



# Supporting Ministers, Upholding the Values



## Good Practice Checklist for Agencies' Ministerial Liaison Areas— Supporting Ministers, Upholding the APS Values

### Roles and responsibilities of Ministerial liaison areas

- Have you documented important principles and policies related to interactions with Ministers' offices and prepared written agency protocols for employees in sensitive situations and in situations that arise infrequently?
- Have you ensured that all employees likely to come into contact with Ministers or their advisers are familiar with these documents, for example, policies and protocols, and know where they can be found?
- Do you draw to the attention of senior managers the scope for communicating these policies, procedures, written protocols and other guidance?
- Do you provide feedback to both agency staff and staff in Ministers' offices on ways to optimise the benefits of the working relationship?
- Do you organise regular meetings between agency leadership and the Minister's advisers?
- Have you asked the Minister and/or senior Ministerial advisers if they want a written weekly bulletin from the agency that provides an overview of agency or portfolio issues requiring urgent attention?
- Have you found out what modes of communication suit the staff in the Minister's office, and made this information available to staff in your agency? (This should not undermine the requirements to seek and document the Minister's decisions finally.)
- Do you prepare and maintain accessible lists of the allocation of responsibilities amongst Ministers' advisers for departmental staff?
- Do you prepare and maintain accessible lists of departmental programme responsibilities for the use of Ministers and their advisers?
- Do you respond quickly to requests, or contact the Minister's office promptly to explain why a fast response is not possible?
- Do you always correct incorrect information as quickly as possible, without being delayed by fear of any embarrassment?
- Do you avoid (or at least not contribute to) party-based discussions, particularly with Ministerial staff, while nevertheless being prepared to seek confirmation of what government policy on a given matter may be?
- Do you maintain open and ongoing communication between the Chief of Staff and the Ministerial liaison area?

- Do you actively manage the relationship between the Minister's offices and the agency by:
  - being proactive in seeking to identify and anticipate Ministers' offices' needs
  - working closely with DLOs, meeting them regularly to get their views on how the relationship is travelling
  - meeting regularly with the Chief of Staff of each agency Minister to keep abreast of issues, including staffing changes in the Minister's office
  - ensuring that every part of the agency finds out about changes in priorities and processes for working with a Minister's office
  - providing early feedback (including oral feedback) to relevant areas of the agency on the quality and timing of briefs, Ministerial correspondence etc.
  - preparing (in consultation with senior managers, Ministers and their offices) policies and procedures on normal working arrangements and on sensitive situations and situations that arise infrequently, and ensuring that employees are aware of those policies and procedures
  - acting as the champion of the broader objectives of the policies, procedures or protocols applying to interacting with Ministers and their advisers, and as a network contact point, trainer, and expert for quick on-the-spot advice?
- Have you established a single area of the agency, and a single workflow management system, within which all work (other than meetings) for Ministers' offices can be recorded or processed?
- Have you maximised the extent to which required styles and formats are built into templates, thus minimising employees' reliance on manuals (allowing manuals and guides to be more concise and to focus on the most important points)?
- Have you ensured that consistent standards and policies operate across the agency, rather than devolving them to individual groups or branches?
- Do you provide central support for portfolio agency interactions with Ministers' offices where these entities have the same requirements as departments? Portfolio-based support can take at least four forms:
  - particularly in the case of very small agencies, allowing and encouraging those agencies who wish to do so to reach agreement with portfolio departments on making appropriate use of departmental Ministerial liaison areas
  - considering taking a portfolio approach to templates, handbooks and guidelines, so that each portfolio agency does not have to prepare and produce its own material
  - to the extent feasible, taking a portfolio-wide approach to the purchase, design, maintenance and use of workflow management software
  - using the expertise and experience of portfolio departments as a training and development resource to enhance capacity in other portfolio agencies in serving Ministers' offices.
- If your agency has relatively limited interaction with Ministers' offices, guidelines such as those applying to Ministerial correspondence may not be able to be 'automated' for other types of interaction. If so, have you provided a checklist for employees to use for the major types of documents prepared for Ministers' offices?

### Working with new Ministers and new or less experienced advisers

- Do you provide new Ministers and their staff with advice and support in establishing office workflow and record keeping arrangements, links to portfolio agencies' email systems and electronic resource documents, as well as briefing on options around procedures for structuring effective interactions between the office and the agency?
- Do you initiate a briefing for individual advisers when they start a job, to assist the adviser to get up to speed more quickly and ask questions about operational issues?
- Do you provide new or less experienced advisers with a combination of training, mentoring or briefing on subjects or processes critical to their interaction with the agency?

### Working with non-Cabinet Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries

- Do you encourage staff to take difficulties which arise over time in a portfolio with more than one Minister up the line as necessary so they can be handled by the agency head who can ensure that the matter is raised with Ministers in the broader context?

- Do you encourage senior staff to raise any operational inconsistencies that emerge in a portfolio with more than one Minister or their offices with the Chiefs of Staff of the Ministers concerned so that they can manage the interface?
- Do you determine if briefs provided to non-Cabinet Ministers should be copied to the portfolio Minister?

### Working with Departmental Liaison Officers (DLOs)

- Have you invited DLOs and/or senior Ministerial advisers during non-sitting periods to contribute to briefing sessions about their roles and on how their Minister's office works?
- Do you encourage APS staff to copy DLOs into email correspondence with staff in Ministers' offices?
- Have you established regular discussions between the DLO and the agency head or deputy (about how relations are working between agency and Ministerial staff and whether service standards are being met)?
- Do you arrange a debriefing of DLOs by the agency leadership and the managers of the Ministerial liaison area on a regular basis and on their return to the agency?
- Have you ensured that agency staff know their DLOs, particularly in large agencies, and know to talk to them about issues that the DLOs might be able to help resolve?

### Administering agency protocols

- Have you documented agency policies and procedures on normal working arrangements with Ministers and their offices as written protocols, in consultation with the Minister and Chief of Staff and agency head?
- Have you prepared for the Minister's office a document describing the framework within which the agency operates, particularly any relevant statutory and administrative features, and roles and responsibilities?
- Have you included in agency materials a regularly updated listing of the names and responsibilities of all staff in Ministers' offices?
- Have you documented, for employees' information, basic details about the channels of communication that the agency maintains with Ministers and their offices?
- Have you prepared information sheets that explain to employees the agency's operations on a normal parliamentary sitting day?
- Have you prepared statements of employees' roles and responsibilities in dealing with Ministerial material?
- Have you spelt out who is authorised to clear briefs or provide advice and how less formal communications are to be reported up the line, as measures to promote quality of service to the Minister and the office?

### Working during caretaker periods

- Do you obtain advice on caretaker periods from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and circulate it to all staff, indicating that it is the approach to be taken within the agency?
- Do you discuss the implications of caretaker convention requirements well in advance with the Chief of Staff, with follow-up discussion with the Minister and Chief of Staff as soon as the election is called and, if possible, before the caretaker period commences?

### Disbursement of grants and making appointments

- Have you ensured that both the Minister's office and relevant employees are fully briefed on the processes under which grants schemes and appointments processes operate, including any statutory constraints that may apply. Where appropriate, have proposed guidelines been discussed with and/or agreed by the Minister?

### Handling briefing materials

- Have you ensured that employees are aware that briefings should be comprehensive and outline a range of options for action, together with the agency's analysis of the implications of the options, rather than providing only a single or a limited range of options?
- Where additional material is sought, do you ensure that employees understand that any supplementary briefing or amendments to original briefs should clarify what advice has been provided at the request of advisers ('your office has also asked that we canvass ...')?

- Do you ensure that employees understand that in general, briefing advice should not be changed or opinions omitted if the agency remains of the belief that particular arguments should be considered by the Minister? Do you advise that where any changes to advice are involved, the brief should record the nature of the changes and the source of the request?
- Do you ensure that employees indicate in any briefing material or record where supplementary briefings have been prepared at the request of a Minister or a Minister's adviser?
- Do you ensure that employees, or their managers, are always confident that instructions are coming from the Minister by:
  - in the case of briefs, requiring the Minister's signature before acting on the recommendations
  - in the case of significant oral requests from Ministerial staff, requiring subsequent confirmation in writing or by email that the request is endorsed by the Minister?

### Briefing relating to particular electorates

- Have you advised employees to distinguish between providing information by electorate to the Minister (which may be appropriate), and providing information directly to Government backbenchers (which is generally not appropriate)?
- Where briefing is being prepared on an electorate basis, do you advise staff to use community-wide standards of statistical reliability and privacy, and a timescale relevant to the services delivered?

### Supporting Budget processes

- Have you covered off process arrangements for Budget preparation in incoming Government briefs to the Minister and in training provided by the agency for new advisers?
- Have you ensured that Ministerial staff understand key features of the Budget process, including the importance of establishing reliable, reasonable timeframes to accommodate any consultation processes the government wishes to establish? Have you made Ministerial staff aware of the need for close and iterative processes between senior managers and advisers under the guidance of Ministers and agency heads throughout the Budget process?
- Have you ensured that Budget costings agreed with the Minister and advisers reflect the form of appropriation that is most appropriately aligned to the budgeted activity?

### Record keeping procedures

- Have you prepared a written agency policy that significant contact by employees with the Minister's office staff, whether face-to-face or by phone, is recorded in a file note? Similarly, do you advise staff that emails should be retained in the agency's record keeping system?

### Responding to questions on notice and appearing before parliamentary committees

- Have you prepared written agency protocols or other guidance to assist Senior Executive Service employees appearing before parliamentary committees to respond in a manner that is consistent with their rights and responsibilities?

### Good practice in training, development and briefings

- Have you ensured induction processes at all levels provide explicit guidance on relations with Ministers' offices? (This information may be integrated into induction seminars and orientation, or it may be communicated by experienced staff acting as mentors to new arrivals. It could include, but not be limited to, documentation in resource material that the staff member receives.)
- Do you apply the information contained in formal feedback on briefs going to Ministers' offices:
  - to record and analyse the feedback centrally, so that agencies can develop an overall picture of how often Ministers' offices are providing feedback and look at trends in that information
  - to transmit feedback back to all employees involved in preparation of particular briefs, so they get some idea of how the Minister's office views their efforts. (In cases where the feedback is negative, are managers advised to handle this sensitively, with discussions with staff about the reasons for the feedback, and what might be done to improve briefs and their assessments in future?)