



## PRIVATE OFFICE GUIDANCE

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## Ministerial Correspondence

Any papers sent to the Private Office ([private.office@detini.gov.uk](mailto:private.office@detini.gov.uk)) should be sent electronically (unless by prior arrangement) and should be copied to the Permanent Secretary, the relevant Deputy Secretary and Head of Division, as well as the Press Office ([press.office@detini.gov.uk](mailto:press.office@detini.gov.uk)).

**N.B. The Special Advisor will see and clear all papers before they are submitted to the Minister. All submissions, briefings, correspondence and invitation cases should be addressed**

**1. Andrew Crawford**

**2. Arlene Foster MLA**

**and be emailed to the Private Office, copied to Andrew Crawford.**

### **Responses**

1. Private office will decide whether a letter addressed to the Minister should receive a Ministerial reply, and if so which division should prepare the advice, or whether it can be answered by the Minister's Private Secretary, or an official.
2. First names should be used when the Minister is corresponding with fellow MPs, MLAs and Peers. The exception to this rule is correspondence with the Prime Minister, First Minister and deputy First Minister who must be referred to by these titles in all circumstances. The Minister will sign letters as Arlene Foster MLA.

### **Transfers**

3. If a division is allocated a letter that they feel would be more appropriately answered by another division Private office should be alerted immediately and the letter will be reallocated. If the division considers that a letter should be answered by another department, or an official should reply instead of the Minister, or vice-versa, then Private Office should be contacted and the division's reasoning laid out. No action should be taken without the awareness of Private Office. The Private Office will arrange any Departmental Transfer.

### **Deadlines**

4. A prompt response to Ministerial correspondence is an essential part of the department's commitment to openness and accountability. All correspondence should be answered within 10 working days of its receipt by the department, with a draft reply to Private Office within 5 working days. If this deadline cannot be

met Private Office should be informed and a holding reply should be provided and an extension to the due back date negotiated for the full reply.

- 5. N.B. Inputs to FM and dFM briefings etc. operate on tighter deadlines and need time to be cleared by the Special Adviser and the Minister before going to FM and dFM.**

## Form of response

6. The Minister has asked that draft letters be as polite and helpful as possible and use simple and concise language and relatively short sentences. The degree of complexity of the answer should take account of the likely expertise of the ultimate recipient.
7. The names of organisations should be written in full on the first occasion they occur and drafts should not normally be more than one page unless there are several points to get across. The use of jargon, acronyms and foreign terminology should be avoided, where possible.
8. Draft replies for any signatory other than the original recipient of the letter should make clear that the letter has been passed to them for reply and has been read by the Minister.

## Treat Official Replies

9. Treat Official replies (TOs) are letters sometimes addressed to the Minister or a named official, usually from members of the public, which the Private Office has decided should receive a reply from an Official on the Minister's behalf. Private Office must be copied in on the final reply.
10. The same rules that apply to Ministerial Correspondence apply to TOs; i.e. deadlines, courtesy and clarity of language.
11. Correspondence relating to the day-to-day operations of the department's NDPBs should be answered directly by those organisations. The Minister will, however, continue to respond to correspondence on policy matters.
12. A transfer of correspondence to an NDPB would not normally be notified to the sender and the reply should therefore make it clear that the letter has been read by the Minister and is being sent at the Minister's request.

### Ministerial Submissions

13. Submissions to the Minister should be brief and to the point. They should be submitted to the Private Office in enough time to allow the Special Adviser and the Minister, should they wish to, to request further advice and hold a meeting before taking a decision. Even in the case of urgent submissions this should be at least 48 hours before the deadline for decision. This is particularly relevant to Invest NI casework submissions which need the Minister's careful consideration.

14. Submissions should normally only be copied to those who need to see them rather than those who might just be interested.

*\*(All submissions to FM/dFM should go through the Special Adviser and the Minister, except in cases of great urgency or by agreement with the Private Office, and should be copied to the Permanent Secretary and to the Special Adviser)*

15. The Permanent Secretary must have been consulted on policy proposals which have major resource implications, raise Accounting Officer issues, or have Machinery of Government implications before a submission is sent to the Minister.

16. The Press Office should be copied in on all submissions and if a press release is required it should be approved by Press Office before it is included in the submission (allow two days, prior to submission deadline, for clearance by Press Office). The Assembly Section should also be copied in if the submission is likely to result in action in the Assembly.

17. If a change in the law or a significant decision is being proposed, or where there are legal problems of any kind, the submission should have the appropriate legal advice/clearance.

18. Submissions should follow a standard format, which aids the Minister's speedy consideration of the issues involved. They should be Arial font, point 12 and single spacing. The text of the submission should follow the subheadings detailed below:

**Sample Submission**

**From :** A.N. Official

**Date:** 9 June 2008

Copy Distribution List Below

**To:** 1. Andrew Crawford  
2. Arlene Foster MLA

**Issue:** To Notify Colleagues of the Appropriate Style of Submission

**Timing:** Desk Immediate, Urgent or Routine

**Need for referral  
To the Executive:** There MUST be a comment here, even if it is simply Not Applicable

**Presentational Issues:** Likely interest from Media, Political Parties, Interest Groups etc.

**Freedom of Information:** Most Submissions are likely to be disclosable – if in doubt speak to your Local Information Manager

**Programme for Government  
/PSA Implications:** There MUST be a comment here, even if it is simply Not Applicable

**Financial Implications:** There MUST be a comment here, even if it is simply Not Applicable

**Legislation Implications:** There MUST be a comment here, even if it is simply Not Applicable

**Statutory Equality  
Obligations:** There MUST be a comment here regarding compliance with Section 75

**Recommendation:** An indication of what is required from the Minister

### Ministerial Boxes

19. Whilst the Minister will endeavour to clear paperwork on a daily basis, Divisions should not automatically assume that the Minister will be able to clear a submission overnight or over a particular weekend. Private Office should be given good notice of any particularly weighty submission and they will advise on the best time for it to be sent to the Minister. It should not be assumed that this will be over a weekend. Fridays are normally constituency days and therefore the Minister is not normally available to clear papers. It is imperative that papers are received in Private Office **no later than 4.00pm** on Thursday afternoon.
20. If possible, divisions should submit controversial/significant submissions well before the deadline for a final decision. This will allow the Minister to seek further advice or a meeting, if necessary.
21. If in doubt regarding any aspect of sending a submission to the Minister it is advisable to contact the Private Office.

**N.B. Executive Papers from other NICS Departments will be handled by David McCune ([david.mccune@detini.gov.uk](mailto:david.mccune@detini.gov.uk)), and they must be copied to [alu@detini.gov.uk](mailto:alu@detini.gov.uk). Executive papers generated by DETI will be issued to Ministerial Colleagues by Private Office.**

### Ministerial Meetings

22. When an external request for a Ministerial meeting is received, the Private Office will seek advice from Officials as to whether the Minister should agree to the meeting. It is helpful to have this advice quickly as an organisation that has requested a meeting will often press for an early response. This should be accompanied by the appropriate Accept or Decline draft letter. Advice to the Minister should be copied to the Special Adviser ([andrew.crawford.@detini.gov.uk](mailto:andrew.crawford.@detini.gov.uk)) and to the Press Office ([press.office@detini.gov.uk](mailto:press.office@detini.gov.uk)).
23. The ultimate decision on whether to accept the meeting will however remain with the Minister, although draft replies should be submitted on the basis of the official advice.
24. Officials need only advise on whether a Minister should accept or decline an invitation on its merits. The Diary secretary will inform Officials if the Minister is free or not.

25. It is essential that the purpose of the meeting and the agenda should be established with the visitors/hosts well in advance of the meeting, and preferably in writing. This ensures the best use of the Minister's time.
26. Officials should, where relevant, consider whether a particular meeting could prejudice the Minister's position in taking a subsequent decision.
27. Where a policy division is acting as secretariat for a meeting they should let the Private Office know well in advance of any potential dates. These should also be confirmed as soon as possible as it is difficult to keep a number of dates free in the Minister's diary for any length of time.

**N.B. Dates in the Minister's diary will not be held without the minister seeing a relevant submission.**

### **Briefing**

28. If the Minister agrees to a meeting, briefing will be requested by Private Office who will set a clear deadline by which this is needed. The length and detail of the briefing will vary to suit the occasion and the Minister's tastes.
29. Briefing for courtesy calls, lunches, dinners, receptions and photoshoots should be as short as possible and usually no more than two sides of paper.
30. Fuller briefing for meetings should be clearly flagged with a 'contents' page at the front. This is especially important for large meetings, but should not be overlooked for other meetings.
31. A meeting may deal with a number of different subjects, but the Minister needs to be presented with one agenda and one set of papers. Private Office will allocate co-ordination responsibilities where necessary.
32. Every brief should include the reason for the meeting; an agenda (agreed in advance with the participants); a list of participants (including pen pictures where relevant); lines to take in a form that can be read out, including defensive material and counter arguments on areas of vulnerability; and some background information (the length of which should be in inverse proportion to the Minister's knowledge of the subject).
33. Private Office will arrange a 15 minute pre-brief prior to all meetings to enable the Minister to discuss issues in more detail. Early notification would be appreciated if officials feel a longer pre-brief is required. On receipt of briefing, Private Office will advise if a pre-brief is no longer necessary.

## During the meeting

34. The Minister will normally take the lead in the meeting, but may well invite the visitors to explain their views first. The visitors will want to hear the Minister's views, but officials should also contribute if appropriate.
35. If the Minister is the visitor it is customary for them to listen to their hosts and respond accordingly.
36. The physical arrangements for a meeting are the responsibility of the Private Office, except for some statutory or regular meetings where responsibility lies with a particular policy division.

## Notes of Ministerial meetings

37. Meeting notes are intended to record accurately any decisions taken or undertakings made by the Minister. They may also, if necessary, summarise the main facts and arguments used during the meeting. They will not however record, blow by blow, each turn of a discussion.
38. **The Permanent Secretary has directed that for all internal and external meetings involving officials it will be the responsibility of the agency, branch, division etc to record a relevant note of the discussion, decisions taken and action agreed. The author should ensure that he/she has issued the minutes to any relevant official – including PS/Minister.** This will allow the Private Secretary to concentrate on following up on the Ministers action points. At the same time the minutes will properly record the discussions on complex issues as officials will have the advantage of a closer knowledge of topics. Please provide details of note taker in briefing, as requested.
39. Officials are normally responsible for any follow-up action detailed in the meeting notes.



**Ministerial Visits and Engagements**

(including speeches)

(also see Press Office section below)

40. A visit or engagement can have a variety of purposes including gathering information, public relations and promoting Government policy.
41. The Minister will have their own views on the engagements they want to undertake. Others may arise from invitations from outside organisations or suggestions put forward by the Department.
42. Most invitations will be sent to officials for advice on their merits. The Minister will expect a steer on whether it is a suitable occasion for ministerial participation. Is the occasion high profile enough? Will it be a valuable use of the Minister's time? Will there be anything newsworthy and suitable to say?
43. Background information on the organisation will be required (including their relationship with the department) and the specific event (including the likely size and background of the audience). Consideration should also be given as to who the immediate audience will be and what audience could be reached.
44. If it is a speaking engagement, an indication of the length of the speech and its main messages/purpose and whether it will be followed by a question and answer session are also valuable. Details of likely fellow speakers and whether they will precede the Minister are also useful.
45. For visits outside Belfast, a number of engagements in the area will usually be co-ordinated for a single visit.
46. The Press Office will cross-reference the Minister's diary with the PR Planner as appropriate. It is important that each Division responds to the Press Office's weekly request for updates to the PR Planner. Press Office contributes to a central Departmental wide Media Activity Planner which will allow them to check whether the Minister is likely to be competing with colleagues for news coverage and they will be able to advise on likely clashes of visits.
47. If the invitation is to be declined there should generally be a few words wishing the occasion well in the draft response.
48. In the majority of cases Private Office will ask the relevant policy division, NDPB, agency etc. to take the lead in organising the engagement, but they should be consulted before decisions are taken or programmes finalized. The Private Office will usually be responsible for the Minister's travel arrangements.

**Briefing**

49. Briefing for the Minister should be as concise as possible. Private Office should receive a detailed itinerary (including contact mobile telephone numbers and names of people and the full address of the venue and a contact name and number there); please ensure you allow time in the itinerary for media interviews and photographs, where appropriate; a short brief on the engagement and the people the Minister will meet, including pen pictures where possible; briefing on the main issues likely to arise and, in the case of visits further afield, background briefing on major issues/problems within the area, especially where there is press involvement (this may be wider than departmental responsibilities).

**Speeches**

50. Often the main reason for a visit or engagement will be to deliver a speech. Generally the Minister requires that the speech be in the form of a deliverable text, rather than bullet points on which to elaborate. Speeches should be submitted in double spacing in Palatino Linotype Point 20 with pages numbered. All foreign names should be spelt out phonetically in brackets. The deadline will be specified by Private Office when the speech is commissioned, but a final speech is needed a week in advance. This gives the Minister time to study it and incorporate any necessary amendments. Ministers speak at different speeds but, as a rough guide, allow for about 125 words per minute.
51. Whenever possible the minister should receive an outline of a speech well in advance of the engagement to enable their initial views to be incorporated in any fully worked up draft speech. The precise tone of the speech will depend on the occasion; an after-dinner speech will often be more light-hearted than a speech delivered to a conference of experts.
52. Early consultation between the policy division and the Press Office should take place to pinpoint potential announcements/publications which might be allied to a speech increasing its newsworthiness and to discuss attendant publicity.
53. The public presentation of policies and activities is a key element in ensuring the effective implementation of policy. The Press Office is the primary source of advice to the Minister and Officials on presentational issues and acts as a channel for public and media attitudes, as well as providing the machinery for announcing decisions and issuing news releases.
54. The timing of announcements is crucial to the achievement of maximum impact. It is important to avoid bunching Departmental announcements and competing with other Government Departments for news coverage. The Press Office will liaise with OFMDFM to pinpoint potential dates for announcements.

55. The Minister will expect the Press Office/Special Adviser to be consulted about the timing, method and content of any significant submission before it is put forward. Where an announcement has positive news value the Minister will expect as a minimum a news release to be issued.
56. The policy division would normally be responsible for preparing a first draft of the speech. The Press Office should then be consulted in advance of seeking clearance with the SPAD and Minister.
57. Early consultation about the message, target audience and timing of an announcement is essential, particularly if paid publicity is involved.
58. It is important to ensure that any significant announcements on policy are made to the Executive before the media is informed when the Assembly is sitting.

### **Press Office Contacts**

**Principal Information Officer:**

Ann Williamson [ann.williamson@detini.gov.uk](mailto:ann.williamson@detini.gov.uk) / 29263

**Senior Information Officer:**

Nicola Steele [nicola.steele@detini.gov.uk](mailto:nicola.steele@detini.gov.uk) / 29297

**General Office:**

[press.office@detini.gov.uk](mailto:press.office@detini.gov.uk) /29305 or 29604

### Special Adviser

59. The Minister is assisted by a Special Adviser, Andrew Crawford ([andrew.crawford@detini.gov.uk](mailto:andrew.crawford@detini.gov.uk)). He is employed as a temporary Civil Servant for the duration of his appointment.
60. All policy submissions and briefings for all Ministerial meetings should be copied to Mr Crawford when being sent to the Private Office for the Minister. It is often worth discussing policy proposals with the Special Adviser at an early stage.
61. When asked, Officials should provide non-political advice and information to the Special Adviser. Particular attention is drawn to the need to ensure political impartiality.
62. Officials can provide the Minister and Special Advisers with factual information for political speeches and documents and can check them for factual accuracy; but they should not comment on any part of the text which is essentially subjective or which seeks to draw political lessons or criticises other political parties.

### Tours and Functions in Parliament Buildings

63. Anyone wanting to book a tour or function in Parliament Buildings (PB) should do so through Private Office. The Events Co-ordination Office in PB will not accept bookings through any other source. Branches should note however that following revised guidance issued by the Assembly in March 2008, the signatures of 3 MLA's, reflecting cross community support are now required when booking events and one of the MLA's **must** be in attendance. Branches can discuss specific requirements and timings etc with the Events Co-ordination Office direct, on Belfast Tel 90521948 (direct dial ext. 21948).

### Ministerial Car

64. Albert Stewart is the Minister's driver and his dairy will be managed from the Private Office. Albert's priority will be driving for the Minister and the car will only be available for officials under exceptional circumstances.

**Private Office Contacts**

**Departmental Private Secretary:**

Glynis Aiken [glynis.aiken@detini.gov.uk](mailto:glynis.aiken@detini.gov.uk) /29452

**Assistant Private Secretary:**

Valerie Stevenson [valerie.stevenson@detini.gov.uk](mailto:valerie.stevenson@detini.gov.uk) / 29316

**Correspondence:**

Michael Duffy [michael.duffy@detini.gov.uk](mailto:michael.duffy@detini.gov.uk) / 29209

Christine McLaughlin [christine.mclaughlin@detini.gov.uk](mailto:christine.mclaughlin@detini.gov.uk) / 29222

**Diary/Ministerial Car/Parliament Buildings Bookings & Tour Forms:**

Gillian Cahoon [gillian.cahoon@detini.gov.uk](mailto:gillian.cahoon@detini.gov.uk) / 29440

Janet McKernan [janet.mckernan@detini.gov.uk](mailto:janet.mckernan@detini.gov.uk) / 29504