

Briefing

If a Minister is about to hold a meeting, take part in a discussion, or make an official visit, you will submit written briefing. It is easy to forget that the primary purpose of a written briefing is to help Ministers achieve their objectives for the meeting. In order for this to happen all briefings should include the following elements, preferably in this order.

P *Reason For The Meeting:* Provide a brief explanation of why the meeting, visit etc. was arranged and who asked for it, e.g. 'You asked us to arrange this meeting to try to resolve the disagreement between . . . ' or 'This is another in the series of meetings in which you are meeting children's charities.'

P *Directions, Agenda etc:* These are very important! The person being briefed (or their Private Secretary) has to know when the meeting is taking place, how to get to it and what is to be discussed. The agenda should be agreed in advance with other participants and should, in the case of a long meeting, suggest starting times for each item.

P *Objectives:* This is the most important part of the brief. You must clearly identify what needs to be achieved if the meeting or visit is to be judged a success, e.g. 'The objective is to get the organisation to agree that . . . ' or 'The objective is to agree a price of £10m or less, for [the project] completed by the end of October', or 'Your objective is to learn about the company and the industry. But the company should also be given an opportunity to lobby about its current planning difficulties (see letter of . . . at Annex . . .)'.

Above all, as ever, think very carefully about whether the meeting is intended to help the Minister decide his/her policy direction – in which case he or she can be encouraged to enter into a fairly open discussion – or whether the meeting is intended to help the Minister achieve his or her pre-determined objectives, in which case his or her style will need to be more proactive or defensive as the case might be. Meetings with other Ministers should generally fall into the first category. It is a great mistake to encourage Ministers to take fixed positions when discussing genuinely difficult issues with colleagues – if only because the other Ministers will respond by adopting fixed positions themselves, so everybody wastes time.

P *Line to Take:* This is the section that the Minister will have in front of him at a formal meeting. Consider repeating it on a card, printed in large type in 1.5 spacing. Provide key points that need to be made and then, if necessary, add defensive material such as areas of vulnerability and the counter arguments. The whole thing should be in a form that can be read out. Do not include confidential material here, in case it too is read out!

P *Participants:* You should provide the forenames and surnames, and positions, of the principal people who will be at the meeting or the principal hosts of a visit. And unless the person being briefed knows them quite well, add a brief c.v. and a note

of other important or other relevant facts.

P *Background:* This is often the least important part of the briefing. In general, the length of the background should be in proportion to the length, complexity and importance of the meeting, and in inverse proportion to the knowledge of the person being briefed. A first, day-long visit to a major institution will therefore justify comprehensive background briefing, including a copy of their latest annual report. You may also consider using a commercial database or the internet. And briefing for a difficult or complex negotiation must include a summary of previous discussions (whether at official or Ministerial level) as well as copies of all documents, legislation etc. that might be referred to. On the other hand a second or third, essentially courtesy call might require little more background briefing than a reference to recent news, or recently-raised issues.

Finally, try to ensure that one official takes responsibility for gathering together, and clearly presenting, all the briefing for a meeting, even if several officials provide contributions. It may seem to officials that the meeting will deal with a number of different subjects, but the Minister will see only one meeting and needs to be presented with one set of objectives, one agenda and one set of papers, clearly presented and flagged.