



INSTITUTE
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GOVERNMENT

Creating an Effective Ministerial Team

Ministers and their special advisers for UK and US

Introduction

Special advisers have become a familiar part of our system of government. They provide ministers with political advice and support that the Civil Service is precluded from giving. Effective special advisers make departments easier to run and help ministers deliver their priorities.

However, research by the Institute for Government concluded that special advisers have little preparation for their roles and that ministers have limited guidance on how to use them. Special advisers can also find themselves having to cover their entire department's agenda with minimal support. There is therefore a need for guidance to be given to both ministers on the management of their special advisers, and to special advisers on their role and relationships.

We have drawn on the practical experience of ministers, advisers themselves and civil servants to put together a series of guides to help fill those gaps.

The guides are primarily aimed at ministers and their special advisers, rather than those who are working from the Centre under the particular arrangements of the Coalition. However, we believe there is also value in the guidance for those who are managing special advisers and for the advisers wherever they are based.

Getting it right – a management guide for ministers

Finding suitable candidates

“Ministers are by definition political. You want someone capable of advice and interface with roles that the minister feels confident with.”

- Former special adviser

Many ministers choose as their special advisers party members or think-tank researchers who are recommended or known to them. This should at least mean they share similar values and understand the party's structure and values.

However, you may also consider former civil servants or experts with particular policy knowledge who are sympathetic to the party's agenda and your own agenda. It could be worth widening the search to identify candidates who would provide greater diversity and bring a range of perspectives and experiences to policy formation. Whatever you choose to do, special advisers are the only people who are working entirely for you and will give 100% loyalty to you and your agenda. Being a minister can be a lonely experience and having loyal colleagues around you can make a significant contribution to achieving your objectives.

While the benefit of continuity is huge, the skills required to be an effective adviser in opposition are different to those needed in government. Ministers are often keen to stick with the same advisers when moving post, but it may be better to bring in more relevant expertise or even use inherited advisers. However, in the case of a reshuffle, there may be limited time and capacity to cast the net wider for special advisers. If that's so, it is useful to bear in mind what roles they would best fulfil against the needs of ministers.

Defining the roles of the special adviser

Every job is different. There are departmental advisers and those that work in No.10.

Within the Coalition, the Deputy Prime Minister also has a group of advisers both in the Centre and across those departments where the Coalition minority party does not have a minister.

However, there are some core roles which all special advisers tend to carry out. Special advisers in the Centre might also be required to broker deals across the Coalition and between departments.

To be effective, there are two main, distinct special adviser roles. You need to decide what you require to ensure that you get the full and appropriate support you need.

1. Political and policy advice, e.g. providing political advice which supplements civil service advice. This also involves building and managing key relationships, e.g., within the department, across government, or with stakeholders.

“What we really need is high calibre political advice. People come along and say what we need are people from business, but this is not necessarily the case. You need people with political nous.”

- Senior Adviser

“One role is to broker cross-departmental deals, with special advisers in other departments.”

- Former special adviser

2. Media and political communications, e.g. political speechwriting, working closely with the departmental press office in covering the political angle of stories, and interfacing with the media externally.

“Special advisers need to know how to do effective messaging to different audiences.”

- Former secretary of state

Two other functions apply to both policy and media roles:

- **strategic planning and priorities**, e.g. developing a strategic plan for the department, brokering deals, making sure the plans are on track, as requested by the minister
- **gatekeeper and quality control**, e.g. quality checking, driving forward and progress chasing.

Qualities that you would seek in a special adviser

Typically these qualities would fall under the following categories and are dependent on the roles that you need.

- **Skills** – drafting and verbal communication, problem solving and advising, creative, presentation, speechwriting, using social media effectively

- **Knowledge** – politically and media savvy, expertise in appropriate policy areas, understanding of policy making and the implementation process, and of how the Whitehall and party machines work
- **Attitudes and attributes** – strategic, analytical, trustworthy, uses discretion, able to stand pressure, tenacity of purpose, multi-tasking, fast learner, team player, self starter, flexible, capable of forming productive relationships, networker.

“Listening and empathy: the ability to understand different viewpoints and why they are held.”

- Former permanent secretary

“Sometimes you will tell a civil servant what the minister wants; that is what they should do, and they will come back and tell you that it’s the wrong thing to do. So you need to change your thinking, or at least be open to changing your thinking. You need to be able to go back to the secretary of state and say ‘I think we got it wrong on this, we should have another look at it.’”

- Former permanent secretary

Choose the right people for the jobs

“The very best special advisers can be very good. They are able to build and improve relationships throughout a department and in some ways to be a very good source of intelligence in the department and able to alert the minister to some things.”

- Senior civil servant

Special advisers have important jobs which can influence the effectiveness of a department and the ability of the minister to achieve his or her policy and political objectives. They also are paid by the taxpayer. Selecting an adviser should reflect this and should be done as objectively as possible.

Although departmental special advisers are personal appointments, it would be wise to have a number of potential candidates shortlisted. Personal chemistry is obviously important and will be a factor in any decision, but it will be of little value if the person recruited is not up to the requirements of the job.

Given the importance of the selection decision you may wish to involve No.10's chief of staff or another senior party member whose advice would be valuable. The Downing Street and the DPM's chief of staff will have selected special advisers to work in the Centre and will have adopted a range of selection methods, such as panel interviews, selection tests and candidate presentations, as well as soundings from others about the potential candidates. This is done to elicit as much about the candidate as possible so that good decisions can be made.

However, it's important to remember that candidate performance in an interview is not necessarily a reliable predictor of effectiveness in a role.

Make sure your special advisers understand the parameters within which they operate

"Building relationships and keeping up pressure when you need to are key. Running around shouting at people, giving orders, will not work – everything will come unstuck."

- Former special adviser

This is crucial. Special advisers have a massively important role in providing the glue between you and the civil servants in your department. They provide the political link and can go to places where the Civil Service rightly cannot. The Civil Service recognises the value of this and how it can help them interpret your thinking. But this will only work if your special advisers understand how they should operate and that they derive their authority from you. You are responsible for how they operate. In particular, they can advise but not instruct civil servants.

Special advisers need to be clear on what you want them to do. You need to ensure they are not freelancing on policy, so it's important that you explain what your priorities are so they can communicate them effectively.

They need to operate in a way that is compatible with being paid for by the taxpayer and in line with the Special Advisers' Code of Conduct. In particular, they will have more day-to-day engagement with both civil servants and outsiders than you do, so the way they conduct themselves will impact on the opinion people form of you.

You need to be open to feedback about any problems that are arising. If it's in relation to your special advisers, you will need to deal with it. If it's the department, then you will need to ensure the private office or permanent secretary sorts it out.

Ministers also need to make sure special advisers get the support they need to be effective, for example, through executive assistant and diary support.

Remember that ultimately you are accountable

“In terms of formal accountability...it’s just down to the secretary of state.”

- Former secretary of state

“It was clear that I was accountable to the secretary of state. They appoint you and can fire you.”

- Former special adviser

Under the Ministerial Code, you are responsible for the management and conduct of your special advisers and are accountable to the Prime Minister, Parliament and the public for your actions and decisions in respect of them.

This is something which you always need to have in the back of your mind and which means you should always know what your special advisers are doing in your name. Problems have occasionally arisen because of a perceived lack of clarity about accountability which is not fair to special advisers. The code, however, is clear – it is you who is responsible for managing your special advisers.

Help your special advisers to do their jobs effectively

“It clearly takes time to fit into [the] role. Getting used to Parliament, how to engage effectively with officials and work well with the ministerial team, and add impact to policy.”

- Former secretary of state

Most people do their jobs better if they are trained for their roles and have access to ongoing training and development. Special advisers are no exception. You will benefit enormously from having well prepared special advisers and so will they.

Getting them quickly up to speed requires some form of induction, including a briefing pack which they should use. The induction will be organised through the departmental permanent secretary and will include an introduction to the Ministerial and Special Advisers' codes.

The private office will arrange policy briefings for them and ensure they use the private parliamentary secretary (PPS) as a source of support for navigating round the department. You should make it clear to the PPS that you want them to help the special advisers to be more effective. The PPS and chief of staff from No10 and DPM's Office will also know that the Institute for Government provides training for special advisers.

There are a number of core areas for induction and training that are seen as priorities for the special adviser, some of which the department will cover. These are:

- the constitutional role and probity: 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)
- 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, DPM's Office and No10
- understanding the importance of the relationship with No10 and the DPM's Office as part of a Coalition arrangement
- the process for clearing matters through No10 and DPM's Office
- how the appraisal process for special advisers works
- 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 messages across: speechwriting, managing the new and traditional media
- planning and prioritising
- dealing with the unexpected: crisis management.

Also training and development should be a continuing process, even after people are established in their roles. Such development should focus on the contexts within which special advisers operate and the core skills they need to do their jobs properly. Ongoing, development should provide examples of best practice from across different departments, new thinking through seminars and workshops, and working with other special advisers from across government on shared policy issues. The chief of staff and head of policy in No.10 and the DPM's Office have a role in coordinating these activities.

Let them know how they are getting on

"If the minister says 'stop doing this', then you know you're on the wrong track. After a while, I asked. I said, 'Here's what I'm doing for you, is this the right stuff?'"

- Former special adviser

Performance evaluation is now built into most jobs but, like ministers, special advisers are an exception. They are not part of the formal civil service evaluation process but as their manager, you should perform that role.

The starting point needs to be clarity about their job description and what you expect them to do. Then have regular chats with them about what is going well – and what less so. At some stages – say every six months – you will want to take soundings more widely in the department, among the wider adviser network (No10 and DPM's Office) and among departmental stakeholders about how the special adviser is doing and where they may need development. You may well find it helpful to participate in a more formal 360-degree feedback process, where the discussion takes place between the special adviser and the minister.

In some circumstances you could subcontract some elements of this to the PPS, but it is worth noting that you will need to take responsibility both for getting the best out of your special adviser and helping them become more effective.

The art and science of being a special adviser – a guide for special advisers

First steps: sort out your job

“The night before [the minister] formally offered me the job, I went into the department to have a discussion...I had a chat with him about his objectives and what he wanted, and it all vaguely made sense but, day to day, I really had very little idea of what I was going to end up doing.”

- Former special adviser

Before beginning your new role, get together with your minister even if timescales are tight. You may know of each other but it is important that you sort out how you are going to work together. You will want to know what their ambitions are for their time in office and, crucially, what their expectations are of you in helping to achieve them. In particular you need to know what their and the department’s priorities are, and therefore what your key tasks will be from day one.

Both you and your minister will be on steep learning curves in terms of getting to grips with the department and, possibly, new areas of policy. So if you’ve got helpful advice and knowledge to contribute then do so.

Although you will have frequent contact with your minister, most of that will be dealing with policy issues and crises that arise. It would be good to find diary time periodically to discuss your job more widely, how you feel you’re getting on and the challenges you face, and to understand what your minister thinks about how you’re performing and whether work priorities need to be refocused.

Core roles

Every job is different. However there are some core roles which all special advisers tend to carry out. You are likely to be given one of these two main roles:

1. Political and policy advice. You are there to provide an overtly political perspective on policy which will build on official advice. You may also sometimes have to provide an alternative to official advice. You will need to be innovative, use your political nous and work your way through policy challenges.

“The role is to ensure policy advice given is the best advice. Provide a second opinion on civil servants’ advice; innovate, be creative. You need critical thinking and innovation to find a policy solution that works.”

- Former special adviser

An integral part of this role involves building and managing key relationships, including within the department, across government, or with stakeholders. You will have a crucial role as a touchstone for your minister to make sure they are plugged into what is going on both outside and within the department.

2. Media and political communications. While the departmental press office plays a key role, you will add value by being able to work outside the impartiality restrictions placed on officials. Working closely with the press office, you will carry out the explicitly political communications tasks – such as political speechwriting and covering stories with an overtly political angle – and engage with the media externally.

Both of these two main roles are likely to include:

- **Strategic planning, tactical awareness and priorities.** You will be involved in helping your minister to develop a strategic plan for the department and, above all, sticking to it. You should be aware of political and administrative obstacles and work out ways of getting round them. Don't sacrifice your strategic priorities trying to keep on top of day-to-day battles – although in reality this will be difficult.
- **Gatekeeper and quality control.** Don't be surprised if your role involves quality checking, monitoring progress and driving forward the minister's wishes. Your minister will have enormous demands on their time and much of this will be deflected onto you. Working with the private office, you will see many of the submissions and other documents that get to the minister's desk and can help provide some quality control. Be rigorous – you can prevent some embarrassing mistakes.

When you first join

“When I first got the job, I asked a fellow special adviser ‘What is the role, what do you do on a day-to-day basis?’ And he couldn't tell me, because it's so different all the time.”

- Former special adviser

If you haven't any previous experience of working in a government department, be prepared for a culture shock. Even the transition from being a political adviser in opposition to government is a big change.

Your priority on your first day should be to meet key people. Top of the list should be the ministers, the permanent secretary, principal private secretary, private office and press office. You should also try soon after you start your job to develop relationships with directors general and other key officials. Good relationships within the department are the foundation for your success because they will help you to deliver. You need to start building these from day one. The private office will ensure that you get the proper policy briefings.

You will also want to work out with any other special advisers in the department how your roles complement each other and how you can work together effectively and efficiently.

You are likely to receive a briefing pack from the PPS as part of your induction to the department. Take the time to read it closely and ask any questions you have. Pay particular attention to the Code of Conduct. It addresses a number of issues you will have to deal with while in post and the behaviour expected of you. You should also look at the Ministerial Code as this sets out the accountabilities ministers have for special advisers.

“After the election, [the special advisers] are all appointed and No.10 holds an induction event...and I talk about the codes of conduct and their contract.”

- Head of Propriety and Ethics

The practicalities are important. You’ll want to know where you are located and get a feel for the layout of the department. Your office needs to be close to the minister’s and maybe even the private office. Find out if you will have any staffing resources of your own, such as a diary secretary. If not, ensure this is organised for you.

Development and training

“I was making it up as I went along.”

- Former special adviser

“We had no idea of what we were supposed to do, so we sorted it out between us. The trouble is we have no idea whether we are being as effective as we should be.”

- Special advisers

Make the most of any opportunities for training. You’ll be incredibly stretched and your time is precious – but think of time spent on training as an investment. The PPS would be a good source of support and the minister will want to ensure that you are fully effective. The areas you need to know about are described earlier in this document. Other sources of support include No10, DPM’s Office and the Institute for Government.

Tip top tips!

- 1. Understand, and value, your formal role.** You can ask the political questions that the Civil Service can't. Don't buy the fashionable view that you are a constitutional aberration – your role protects the Civil Service from politicisation.
- 2. Think about the impact of your behaviour.** You can advise, not instruct civil servants. That's a constitutional line in the sand. Remember you are not the minister. Treat people with dignity and respect. Avoid unnecessary spats and be sure to build a good relationship with the permanent secretary and the principal private secretary. Chances are they will be better at office politics than you are if you go into battle... And don't become the story – it's the end.
- 3. Know your minister's instincts.** You are there to amplify and transmit your minister's political instincts, and to some extent transmit the concerns of the department and stakeholders back to the minister. Civil servants will notice differences between your expressed views and that of your minister – you'll be sidelined fast.
- 4. Maintain focus.** You can expect hundreds of emails a day and more paper than you can print, let alone read. Ensure you have the proper administrative support. Your most likely regret, and that of your minister, will be that you tried to do too much and should have focused on a few key things.
- 5. Know your subject and your limits.** Are you there to be a policy expert, or to deal with the media? Don't try to do everything. Keep your minister informed of all your activities, to avoid any unnecessary surprises.
- 6. Keep an eye on wider, non-departmental issues.** Your department is just a department – but your minister is a member of a government and cabinet. Like your minister, you have a rare and precious role that extends outside the boundaries of your department. Remember you are part of a network. Do demonstrate team behaviour and keep fully connected to your other special adviser colleagues and to the Centre
- 7. Don't get obsessed with the media.** A key trap is failing to shed the media focused mentality of opposition. Worry about next year's headlines, and not so much on the next day's. And don't run an alternative to your press office. They are there to serve the minister too.

8. Don't edge out other views. You are a key gatekeeper, alongside the private office. Make sure your minister hears a range of views to avoid groupthink. And in a coalition, you should double check that your partner in the other party is in the loop (don't get caught not cc-ing key documents).

9. Show humility. You made it and you have an important job, but no one knows everything. Everyone you meet may hold that key insight, and everyone has power, capability and resource of some kind.

10. Be extremely careful. Look after confidential or restricted documents, and watch out for Freedom of Information (FOI) requests – everything you write (even drafts or notepads) can be FOI-ed. Only use phones or Blackberries provided to you by the department (which have special encryption facilities built in) to avoid unwanted surprises from hackers. Be discreet: watch out for stings and 'free' lunches.



The Institute for Government is here to act as a catalyst for better government

We help make government more effective.

- We carry out research, look into the big governance challenges of the day and find ways to help government improve, re-think and sometimes see things differently.
- We offer unique insights and advice from experienced people who know what it's like to be inside government overseas.
- We provide inspirational learning and development for very senior policy makers.

We do this through seminars, workshops, talks or interesting connections that invigorate and provide fresh ideas.

We are placed where senior members of all parties and the Civil Service can discuss the challenges of making government work, and where they can seek and exchange practical insights from the leading thinkers, practitioners, public servants, academics and opinion formers.