

Ministerial Correspondence

You will draft replies to a huge number of letters during your career, both for your own signature and that of others. The key thing to remember is that you should draft a letter which:

- positively, persuasively, clearly and accurately states the Minister's views
- clearly sets out any follow up action, and
- provides a full reply to the incoming correspondence.

Letters should also:

- show that the Minister appreciates what is troubling the correspondent,
- be polite and helpful
- use clear, uncomplicated language and short sentences, and
- be to the point, avoiding jargon and references to legislation unless they are absolutely necessary

As always, you must be clear, before you start on the reply, what mode you are in. Is the correspondence part of the process through which policy is decided, or are you in 'promote/defend' or 'implement' mode? Correspondence about policy development or policy implementation can be more interesting, because you can (or the Minister can) admit uncertainty and enter into genuine debate. Defensive letters are more boring, because you want to close the correspondence. It is therefore tempting – and sometimes necessary – to draft something very short, simply saying that the correspondent's views have been noted, or rehearsing the Government's position without responding to the particular points in the incoming letter. But try to do better than this. The person at the other end will almost certainly have invested a lot of time and emotion in the letter to the Minister and it is awful if they just get a brush off by way of reply. Equally, however, do not beat about the bush if, for instance, there is little or no prospect of the Minister agreeing to something, including an invitation.

Now a word about mechanics. Private Offices divide incoming correspondence into four broad categories.

First, there is inter-Ministerial correspondence – formal letters or minutes sent from a Minister in one department to a colleague in another. These are very important bits of paper because they represent the main route through which policy problems are aired and resolved. An odd feature is the copy list which is in the final paragraph 'I am copying this letter to the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer . . . and to Sir Humphrey Appleby [i.e. to the Cabinet Secretariat]'. When drafting the reply you should never say 'I am copying this letter to recipients of yours' – for this makes life very difficult for Private Office correspondence clerks who will not have the original letter easily to hand.

Next, there are letters and emails to which the Minister will reply. These include most

letters from MPs, MEPs, members of the devolved administrations and key opinion-formers. You will in time become quite expert at drafting replies to such letters. Replies to MP's letters usually begin:

Thank you for your letter of [date] enclosing correspondence from your constituent, Mrs . . . , [Managing Director of . . . Co Ltd.] of [full address] about [subject].

The third category – relatively small in number – consists of MPs' and similar letters which are passed on to senior civil servants, usually Agency Chief Executives, for them to reply in their own name. This happens only when the result is that the correspondence is handled in a way most likely to meet the needs of the MP and his or her constituent. The usual benefits are that the MP and his or her constituent get a quicker reply; the reply comes from the person who has direct responsibility for the subject matter of the correspondence, and direct access to the facts; and there are paper handling and staff cost savings. However, if an MP specifically asks for a Ministerial reply, then this must be given. And officials should never reply to MPs' or similar correspondence which raises political issues, or issues on which the policy is not settled.

Then comes the largest category of all, the letters from the public which are sent down for 'official reply'. These vary hugely in style, content and importance. It is therefore a great mistake to treat them all in the same way. Some will be so interesting or important that the Minister should be asked to reply. And others will not need a reply at all. But the majority will receive a reply, which might begin:

Thank you for your letter of [date] to the Secretary of State for . . . about [subject]. I have been asked to reply.

You will become particularly adept at drafting polite replies to the numerous invitations that reach Ministers' offices. Indeed, it can be particularly tricky to draft a reply to an invitation. Some suggestions, to get you started, are in Annex 1 at the end of this book.

Incidentally, it is useful to know that:

- Those honoured by the Queen become 'Sirs', 'OBEs' etc. on the day of announcement. But it takes two or three weeks before a new Lord or Baroness is properly created. Until then they retain their former status.
- Only Privy Counsellors (i.e. all current and former Cabinet Ministers and a few current or former senior non-Cabinet Ministers) are 'Rt. Hon.'
- It is best to refer to Baronesses as 'Baroness X' rather than 'Lady X', so as to distinguish them from women who become 'Ladies' when their husbands become 'Sirs'.