



**Australian Government**  
**Australian Public Service Commission**

# Ministerial Transitions

Strengthening Partnerships

November 2021



## **Ministerial Transitions**

In Australia's democracy, managing transitions is an important part of our political system and the Australian Public Service (APS).

This paper outlines broad principles for transitions that take place during the course of the relationship between the APS and the government of the day. It is intended for senior departmental officials, departmental staff responsible for portfolio support, Ministerial staff and Ministers.

Every department has their own approach to managing transitions. Arrangements need not be standardised across the APS, but should be underpinned by a set of guiding principles. This paper outlines basic principles and suggestions, which are based on best practice, to ensure smooth and consistent transitions across government.

This paper provides the opportunity to share good practice across the APS. This paper has been developed following extensive consultation across many levels of government, including at Secretary and Ministerial level. The consultation has drawn on examples of good practice, which subsequently underpin the principles.

### **What is a "transition" and why do we need principles?**

Transitions take a number of forms. While often thought of as meaning a change of government, transitions also include a change of Minister, a change of Secretary or a change of senior Ministerial staff.

It is common for governments to go through transitions in Ministerial appointments after an election, and from time to time during a parliamentary term. Ministerial staff can change at any time.

The principles in this paper are designed to encourage consistency across government, and provide a clear framework and guidance to support transitions. The principles offer high level guidance to inform decision making.

This paper focusses on the process, logistical and operational matters of transitions. Successful implementation of logistics and engagement contribute to building a relationship and strengthening the partnership between the APS and ministerial offices.

### **Why is managing transitions important?**

Managing transitions effectively is the start of an enduring relationship between the APS and a Minister. Effective transitions develop confidence and trust between the APS, Ministers and Ministerial staff. A smooth transition has a lasting positive impact on the partnership between the APS and the government of the day. It also ensures continuity of systems and services in as seamless a manner as possible, which contributes to continuity of business for critical institutions of government. Ultimately, a well-managed transition will result in better public administration outcomes for the Australian community.

Conversely, a poorly managed transition creates a poor first impression and negatively impacts the relationship between the APS and the government of the day. This reduces the efficiency and effectiveness of this critical partnership and can impact public confidence.

### **The value of a dedicated focus on transition arrangements**

Arrangements for transitions will vary across departments and Ministerial offices, depending on the size of the Department, Ministerial preferences and established practice. However, arrangements should be similar across government. A key reason for promoting consistency is that, during the course of a Minister's career, a Minister can move across a number of portfolios. Consistent approaches to transitions makes it easier for Ministers and their staff to transition effectively.

Adhering to a clear set of principles allows departments to move to action quickly during times of transition, reduces the risk of misunderstandings or unclear expectations, and provides consistency and continuity for effective government.

Different transitions present different levels of risks and issues to consider. For example, matters to consider are different for a new minister in a new government, compared to a new minister in the existing government.

### **Principles for Transitions**

Every Minister has different experience and different needs, and there is no "one size fits all" approach to transitions. However, an approach based on principles is important and contributes to an effective and smooth transition.

An overarching principle for any transition is for the individuals involved to place themselves in the shoes of the other and to appreciate and recognise the needs of all parties. A simple question to ask is "*what do you need and how can we support you*"?

It is also important to consider what is needed, what is important and what is urgent. Departments should be flexible, responsive and proactive at all times in a transition.

#### **1. A clear system for managing the immediate response to a transition**

Getting the basic foundations right is critical for building strong partnerships between the APS and the government of the day. These can be as simple as getting the "office basics" right.

Departments should have a system in place for the early set-up arrangements during a transition period. This system should identify tasks and roles and have relevant officers and teams assigned to each task. There should always be a Transition Plan.

In the case of a new Minister in a new portfolio, a suggested approach is for the Department to stand up a Transitions Team to execute the Transition Plan and work directly with the Minister's staff to set up administrative and technical processes, according to the Minister's preferences and the particular functions of the department and portfolio. A Transitions

Team would most likely be formed from an existing team in the ministerial support area of a department, and should be led by a senior departmental official.

A Transitions Team could also act as a “lead” for other agencies in the portfolio.

An obvious example of an important task for the Transitions Team is to ensure connectivity as soon as possible. This involves arranging early and prompt IT access for the new Minister and their staff, including phones and laptops. Whilst this task should be relatively straightforward, if done well, it demonstrates the professionalism of the APS and sets a positive tone from the start.

In any transition, Departmental Liaison Officers (DLOs) must quickly adapt to new working arrangements and relationships. Departments should provide clear advice to DLOs on what is expected of their role and DLOs should be ready to adapt.

Departments should consider the need for other support and administration staff and should be ready to provide temporary staff to a new Minister’s office if required. Support and administration staff are critical to a smooth transition and if they are not in place, the Department should assist where possible. APS staff should be reminded of their responsibilities under the APS Values and APS Code of Conduct and supported where necessary.

Departments may need to provide assets and equipment to locations other than Parliament House. Ministerial staff may not always be based in Parliament House. They could be based in a Commonwealth Parliament Office or in the Minister’s Electorate Office.

When a Minister moves from one portfolio to another, or if a Minister is sworn to more than one portfolio, coordination between departments is essential to ensure a smooth transition. Different departments provide many support functions in a transition. There must be close and efficient liaison between the Minister’s former and new departments to transfer business processes, practices, preferences and services. Close cooperation should be at all levels, from the Secretary down.

Departments should also work together closely when Ministers are sworn to more than one portfolio and have multiple ministerial responsibilities. For example, departments could consider the concept of a “home” or “lead” department when providing assets and equipment, and the role of DLOs will need to be discussed.

These are just some examples of the many tasks various departments undertake during a transition. It is not an exhaustive list.

## **2. Early, clear and straightforward communication**

Transitions take place in dynamic and fast moving environments. To ensure a smooth transition, a “no surprises” approach is essential.

Departments take a variety of approaches to managing transitions, particularly in the case of a new Minister.

It is important to note that a Minister does not become a Minister until the Governor-General officially swears that person to a portfolio. However, where the Prime Minister has indicated that a person will have responsibilities for a particular portfolio, the Department is not precluded from engaging with that person prior to their appointment.

In the case of a new Minister, the Department should determine who makes contact with the Minister’s office and when. It is important to develop a relationship early with the new Minister and their Chief of Staff to ensure the provision of an adequate level of care and support. This is particularly important when a Minister has not held ministerial office before.

In the early stages of a transition, departments should establish a “one stop shop” approach to facilitate all contact between the Minister’s office and the department.

This “one stop shop” approach allows new Ministerial offices one place to go for support, rather than across different enabling services and different areas of the Department. This is particularly important in Ministerial matters, but also assists with other key personnel changes.

During a transition, the Minister’s Chief of Staff (often with the support of relevant Ministerial staff) and APS officials should work together to establish:

- A framework for the manner and frequency of contact during the transition.
- A list of the key issues to be managed during the transition, including the Minister’s priorities.
- The risks and opportunities arising from the transition.

The Minister’s Chief of Staff plays an important oversight role, even if they choose to delegate some of the detailed work.

### 3. Clear frameworks to ensure continuity of effective government

Key parties to a transition should consider the implications of a transition and provide effective advice. When providing advice, and particularly if seeking action, departments should consider what matters are *urgent*, in comparison to matters that are *important* for the Minister.

Early advice includes:

- Considering advice to a new Minister or new Ministerial staff member who may not have had exposure to critical issues in the portfolio.
- Providing advice on Ministerial responsibilities about which a new Minister may not be aware.
- Identifying key issues a Minister needs to know.
- What issues or appointments are scheduled and are crucial now and in the forthcoming weeks.
- Providing an analysis of key internal and external stakeholders.
- Prioritising information to ensure time-critical matters are raised and dealt with effectively.

Departments should determine the Minister's key priorities as soon as practicable and be mindful of these priorities when providing advice. Departments should also advise Ministers of any existing commitments, previous commitments and any portfolio policies already decided by Cabinet.

In the case of a new Minister, an example of ensuring the continuity of effective government is when the Department provides a senior official to undertake a short-term placement in the Minister's office. This official could be a high performing EL2 or SES Band 1 and can deliver policy advice and guidance during the early stages of the transition, while the Minister establishes their office and recruits their Ministerial staff. The APS should inform Ministers that seconding departmental staff to a ministerial office is possible, particularly in the short term.<sup>1</sup> Such a role would be in addition to a DLO.

In anticipation of any transition, the Department should identify high performing individuals who would be suitable for a placement in a Minister's office. This placement not only supports the Minister, but also provides both an excellent experience and career development opportunity for departmental staff.

In the case of a new Minister, Departments should extend an invitation to the new Minister and Ministerial staff to visit the Department and meet officials of all levels at the earliest opportunity. This visit could be in the form of an afternoon tea or a floor walk. This invitation should also extend to portfolio agencies, where relevant.

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<sup>1</sup> A Minister can also backfill vacant adviser positions with APS staff for up to 12 weeks. However, it is not possible to supplement a Minister's office with APS staff for lengthy periods outside of their MOP(S) staff allocation as approved by the Prime Minister.

Ministers and their departments should work closely to ensure that the Department (and agencies, where relevant) have a clear understanding of the Minister's expectations.

Departments produce Incoming Ministerial Briefs and Government Briefs during the Caretaker period. Systems should exist to produce high quality Incoming Briefs quickly in the event that a transition takes place outside of a Caretaker period. The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet provides more information about the Caretaker Conventions [online](#).

Departments should provide clear advice about equipment available for the Minister and Ministerial staff and what is appropriate in the context of a particular portfolio. Departments should always be flexible and responsive and try to accommodate Ministers' preferences. However, Departments should also draw on their experience of transitions and provide advice accordingly.

Ministers should be aware of the role of the Cabinet Secretary and Cabinet processes. The Prime Minister appoints the Cabinet Secretary, and they can be either a Parliamentarian or a senior Ministerial staffer. The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet publishes *The Cabinet Handbook*, which outlines Cabinet policies and procedures which Ministers should follow. *The Cabinet Handbook* is [available online](#).

#### **4. Be mindful of information overload**

In the case of a new Minister, initial discussions on procedures, briefings, security and IT can be overwhelming. Departments should be conscious of information overload and the relevance, urgency and importance of information provided in briefings to a new Minister.

This may particularly be the case after an election campaign, where transitions are fast paced and occur after intensive work periods.

A suggested approach is for the Department to follow up initial briefings with an offer of a "deep dive" on particular topics or supplementary briefings beginning three to four weeks after the transition has taken place.

#### **5. Off-boarding is an important transition**

An important transition to manage is the off-boarding of a Minister and Ministerial staff. Closing down a Ministerial office means a change of personnel, retrieval of assets and identifying legacy documents. Departments should have a system in place to manage off boarding, which can occur at any time.

For example, on departing office, a Minister and his or her staff will need to make arrangements with the National Archives of Australia to [transfer relevant records](#).

While there are no fixed rules, once a Minister no longer holds their position, their Ministerial offices in Parliament House and other locations generally need to be decommissioned within a few days. This involves significant departmental support, as well as cleaning and preparation work by the Department of Parliamentary Services and the Department of Finance. Sensitive material, including Cabinet document retrieval, must also

be considered. Departmental assets must be ready for return, with the Department handling and auditing all assets. The Department of Finance also has a significant role to play in terms of when equipment can be removed from Parliament House, and when new offices are ready for occupation.

Departments should also be flexible and proactive in their dealings with exiting ministerial staff, who will need time to close down systems such as email and mobile telephones.



Following are transition matters for departments to consider. Please note – this is guidance only and is not exhaustive. Timelines are suggestions and departments should consider what is urgent and prioritise accordingly. This is an indicative set of matters upon which to base transition plans. Each Department will form transition plans according to its needs and those of incoming Ministers and staff.

### Matters to Consider – New Minister

<b>Within the first week of new Minister’s appointment</b>
Identify contact person and team within department to run the transition process.
Identify contact person within Minister’s office.
DLO appointment to be complete and in place, noting this is likely to be done in advance, unless the Minister would like a change.
Arrange initial meeting with Minister, their Chief of Staff and contact person within Minister’s office.
Provide a copy of the Incoming Minister’s Brief to the Minister and their office.
<p>At the initial meeting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss the department’s senior staff responsibilities and structure.</li> <li>• Discuss available departmental resources including ICT and other equipment, corporate services, website, social media and communications functions, telecommunications, stationery, motor vehicle, and whether resources are required in the Electorate Office, a Commonwealth Parliament Office or the Minister’s home. The Department of Finance also provides <a href="#">guidance</a> on services available to Ministers.</li> <li>• Discuss security (input from ASIO/ASD).</li> <li>• Discuss media monitoring, and media handling processes.</li> <li>• Discuss staffing, including DLO and also other departmental staff who may be available for temporary placement.</li> <li>• Discuss preferences for briefings.</li> <li>• Offer to brief Minister on areas of interest and confirm those dates.</li> <li>• Define a process for ongoing engagement with the Minister and their office, for example, a weekly meeting, a fortnightly meeting, engagement with Chief of Staff or another adviser.</li> </ul>
The Minister and Minister’s staff to discuss workplace health and safety obligations and procedures.

**Within two weeks of new Minister's appointment (or as directed by Minister's office)**

Confirm all departmental resources for Minister's office are in place.

SES to brief Minister and relevant adviser on portfolio responsibilities.

Department to provide brief on Minister's responsibilities, including what falls within their power, what requires Cabinet approval, the role of the Cabinet Secretary and what legislation the Minister is responsible for.

Department to provide Minister and staff with security briefings and security training.

Department should extend an invitation to the Minister and their office to visit the department, for example for an afternoon tea or "floor walk". An invitation should also be considered in due course for portfolio agencies.

**Within three weeks of new Minister's appointment (or as directed by Minister's office)**

Where appropriate, Minister and department to work on statement of expectations for relevant departments, agencies and regulators in the portfolio. Where these statements exist, they should be provided to the Minister. The Minister should write a new statement where appropriate and relevant.

**Within four weeks of new Minister's appointment (or as directed by Minister's office)**

SES to offer Minister and ministerial staff deep dive briefings on topics selected by the Minister.

Department to review with Chief of Staff support and engagement provided to date, and seek feedback to improve or refine processes.

## Matters to Consider – New Ministerial Staff Member

<b>Before the new staff member commences</b>
Following consultation with the Chief of Staff, the DLO to contact new staff member to begin on boarding process, including setting up IT and introduction to AGSVA to obtain necessary security clearances (through the department).
IT (email, laptop and mobile telephone) should be in place before the new staff member commences.
DLO or Office Manager to arrange an appointment with the Parliament House Pass Office for the new staff member on their first day.
<b>Within the first week of new staff member's commencement</b>
DLO acts as main departmental support for new staff member for IT and facilitating briefings, introductions to and contact with department.
The Minister and Minister's staff to discuss workplace health and safety obligations and procedures.
DLO to arrange security briefing with new staff member
Department invites new staff member to the department to meet relevant SES, executive officers and executive assistants and provide briefings.
DLO to provide a departmental organisational chart.
Relevant SES to confirm with new staff member the preferred way of communication and engagement, including the new staff member's approach to briefing.
<b>Within two weeks of new staff member's commencement</b>
DLO to confirm new staff member has all departmental resources in place.
DLO to check if new staff member requires further briefing or clarification of any departmental matters.
<b>Within three weeks of a new staff member's commencement</b>
Relevant SES Officer from Department to review engagement with the adviser to date and seek feedback in order to refine or improve processes.

## **Transition of a New Secretary**

Departments are responsible for the transition of a new Secretary. Departments will have their own internal processes for managing such a transition, and the preferences of the incoming Secretary will be important.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide guidance to departments on transitioning incoming secretaries. However, departments should consider the following points in relation to the interaction of a new Secretary and a Minister and his or her office.

- The new Secretary and the Minister and the Minister's Chief of Staff should establish contact as soon as the appointment is announced.
- The Minister should discuss with the Secretary his or her expectations of the Secretary and the Department.
- The Secretary should meet with Minister's staff.
- The Minister's staff should meet with Secretary's Executive Officer and Executive Assistant.
- The Minister and Secretary should discuss preferences for ongoing engagement, including regular meetings and the role of the Chief of Staff.