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INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT

Strengthening private office

How the civil service should improve support for ministers

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About this report

Private offices provide essential assistance to ministers. But some struggle to recruit and retain experienced staff, and fail to deliver the support ministers need to achieve their aims in government. This report sets out how the civil service can improve private offices to ensure that every minister is supported capably.

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Summary

"Your private office is the reason you'll succeed or fail."
Maria Miller, culture secretary, 2012–14

All ministers – from cabinet members to parliamentary secretaries – are provided with the support of a team of civil servants who form their 'private office'. Led by a principal private secretary (PPS) or, in junior ministers' offices, a head of office typically managed by the PPS, this small team of private secretaries remains in place regardless of government of the day or any reshuffles. Special advisers and some senior civil servants receive similar support.

Their job is to welcome a new minister on their first day and help them settle into their role, support them in taking decisions and follow up on their implementation. Private offices are responsible for essential administration, such as managing the minister's diary and correspondence, taking and distributing meeting notes, and co-ordinating and summarising papers submitted to the ministerial 'red box'. But they also play a series of more complex roles: advising the minister on how to get things done in government, managing relationships across Whitehall and marshalling the department to achieve their minister's priorities. They are the 'face' of the department to ministers and their work will affect how ministers view the wider department.

Recent events in government, including the circumstances surrounding Dominic Raab's resignation as justice secretary in May, have further strained the relationship between ministers and civil servants. In this context, and with the likelihood of a raft of new ministers, with new priorities, taking office after the next general election (whatever the outcome) it is more crucial than ever to reset that relationship. As the most immediate point of contact between ministers and their department, and indeed the wider civil service, private office is a good place to start. This works both ways: it is important that ministers create a positive culture with their private office staff, and that private office teams provide a high quality service to ministers.

Drawing upon the Institute for Government's extensive archive of interviews with former ministers, as well as interviews with 27 people working in and around private office – including current and former ministers, private secretaries, senior civil servants, special advisers and parliamentary assistants – this paper assesses the health of the private office model as it stands today. We bring together insights into how some private offices, departments and ministers are already handling problems and offer our own recommendations for change, looking at five key areas of the private office's role in turn: recruitment, training, handling parliament, organisation and staffing, and civil service accountability.

Is the private office model working?

Private offices are an "old and familiar part of the Whitehall furniture".[1] They operate broadly the same way as they did 50 years ago, based on a model with origins in the 18th century.[2] But in interviews, current and former private secretaries, senior civil servants and special advisers all resisted the suggestion that the private office is an outdated system of support for ministers. We talked to staff from a non-departmental public body that has, in recent years, developed support for its chief executive based on the ministerial private office who found it far more effective than their previous approach. Several interviewees who had left government for the private or third sector argued private offices are much better than the support offered to other senior decision makers such as CEOs – typically a single executive assistant. One had even recreated a private office structure within their new organisation.

Former ministers often praise the dedication and skill of their private office teams. For instance, the former sports minister Tracey Crouch recalled "fantastic" support, highlighting conscientious diary management that afforded her time for her young family. Paul Burstow, a Liberal Democrat minister in the coalition government, said his private office "went above and beyond" and was "very good at working the corridor on the fourth floor on my behalf" to promote and guard his agenda in government.

A strength of the private office model is that it can be highly adaptable to the needs of an individual minister. Many interviewees gave examples of private offices changing personnel, restructuring office responsibilities, bringing in data analysts and supporting functions such as implementation units to meet the needs of a specific secretary of state.

In 2013, driven by concerns that ministers were not getting enough say over who they could appoint to their immediate teams or enough support to drive through their policy priorities in office, the government introduced provisions for extended ministerial offices (EMOs).[3] These allowed ministers to directly recruit and manage a group of expert policy advisers as temporary, non-political civil servants to help them with key initiatives.[4] EMOs were not initially popular, in large part due to a requirement that one member of the extended office report to 10 Downing Street.[5] The Institute has criticised EMOs for isolating ministers from their departments, undermining the primary role of the private office: acting as a bridge between a minister and their department, transmitting ministers' political priorities into the department and curating departmental advice to present to ministers.[6]

Yet EMOs left a legacy: ministers are still able to appoint one or two expert policy advisers, often hired personally and outside of usual civil service procedures, to achieve their aims in government. Successful private offices have shown their flexibility by incorporating this aspect of the EMO system.

When private offices work well, they work very well – the problem is that not all of them do. Caroline Dinenage, a former minister of state, told the Institute that "it's only later on, when your private office isn't working very well, that you realise how lucky you are if you move into a private office that works well", while the former home secretary Jacqui Smith highlighted that a "key issue for you as a minister, although over which you have relatively little control, particularly as a junior minister... [is] the extent to which your private office helps you to do the job".

Many ministers express frustration with the support they receive from officials, including with basic functions such as managing the ministerial diary and filtering the quality and quantity of submissions. Ministers are also often unsatisfied with the advice their private secretaries provide, in particular with officials' lack of understanding of parliament and its implications for the work of government. Some, like the science minister, George Freeman, report feeling like "my private office was not 'my' private office. It was the civil service's private office for setting my priorities." Others complain about insufficient "challenge", feeling their private office didn't always give frank feedback on ministerial proposals where necessary, or were afraid of serving up news or advice that they didn't think the minister would welcome.[7]

While preferences may differ, former ministers often tell us they value private offices that are proactive and take initiative. Tessa Jowell, a secretary of state in the last Labour government, recalled needing a private office who were more than "people who stapled the submissions together and put them in your box". The former Conservative minister Alan Duncan felt that "a minister can be deeply hamstrung by a formula rules-driven private secretary who has no imagination". However, both ministers and experienced civil servants described the common occurrence of 'transactional' or 'post box' private offices, which competently manage ministers' diaries and paperwork but do not make a strategic contribution to the ability of ministers to work the civil service machine to achieve their aims in government.

Private office acts as a route to promotion, not a valued specialism

Like many roles within the civil service, private office is not treated as a specialism that requires specific background or training to do well. A job as a private secretary is considered a career stepping stone; a role in which to gain experience, rather than one that requires experience.[8] While positions are prestigious, the long and unpredictable hours mean officials often find the pace of work difficult to sustain and tend to spend only a short time in private office before moving on to 'bigger and better' things. This creates a system in which, as the former secretary of state David Blunkett once complained, "private office is a training scheme for people to dib in and out of".[9] Yet new private secretaries typically receive no formal training. They are expected to learn on the job, compounding problems caused by the fact they are often inexperienced.

The civil service has failed to realise the benefits of encouraging private offices to work together. There is, for instance, no means to share lessons and best practice systematically between private offices or more broadly across government. In practice, this is more often done by the circulation of staff and ministers themselves between roles in different departments (which has its own drawbacks).

Poor service is overlooked as it mostly affects junior ministers

While private offices serving secretaries of state are not immune to problems, it is junior ministers who most commonly lack the support of an experienced and effective private office. The best internal candidates apply for prestigious positions – which are often also more senior and better paid – working for the secretary of state. Junior ministers' offices, which tend to be smaller than secretary of states' teams, are sometimes staffed by officials with just a few months' experience in the civil service, or even external recruits. This is a problem because so much of the role of a private office is helping a minister to navigate Whitehall, something that isn't possible if the private secretaries cannot navigate Whitehall themselves.

If new ministers are paired with inexperienced private secretaries problems can go overlooked – ministers in their first role in government may be unaware that the support they are receiving is inadequate. For instance, the Institute heard from a junior minister who had not realised their private office could provide 'box notes' summarising papers submitted to their red box. There is no robust system in place to ensure basic standards are being met by all private offices. In interviews, former permanent secretaries recalled spotting and addressing problems in the offices of secretaries of state but said they tended to have little involvement with junior ministers or their private offices. It is easy to see how poor service can fall through the cracks.

Improving the capability of junior ministers' private offices as well as the co-ordination between different private offices within departments is a prerequisite to establishing effective ministerial teams. Interviewees told the Institute that the civil service sometimes views junior ministers as a low priority compared to secretaries of state, as existing for party management purposes and not of practical use in the work of the department. But it matters when they are under-supported.

Junior ministers often carry out parliamentary business that is vital to the work of government, and delegating decision making to junior ministers is a useful means of easing the overload on secretaries of state. It would be naïve to ignore that political and personal relationships between ministers can constrain a secretary of state's willingness to delegate to their colleagues. But ineffective private offices leave junior ministers poorly equipped to handle responsibility, and more likely to make mistakes that lead to loss of confidence from the secretary of state. Where ministers do push for more co-ordination with their colleagues, poor private offices can impede them working together effectively. Stephen Crabb, the former pensions secretary, remembered "working quite hard to build collegiate relationships with the other junior ministers" but "didn't always get a sense that the private office worked like that".

Ministers have a role in shaping the support they receive

As this report sets out, the civil service has work to do to improve the capability of private offices – but ministers also have a responsibility to communicate their needs to officials clearly, use the resources they are provided with effectively, and build good working relationships with civil servants and their ministerial colleagues.

There is a relatively high degree of flexibility for ministers to reshape the working style and structure of their private offices, but that does not mean they should do away with everything they inherit in their office. There are certain essential functions that are needed in private office regardless of what else changes – diary management, handling policy advice and managing relationships across government. Private secretaries must be organised such that they have sufficient oversight of work and relationships in the wider department. While ministers should be able to change the structures of their private office, it is important that they do not get rid of these core functions.

Ministers are often particularly keen to replace their predecessor's PPS or head of office with someone of their choice. If a minister and the head of their private office struggle to work together effectively, it is right for the permanent secretary to find a suitable alternative. But making requests rashly can cause unnecessary disruption and undermine the quality of support a minister receives from their private office. Before asking for a change, ministers should articulate clearly what isn't working in the current relationship, and carefully consider the trade-offs of a replacement.

What's more, due to their own demanding schedules, ministers often place a high premium on officials' willingness to work long and unpredictable hours. But they should recognise that a skilled private secretary who can't work weekends is of more value than an ineffective one who can. Lord Mandelson recalled seeking out an experienced candidate on the agreement that he could "take [his children] to school and read to them at bedtime... that was the arrangement and neither of us regretted it".

The culture created by ministers themselves dictates the kind and quality of support they receive. Ministers who claim to want 'challenge' from officials do not always proactively encourage it, nor do they always receive it well. Civil servants will not challenge a minister unless that minister creates an environment in which they feel comfortable doing so. Some interviewees described ministers who 'empowered' their private secretaries by making clear that they trusted them. But others described how ministers sometimes instilled a culture of bullying and intimidation – in which civil servants were naturally reluctant to push back.

Ministers should set clear expectations for how they want their private office, special advisers, and any externally hired policy advisers to work together, treating them as one team with separate responsibilities. Politically appointed advisers play an important role supporting ministers in ways that private office staff cannot[10] – but officials and advisers working in isolation or competing with each other for the minister's favour make for a dysfunctional support system. The head of office must ensure private office staff work with special and external advisers to pursue their minister's aims in government.

But ministers and advisers also have a role in building effective relationships with private office teams, including bringing them into key conversations so that they can understand and communicate political needs and priorities to the rest of the department. New advisers may benefit from inductions covering how they can work well inside government and use resources such as private offices most effectively.

Secretaries of state should give thought to how they use their ministerial teams, as well as their private offices. While private offices have a role facilitating communication between ministers, only the secretary of state can lead on collaboration. When secretaries of state sideline their colleagues, it signals to the civil service that junior ministers are a low priority, and adds to their own workload. However, junior ministers cannot expect to take on political leadership for policy areas if they do not demonstrate their understanding of the secretary of state's strategic vision, or capably carry out those tasks they are assigned. Regardless of politics and personal differences, ministers have a duty to find a way to work together in government.

The Institute has previously recommended that prime ministers extend reshuffles over longer than is typical, to allow secretaries of state some influence over the make-up of their teams and thereby encourage more trust in their junior ministers.[11] At the very least, prime ministers should give more thought to how they assemble their departmental ministerial teams – and in turn, secretaries of state should give more thought to how they lead them.

The rest of this report brings together our recommendations on how to address the issues highlighted here – looking at recruitment, training, handling parliament, organisation and staffing, and civil service accountability.

Recruitment

Private secretaries need experience to help their ministers navigate Whitehall

One of the primary roles of a private office is to act as an 'institutional' guide. At the most basic level, private offices are responsible for explaining to ministers their responsibilities and how processes such as submissions and write-rounds work. Arguably it is junior ministers, typically still early in their government careers, who are in most need of help navigating Whitehall. Steve Webb reflected on his first role in government, telling the Institute how much he valued having an "experienced hand in the private office who if I'd ruffled feathers could quietly nip downstairs and smooth them, or knew who in another department was the right person to talk to".

But even the most experienced ministers benefit from a private office team with deep departmental understanding. A good private secretary might, for example, point out that a recommendation at the end of a submission is a compromise between two directors with which neither is entirely happy; explain who is blocking progress on a project and what might be done about it; or recommend when and how the minister should alert No.10 to a problem.

The PPS or head of private office also plays a key role upholding propriety and ethics, advising and enforcing what ministers can and cannot do. Without this support, ministers run the risk of falling foul of the rules and finding themselves out of government altogether. Special advisers and ministerially appointed policy advisers can offer valuable fresh thinking and challenge to civil service advice, but it is essential that ministers are also closely supported by career civil servants who understand how the system works, can advise on constraints and challenges from the department's perspective, and can communicate the minister's priorities and political needs back to the department.

In interviews we heard time and again how important it was for private secretaries to have prior experience working in the department to fulfil this role successfully. One former PPS told us about the importance of understanding departmental decision making processes; another that departmental relationships were one of the key attributes a private secretary should bring to the role.

However, junior ministers are sometimes supported by private secretaries with little or no experience in Whitehall. We talked to former private secretaries who had joined junior ministers' private offices after less than six months in the civil service, as well as both current and former PPSs who had recruited external candidates into junior ministers' private offices. Another former PPS told us they were concerned that too many "brand new recruits" go into private office, who might not know some of the basics of how government works.

The situation is similar when it comes to private offices supporting special advisers. We interviewed a former assistant private secretary and a former private secretary to special advisers who had both been recruited externally. One described the steep

learning curve of starting out in private office while working out how the civil service, government and parliament worked – and indeed, the difference between them.

Getting to grips with relationships is even more of a challenge: another external recruit recalled "being kind of mystified, looking up job titles on the organogram trying to make head or tail of who I needed to talk to". Having since moved into a policy team, they explained that as a private secretary they had never properly understood how much work went into a submission, and confessed to having only now realised "exactly what it was we in private office were asking from the department". One former permanent secretary told us that this relative lack of experience means that private secretaries in junior ministers' offices often become too aligned with the minister, against the department.

While it is right for a private office to focus on achieving their minister's aims, it is crucial that they can act as a bridge between the minister and the department, helping each to obtain what they need from the other, and to work together effectively.[12] Failing to understand the department's needs and constraints only isolates the minister from important information. For example, a private secretary without departmental experience may lack understanding of economic impact assessments or legislative drafting. Without adequate experience in Whitehall, it is very difficult for a private secretary to fulfil their role as an institutional guide, leaving ministers under-supported and disconnected from the department they are trying to lead.

Private office roles should require minimum experience

Part of the problem with recruiting appropriate staff to work in private office is that within the civil service, jobs in private office are thought of as a way to gain experience, rather than roles that require experience. According to research by the Social Mobility Commission, a stint as a private secretary is an "accelerator role", linked to fast-tracked progression within the civil service.[13] Long considered "a training ground for high office", nearly every permanent secretary was once a private secretary.[14]

Not only is private office an "accelerator", but exposure to ministers and top officials helps to develop officials' personal networks and their understanding of senior decision making, both of which are beneficial when applying for future jobs. Civil servants we interviewed often instead stressed the value of experience gained in private office. One interviewee said they had treated it like a "finishing school" before going for promotion to a higher grade and described private secretaries as mostly HEOs in their early twenties going for promotion.

The future prospects associated with a job in private office are helpful for attracting bright and ambitious officials – at least, for positions in the office of a secretary of state. But the practice of taking on a promising fast streamer with a couple of years under their belt seems – in some, more junior private offices – to have slipped into hiring officials with just months or no prior experience in Whitehall at all. When recruiting private secretaries, proper weight needs to be placed on the current experience and capability of officials as well as their potential.

- **Job postings for private secretaries supporting ministers or special advisers should require candidates with at least two years' experience in the civil service, ideally with previous experience within the relevant department.**

- **Departments should ensure new private office staff have proper inductions so they can meet key figures in the department and understand their work, supporting them to build relationships quickly.**

Diary managers supporting ministers should be subject to slightly different requirements to private secretaries. Ministers often emphasise the importance of diary management: former minister Nick Hurd told the Institute that "the most important person in the room is the diary manager because management of your time as a minister is absolutely critical... The system wastes so much of your time in meetings and the instinct is to fill your time." But good diary managers are hard to come by – several interviewees told us they were "like gold dust". The former Conservative leader of the House of Lords, Baroness Stowell, said that she had personally trained the diary managers in her office after finding they weren't doing the job to her standards.

Interviewees described two types of diary managers in private offices. The first were professional diary managers with years – if not decades – of diary management experience who are highly sought after. The second were new civil servants, typically very junior and without experience in managing a diary, who move on quickly to a policy role. Interviewees agreed that it was not necessary to have worked in Whitehall before to do a diary secretary job well, but it was important to have previous experience in managing a diary. It is therefore sensible for private offices to look beyond the civil service to hire external candidates with diary management experience.

This will likely require paying a competitive salary on par with equivalent roles in the private sector, reflecting the high value that ministers place on this skill. Some private offices have already made changes with the aim of better attracting and retaining experienced executive assistants. For instance, we interviewed one PPS who had upgraded the diary manager for the secretary of state to a more senior 'office manager' role, with oversight of other processes in the private office such as ensuring papers went into the minister's red box on time, and overseeing correspondence.

- **Postings for diary managers supporting ministers should require candidates with diary management experience and should be advertised externally by default.**

- **Private offices should consider recruiting for a more senior 'office manager' role paid a competitive salary on par with equivalent jobs in the private sector.**

- **If unable to recruit an experienced diary manager, the head of office should ensure that diary management training and support are provided to new hires.**

Departments should make working for junior ministers more attractive

Introducing minimum requirements for experience for private secretary roles will not work where there is an insufficient supply of suitable internal candidates. We heard that jobs supporting a secretary of state attract plenty of good applicants, but several interviewees admitted that it is difficult to recruit talent into junior ministerial offices. The former minister of state Hugo Swire described how he had been "expecting when they advertised for a new private secretary for me that I would have some of the greatest high fliers in the Foreign Office coming through, and alas that was not the case... I was presented with one candidate." This can be a particular problem in Lords ministers' offices. The former Labour minister Lord Myners told the Institute: "My first private office was made up of people who nobody else wanted."

A former PPS told us they began running external recruitment rounds for junior ministers' private offices only after struggling to fill vacancies. It seems that, currently, many of the internal candidates applying to work in the secretary of state's office do not consider applying to work for a junior minister.

Some interviewees cited the long and unpredictable hours of a private secretary as the cause of recruitment difficulties. But this does not explain the disparity between secretary of state and junior ministers' private offices, as hours are broadly comparable. The real difference is in prestige, and sometimes seniority and pay. Although junior ministers are responsible for much of the important, lower-profile work of government, they are less influential than secretaries of state and have more limited involvement in decision making. For this reason, positions in their private offices will likely always be less prestigious.

However, hiring managers should consider how they can shift this perception and better 'sell' roles in junior ministers' private offices to internal candidates. A key attraction of working with a junior minister might be that their smaller private offices facilitate a closer working relationship. Hiring managers should also emphasise that experience in a junior minister's office puts officials in a stronger position to apply for a senior position in the secretary of state's office in the future.

Because it is difficult to shift perceptions around prestige, it is even more important to reduce disparities in seniority and pay. In some departments private secretaries to junior ministers are more junior than those in the secretary of state's office. A secretary of state is typically supported by a PPS and sometimes a deputy PPS at senior civil service grade, with private secretaries usually at grade 6 or 7. In some departments, only the single most senior private secretary in a junior minister's office is a grade 7, with the rest being lower-ranking officials on accordingly lower salaries.

Secretaries of state have greater responsibilities than junior ministers. Their private offices cover a broader portfolio and take a co-ordinating role within the department and across government. It makes sense for the secretary of state's office to be staffed by a greater number of private secretaries and led by senior civil servants; staffing every junior ministerial office with an official at the same grade as the PPS

or deputy PPS would be unnecessarily resource intensive and could disrupt reporting lines. However, making the private secretaries and assistant private secretaries in a junior minister's office of equivalent seniority to those supporting the secretary of state, and paying them accordingly, would help to attract candidates with the same level of experience.

One former PPS told us they had success using 'near-miss' candidates applying to roles in the secretary of state's office to staff junior ministers' offices, as well as using shared recruitment rounds to fill positions across all ministerial private offices in the department. These methods can help to tap into the talent pool of candidates attracted by the prestige of working for the secretary of state who might not otherwise apply to work with a junior minister. Hiring private secretaries at equal seniority and pay across all ministerial offices in a department would help to support this.

Collaboration across junior ministerial offices may also help resolve recruitment problems. In the Treasury in the mid-2010s, two junior ministers were supported by distinct teams working in a shared office space with some overlapping functions. This could be taken further: departments might wish to experiment with the model of a single private office serving all junior ministers.

This office could be headed up by a senior civil servant acting as deputy PPS, who would be able to oversee and support inexperienced private secretaries – but a single combined private office might also justify higher-graded roles for a smaller overall number of officials supporting junior ministers, increase their prestige and thereby help to attract more experienced candidates. Each junior minister could still be closely supported by a lead private secretary acting as 'point person' for their agenda in government. But an otherwise shared staff would facilitate more effective management of work, allow flexibility to draw on resource as and when required, promote increased co-ordination between junior ministers and help them to spot problems across policy areas.

- **Where this is not already the case, departments should appoint private secretary and assistant private secretary roles in junior ministers' private offices at equivalent grade and salary to the secretary of state's office.**

- **Hiring managers should review 'near misses' from previous vacancies in the secretary of state's office and encourage suitable candidates to apply for roles in the offices of junior ministers.**

- **Where possible, hiring managers should run shared recruitment rounds for vacancies in the secretary of state's office and junior ministers' offices.**

- **Hiring managers should consider how they can better 'sell' roles in junior ministers' private offices to internal candidates, for instance through informational campaigns.**

Departments should build a pipeline of private office talent

Outside of recruitment rounds, private offices should identify and encourage civil servants working in the wider department who might be a good fit for future roles. Some private offices already use a 'locuming' or 'cover weeks' system where officials are rotated in to temporarily cover the duties of private secretaries who are ill or on annual leave. This strengthens support for current private office staff, allowing them to take appropriate time off and thereby guarding against the burnout associated with working long and unpredictable hours. It also creates a 'stable' of people in the department with some experience in private office, helping them to decide if it is a good fit for them and if so, putting them in a strong position to apply for future vacancies.

This, in turn, facilitates the department's understanding of private office and of their ministers. Ministers also appreciate the chance to trial officials who might later join their private offices. One junior minister told us that locuming helps to identify the right people with the right skills. However, we heard this works best when the official is covering a period longer than a week or two, as it takes a while to settle into the role. And there may be only a limited number of locuming opportunities available, depending on the working patterns of current private office staff.

'Private office bootcamps' are a shorter-term but wider-reaching means of giving officials in the department a taste of what the job might be like and putting them in a stronger position to apply for future roles. We heard that in the past one department had run day-long bootcamps putting officials through a series of typical private office tasks, which served to both identify potential future recruits and provide them with basic training in private office processes. However, this was resource intensive and driven by individual volunteers – without institutional backing the initiative fell away when those staff members moved on.

Running a regular bootcamp programme across the civil service would provide private office experience to officials in a broad and accessible way, complementing the more immersive but also more limited locuming opportunities offered through departments. This could be centrally co-ordinated by the Private Office Network, a previously informal support network for private office staff that has recently been brought inside the civil service policy profession and which is now in the process of creating training materials for new private office staff.

Departments should think carefully about how they can use locuming and bootcamps to open up opportunities to officials who might not usually consider jobs in private office. Private office staff tend to be relatively young as the demands of the role are difficult to manage with dependents. But older staff, depending on their circumstances, could be an untapped pool of internal talent with the skills and experience to do well in private office.

Similarly, while private secretaries are typically policy officials, in some cases ministers might be well served by civil servants with experience of delivery functions in the department. For instance, an immigration minister might benefit from a private

secretary who understands immigration casework and the operation of Border Force. This will also be beneficial to the department as somebody close to the minister will understand how policy looks on the ground.

- **Private offices should use locuming to identify and trial staff in the department who might be a good fit for future vacancies, including those from non-traditional backgrounds or who might not usually consider a role in private office.**

- **The Private Office Network should help to co-ordinate and promote locuming opportunities within and between departments and organise regular private office 'bootcamps' across the civil service.**

Private offices should support staff to return after time away

Junior staff often work in private office for only a short amount of time: interviewees' estimates of the average period ranged from nine months to two years, with several citing examples of even shorter stints. Interviews with both junior and senior civil servants suggest that turnover is – to an extent – inevitable: private office jobs entail long hours due to the demands of ministerial schedules. Private secretaries working eight-hour days while ministers continued into the night would leave ministers unsupported at critical times and leave private office out of the loop on urgent matters.

Some interviewees suggested job sharing roles in private office, which they believed could help ease the workload of individual officials. But others dismissed the possibility, particularly at senior level; they thought it would make it harder to keep across all relevant issues in a portfolio, and crucially, to build a relationship with the minister. We heard of no examples where job shares had been implemented.

Several interviewees felt it was detrimental for officials to remain in private office for more than two or three years. One former PPS argued that "if you stay in private office too long, you become too close to the minister and lose that all-important understanding of the department – which makes you less effective". Another, who described themselves as a "career private office person", nonetheless attested that spending a few years back in a departmental role brought them new insight when returning again to private office at a more senior level. They warned from experience that staying with a minister for an extended period can lead to loss of credibility with other civil servants. Permanent secretaries generally discourage senior private secretaries from moving with a minister to a different department, although it does happen on rare occasions.

High turnover, then, is something to be worked with rather than resolved – private office staff moving back into the department after a few years can guard against both burnout and perceptions of being 'captured' by the minister. However, the civil service needs to ensure that private secretaries are supported to go back into private office after a period elsewhere in the department if they wish to do so, to ensure that talented staff aren't discouraged after a single stint. Private office should be seen as a valued specialism in the civil service, not merely a stepping stone.

Formal career-planning would be difficult to implement. However, secondment schemes allowing private office staff to spend six months to a year supporting a project elsewhere in the department, before returning, would allow officials to come back refreshed, with new skills and insight into the work of the department and help private offices to retain experienced staff. Departmental HR could also, on a voluntary basis, keep track of civil servants who have previously served in private office and draw their attention to future vacancies; for instance, through a regular newsletter. Running mentorship schemes pairing current and former private office staff could create an opportunity to pass on skills to less experienced officials, but might also help keep former staff engaged and interested in returning to a role in private office.

- **HR managers should offer private office staff secondments back into the department for six months to a year if they are feeling burnt out.**

- **HR managers should keep track of officials who have previous experience in private office and draw their attention to suitable vacancies.**

- **The Private Office Network should expand its existing offer of networking opportunities for civil servants in private office, including through mentorship or buddy schemes pairing current and former private office staff.**

Training

Private offices need to get the basics right

Ministers sometimes complain that private offices do not exercise the basics of their role – including diary management, the submissions process, and cross-Whitehall co-ordination – well. Baroness Stowell told the Institute that she organised a session on how to run a diary with a group of diary managers, after finding they weren't doing the job to her standards:

> **"When I went to DCLG I felt like I had to almost train people on what it is that you need to do in order to provide effective support to somebody... [my private office] worked really hard, had a great attitude and wanted to learn and I enjoyed helping them – because I knew that would mean they would be better at helping me."**

These functions aren't glamorous, but they are essential. And crucially they form the basis for the trust between ministers and their offices – which in turn allows the more strategic functions of the private office system to work. A private office that fails to manage diaries and handle submissions effectively is wasting the minister's time and frustrating a system that relies on quick decision making. Moreover, if administrative functions are not fulfilled by the private office, there is no reason why the minister should trust officials to manage more complex challenges such as departmental relationships.

The civil service should develop a curriculum for private office

Learning on the job is a necessary part of being a private secretary. Junior civil servants are unlikely to have prior experience working closely with ministers in a similar setting and the unique work of private office means some key skills are difficult to develop beforehand. But a lack of basic training limits private secretaries' opportunities to develop more complex skills, as they are forced to spend their early weeks in the job mastering the basics from scratch. Interviewees from the most junior to the most senior ranks of the civil service confirmed that few private secretaries are currently offered training specific to private office work.

One task unique to private office is writing 'box notes' – the cover sheets summarising each paper submitted to a minister's red box. These help the minister understand the context and implications of the submissions, and are particularly useful for ministers receiving numerous complex submissions daily. This makes them important tools of communication and relationship management. But box notes are often inadequate, particularly in junior ministerial offices. (We heard of one case where private secretaries were not providing box notes at all, and the minister did not know to ask for them – but this is rare.) More frequently, box notes are simply insufficient.

Some centralised basic training is currently under development. The Private Office Network has made a good start at producing videos on standard private office tasks, such as putting together a red box – heads of office should ensure that their junior staff have access to these at a minimum. But the network still has work to do. As well

as being trained in the basics, private secretaries should be supported in developing more complex skill sets, such as handling difficult relationships. The former National School of Government used to offer induction and skills development sessions for private secretaries, role-playing typical and crisis scenarios as well as connecting 'battle hardened' private secretaries and diary secretaries with new staff to pass on lessons learned through years of experience.

Today, some heads of office carry out similar training on an individual basis – one interviewee told us about a private office away day during which private secretaries took part in a 'difficult conversations' exercise using actors. However, this type of training is piecemeal and rare. Sessions aimed at discussing and developing the 'soft skills' needed to be an effective private secretary should be included in an expanded central curriculum offered to private office staff.

More broadly, running networking opportunities and mentorship schemes pairing current and former private office staff would help to convene a community of practice and create more informal opportunities to pass on advice and skills to less experienced officials. To support this work, the policy profession should provide the Private Office Network with proper resource to act as the professional centre and co-ordinating function for private office in the civil service.

Departments should still play an important role in inducting, training and developing new private office staff, given individual private offices operate differently to meet the needs of their minister. Departments must ensure that new private secretaries understand key departmental processes and are equipped with the necessary contacts to perform their roles effectively. In particular, departments should ensure effective handovers between outgoing and incoming staff to allow experienced officials to pass on tips, minimising loss of institutional memory and disruption to the work of the private office. Where possible, start and end dates could be arranged so new private secretaries have the opportunity to shadow the official they are replacing.

- **The Private Office Network should expand training offered to private secretaries. This should be developed into a formal curriculum, which might include:**
    - **Seminars led by experienced private secretaries**
    - **Informal group discussions including junior and senior private office staff, covering subjects such as handling complex submissions, relationship management, and maintaining links with the department**
    - **Exemplar materials, including box notes and ministerial diaries.**
- **Individual departments should supplement this with department-specific training, including on handovers.**

- **The Private Office Network should expand its existing offer of networking opportunities, including through mentorship or 'buddy schemes', pairing new private office staff with more experienced counterparts and potential future private secretaries with current staff.**

- **The policy profession should provide the Private Office Network with sufficient resource to cover the above (and other recommendations in this paper).**

Parliament

Private offices need to understand parliament to understand their minister

Demands on ministers' time and attention come not only from their department (and for secretaries of state, cabinet) but also from parliament. Parliamentary business, including engaging with colleagues on the backbenches, is crucial to implementing the government's agenda. Most ministers are also MPs, who must make time to engage with and represent their constituents – a particularly pressing responsibility for those holding marginal seats and especially in the run-up to general elections. Interviewees across government and the civil service told us that these competing demands were often poorly understood by private office.

Ministers for their part complain that civil servants fail to appreciate that they are accountable to parliament and must consider the parliamentary and party political implications of their work in government. One we spoke to reported frustration with the civil service's failure to understand parliament; another described themselves as "staggered" by it.

The problem is again particularly acute in junior ministers' offices, which is concerning given the key role often played by junior ministers in overseeing the passage of bills through parliament. Nick Hurd, a former minister for Northern Ireland, told the Institute: "In my experience, the civil service aren't very understanding of parliamentary process or the reality of that bit of a minister's job, let alone the constituency. That's still a failing in the system." The former minister Hugh Robertson agreed: "One of the things that the civil service, bizarrely, doesn't do terribly well is parliament. It doesn't understand it, and it doesn't understand the importance of a three-line whip."

This is not only a case of ministers complaining about the civil service. The senior officials we interviewed agreed that private offices often fail to appreciate the obligations and constraints conferred by parliament.

Tim Loughton, a former minister and select committee chair, offered one solution. During his time in office he was asked to give a talk to officials on parliament and was astonished by the appetite for it. However, he rightly pointed out that "it shouldn't take a minister to tell civil servants how parliament works". In recent years the Government Skills and Curriculum Unit has created resources and training on parliament for bill teams, departmental parliamentary teams, as well as policy officials more generally. Building on this work, the Private Office Network should develop practical resources and training on parliament geared specifically towards private office staff, designed to help with hands-on issues such as how to support a minister in handling parliamentary business and relationships. Training on parliament should be a core part of the central curriculum offered to private office staff.

- **Basic training offered to all private secretaries should include training on how parliament works, including the legislative process and how they can best support their minister with parliamentary business.**

Departmental parliamentary teams should be better integrated into private offices

Understanding of parliament is important beyond private office – wider department staff need to be properly equipped to support ministers' responsibilities in parliament. All departments have a team to manage the relationship with parliament, but one former permanent secretary described these as "a bit of a backwater". Other senior civil servants agreed.

Some PPSs reported changing the structure of private office to address this; for example, by introducing roles with explicit responsibility for overseeing and communicating with the departmental parliamentary team. Some asked the departmental parliamentary clerk to report to a senior private secretary or deputy PPS. Another experienced PPS made a deputy PPS responsible for oversight of wider ministerial support functions, including the parliamentary, correspondence and briefing teams. Other officials emphasised the importance of seating the departmental parliamentary team physically close to the private office to encourage close communication. These structural changes reduce the likelihood of parliamentary business being consigned to a dark corner of the department.

- **Departmental parliamentary teams should report directly to a senior private office official.**

Private offices should co-ordinate with their minister's parliamentary office

It is not just co-ordination with parliamentary teams in the department that can be a problem – private offices frequently fail to build good working relationships with staff in their minister's office in parliament. Separate ministerial and constituency diaries can be a common issue. In theory, ministers focus on government obligations from Monday to Thursday, before spending Friday, Saturday and Sunday on constituency duties. In practice, though, ministerial duties extend beyond four days of the week, and it is therefore important for private offices to collaborate with those supporting their minister across all areas of their work.

One minister's parliamentary researcher we spoke to complained about difficulties co-ordinating with private office – with no reliable, formal line of communication they depended on a personal relationship with an official whenever problems arose. But working across two diaries still presented problems: the individual concerned suggested giving parliamentary staff the security clearance necessary to access ministerial diaries, thereby allowing the two offices to run the minister's life from a single calendar. But some private office staff we spoke to resisted this: they argued that diary managers need total command of the diary, and that parliamentary staff do not have the appropriate training and security clearance to be privy to government business.

Other interviewees offered alternative solutions. A former private secretary recalled one minister's office holding a weekly or fortnightly meeting to which all of the minister's parliamentary staff, constituency staff and advisers were invited. This private secretary was also able to see the minister's constituency meetings in their diary, although not vice versa.

While it would often be inappropriate for parliamentary staff to access the details of government meetings, the two offices can – and in some cases do – work from a shared calendar. Ministerial meetings may often be sensitive, but this time can typically be blocked out in a calendar without revealing the purpose of the meeting or identity of the participants. This requires some pragmatism on the part of the private office: accepting that party, parliamentary and constituency obligations are an important part of the ministerial schedule, and that strong relationships with the minister's parliamentary office are vital.

Private office must find a way to work as part of one team across the various areas of the minister's life. As one deputy PPS told us: "It's the job of the diary secretary to make the parliamentary office their best friend." The former minister George Eustice even told the Institute that he would hold social events between parliamentary and private office to facilitate their relationship.

Getting this right goes to the heart of the challenge of private office: there are always cases where people make it work, but the system too often fails. Better established, formal mechanisms for co-ordination between private office and the minister's parliamentary office – alongside the more informal relationships that some officials build – would make for better supported ministers across all of their spheres of responsibility, all of the time.

- **The private office diary manager should be made responsible for co-ordination with the minister's parliamentary and constituency offices, as well as for maintaining a close working relationship.**

- **All ministerial, parliamentary and constituency obligations should be organised from a single diary, with access limited as necessary.**

Organisation and staffing

Ministers need to understand their options when it comes to 'ways of working'

Adapting to the individual needs of a minister is an essential part of a private office's job. Heads of office typically have a 'ways of working' discussion with their minister in their first days in a new role – covering things like whether they concentrate best in the morning or evening, whether they prefer to discuss advice in meetings or on paper, and how they prefer submissions to be laid out. This proactive engagement with ministerial working style enables the private office to process and present information in a way that works best for their minister, and remove distractions that could get in the way of decision making.

Sometimes these adjustments are absolutely essential for ministers to do their jobs well. Dame Sue Owen, a former permanent secretary, recalled the transformative change when Matt Hancock, who had been complaining about the length of his submissions, confided that he was dyslexic and did much better with numbers, tables and presentations than long written documents. Making this adjustment allowed Hancock, and therefore the department, to work more quickly and effectively.

Often new ministers have never thought about how they want to work before, especially with regard to making decisions, and are unaware of what adjustments can be made by the civil service to suit their needs. The former culture secretary Jeremy Wright recalled:

> **"The weirdest question I've probably ever been asked in my life is when I showed up in a department and the civil servant in my private office said: 'How do you like to work, minister?' You think, 'Well, what answer do you want? As little as possible? Only on Thursdays?'"**

Our interviews with those experienced in working in and around private office across Whitehall raised a number of useful examples of changes made to support the working style of ministers:

- Some ministers preferred to use a digital red box, set up on OneNote or email
- Some ministers set word limits or page limits on submissions
- One cabinet minister asked for meetings of no longer than 30 minutes – or if necessary, two consecutive 30-minute meetings with a short break in between
- One cabinet minister held monthly one-on-one stocktakes with each director general in their department to discuss upcoming work
- Lord Frost asked for access to his private office email address, so that he had sight of documents and queries as they came into his office throughout the day

- Tim Loughton organised a weekly 'open door' slot so civil servants of all seniorities could come to share ideas and concerns with him directly.

There is no single blueprint for how private offices should support their minister; there should always be room for innovation and new ideas, based on the needs of the individual. At the same time, private office staff – particularly the head of office – have a responsibility to ensure effective processes are followed and that ministers are getting the service they need to make properly informed decisions. This could mean, for example, insisting that a minister considers more detailed advice from officials, even if they prefer to make a decision after a quick WhatsApp exchange.[15]

Adapting to ministers' preferences must not mean skipping essential government processes. It would be helpful for both ministers and their senior private secretaries to have reference to examples of working style adjustments that have helped others, to ensure that ministers are fully aware of the possible changes their private offices can make, and to guide a clear and comprehensive 'ways of working' discussion.

- **The Private Office Network should survey its membership and interview former private office staff and ministers, to compile examples of 'ways of working' adjustments that ministers have found helpful in the past, their benefits and any drawbacks.**

- **It should publish this as a resource for ministers and private office staff, and regularly update it to include new practices.**

- **Heads of office should use this briefing to guide their initial 'ways of working' discussion with ministers.**

Ministers should have a chance to say how they want their private office structured

Beyond adjustments to private office processes it is possible for the PPS to make substantial changes to the structure of private office to meet the needs of the minister, in concert with the permanent secretary.

Ministers should have clear opportunities to have input into the way their private office is structured, but it is ultimately the PPS's responsibility to act on this in a way that allows the minister and department to work together effectively. They should not act on ministers' wishes blindly, but continue to take a directing role in how the private office is organised.

Some ministers may not have clear views on how they want their private office to work. And ministers and PPSs should avoid changing private office structures unnecessarily – it is possible to make alterations that are disruptive but add no value, or are even adverse. There are certain essential functions that are needed in private office, regardless of what else changes, such as managing the ministerial diary, handling the inward and outward flow of submissions and decisions, and communicating with other

private offices across Whitehall. Private secretaries need to be organised in a way that they have sufficient oversight of work and relationships in the wider department. Portfolios and reporting structures, whatever they are, need to be clear.

Allocation of resource also needs to be proportionate. Private office roles shouldn't unnecessarily replicate functions already housed in the department. For instance, ministers might consider whether an implementation unit focusing on their major priorities is necessary where there is an existing one overseeing the work of the department as a whole. Moreover, private offices should support ministers to interrogate and direct policy teams in the wider department, rather than acting as an alternative source of policy advice, which only disconnects the minister from the civil servants who best understand policies and are responsible for developing and implementing them.

To this end, it can be helpful to bring in a small number of externally hired expert advisers to provide fresh thinking and directly support ministers – but too many risks breaking down the system of a permanent, impartial civil service. Undermining the central role of private office as a bridge between the minister and the wider department only damages its ability to help ministers operate the civil service machine to achieve their aims.[16]

There is a relatively high degree of flexibility to reshape the structure of private offices. We heard examples of PPSs increasing or decreasing the number of staff in a private office; changing staff portfolios, reporting structures, or seniority; recruiting specialist staff such as data scientists; and creating a policy or implementation unit in the orbit of the private office focusing on the secretary of state's priorities.

Despite the dismantling of extended ministerial offices (EMOs) in 2017, current ministers continue to make use of expert advisers brought in outside of normal civil service procedure. For instance, in 2020 the Department for Transport set up an acceleration unit as an EMO reporting directly to the transport secretary.[17] The environment secretary, Thérèse Coffey, recently appointed an expert from the Conservative Environment Network as a policy adviser, showing that ministers can bring in politically aligned staff through routes other than appointing them as a special adviser.[18]

It seems that almost any change to the organisation of a private office remains possible where the minister requires it to make things work better. But beyond the option to employ an external adviser, many ministers are unaware that they have any influence over the way that their private office is organised or what these changes could look like.

Efforts to restructure private offices are usually initiated by either an experienced PPS or sometimes a minister who has seen alternative models work well in other departments. This may be born out of 'ways of working' discussions or early conversations with a minister about their priorities for the department, at which point

the PPS might decide that more widespread organisational changes are necessary to provide the support the minister needs to achieve their aims. But there is no automatic juncture at which a head of office sits down with their minister and permanent secretary to discuss the resourcing and organisation of their private office.

Ministers and civil servants distracted by dealing with other issues might easily never have a conversation on the subject at all. And there are few formal mechanisms for passing on best practice regarding private office structures. The recent introduction of a PPS network and private office conference offer some limited opportunities, but most commonly, best practice is shared only through prior experience and word of mouth.

Apart from a small number of junior ministers who employed an external policy adviser, every example of organisational changes to private offices we heard about was in the office of a secretary of state. One junior minister said they felt they had very limited influence over the roles and portfolios in their private office. While it may not be an appropriate use of resource to double the size of their office, establish an EMO or set up an implementation unit overseeing their priorities, junior ministers would nonetheless benefit from a conversation with their head of office about what changes are feasible and might be helpful.

Most changes that a minister wants to make to the structure of their office are likely to be relatively small and straightforward, and therefore would be unlikely to cross the desk of either the permanent secretary or the secretary of state. However, a junior minister may want to take the advice of the permanent secretary or secretary of state when thinking about how they can make their office as effective as possible. Conversely, a secretary of state is unlikely to want, or have time, to get involved in how their ministerial colleagues run their offices, but may be able to offer advice.

- **A few months after a minister has been appointed to a new role, the permanent secretary should set up a conversation with the minister and their PPS or head of office to discuss the structure and staffing of their private office.**

- **The Private Office Network should survey its membership, and interview former private office staff and ministers, to compile different models for organising and staffing private offices.* The network should publish this as a resource for ministers and private office staff, and regularly update it to include new practices.**

* As a starting point for this work, changes to the structure and organisation of private offices we came across in research interviews are listed in the Appendix.

Ministers need clearer guidance on their involvement in private office staffing decisions

Perhaps the most fundamental change that a minister can make to their private office is requesting a change in staff. As with all civil servants, ministers do not have the direct ability to hire or fire officials working in their private office. However, if a minister feels they cannot work well with their PPS or head of office they may ask the permanent secretary for a replacement – which the minister would usually select from a non-prioritised shortlist of three or four candidates who have qualified in a fair and open civil service recruitment process. This is sensible, in recognition of the importance of a good personal relationship between a minister and their PPS or head of office.

However, it is not always clear what the limits are for ministers' involvement in the staffing of their private office. Although permanent secretaries generally discourage ministers from bringing private secretaries with them from their former department, it is (confusingly) sometimes permitted. And one junior minister told us that while they have always been involved in interviewing the most senior official in their private office, they found rules vary between departments when it came to hiring more junior staff – sometimes they were invited to be involved in the process, and sometimes not.

Lack of guidance over recruitment decisions can also be frustrating for civil servants in a different way. One former PPS told us that with the support of the permanent secretary it was easy to move on junior private office staff and bring in someone else if they were not working well with the minister. From their perspective, the difficulty was when ministers were unable to articulate what was not working with a private secretary, or what they wanted in a new one:

> **"They'd just say 'they're useless, get someone else'... at first we kept trying to replace one HEO for another, broadly similar HEO. Before it became apparent that just wasn't working."**

Another former PPS argued that while changing private office staff was not necessarily a bad thing, it could happen too rashly. They felt that before asking for a change in private secretary, ministers should clearly articulate what was not working about the current relationship, and carefully consider the trade-offs of a replacement, including loss of institutional memory and disruption to the smooth running of the private office.

- **The Cabinet Office propriety and ethics team should develop clear and consistent guidance, applying across departments, about the appropriate level of involvement of ministers in the recruitment of their private office staff.**

- **When requesting change in private office staff, ministers should be required to have a conversation with their head of office, PPS or permanent secretary, following which a written record should be produced.**

Accountability

Civil service leaders should be held to account for the capability of private offices

Permanent secretaries are technically responsible for the capability of private offices, just as they are for the rest of their department. However, in practice this responsibility falls to the PPS. Permanent secretaries take an active role in the appointment of the PPS and sometimes act as their line manager. In turn, the PPS then manages the rest of the secretary of state's office, junior ministers' offices (including the heads of each office) and any special advisers' offices. With the consent of the permanent secretary, they typically exercise a great deal of discretion in organising private offices and resources to meet the secretary of state's needs. If ministers feel there is a problem with their private office, they can apply to the permanent secretary.

However, this reporting structure tends to fray under a busy workload. Increasingly, PPSs report to the director or director general of strategy in the department. In turn, it's not unusual for the PPS to delegate management of junior ministers' private secretaries to a deputy. Interviewees who worked in junior ministers' offices told us they had often felt overlooked by officials in the secretary of state's office – one former private secretary to a junior minister complained of the "unhealthy hierarchy" between private office staff in the secretary of state and junior ministers' offices.

The relationship between the permanent secretary and junior ministers also tends to be more detached in practice than on paper. An experienced junior minister told us that permanent secretaries' interactions with them were very variable. One former permanent secretary told us they held fortnightly one-to-one meetings with junior ministers in their department, but others said they almost never got involved with ministers except for the secretary of state. Junior ministers who don't understand the standard of support their private offices should be providing them with may not take the initiative to set up a conversation with the permanent secretary, even if their private office isn't up to scratch. Given the often distant relationships between the PPS and junior ministers' private secretaries, as well as permanent secretaries and junior ministers, it is easy to see how oversight of junior ministers and their private offices can fall through the cracks.

The fire-fighting nature and pace of private office means there's seldom an opportune moment to stop and consider whether things are being done in the most effective way. One former private secretary recalled rarely having enough time to step back and think about processes – except when a new minister came in, which would bring fresh direction or scrutiny. Even then, as private offices tend to be built around the needs of an individual minister, it can be hard to view challenges in the round, to see where problems are systemic and where they are specific, or where it might be possible to learn from practices elsewhere in the civil service.

For this reason, it is important that there are regular, established opportunities for permanent secretaries, heads of office, and ministers to come together to carve out dedicated time and space to examine the operation of private offices in their department. To create a baseline, the Cabinet Office should carry out a 'light touch' review assessing private offices across government. The aim would be to explore best practice in private office across Whitehall, as well as to hold permanent secretaries personally accountable to the cabinet secretary for the current performance of the private offices in their department and for building their capability to face future challenges.

Supported by a small team in the Cabinet Office and a board made up of a mix of external reviewers and senior officials from different departments, the review would assess the strengths and weakness of private offices in each department, taking the problems identified in this report as a starting point.

- **Permanent secretaries should be held to account through a review of private offices across departments, assessing and comparing their current strengths and weaknesses, and what can be learnt from other departments.**

- **Thereafter, the permanent secretary and PPS should together undertake annual stock takes, conducting conversations with each junior minister in the department and their head of office to discuss how well the private office is working, covering:**

    - **Essential functions – including quality of diary management, handling of submissions, correspondence, and co-ordination with other private offices and the minister's parliamentary office**

    - **Strategic functions – including quality of advice, relationship management, and handling of propriety and ethics**

    - **Staffing – including capability of staff and the state of relationships across the wider team, including any external advisers**

    - **Structures – whether the current organisation of the private office is right to deliver the minister's aims.**

- **Separately, the permanent secretary should conduct a stock take with the PPS and secretary of state to discuss how well the secretary of state's private office is working.**

Conclusion

Private offices are not working to their full potential across government. Talented, experienced officials make the system work – and often well. But this is not standard, with success often reliant on individuals able to take the initiative because they understand Whitehall, the role of the private office within it, and where the system can bend or break. Problems arise when private offices struggle to recruit such individuals, and are exacerbated when those offices in turn support similarly inexperienced ministers.

Recruiting more experienced private secretaries – particularly in junior ministers' offices – and offering them better training and development will mean ministers receive not just administrative support, but the complex strategic support required to achieve their aims. Following on from this, improving private offices' understanding of and relationships with parliament and ministers' constituency lives will further ensure that ministers are supported across the range of their responsibilities. When a new minister enters office, a series of important conversations will help ensure that they're getting the personalised support that they need. And a Cabinet Office review of private office will hold civil service leaders to account for the current and future standard of private offices in their department and spread best practice across Whitehall.

These reforms will ensure that private office is seen as a serious specialism within the civil service, requiring particular experience and skills, not merely a stepping stone in an ambitious civil servant's career. More substantial resources too will help. Providing a higher standard of private office support will enable junior ministers to operate more effectively in government – and so encourage secretaries of state to delegate, making government more effective.

They do not fundamentally change the nature or structure of private office. One of the strongest selling-points of the traditional private office is that it can respond to the evolving demands of modern politics and changing ministers. And though unpopular at the time, extended ministerial offices have left a mark across Whitehall through the endurance of policy advisers and specialist units in the orbit of private office, with many more successful private offices adopting elements of the EMO model.

To innovate and respond to change, private offices need the capability and experience to know when and how to go about it. The civil service ministerial support system does not need to be rebuilt from the ground up, or standardised – it needs to be strengthened.

Appendix

In this report we recommend that the Private Office Network survey its membership and interview former private office staff and ministers to compile different models for organising and staffing private offices. We suggest the network publishes this as a resource for ministers and private office staff, and regularly update it to include new practices.

As a starting point for this work, we have put together an appendix listing some of the ways we heard PPSs had changed the structure and staffing of private office in our research interviews.

Increasing or reducing the number of private secretaries in an office

We heard of PPSs almost doubling their private office teams – for instance, assigning two private secretaries to cover each policy area, rather than one – typically to meet the level of scrutiny the secretary of state wanted over decisions.

We also heard of those who had 'rationalised' or reduced the size of private offices, so that they delegated more work and handled less of it themselves. Some interviewees argued this created clearer lines of communication with the department and private secretaries who individually had more contact with their minister and a better understanding of their priorities.

Increasing the seniority of private office staff

One PPS told us about restructuring their private office so that there were fewer assistant private secretaries, and more senior private secretaries. They felt this was important to enable private office staff to provide the robust challenge and advice the minister desired. We also heard of at least one minister requesting and being provided with a PPS at director rather than deputy director level.

Upgrading the diary manager role to a more senior office manager

One PPS told us they replaced a junior diary manager role with a more senior office manager role, with oversight of other processes in the office such as ensuring papers went into the minister's red box on time, and overseeing correspondence.

Splitting private secretaries' portfolios by 'functions' like implementation or communication rather than by policy area

Typically, private offices are organised so that each private secretary handles documents, communications and relationships related to a specific part of the minister's policy portfolio. But sometimes a private secretary might have oversight of cross-cutting 'functions' such as communications. One PPS we talked to had created a new private secretary role with oversight of departmental teams supporting the private office, including the parliamentary team, correspondence team, briefings team, FOI team and other business support functions.

Bringing data scientists into private office

One PPS brought in a pair of data analysts from the wider department to work as part of the private office, helping to analyse and 'translate' data supporting decision making, as the minister wanted specialist technical advice that other private secretaries weren't qualified to provide.

Creating an implementation unit, policy unit or strategy unit

We heard of several instances where PPSs had helped set up a strategy unit, policy unit or implementation unit as supporting structures to their minister, built around a core private office. These were distinct from similar units in the wider department, as they focused solely on the minister's major priorities rather than the work of the department as a whole, and often reported to the PPS. Some units were staffed solely by civil servants, while others included external policy advisers. For instance, the acceleration unit in the Department for Transport functions as an extended ministerial office with an expert panel.[19]

Bringing in external policy advisers to provide direct advice to ministers

Recent and current ministers have requested and brought in external policy advisers to provide expert advice on policy issues, as well as occasionally on functions such as data analysis or organisational management.

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