



6 September 2019



Reference: OIA-2019/20-0112

Dear 

Official Information Act request relating to DPMC Private Secretaries in Ministers' Offices

Thank you for your Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) request received on 25 August 2019. You requested:

"...information you hold regarding policies or guidance that assist Private Secretaries to fulfil their roles and duties in Ministers' Offices. ..."

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) does not hold specific policies or guidelines for Private Secretaries to support the specified functions of the different duties in their respective Ministers' offices. Each Minister's office will have a handbook, materials or systems in place for incoming Private Secretaries which provides guidance and advice to assist them in their roles. Usually, an incoming Private Secretary is trained on the job by the outgoing Private Secretary. Each Minister's office is unique and will have different guidance and protocols for how the office operates and what each Private Secretary is expected to do in their day-to-day work.

However, where DPMC supports Minister's offices, we do provide Private Secretaries with a generic handbook, which provides them with a general overview of the role of a Private Secretary. I have attached this document to this response. Please note, that we also provide Private Secretaries with materials that any new on boarding DPMC staffer would receive. I have not released these materials or considered them for release, as they are not specific to Private Secretaries.

You have the right to ask the Ombudsman to investigate and review my decision under section 28(3) of the Act.

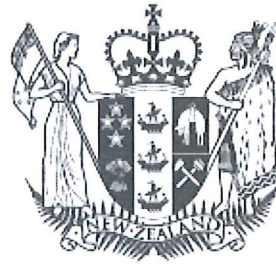
Finally, for your information, this response will be published on the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's website during our regular publication cycle. Typically, information is released monthly, or as otherwise determined. Your personal information including name and contact details will be removed for publication.

Yours sincerely



Clare Ward

Executive Director, Strategy, Governance and Engagement Group

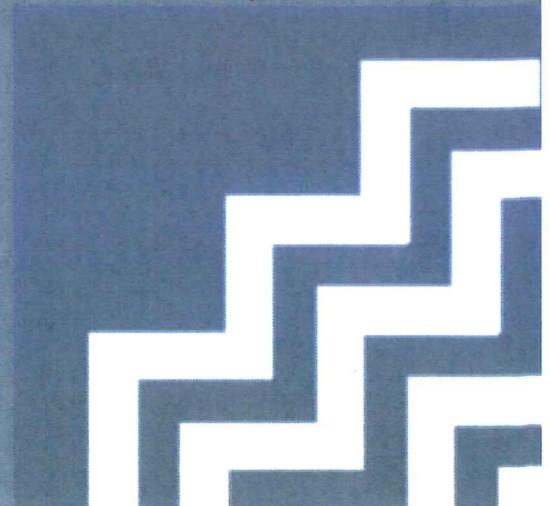


**DEPARTMENT OF THE
PRIME MINISTER
AND CABINET**

TE TARI O TE PIRIMIA ME TE KOMITI MATUA

Private Secretary Handbook

July 2018



Introduction

This document should guide your work as a **Private Secretary**.

This reference guide should be read alongside other information that you may be provided about the style and preferences of the specific Minister.

Each Ministerial office has its own dynamics in accordance with the way the Minister works and the leadership style of the Senior Private Secretary.

The Minister's office – Overview

The Ministerial Office is an unusual workplace. While all the team 'work for the Minister', the employment arrangements are with a range of agencies and you will need to manage a complex set of multi-organisational accountabilities.

Having a clear understanding of the other roles in the office, and how your colleagues like to work will be helpful. While you can read about the nature and responsibilities of the other office roles, you also need to talk to your colleagues and understand their preferred working style.

A well-functioning office is a huge asset for a Minister. A critical component of a well-functioning office is a good working dynamic across the team, where different roles are understood, processes streamlined, and people in the team are respected for their knowledge and approach to their work.

The key features of the positions in a standard Ministerial office with Cabinet responsibilities are set out below.



The Senior Private Secretary

The Senior Private Secretary (SPS) has overall management responsibility for the office, managing it on behalf of the Minister and supervising the staff in the office.

Some Press Secretaries and Advisors may 'report directly' to the Minister, but the SPS still has responsibility for overall management of the effectiveness of the office. This includes office budget management and performance management.

The SPS is the Minister's diary manager and will oversee all travel arrangements. In some offices the administrative tasks associated with these functions are delegated but the SPS retains overall control.

The SPS is also the conduit for any issues needing to be raised with Ministerial Services.

In summary, the Senior Private Secretary:

- provides leadership to all office

staff ensuring they are aware of, and adhere to, the office standard practices, Ministerial preferences and established protocols and procedures

- manages and provides advice on support services to the Minister
- develops, maintains and reviews the office systems and processes
- manages communications between the Minister and the Ministerial office, the Minister's departments, Crown entities, other offices in Parliament and the public
- manages the Minister's House activity, legislative programme, diary, office allocation and travel commitments
- manages the relationship with the Minister's family and electorate.

The Ministerial or Political Adviser

Most offices have advisors who are employed by Ministerial Services to provide an advice on policy issues and options. Ministerial Advisors also manage the Minister's political programme.

Among other duties, Ministerial Advisors will normally:

- provide an oversight across portfolios and work to ensure each portfolio complements work in others
- advise on the risk management of issues within Minister's portfolios
- review and comment on policy advice received from the Minister's department/s and provides comment direct to the Minister
- develop plans to implement and communicate policy decisions
- liaise with government members on select committees on relevant legislation
- take responsibility for consultation with coalition partners and support parties in matters relating to their Minister's portfolios
- look over Cabinet and Ministerial papers advising the Minister on potential risk and other matters they may wish to consider, usually from a political perspective
- oversee oral and written parliamentary questions and review

draft OIA and written question responses provided by departments for consistency across Ministerial offices

- maintain relationships with other Ministers' offices and the Prime Minister's office, advising them of potential and emerging issues
- liaise with advisors/senior staff in Minister's departments/ministries.

You should not initiate contact with political staff in other Minister's Offices, Members of Parliament, or political parties without first discussing this with the advisor. This also applies should you be directly approached by someone from another political party for information.

Ministerial advisors are often referred to as political advisors or senior advisors and are usually considered one of the senior staff in the Office. People in these roles are usually selected by the Minister, approved by the Chief of Staff and appointed by Ministerial Services. These roles are not bound by the Public Service's political neutrality rule.

The Press Secretary

The Press Secretary provides media advice, public relations, social media and information services for the Minister as required. This includes:

- preparing speeches, media statements and other publicity material eg social media posts
- advising the Minister on the public relations implications of proposals and policies
- monitoring media and social media coverage
- liaising with media
- liaising with other press secretaries, including the Prime Minister's Chief Press Secretary
- liaising with communications staff in the Minister's departments and working with them on press releases/talking points/speeches prepared by the Ministry/Department in the Minister's name
- arranging public relations opportunities and interviews
- posting the Minister's speeches and media statements on the Executive Government website

Some busy offices also have a communications or media assistant in addition to a press secretary.

Electorate Private Secretaries

Ministers who are also electorate Members of Parliament may also have an electorate private secretary as a member of the office staff. They will liaise with the Minister's electorate office, and deal with electorate related correspondence, diary and briefing matters.

Administrative staff

Ministerial Secretaries and Ministerial Assistants provide services including reception, word processing, data and information management, supplies management and processing paper flows.

Portfolio Private Secretary

Portfolio Private Secretaries deal with the Minister's activities relating to the portfolio and is usually seconded from the portfolio department/ministry. The Portfolio Private Secretary:

- provides policy advice and analysis from the department on portfolio issues
- actions, manages and monitors Ministerial requests and directives to the agency to ensure appropriate and prompt action and/or reply
- is responsible for obtaining Ministerial decisions and sign off on agency briefings, draft cabinet papers, correspondence etc as required
- drafts appropriate correspondence as required, or directs ministerial correspondence to the agency for a draft response
- provides to the agency Cabinet/Cabinet Committee decisions and other relevant material received from Cabinet Office
- ensures the Minister's senior staff are kept informed of the major issues relating to the Minister's portfolio responsibilities
- attends agency briefings/other relevant portfolio meetings with the Minister to ensure on-going

understanding and management of issues, effective liaison and relationships development and to record and action any follow-up requirements, including briefing the agency

- provides assistance and support to the Minister at meetings/briefings/conferences as required
- establishes and maintains good working relationships with all staff in the Minister's office and with other ministerial offices and the Cabinet Office
- liaises with the Senior Advisor and Press Secretary to prepare possible parliamentary question responses
- be aware of and monitor portfolio work being undertaken by MPs on Select Committees responsible for dealing with issues and legislation in relevant portfolio/s
- other duties as directed by the Minister, or SPS.

Seconded status

The secondee from a Ministry/department is responsible to and takes direction from the Minister. In practice, the Senior Private Secretary as the agent of Ministerial Support has responsibility for the day to day allocation of tasks to the secondee.

The home department should not allocate work tasks to the secondee during this secondment except with mutual agreement by all parties.

Hours of work

The hours of work which Ministerial office staff are expected to keep depends on the requirements of the Minister.

As a general guide, most offices are open from 8.00am to 6.00pm. A Minister may require staff to be on duty in the office in the evening when the House is sitting or on occasions during the weekends. Some offices run an evening roster on Tuesday and Wednesday nights during sitting weeks to ensure that the office is open. Some staff will travel with the Minister to local or international engagements as required.



Taking leave

Annual leave

You are entitled to take leave. The more notice you can give, the better. If possible, you should try to take house sitting days and other busy periods into account before requesting leave.

Leave approval must be sought from the Senior Private Secretary and your DPMC Manager. If approved, you should contact the OCE to arrange cover; even if you expect it will be a quiet day, it is helpful to arrange for someone to be "on call" to come over if needed.

Sick leave

You are entitled to take sick leave. If you are sick you need to:

- advise the Senior Private Secretary and your Manager
- arrange cover (or ask another Private Secretary to arrange on your behalf)

Early on in your secondment you should find out how the Senior Private Secretary likes to manage sick leave, for example whether an email suffices, or they prefer a phone call.

Performance Reviews

You will continue to have performance and salary reviews while on secondment. Your Manager will complete these in line with relevant policies and in consultation with the Ministers' Senior Private Secretary.

The Private Secretary role

Your role

As outlined above (Portfolio Private Secretary) your role is to provide advisory and administrative support to the Minister and to facilitate communication and information between the Minister and the Department.

The Private Secretary role is highly visible. How you perform will directly influence the Minister's view of the Department and associated agencies.

In your role you will be called upon to exercise good judgement in difficult or unclear situations. The following principles will help.

- Clarity that while you are providing support to the Minister, you work for the Department.
- Keep people informed. Providing a heads-up to the Department of emerging issues will help the Minister and the Department.
- Remember that you do not act alone. The Department wants you

to succeed and is there to provide support and guidance.

- If in doubt, ask. No question is too trivial.
- The Public Service code of conduct applies to this role and you must take care to be politically neutral at all times.
- You are there to represent the Department, so personal views on issues should not be offered.

Relationship management

Building and maintaining good relationships is critical to your success. In carrying out the role, you will be working or liaising with other offices and agencies at Parliament. You will need to establish and maintain good relationships with:

- the Minister
- your immediate Ministerial Office team
- staff in other Minister's Offices
- Cabinet Office staff
- managers and relevant staff in the Department and associated agencies

You will also interact with interest groups and the public.

Building a reputation as someone who is easy to deal with, and being clear in what you need and by when, and

knowledgeable about the Department's work, will assist you to deliver effectively.

Dealing with ambiguity/uncertainty

There will be times when papers, information or tasks come to you and you do not know what to do. In these circumstances you should ask someone for guidance.

Depending on the task, options include seeking advice from:

- other Private Secretaries
- your Manager
- the Department Manager whom you know has responsibility for the matter in question
- the Political Advisor, Press Secretary, or Senior Private Secretary

Providing information to the Minister

Accurate, relevant and sufficient information is critical for the Minister and Department to be able to carry out their roles effectively. You will assist by doing what you can to ensure that the Minister/Department receives information they need:

- in a timely manner
- to a high quality standard (relevant, succinct and well-proofed)

- in an easy to read style and covers the key points
- with identified risks known
- in an appropriate format for the purpose

Being resilient

Working in a Ministerial Office can be challenging at times. The people around you, not just the Minister, can work under pressure at times with high work-loads and tight timeframes. You will also have the same pressures.

You will need to be resilient, see the big picture, and try not to take issues personally.

It is important that you personally contribute to making the Ministerial Office as positive environment as you can. Do your best not to add to the stress of others by being calm and as responsive as possible and helping where you can.

If you are becoming unreasonably stressed, you must take steps to manage

this before it becomes a problem. That means advising either your Manager or contacting the DPMC Wellness programme to help you work through strategies to deal with the stress you are experiencing.

Political neutrality

Private Secretaries are professional public servants who are politically neutral and bound by the normal guidance and ethics which bind all public servants. The Ministerial Office is a political environment, and you will need to manage this situation carefully. If in doubt, discuss tasks you are being asked to do with other Private Secretaries or with your manager.

Knowing who to ask

No one expects you to know everything about the Ministerial portfolio, but it is really handy and will save time if you know who to ask about particular issues. A key contact list is available for you.



Working with the Department

Advice provided by the Department

Advice from the Department to the Minister, in whatever format, must be fair, impartial, comprehensive and trustworthy.

Advice must reflect the priorities determined by the government of the day. During the policy development process, the advice given by officials should be 'free and frank', so that Ministers can take decisions based on all the facts and an appreciation of all the options. Once policy is determined, Ministries are responsible for its effective implementation.

Ministers may ask employees in the state sector to provide them with factual or analytical material, but should not require officials to offer comment or opinion on clearly political topics¹.

Providing feedback to the Department

From the Department's perspective, as you are working alongside the Minister and the Ministerial Office team, there is an expectation that you will form a good understanding of the Minister's priorities. You will understand the way the Minister works and thinks more quickly than other Department staff.

You will often be in a position to know the Minister's view on issues and whether he/she will require more or different information on an issue. You need to provide this information or feedback to the

Department in a timely manner, to help the Department to be responsive, prepared and not surprised.

¹ Cabinet Manual 2008 para 3.50-3.53

Overarching tips

- Sign up for Cab Net and get alerts set up for Cabinet Office Circulars - these provide helpful information such as the timetables for Cabinet and Cabinet Committee meetings, membership of Cabinet Committees and requirements during an election.
- Monitor emails, and prioritise. Develop a system that helps you manage the number of emails (you might want to colour code, or create tasks/reminders) and correspondence.
- There will be a lot of paper. Develop or use an existing a system that works for you to manage the paper flow. Past Private Secretaries have used a multi-tiered in-tray (in-tray, with the minister, cabinet papers, pending action). What works for you will depend on your working style.
- Always keep a copy of everything (especially signed documents). Do not assume that you will get a copy back.
- It is important to manage your own stress levels. Remember that some things are outside your control.
- Always provide deadlines when requesting information. You can always discuss extensions later if needed.
- If there are large attachments to documents, which the Minister does not need to read, provide them with a copy of the briefing minus the attachments and put a post-it on the front that offers to provide the attachments if required.
- In general, original papers and the copies of outgoing correspondence are returned to the Ministry as the need for them has been completed. You may find it useful to keep a list or record of papers that the Minister has seen, and when they were read / approved.

