

Giving Ministers an armchair ride

A constant refrain

You'll have heard us talking about giving Ministers an armchair ride repeatedly!

At times it's done beautifully – and many of the papers which score a 5 out of 5 are impressive for this alone. However, from what we see across all the reviews we do, agencies don't do it consistently.

The concept is about recognising that Ministers don't just have to read your advice and make decisions themselves. They also have a job to do in:

- Convincing their colleagues to support their recommended way forward or negotiating with them on an alternative pathway.
- Explaining decisions to stakeholders and the general public.
- Responding to concerns raised by stakeholders and getting their input/support for policy decisions.

And we don't mean this¹...



¹ Source: Stuff.co.nz 22/01/2019.

In addition to that contest of ideas, Ministers also need to deal with practical matters, e.g. signing instruments that implement decisions (including legal agreements, appointment letters, letters of expectations, letters of all types), or being well prepared at meetings – including being ready to make effective interventions or propose alternative resolutions/ positions.

Practical and tactical, but not political

Ministers are time poor. So, any usable help and support you provide reduces the burden on Ministers and their staff. It also helps build a good relationship between Ministers and agencies.

Of course, there is a boundary between political advice and support, and advice to support the policy process, and the implementation of that policy. Our previous Masterclass on tactical advice² discusses this context. But there is also plenty of guidance around for public servants to help with this³.

The Policy Quality Framework helps to inform what is required

There is a range of elements in the Policy Quality Framework relevant to supporting Ministers (particularly in the Advice category).

But perhaps the most relevant is the following:

“Anticipates decision maker's needs, next steps, and is timely.”

²

https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20GovernGove/brief_22_tactical_advice_2.pdf

³

<https://www.publicservice.govt.nz/assets/Legacy/resources/Code-of-conduct-StateServices.pdf> :
<https://www.publicservice.govt.nz/assets/SSC-Site-Assets/IES/Election-Guidance-2020.pdf>

The advice:

- indicates when a decision is required and the consequences of delaying a decision
- anticipates likely questions
- addresses next steps and their timeframes
- has all the content needed to support the next steps and avoid unnecessary follow-up
- where appropriate, attaches talking points and includes a ‘25 words or less’ argument, or other aids
- is provided in time for a considered decision”.⁴

A checklist

We’ve developed a checklist designed to help you identify what is needed for different types of papers in different situations. It looks at both the practical support Ministers need and the tactical support, which provides added value. It’s attached as an appendix.

It is designed to be used by authors, managers and peer reviewers to make sure you have all the bases covered before a piece of advice leaves the building.

You will have internal expertise in this

Your colleagues who have worked in Ministers’ Offices will know what Ministers need and have plenty of experience designing the extras that make a difference. In those roles, they will have asked the agency for further material, crafted a set of talking points for the Minister, provided a short summary of the key issues, or highlighted risks. They can provide useful insight. Of course, specific Ministers will all have slightly different preferences. Their Private Secretaries (most often seconded from your agency) are an excellent source of help in understanding whether the Minister would prefer a chart, table, or outline notes to a fully drafted speech. It’s well worth a regular meeting with them to track how the Minister’s preferences are evolving, or occasionally a quick call to check on a tricky issue.

It’s worth looking for previous papers which have done this well – these will give you some good ideas – especially where there have been favourable responses from the office or the Minister.

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⁴ <https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/publications/full-policy-quality-framework-html#child-10>

Appendix A Armchair ride checklist

Key

AM Aide-mémoire	B Briefing – where decisions are required	CC Cabinet cover note	EB Event briefing	M Meeting brief
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Table 1 Armchair ride checklist – practical and tactical

Item	Comments	Types of paper	Y/N
Practical			
Clear purpose statement	Covers the what and the why.	AM B CC EB M	
Tight summary	Boils down the main issues; can be in key points form. ⁵	AM B CC EB M	
Easy to read at pace	As succinct as possible, Plain English, avoiding jargon and acronyms.	AM B CC EB M	
Size of the prize	Be clear early in the paper about how important (people affected, \$, industry impacts etc.) and how urgent it is.	AM B CC EB M	
Next steps laid out	Be clear what the Minister/s has to do and by when, and what others will do and when too.	B	
All the material the Minister needs	Draft letters, documents to sign, speech notes, talking points, etc. etc.	B	
Time, place, run sheet	Covers all the practical information. Include greetings, protocol, cultural information, and who will be there to support the Minister (e.g. officials).	EB M	
Who is attending?	Biographical information, photos, involvement in other government bodies, whether the Minister has met them before. Include comment on the media attendance.	EB M	
Talking points	To assist the Minister to communicate about a decision or policy position, either formally or informally. Talking points might be framed differently for different audiences.	B CC EB M	

⁵ A good rule of thumb is anything four pages or more needs a summary.

Item	Comments	Types of paper	Y/N
Tactical			
Strategic fit	Outline the links to government priorities and other key strategies and policies.	AM B CC EB M	
Treaty considerations	Apply the Cabinet Office guidance.	AM B CC EB M	
Risk assessment	Do a risk assessment, report on the major risks and how they can be managed. Size the risks.	AM B	
Intelligence	Explain what others think and what issues might be raised – this includes other Ministers, other agencies and stakeholders. This helps the Minister tackle matters proactively and/or to frame responses appropriately.	AM CC EB M	
Objectives	Be clear about the purpose of the meeting/engagement or event – from both the participant’s perspective and the Minister’s perspective. What should they hope to achieve? What does a good outcome look like? Giving an overall objective helps the Minister to manage the meeting in flight and respond to the unexpected.	EB M	
Defensive talking points	To address any tricky issues that might be raised. These can also be done as Q&As.	CC M	
Impact analysis	Who is likely to be affected and to what extent, e.g. individuals, groups, firms, also include a population analysis, Māori impacts etc.	AM B CC EB M	
Plan B, and C...	Outline a fallback position if the preferred way forward can’t be agreed upon. In a tricky situation, with more entrenched views, you might also need a Plan C; or some bottom lines to aid negotiation.	CC M	
Keeping other Ministers in the loop	Advice on which other Ministers need to be consulted or informed – plus talking points, short summaries or letters to aid this process. Ministers don’t make key decisions in isolation!	AM B	
Media	Media material, e.g. release, speech notes, suggested social media content, Q&As	EB	