
Forum for Change

In Focus:

Working with Whitehall



Why is it important?

Any organisation seeking policy change must engage with Government if it is to succeed. The UK's central Government consists of the Prime Minister, the Cabinet, junior ministers and civil servants.

It is organised into departments, executive agencies and non-departmental public bodies. It is often referred to as 'Whitehall' after the street in London where many Government departments are located. Responsibility for many policy areas is devolved to the Scottish Government (formerly the Scottish Executive), the Welsh Assembly Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. Although this guide refers to influencing the UK-wide Government in Whitehall, the same principles apply to influencing officials in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Departments are managed and staffed by civil servants (officials). The received wisdom is that ministers govern and officials deliver the will of ministers but the truth is more complicated. Ministers come and go but the civil service remains in place. Often it is civil servants, not ministers, who take policy decisions. Even the decisions taken by ministers will be heavily influenced by the advice they receive from officials. Senior and mid-ranking civil servants are in a powerful position to influence Government policy so it follows that voluntary and community organisations need to influence officials if they want to achieve policy change.

Policy is instigated and applied by Government, which is not the same as Parliament.

Parliament is essentially a scrutiny body – its main role is to examine and question the policies and actions of Government. Parliament is also a legislative body which debates and passes laws. Although Parliament can amend legislation, unless the governing party or coalition has a very small parliamentary majority it is unlikely that MPs will be able to block or significantly alter Government legislation. Therefore it is important that voluntary and community organisations seek to influence Government policy-making to ensure they are involved in policy and legislative changes from the beginning of the process.

List of Whitehall Departments (as of July 2010)

- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS)
- Cabinet Office
- Department for Education (DfE)
- Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG)
- Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)
- Ministry of Defence (MoD)
- Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC)
- Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)
- Department of Health (DH)
- Department for International Development (DfID)
- Northern Ireland Office (NIO)
- Department for Transport (DfT)
- Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)
- Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)
- Home Office
- Ministry of Justice (MoJ)
- Scotland Office
- Wales Office

Source: www.direct.gov.uk

What does it involve?

Working with civil servants involves building relationships with key officials in order to successfully influence policy and legislation that affects people represented by your organisation.

It is important to get in on the ground floor if you are serious about achieving a major shift in policy. Government regularly publishes green and white papers and although these policy papers are subject to public consultation they are essentially statements of intent, and by the time a bill receives its first reading in Parliament its content is already well-established and is not likely to be radically altered by the time it receives royal assent. Building strong, mutually beneficial relationships with officials over the long-term may be more complex and time consuming than writing a consultation response or tabling amendments but will ultimately give you a much better chance of achieving the results you want. Building these relationships will complement other activities as well as opening up opportunities for additional chances to influence policy development.

The earlier your organisation can be involved in developing and drafting policy relevant to your goals the more chance you will have of getting your ideas accepted by Government. Getting in early relies on cultivating good, constructive relationships with key officials who know and trust you well enough to involve you at an early stage.

Voluntary and community organisations are occasionally criticised by others as being too close to Government, of being co-opted into promoting and defending the Government's agenda at the expense of their own and of compromising the sector's independence and integrity. This is a danger to be aware of. What is important is that you are confident that your relationship building work contributes to furthering your charitable objectives and you are able to maintain a suitable distance when necessary. Aim to be a critical friend i.e. willing to work with officials (and ministers) when common ground can be found but unafraid to speak out when Government gets it wrong. This approach will allow you to work closely with Government without compromise.

Don't let fear of compromising your independence put you off working with civil servants. The Charity Commission publication *CC9 – Speaking Out - Guidance on Campaigning and Political Activity by Charities* states that 'a charity must not give its support to any one political party' but it "may express support for particular policies which will contribute to the delivery of its own charitable purposes'. As long as you are careful not to give blanket support to a Government programme and can explain why you support specific policies when they coincide with your own positions you should stay within charity guidelines (if in doubt, check with The Charity Commission).

What does it involve? continued

Working with civil servants is perhaps the antithesis of public campaigning – publicity stunts, lobbies of Parliament, letter-writing campaigns, media coverage and so on – because it usually takes place quietly behind closed doors. The decision about which tactics to use in the lexicon of campaigning and influencing should be taken because you judge they are appropriate to the circumstances in which you are working and are the methods most likely to help you secure change. However, if your organisation consistently defaults to public campaigning and gains a reputation as an organisation that seeks to embarrass or attack Government it is unlikely that you will be trusted by officials who will advise ministers not to talk to you. Being a critical friend can strengthen your hand and bring you more influence because it is a measured, constructive and respectful way to behave rather than just grandstanding.

To influence civil servants you need to be able to provide evidence that your policy proposals will lead to clear outcomes. Officials are usually generalists who are expected to learn a new policy area every few years so they rely heavily on voluntary and community organisations to tell them the consequences of policy on the ground. They rely on the feedback and frontline understanding that you can give them so having an evidence base puts you in a powerful position.

Departments rarely take decisions in isolation. Instead there is a complex interplay between different departments which are often in competition with each other for resources, for legislative time or to raise the profile of their Secretary of State. You will need to be aware of all the departments which have an interest in or are affected by your policy area and work out how to navigate competing interests. Departments look for leverage to further their own agendas and voluntary and community organisations can be important in making this happen, for example by providing evidence that a particular policy has the ability to achieve real change on the ground and should therefore take precedence over competing policies.

TIP Civil servants refer to people who offer a constructive view of Government policy in public as ‘white coats’. White coats are sometimes quoted in Government press releases – the organisations to which they belong can then use the Government news as a hook to secure its own media story and coverage.

Where do I start?

Working with civil servants can seem daunting because of the size and relative secrecy of the Government machine. However, anyone can learn how to identify and influence the officials who are in a position to help you achieve policy change.

As is the case with anything you do, make sure you know your objectives. Do not create relationships with officials for the sake of it – do it with a specific purpose in mind.

Do not underestimate the value of research. Before you start, find out as much as you can about the primary department you need to communicate with. Try to understand its size and structure by looking at organisation charts on departmental websites. Consider what links may need to be made with other departments. For example, policy concerning alcohol misuse may be dealt with primarily by the Department of Health but the Home Office may also have an interest in the context of anti-social behaviour and crime reduction.

TIP Do not assume officials in different departments know each other and communicate on a regular basis about common interests. You may need to help them make links with each other.

Step 1 Identify the right person

It can take some time to track down the right person but persevere and you will find them eventually.

Civil servants fall into three categories – policy officials, those who perform operational roles and those who provide corporate support. Most of your effort should be focussed on communicating with policy officials.

Aim to establish relationships with the lead policy officials working on your areas of interest. Ideally you should be in contact with civil servants who occupy the mid-ranking positions formerly known as grades 5-7 and which are now known variously as Assistant Director, Head or Principal. These are the people who need to know what the consequences of a new policy might be or how a policy objective can be met – the goal is to become the person they call to find out.

The temptation to aim for contacts at a very senior level should be resisted if you want to avoid selling yourself short. Senior people have authority to make decisions but lack time to engage in depth. Mid-ranking officials are tasked with knowing their policy areas and providing advice to ministers and senior civil servants. They will be able to engage with you to a much greater extent and will brief senior colleagues about your issues. You run the risk of scoring an own goal by going in over the heads of policy leads – it annoys the person who ends up liaising with you to do the work that has been delegated down.

There are several ways to identify the right person to contact:

- Buy or borrow a copy of the Civil Service Year Book which contains complete details of staff in central and devolved governments including their responsibilities and contact details (the Year Book is also available online if you take out a subscription).

- Ask an umbrella organisation in your field if they can recommend civil service contacts to you – umbrella bodies are often the organisations that civil servants turn to first when seeking views, so staff in these organisations may already be familiar with policy officials.
- Pay to use another online database to search for contacts e.g. DodOnline, DeHavilland, Goveval etc.
- Every department has a voluntary and community sector champion at senior level to act as its formal liaison point with the Office for Civil Society in the Cabinet Office; call the department to find out who that person is and send them an email asking to be put in touch with the officials who deal with your policy area; they or a member of their team will find the policy lead and connect you to them.
- Call the enquiries line of the department you are interested in and ask the switchboard to put you through to the person who deals with your policy area (be prepared to be sent 'round the houses' before you get through to the right person).

TIP If you get an opportunity to meet the Director General or the Permanent Secretary take it. They have broad knowledge but a lot of power so think as carefully about how you manage your relationship with them as you do about how to handle ministers.

Step 2 Make contact

Some organisations have well-established links with officials but others will need to start from scratch. Many people find it difficult to cold call someone they have never met or spoken to before so if you feel nervous about contacting a civil servant for the first time you are not alone. Do not let nerves put you off making contact – officials are supposed to maintain knowledge of the views of stakeholders in their policy area. They need you as much as you need them.

- In the first instance, put in a call to your chosen official to introduce yourself; if you cannot get hold of them on the telephone, try email instead.
- Offer to meet with officials to explain your organisation's position on key areas of Government policy.
- Look for areas where you think you can help each other or work together – the relationship must be mutually beneficial to work.
- Always offer solutions to problems – moaning about the failings and inadequacies of Government policy without offering constructive alternatives will not get you very far.
- Back up your proposals with strong evidence.
- Use the telephone rather than relying exclusively on email – it helps to build up personal rapport and get you onto first name terms.

TIP Keep up-to-speed with the Government's agenda and what it is doing in your policy area by using a good monitoring system. Try to position your organisation and proposals as contributing to the delivery of Government objectives and helping officials solve policy problems.

TIP If your campaign is based on scientific evidence try to locate a government specialist in the relevant area as a contact. What ever point you make to a policy generalist within the civil service they will be checking it with in-government experts anyway.

Ministerial Meetings

When should you seek a meeting with a minister rather than dealing with civil servants?

Meeting a minister is one of the biggest tools in your armoury and it is important not to waste the opportunity. There is little point in seeing a minister simply to put forward an argument. If you secure a meeting with a minister to talk about an issue that has not already been discussed with civil servants it is likely that the minister will simply ask you to go away and meet with officials. Civil servants may take umbrage that you attempted to go over their heads. They will perhaps be less inclined to listen to your views than they might have been had you approached them in the first instance.

If you judge that a meeting with a minister is essential to securing the policy change you seek, your aim should be to have civil servants on your side helping you to gain political commitment from the minister for a particular course of action. Officials will attend any meeting you have with a minister and will thoroughly brief him/her beforehand. Civil servants will not forgive you for springing something on the minister that they haven't anticipated. If you want to keep them on side make sure you brief the officials in advance about what you intend to discuss at the meeting.

Unless there is resistance within the civil service, a meeting with a minister should be the icing on the cake and the moment where a formal decision is taken to adopt a particular course of action.

Special Advisers

Special Advisers (or 'SpAds' as they tend to be known) are temporary members of the civil service but stand apart from the main body of officials because they are appointed directly by the Secretary of State.

From 1997, the number of SpAds increased to about three per department. However, the Conservative party (the dominant partner in the recently elected Coalition Government) said before the election that if elected it would appoint fewer SpAds.

SpAds are interested in the strategic and political angles of policy (not the detail) and are heavily concerned with how a policy is publicly communicated or the impact it has on their boss's reputation and standing in Cabinet.

SpAds can be viewed as an 'alternative Whitehall'. Bear them in mind as an alternative route of influence if:

- you are not getting anywhere with officials
- there is a political angle to your issue that you think officials are not picking up on
- you think the minister and officials may hold differing views.

Step 3

Develop and maintain the relationship

To get results, you need to maintain regular contact with mid-ranking officials. You should be able to have a frank conversation with officials so that you know if you disagree. Aim for civil servants to see you as someone they can call or drop an email to at any time, and vice versa.

Do not drop officials as soon as your immediate need to talk to them has passed – the most beneficial relationships are long-term ones. Sometimes a relationship may not provide any tangible benefit for months (or even years) after first contact is made. Influencing policy is a long game and your contact with civil servants should be part of a long-term strategy.

Do not get in touch with officials only when you want something from them. Remember that every relationship is two-sided – ask what you can do for them as well as the other way round and fulfil requests if you can. For example, civil servants are sometimes asked to arrange ministerial visits at very short notice (less than 24 hours). The official tasked with organising a visit to, say, a homeless project wants to be able to pick up the phone to someone who can organise a half hour itinerary including a short 'meet & greet' session with service users.

It might be a major irritant to have to drop everything to help make a ministerial visit happen but if you are willing to do so you will stay on good terms with the policy official. In the short-term you will have an opportunity to get your project in front of the minister (which occasionally is enough in itself to lead to change if the minister is taken with what s/he sees) and in the long-term you will have some credit in the bank to be used when needed.

Do not lose touch with people when they are reshuffled – you never know where and when they might pop up again and prove useful.

TIP If other organisations are already the key 'go – to' organisations try approaching someone at a slightly lower grade. You are more likely to get your view heard and they will also benefit from being about to put forward an alternative point of view.

TIP If you are told something in confidence make sure you keep it that way as confidence is taken very seriously by the civil service – leaks will be frowned upon.

What do officials want from the voluntary and community sector?

Civil servants are usually generalists rather than experts in a particular field. They are expert in providing advice to ministers, interpreting what ministers want and putting it into action. They will rely on you to be the person who can fill them in on the issue at hand, especially with regard to how things are working on the ground. Aim for officials to see you as the authority in your field and the best person to come to if they want to know something about your area of interest.

If you can, provide civil servants with:

- Facts and figures.
- Fresh insights and examples of the ways in which people's lives have been turned around.
- Realistic policy proposals, preferably ones that have been tested and costed.
- Information about new developments in your field.
- Views about the consequences (intended and unforeseen) of Government policy.
- Written briefings on policy issues that are to the point and easy to digest.
- Evidence of how Government policies will affect the people you represent.
- Evidence of the reaction of interest groups and the public to Government proposals.
- Details of your latest projects, photos etc (but make sure anything you send can be used without the need for officials to come back to you for approval).
- Advance notice of any public actions or interventions you intend to make on a subject (of course, you are not obliged to divulge this information – whether or not you choose to do so will depend on strategic judgements about what is likely to lead to change).

Step 4

Trouble shooting

What should you do if civil servants fail to engage with you despite your best efforts?

Officials might disagree with your position because it does not fit with the thinking or priorities of the current Government. If your position cannot be framed in the context of helping Government meet its agenda, you will have to wait for a more favourable set of circumstances or decide to step up the pressure in other ways.

Parliamentary campaigning and hard-hitting media coverage are traditional ways of pushing an issue up the political agenda. Some intelligent parliamentary questions (PQs), a flood of letters to the minister or a well-placed piece of media coverage could force Government to take notice.

Tried and tested ways of working with civil servants:

- Offer a solution with every problem you present.
- Explain how your policy change will save money.
- Find something to offer that is going to make them look good.
- Always give a copy of briefings to ministers and civil servants.
- Diplomacy.
- Ask for a follow up meeting after you have sent a consultation response to explain the complicated bits!
- Share information early.
- Mirror key words/language of the policy areas that you're seeking information about.
- Be clear that you offer a useful or not-yet-heard perspective.
- Bring human voices/stories to back up policy.
- Make friends.
- Invite them to reception events.
- Open with 'how can I help?'.
- Be clear and concise.
- Find equality and VCS leads (or ex-VCS workers!).

Source: *Forum for Change seminar on working with civil servants (June 2010)*

TIP Provide civil servants with as much briefing material as possible – tailor it to the individual and include case studies, clear positions on key Government policies and your contact details

Civil servants may see you as lower down the pecking order than some of the other organisations they engage with on a regular basis. It can be frustrating, especially for smaller organisations, when civil servants seem to rely on the views of a small number of 'usual suspects'. Explain to officials why you bring a particular perspective that they may not have heard before – they need to know the positions held by all stakeholders so should want to engage with you if they are convinced you will offer fresh insights. Alternatively, suggest a roundtable meeting with several organisations in your field. It can be difficult for civil servants to find time to meet ten different charities but a single meeting is more manageable. It is not necessary for everyone at the meeting to hold the same position on the policies under discussion – officials want to hear a plurality of views, not a collective one.

If civil servants are giving you the brush off by providing bland replies to letters or PQs take another look at what you have written. Have you phrased your letters and questions in such a way as to make it easy for officials to avoid saying anything substantial? Make sure you ask specific questions rather than simply making statements about what you believe or would like to see changed. This makes it harder for civil servants to duck the issue.

Sometimes you may receive no response at all to a letter, email or phone call. Follow up politely but if there is still no response, consider asking a friendly MP to write on your behalf instead as s/he is more likely to be guaranteed a reply.

It might be that Government policy on your issue is unclear and officials are therefore avoiding talking to you because there is not a lot they can say (at the time of writing, this is happening a lot because a new Coalition Government has just been elected and officials are not yet sure of its priorities). Be persistent – channels of communication may suddenly open.

Occasionally civil servants may hold a wholly negative view of your organisation and will avoid talking to you and any other organisations they mistrust. If you suspect this is the case, ask yourself why officials might have formed a negative view. Does your organisation regularly criticise Government in unconstructive terms? Does it have a reputation for deliberately embarrassing ministers in public? Do you consistently put forward proposals that are not evidence-based? There may be any number of reasons, justified or not, why officials hold your organisation in low esteem. Try to understand why they hold this view and do what you can to challenge it.

What next?

Working with civil servants might seem like hard work but if you get it right the benefits can be huge. If you work in a small organisation with limited resources, try to develop just one key relationship to start with. If you are part of a larger organisation you can be more ambitious. Try to think yourself into what it might be like to be a civil servant so you can start anticipating what officials want from you and how to get what you want in return.

Working with civil servants is just one part of what you need to do to influence policy and practice. It should be done as part of a wider campaigning strategy. Make sure you do not work with civil servants in isolation but join up this part of your work with other activities.

Putting it into practice

If you have five minutes...

- Join the Working with Whitehall discussion group on the Forum for Change website at www.forumforchange.org.uk
- Watch some clips of BBC series Yes Minister or The Thick of It on YouTube at www.youtube.com to get a flavour of the civil service.

If you have one-two hours...

- Find out the name of a civil servant who works on a relevant policy area in your chosen Department and put in a phone call or write an email to introduce yourself.
- Read the 'Government and Whitehall' chapter in Mark Lattimer's Campaigning Handbook (2nd edition published in 2000 by The Directory of Social Change).
- Watch a couple of full episodes of Yes Minister – it really will teach you something about the way Government works!

If you have one day...

- Organise an away day with colleagues to think through why and how you need to work with civil servants. Consider the purpose of developing relationships with officials. Draw a map of any civil service contacts you already have and identify the gaps where you need to find new contacts. Decide what it is you want to say to officials and how you are going to deliver your message. Develop an action plan.

Further reading

Toolkits and guides

The Civil Service Year Book

published by The Stationery Office

Lobbying: The Art of Political Persuasion

by Lionel Zetter

published by Harriman House Publishing, 2008

Getting Started: Working with civil servants

factsheet published by NCVO

Online resources

www.direct.gov.uk

contains an A-Z of central government listing departments, executive agencies and non-departmental public bodies

The Civil Service website

www.civilservice.gov.uk

www.civilservant.org.uk

is a website written by Martin Stanley, a former senior civil servant. It is aimed at civil servants who want to learn more about how to do their jobs effectively but is worth dipping into for some interesting insights into how the civil service works.

The Northern Ireland Executive

www.northernireland.gov.uk

The Scottish Government

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Home>

The Welsh Assembly Government

www.wales.gov.uk

About Campaigning Effectiveness, NCVO

Campaigning Effectiveness, NCVO supports and empowers people and organisations to change their world through campaigning and influencing policy. We bring together experience and expertise and drive excellence in campaigning and policy work across civil society by providing support, knowledge, tools and resources.

For further information about our work go to www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/campaigningeffectiveness

About Forum for Change

The Forum for Change, funded by the Big Lottery Fund is a network for people influencing policy and campaigning for change across the voluntary and community sector. Membership is free and open to everyone.

To join or for further information go to www.forumforchange.org.uk or email forumforchange@ncvo-vol.org.uk

About In Focus

In Focus guide are produced for Forum for Change members as part of the Policy Skills Development Programme. Other titles include:

- Building your evidence base
- Commissioning research
- Influencing devolved governments
- Involving people that matter
- Policy development
- Making sense of the external environment

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This paper is sourced from sustainable forests
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