, we gave evidence to the PASC.

Many areas of the Institute's work on other aspects of government have touched on special advisers. A number of our recent reports comment on, or explore, their role and reveal the pivotal part they play in effective government: *The Challenge of Being a Minister*<sup>4</sup>, *Taking the Helm*<sup>5</sup>, *Transitions*<sup>6</sup>, *United We Stand*<sup>7</sup>, and *Balancing Act*<sup>8</sup>.

With this paper, we seek to consolidate the Institute's work on special advisers – and, in particular, to build on *Oiling the Machine* – in light of subsequent developments and recognition of the need for a more detailed practical guidance for both special advisers and secretaries of state.

### 1.4. Changes and evolutions

Since the Coalition came to power, a number of changes have been made affecting special advisers and the environment within which they operate.

Initially, special adviser numbers were cut below pre-election levels, in line with a Conservative pledge made in opposition. Since then, the number of special advisers has risen again to match that of the previous administration: from around 68 in June 2010 to 85 at present (60 Conservative, 25 Liberal Democrat).<sup>9</sup> This has been due to the recognition of a need for political support, with additional Liberal Democrat special advisers appointed to serve the Deputy Prime Minister across departments not headed by a Liberal Democrat secretary of state. Boosting the number of Liberal Democrat special advisers in the Coalition has been recognised as a success as it

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan McClory (2010), *Oiling the Machine*, Institute for Government.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Riddell, Zoe Gruhn and Liz Carolan, *The Challenge of Being a Minister*, Institute for Government, May 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Zoe Gruhn, *Taking the Helm*, Institute for Government, June 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Riddell and Catherine Haddon, *Transitions*, Institute for Government, October 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Akash Paun, *United We Stand?*, Institute for Government, September 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Akash Paun and David Atkinson, *Balancing Act*, Institute for Government, March 2011.

<sup>9</sup> The growth in the number of special advisers since the 1990s is well documented in a Commons Library Standard Note. See Oonagh Gay, *Special advisers*, House of Commons Library, August 2012.

has given the party more equal political support. This follows recommendations made by the Institute.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond numbers, the current administration made changes to the Code of Conduct for Special Advisers, to stipulate that special advisers work for government as a whole, not simply for their appointing minister. This change was designed to ensure that special advisers work collectively in coalition.

Transparency around special advisers and their activities has improved over the last decade or so. Since October 2010, the Cabinet Office has published a list of special advisers, detailing the names and salaries of special advisers and their appointing minister. Furthermore, since May 2010, the Cabinet Office has made available 'special adviser transparency publications', which give a record of special adviser hospitality, gifts and meetings (for example, with people from media and business).

### 1.5. Continuing challenges

Despite the improvements in special adviser transparency, issues remain. A small number of isolated cases of misconduct continue to generate criticism of special adviser practices. Debate therefore continues to focus on the numbers of special advisers – particularly whether a cap should be established – rather than on the resources ministers need to perform their roles effectively.

### 1.6. Conclusion

A number of grey areas remain regarding the day-to-day work of special advisers and the managerial role played by ministers, and how this impacts on ministerial effectiveness. We believe this lack of information hinders debate about the contribution of the special adviser role to government. Through the research we have undertaken, exploring and bringing clarity to these areas, it has become evident that practical advice and guidance is required, for both ministers and special advisers, to help ensure that the role is sufficiently supported to enable special advisers to make a valuable contribution to the effectiveness of ministers and government as a whole.

<sup>10</sup> See: Akash Paun, *United We Stand?* Institute for Government, September 2010.

## 2. Special advisers in practice: positives and pitfalls

### 2.1. How the roles are currently defined

*Special advisers need not be impartial so that they can give political advice to ministers. They operate within the official space, with skills and expertise but without the constraint of impartiality.*

Senior civil servant

The roles special advisers carry out have evolved significantly in an ad hoc fashion since the first appointments were made. The permanent Civil Service, bound by obligations of impartiality and objectivity, is unable to provide secretaries of state with political support. As political appointees exempt from the Civil Service obligations of impartiality and objectivity, special advisers fulfil this function. Crucially, as temporary civil servants, rather than party appointees, they have access to official documents and are able to attend official meetings, which is necessary if they are to assist the minister usefully in all aspects of their work. In this respect, they also act as what interviewees called a 'firewall', protecting the Civil Service from politicisation.

Below are the core roles special advisers tend to perform, as identified through our interviews.

#### i. Political and policy advice

Special advisers are there to provide an overtly political perspective on policy. As one former senior civil servant stated, special advisers need to think "How do we get the best political clout out of our policy decisions?" A former special adviser elaborated by saying that their role was to "ensure the policy advice given is the best advice, providing a second opinion [to] civil servants. You need to be innovative and think critically to find a policy solution that works."

To perform this advisory role effectively, policy special advisers build and manage key relationships, be it within the department, across government, or with stakeholders. Both within and outside the department, special advisers must identify where and with whom they need to build and manage relationships.

Special advisers can and should forge mutually beneficial relationships with civil servants. Equally, in response to this, one former senior civil servant commented:

*I always felt that there was at times reluctance for the reverse to happen. Too often, very senior civil servants did not get to know and help SpAds. Those that did benefitted from it.*

Indeed, special advisers are valued by civil servants for their access to the minister and giving a reliable explanation of their point of view. As one former secretary of state commented:

*They explain to the department what you actually mean. You need to build relationships with other ministers, other departments, political colleagues and parliamentarians, press, and external stakeholders.*

Through these external relationships, special advisers provide the minister with a link to the outside world – and vice versa, acting as a ‘touchstone’.

Experts may also be brought into a department by the minister to provide specialist advice on their policy area.

## **ii. Media and political communications**

Working closely with the press office, special advisers can carry out the explicitly political media and communications tasks. These include political speech writing and covering stories with an overtly political angle, as well as interfacing with the media externally. As one former permanent secretary explained:

*There will always be a time when the secretary of state has a story he or she wants to promote or proactively or head off. [What] the department or chief press office...can't say is, for example, 'of course that's what the shadow secretary of state is saying now, but look at what they said at party conference – they have done a complete 360 degree turn.' You want that political spin. It's not an illegitimate role.*

Further to these two main, distinct roles, both media and policy special advisers carry out the functions of:

- strategic planning and prompting ministers on priorities
- gatekeeper and quality control.

## **iii. Strategic planning and priorities**

Special advisers are often involved in helping their minister to develop a strategic plan for the department and, above all, sticking to it. “A good special adviser will help the minister get a strategic grip on their department and define a strategic way forward,” said one former senior civil servant. To do this, a former special adviser emphasised the need to troubleshoot and “get things moving”. Another special adviser agreed, identifying the need to “unblock things through good relationships with key contacts in other departments”.

#### iv. Gatekeeper and quality control

An effective special adviser “makes sure the minister picks up on things that have particular risks” and will “protect the minister from mistakes”, claimed one special adviser. This can be in anything from a ministerial submission to departmental correspondence.

*Special advisers are dysfunctional when they don't know their role.*

Former civil servant

Special advisers can perform a combination of some or all of the roles outlined above. Defining what general special adviser roles are is difficult because it “depends so much on the minister”, stated a former senior civil servant. Ultimately, as one former special adviser emphasised, what they do is “very much down to the individual adviser and the individual ministers they work for”. Drawing on one experience, a senior civil servant stated:

*Special advisers found the job difficult as the secretary of state was not clear about what he wanted them to do.*

It therefore comes as little surprise that one former special adviser told us, “I had no idea what was going on for the first three months.”

True to the history of organic development of the special adviser role, in coalition government they have had to adapt too. Interviewees highlighted that the skill set does not change for coalition special advisers. What does change is the nature of special advisers' relationships, while, argued one civil servant, “everything is more difficult” and “takes longer”. Not only do special advisers have to work with civil servants and outsiders to bring them onboard, they must liaise with the other coalition party. Moreover, current special advisers highlighted that civil servants' lack of experience working in coalition has further complicated their job and there is a greater need for the two partners to communicate regularly by sharing knowledge and competencies. The two parties' chiefs of staff and their offices play a crucial role in coordination and brokering, and relationships rely on a very high level of trust.

## 2.2. Recruitment and appointment

*Recruiting the right special advisers was 50 per cent of my job.*

Former secretary of state

Secretaries of state need to have freedom of choice in appointing their special advisers, as selecting somebody they trust is crucial for the relationship to work. “Retaining the freedom to make purely political appointments is important,” emphasised a former permanent secretary.

Evidence shows that when a special adviser has not been the secretary of state's choice, the relationship has not been as fruitful or successful, because the special adviser has not been the right 'fit' in the team. Choosing the right person for the job is therefore crucial, but evidence demonstrates that recruitment and appointment processes do not reflect this.

#### **a. An opaque and variable process**

*Special adviser recruitment is done in a dark room.*

Principal private secretary

Despite the importance of the role, there are no established recruitment procedures for special advisers. Often, a new minister will appoint the political advisers who worked for them in opposition, usually if they were shadowing the brief subsequently allocated to them in government. If not, they might appoint somebody that they already knew from within their political party. Sometimes a shortlist will be drawn up, either by the minister or someone else from the party, and interviews held. There is a key difference between advisers brought in from opposition and those recruited mid-term, who may know the secretary of state less well.

In a new government, recruiting the right special adviser in a short amount of time can be difficult, given the imperative to have someone in place straight away and the immediacy of transition into government. This is even harder if the cabinet position is one the minister was not shadowing or expecting.

Some interviewees questioned the merits of recruitment from within the party. "When narrowed down to the party pool, are [ministers] getting the best talent?" posited one civil servant. This bears particular relevance to the expert special adviser role, where highly specialist knowledge might not necessarily be available within the party.

Although the vast majority of special advisers cause no problems, controversies highlight how some inappropriate people are on occasion recruited for these roles. Difficulties have arisen for a number of reasons, such as a fundamental breakdown of relationships between the special adviser and departmental civil servants, accusations of special advisers shouting at and bullying junior civil servants, special advisers spreading rumours about politicians and special advisers freelancing beyond their remit on behalf of the secretary of state.

There have been some prime-ministerial vetoes of special adviser appointments, but these are relatively rare. Minister and special adviser often "have a particular bond and trust" and it takes "a very good reason to second guess that", remarked one special adviser.

## b. Getting it right first time

*[As secretary of state] you must feel comfortable you can explain the appointment to Parliament, if asked – so don't just employ your brother-in-law.*

Former special adviser

It has been highlighted that devising a universal special adviser recruitment process would be difficult. One suggestion made was that secretaries of state should be able to decide that their special adviser was an unsuitable choice after a probation period of, for example, three months. However, rather than this ex-post solution, improving the recruitment process itself would be more useful.

One possible model for improving transparency and ensuring suitable appointments are made could be through pre-appointment hearings by the relevant select committee. This was one of the issues explored at the recent PASC inquiry on special advisers.<sup>11</sup>

However, the individuals we interviewed largely opposed such a change. Firstly according to one former special adviser “involving any external arbiter would confuse accountability”. Secondly, the hearings are not suitable for special advisers, whose role is not to defend the public interest, which was highlighted by the Institute in *Balancing Act*.<sup>12</sup> Thirdly, as one special adviser stated, “it would be difficult to see how it would work out without them becoming highly politicised and the system abused”, with the opposition of the day potentially seizing each hearing tactically to prevent nominees from being appointed.

A number of interviewees concurred that post-appointment hearings are one possible solution, in which the secretary of state, rather than the special adviser, would justify the appointment to the public. Rather than establishing prescriptive rules, one former special adviser advocated the “smell test”, explaining that a minister should feel confident that they could go before a hearing to justify their choice and say: “X will be terrific because...”

However, as select committees act independently in choosing their investigations, it would be impossible in the current system to institutionalise pre- or post-appointment hearings. One suggested means of improving transparency was for special advisers' CVs to be posted online.

<sup>11</sup> Public Administration Select Committee inquiry into Political Special Advisers, May-June 2012. See: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/public-administration-select-committee/inquiries/parliament-2010/political-special-advisers1/>

<sup>12</sup> Akash Paun and David Atkinson, *Balancing Act*, Institute for Government, March 2011.

Nonetheless, good recruitment itself is the key, in which the secretary of state exercises personal choice.

It has been suggested that better guidance and advice be given to secretaries of state about how to recruit the right special adviser. Prior to appointing, “Ministers should think about what they want and what special advisers can add to them as secretary of state,” argued one senior civil servant. Providing secretaries of state with a framework about suitable skills and characteristics for special advisers could help them make a decision. However, it is important that it also recognises the necessity for the secretary of state to have implicit trust and confidence in the adviser.

### 2.3. Induction and continuous learning and development training

*[Special advisers] find it really hard; they are dropped into the centre of government and left to sink or swim.*

Former permanent secretary

Once in their role, special advisers are given little support through preparation, induction and training. “As a special adviser coming to government, a department [can be] lonely and new,” argued a senior civil servant, when making the case for induction for advisers.

According to our interviewees, it takes on average three to six months to get up to speed. Unsurprisingly, therefore, there is great appetite for better preparation for special advisers. As a former senior civil servant stated, “it is wrong to pretend that people can be effective with no support”.

*If you're a minister and you want to have a certain special advisers but you're not happy that they understand certain things in government or parliament, then make sure they get training to understand this.*

Former special adviser

Better preparation and training could make the transition easier and enable special advisers to serve their ministers effectively from day one. If ministers wish to be able to hit the ground running, having well prepared special advisers can be hugely helpful. Preparation in opposition<sup>13</sup>, induction, and ongoing training are necessary for this.

In terms of form, preparation work with potential special advisers in all political parties in the run-up to an election has been largely supported. The Institute did such work prior to the 2010 general election, through training and development sessions.

<sup>13</sup> See also: Peter Riddell and Catherine Haddon, *Transitions*, Institute for Government, October 2009.

This has been continued for current special advisers, and we believe that keeping up training once in role is essential. Furthermore, for any preparation and training to be truly effective, it has to be based around compulsory core elements. In addition, the secretary of state needs to be explicit about what the special adviser is required to do. Training should be tailored and respond to this and each special adviser's needs.

There are a number of core areas for induction and training that have emerged as priorities. These are:

- the constitutional role and probity: the Code of Conduct, what special advisers and civil servants can and cannot do, declaration of interests, common pitfalls
- Whitehall: how the machine works, hierarchies, structures, procedures, private office
- working well with the Civil Service (without becoming another official); understanding the boundaries between political and official
- typical special adviser scenarios that bring to life situations that new special advisers are likely to encounter (getting insights from ex-special advisers)
- working with other departments and No.10
- managing Parliament and the legislative process: the political context and intricacies of Parliament, and how to operate within a coalition government
- making the transition from political adviser in opposition to special adviser
- dealing with stakeholders
- getting the messages across: speechwriting, managing the new and traditional media
- planning and prioritising: putting strategic objectives first
- dealing with the unexpected: crisis management.

In-role support for special advisers could also be given in a briefing pack. This could be provided on their first day and include the key information they need. Another idea is for special advisers to be mentored, for example, by a former special adviser or civil servant working in their department. Having an established person to turn to with any questions is considered highly valuable. The private parliamentary secretary (PPS) is often a good source of support and advice.

## 2.4. Accountability

*It was clear that accountability was to the secretary of state.*

Former special adviser

The majority of interviewees saw it as “absolutely clear” that special advisers are accountable to their secretary of state, who “hires and fires”. This reflects the Ministerial and Special Advisers’ Codes of Conduct.

*The responsibility for the management and conduct of special advisers, including discipline, rests with the Minister who made the appointment. Individual Ministers will be accountable to the Prime Minister, Parliament and the public for their actions and decisions in respect of their special advisers.*

Ministerial Code of Conduct

Given that accountability clearly lies with the secretary of state, they must be held accountable for what the special adviser does. As a former senior civil servant stated:

*It’s the secretary of state who provides the operating environment for their special advisers. If a special adviser is doing the wrong thing...it is because the secretary of state will permit that and the special adviser knows it. It’s no good just blaming the adviser.*

As such, there can be little doubt that ministers are fully aware of what their special advisers’ daily activities are. Consequently, concerns expressed about accountability did not relate to where it lies; rather, to enforcing it effectively.

*The responsibility for the management and conduct of special advisers, including discipline, rests with the Minister who made the appointment. It is, of course, also open to the Prime Minister to terminate employment by withdrawing his consent to an individual appointment.*

Special Adviser Code of Conduct

Both the special adviser and ministerial codes are useful for clarifying accountability, but, with the creation of the position of adviser on the ministerial code, there has been a shift away prime ministerial enforcement of the codes, blurring accountability. As one PPS pointed out:

*It now becomes a question for Alex Allan, the Prime Minister’s adviser, to work out how accountable somebody is who has been appointed by the PM.*

Following suggestions made by interviewees, we recommend that it be made explicitly clear to new ministers where accountability for special advisers lies. One special adviser argued:

*They should be aware that their special advisers are not being managed by the permanent secretary... [and] need to stop and think about accountability and be aware of what their special adviser is doing in their name.*

One suggestion, which we uphold, is to make this part of the minister's induction or briefing.

## 2.5. Management and governance over behaviour

### a. Day-to-day management

Ministers often lack management experience, which was highlighted and explored by the Institute in *The Challenge of Being a Minister*.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, given the constraints on their time, they clearly do not have the capacity to manage their special advisers in the conventional sense. One former permanent secretary explained:

*Special advisers are generally in the next office to their minister*

They shared the opinion expressed by the overwhelming majority of interviewees that the high level of personal contact between minister and special adviser means that they are aware of activities being carried out in their name. Ministers need to take responsibility for managing their special advisers, especially as there is no Civil Service line management (which interviewees did not dispute) as it would confuse accountability.

The accountability and line management model is slightly different for special advisers at the Centre, where chiefs of staff are regarded as line managers in No.10 and the Deputy Prime Minister's office.

An element of central coordination of special advisers is seen as a positive development, creating a community and facilitating communication between special advisers. This has developed in the Coalition and was cited by interviewees as particularly important for fostering collective, cross-government working and coordination. This is put in practice via meetings of all special advisers, and smaller meetings relating to different policy areas, which was stressed by current special advisers as a means of reinforcing the collective working of both parties.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Riddell, Zoe Gruhn and Liz Carolan, *The Challenge of Being a Minister*, Institute for Government, May 2011.

## **b. Governance over behaviour**

*If a senior official went to the secretary of state and said 'we have a problem with your special adviser for these reasons', I think the secretary of state would want to do something about it.*

Former senior civil servant

With regard to governance over special advisers' behaviour, a special adviser stated clearly:

*The formal position is clear in the Special Adviser Code: disciplinary responsibility lies with the appointing minister.*

Another special adviser argued:

*The Special Adviser Code is written as a Civil Service document. It would be useful and more accessible to have something that is one page, with examples...of what to do, and a summary of the Code.*

It has been suggested that a separate code be devised – explicitly for special advisers – from scratch as opposed to something that has been “bolted on” to the Civil Service Code. However, given its clarity, a new code, or changes to its content, is considered unnecessary by most interviewees, which we uphold.

The problems around misconduct lie in its implementation, as, according to one former permanent secretary, “behaviour goes ignored”. Ministers must be aware that too much freedom for special advisers could expose them to risk, given that special advisers act in their name and are accountable to them. They are not proxies and tacit acceptance of inappropriate behaviour is unacceptable. So, just as the code needs to be relevant, it also needs to be ‘policeable’. What is most important is whether special advisers adhere to the principles behind it, rather than crossing every ‘t’ and dotting every ‘i’.

With regard to successful implementation in respect of the code, what matters, stated one special adviser, is “setting the right culture”. This is a role that the chief special adviser can play, giving clear advice and boundaries to their colleagues (e.g. in the case of a quasi-judicial process). It has been suggested that the prime minister meeting with special advisers would give the PM the opportunity to set the tone and the expectations about special advisers' behaviour in his or her government. However, it must be done on an ad hoc basis, as “institutionalising [such] a meeting...would make it start to feel artificial,” argued one senior civil servant.

The question remains of what to do in cases of misconduct. It can be difficult for permanent secretaries to intervene, given the close, trusting relationship there should be between the special adviser and secretary of state. Our findings show that a good

relationship between the permanent secretary and secretary of state is vital here, as it will enable the two to have a frank and open relationship, in which the former can raise any issues regarding special advisers. Interviewees stated that it is reasonable to assume that he or she would want to know if there was a problem with their special adviser. As one former permanent secretary argued:

*[The permanent secretary needs to be able to say] ‘you can’t do this’. I don’t know anyone that would not have heeded that advice, particularly given the ultimate risk that the perm sec would put that advice on the record if not acted on, making it potentially a resigning matter [for the minister].*

One way to overcome this which has been put forward, is to have a reporting mechanism between the secretary of state and prime minister. In another model, No.10 could call up the secretary of state to inform them that their special adviser was not performing well. However, it was questioned whether this would work in practice. Furthermore, another senior civil servant gave the caveat that, in some cases, problems have arisen precisely because a secretary of state has been “unwilling to listen” to people telling him that their special adviser’s behaviour is inappropriate.

Apart from developing ways to identify poor behaviour, there need to be consequences. We have explored the issue of the culture of resignation. Rather than resorting immediately to resignation, it has been suggested that other ways of disciplining special advisers be introduced. We support this idea and envisage that disciplinary measures could include a pay cut or formal warning, in line with disciplinary procedures in other jobs and, indeed, the permanent Civil Service.

Effective performance evaluation is a means of bringing inappropriate behaviour to the attention of the person concerned, of preventing it and encouraging good practice.

## **2.6. Performance management: giving evaluation and feedback**

*Ministers seldom have experience of managing, let alone being frank with people about their performance.*

*Former special adviser*

Tellingly, almost all interviewees highlighted the lack of feedback for special advisers, which is due not least to most ministers’ lack of managerial experience.

The almost complete absence of evaluation of in-role performance is considered by all interviewees to be inadequate. A former permanent secretary argued:

*[Special advisers] should be performance managed – they are [temporary] civil servants. There should be some performance reporting process.*

There is strong support for a 360-degree feedback mechanism, especially because, as one former senior civil servant put it, “a secretary of state should be interested in others’ views of the special adviser – and they need assistance in that”. They could solicit the feedback of key individuals, such as the permanent secretary, the principal private secretary, civil servants and other special advisers. There is consensus that to be most useful the process should lead to a conversation with the secretary of state and the permanent secretary together with the chief of staff.

The embryonic 360-degree central feedback mechanism tested out by the current government is seen as a step in the right direction but needs to be improved to be more effective, with consideration given to each special adviser’s role. In this respect, it has been recommended that a job description or criteria for what makes an effective special adviser would be useful to facilitate evaluation.

This 360-degree feedback process has been overseen by chiefs of staff. The difficulty around someone other than the appointing secretary of state carrying out the evaluation has been highlighted. One suggestion was for the Cabinet Office minister to perform this role. However, there is consensus that the secretary of state should carry out performance management of their own special advisers with the chief of staff.

Linked into performance evaluation could be a pay review mechanism, which would reflect progress in the role, and reinforce professionalisation.

While there is much support for a new feedback mechanism, it has been argued that it would be difficult to do so mid-term. A PPS observed:

*[To introduce something now] would come across as [saying to special advisers] ‘you’re not doing your job very well’. An incoming prime minister could say: ‘we’re going to make the special adviser system delivery better and manage the system collectively’, and people would accept that, in that context.*

We propose that new mechanisms should be put in place at the start of a new term.

### 3. Making it work: advice and practical guidance

From the interviews we have undertaken and the evidence we have explored, what becomes clear is a need for better support for and management of special advisers, to ensure the roles they perform contribute to and enhance ministerial effectiveness.

Our research has shown that providing special advisers and secretaries of state with practical advice would improve the effectiveness of both groups and address the weaknesses of the current arrangements. Secretaries of state would benefit from having practical guidance on managerial issues, while special advisers have much to gain from advice on carrying out their roles effectively. The guide we have produced seeks to address these issues.

Advice for ministers covers not only how to manage special advisers and support them through training and development opportunities, but also how to select special advisers, so that right from the start they have the best chances of building an effective team.

Advice for special advisers focuses on the practical issues of what to do on the first day, coupled with explanations of different roles, and general tips and practical cautions for getting on well in the role.

## 4. Recommendations

1. Better guidance and advice should be given to secretaries of state about how to recruit the right special adviser. Prior to recruitment, they need to think about their specific needs and what they would like a special adviser to do within their team. To this end, they should be provided with a framework about what kind of person would be suitable and useful in the role. This ought to include the key skills and knowledge required to be effective for the minister, while recognising the importance of implicit trust and confidence between secretary of state and adviser.
2. In opposition, shadow cabinet members should do extensive preparatory work to understand the skills and capabilities they will need their special advisers to have and the specifics of the roles they will be required to undertake. This will help to make any transition as smooth as possible.
3. It should be made clear to ministers that they are fully accountable for and responsible for managing their special advisers, who do not have line managers in the Civil Service. This should form one aspect of their induction briefing.
4. The minister must know what they expect the special adviser to do. Whether or not the minister wants to set objectives formally, there will be objectives to achieve, and the more explicit these are the fewer misunderstandings there will be. Similarly, limitations on authority should be made clear, so that there is a wide understanding of the delegated authority from the minister which is being applied. The permanent secretary, other departments and the private office should know this, as well as the special adviser and the minister.
5. A new code of conduct is not necessary. The present code is sufficient; what needs to be addressed is its application. More needs to be done to ensure that special adviser conduct reflects the code. A quick-reference two-page guide to the code with real-life examples could be created for special advisers, and working in adherence to the code should be one aspect of special adviser induction.

6. Rather than addressing misconduct solely with resignation, disciplinary measures for special advisers ought to be introduced e.g. a pay cut or warning, in line with those in other jobs and, indeed, the permanent Civil Service.
7. A 360-degree feedback mechanism for special advisers should be established, which could seek the feedback of key individuals, such as the permanent secretary, the principal private secretary, civil servants and other special advisers. The process should lead to a conversation with the secretary of state, together with the permanent secretary and chief of staff. A new feedback process should be put in place at the start of a new term.
8. If ministers are to be able to hit the ground running, having well prepared special advisers can be hugely helpful. Preparation in opposition for potential special advisers and induction are necessary for this, and keeping up development once in office is essential. For any preparation and training to be truly effective, it should be based on compulsory core elements.
9. In-role support could also be given in a briefing pack for special advisers. This would be given to them on their first day and include the key information they need. Another form of support is for special advisers to be mentored: this could be by a former special adviser or civil servant working in their department; having an established person to turn to with any questions is considered highly valuable and the PPS is often a good source of support and advice.
10. Relaxing the rules on the number of special advisers per secretary of state has been advocated as some departments cover huge subject areas. A strong case has also been made for redistributing special advisers between cabinet ministers to departments where need is greatest.