



**Victorian
Public Sector
Commission**



How to meaningfully engage your minister

What meaningful engagement looks like with your minister and their office

Meaningful engagement with a minister's office helps you:

- exchange information efficiently
- ensure clarity and understanding
- document decisions
- build a trusting relationship.

The guidance will apply more or less directly if you're an officer who rarely engages the minister's office compared to an executive who does. Speak with your manager if you have any doubts about your role in this process.

Connect the right people

Meaningfully engaging a minister and their office will connect decision-makers (the minister) with those who have the information necessary to support a fully-informed decision being made (generally department officials with relevant subject matter expertise).

The right public servant to advise a minister will be:

- someone with the appropriate authority to engage your minister and their office
- someone with sufficient content knowledge and expertise to inform the engagement.

Communicating with all the relevant people ensures you provide advice in a timely way. Depending on your level of authority, you or your executive may need to liaise with:

- the office of the secretary or deputy secretary
- the department liaison officer
- the ministerial adviser or administrative employees in your minister's office
- your minister's chief of staff.

Public entities advise their minister in relation to their functions and should consider engaging the department when it's appropriate. Departments may need to engage with their portfolio public entities to inform a brief.

Communicating with ministerial advisers

At times it may be adequate to only advise a member of a minister's office on a developing situation or a task that is in progress.

This can happen when you:

- have already advised your minister on the matter
- intend to advise the minister on a matter and are seeking guidance on any relevant details or approaches.

Don't assume your minister will be aware of any information you communicate to their adviser. Remember, advisers support their minister, but they don't make decisions on the minister's behalf. Briefs aren't prepared for advisers; they're prepared for the minister.

If you need someone to make a decision, take the steps available within your authority to ensure you make your minister aware of all the necessary information. For both executives and officers, this can involve seeking advice from a senior executive.

Your secretary or equivalent is your minister's primary policy adviser and must also be aware of and have access to all the advice you give to your minister's office.

Giving clear information and advice

You'll often play a role in advising a minister on a matter regarding a policy or program they're responsible for.

If you're an officer, you might have to raise the initial matter or write the first draft of a

brief.

If you're an executive, you might be responsible for approving a brief. You may also speak directly with your minister and their office during the briefing process if supplementary information is needed or to clarify points.

Ensure your minister and their office have a good understanding of a matter. Your minister will make the best decisions when you state your recommendations and back them up with relevant evidence.

When you bring a problem to the attention of your manager or an executive, you should also present a set of options and solutions. These will inform the recommendations and decision points that are presented to your minister.

When you don't have all the information

There may be times you need to advise your minister's office of a rapidly developing matter, for which you haven't had time to develop a response proposal. For example, frequent changes in emergencies such as fires, floods and pandemics.

As an officer or an executive, remember to:

- always consult with the responsible executive
- be clear about what you do and don't know
- outline what actions are underway to address the issue.

As an executive, ensure the secretary and anyone else with relevant responsibility and authority is aware of the situation and the proposed approach.

When information becomes available, you may need to brief your minister again. Bring any proposals to the attention of the decision-maker as soon as possible through the appropriate channels. Note where information was previously provided.

Documenting decision-making

Ensure you document decisions so you have a record of:

- what decision was made
- who made it
- the information the decision was based on.

This is fundamental to responsible government and supports others to understand the rationale for the decision.

When you have a rapidly developing matter, well-documented decisions ensure everyone understands what needs to be done. For example, during a crisis. Well-documented decisions also help others look back at a matter and learn from any experiences, benefits or mistakes.

From its start through to its completion, always document any advice you develop so you can refer to it later. This can range from simple file notes or emails saved on your organisation's information management system to formally endorsed briefings that are saved in dedicated brief and correspondence systems.

Your organisation will have advice on how to meet any information storage requirements for these systems.

Documenting decision-making also supports your organisation's freedom of information (FOI) responsibilities. Your organisation will have a person or team responsible for FOI matters who can provide you with more information.

Oral advice or difficult formats

There may be times when you receive oral advice or advice in a format that's harder to document, such as with digital messaging platforms. This can often happen in times of urgency.

You still need to document the advice as per your [records-keeping obligations](#) if your interactions are directly involved in decision-making. This is so you can refer to it later. Talk with your organisation for advice on what to do. For example, writing a brief summarising the discussion and confirming the agreed next steps.

Build a relationship of trust

Build trust with your minister and their office using:

- a common understanding of roles and an open sharing of risks, information and ideas
- consistent practices that reflect the Victorian public sector values.

Your organisation will have processes and protocols developed between your secretary, your senior executive team and your minister. They support consistency when engaging

with your minister's office. Also refer to [Informing and advising Ministers – Guidance for Secretaries and senior executives](#).

Everyone should clearly understand these processes and protocols.

Your organisation may also have templates and other materials to support a professional working relationship.

If you're unsure of your agency's processes and protocols, and how you can feed into them, ask your manager.