

Getting you started...

Working with civil servants

The civil service is one of the most diverse organisations in the country, with 23 main Whitehall departments, 66 executive agencies and almost 490,000 employees. Building relationships with civil servants is often a key component of influencing public policy, but how do you overcome the challenges of a complex structure and frequent reshuffles to form meaningful working relationships?

Why do it

A great deal of power resides with civil servants; while governments inevitably come and go, the civil service has been running continuously for centuries. Civil servants are much more approachable now than in recent decades, and can provide powerful inroads to influencing the public policy arena.

When and how to...

Be sure of your objectives: Before you even begin working with civil servants it's important that you are clear about what you want to achieve. Sometimes building and maintaining relationships can become a pursuit in itself, so clear priorities will ensure you stay focused.

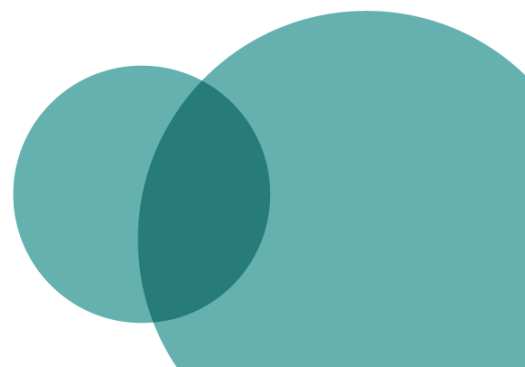
Get started early: It's important to start building a relationship as soon as you get into a new post, rather than waiting until you need something before you get in contact. Don't be afraid to approach civil servants; get on the phone to introduce yourself and request a meeting as soon as possible.

Find the right person: You should be aiming to deal with civil servants at assistant director, head or principal level (grades 5 to 7 under the old system). Most government departments have websites which detail organisational structures, and you can pay to use online directories such as *DodOnline* or *DeHavilland* to find specific individuals. There is also a good choice of useful reference books available, such as the *Civil Service Year Book*.

Together these should give you a good start in establishing who to approach first, but as a last resort you can always just call the department's general enquiries number or contact someone in a vaguely relevant position to see if they can help.

It's important to bear in mind the balance of seniority and time; the person with the authority to make the decision you're looking for may not have the time to engage with you in any depth and might actually be briefed by a more junior member of staff, who could therefore be your best way in.

Establish shared priorities: Dealing with civil servants is like any negotiation process. You need to be aware of the issues that ministers are taking most interest in and establish areas of overlap by relating your arguments to wider government objectives.



Campaigning Effectiveness

Get your timing right: Try and keep on top of political developments and be aware of the timing of important announcements, like the Budget or Comprehensive Spending Review. If it's possible, try and swim with the government tide in what you are proposing.

Build trust: Always respect confidences when dealing with civil servants and use discretion if given information that's not in the public domain. Leaking confidential information will inevitably cease any relationship you've built. Be honest and realistic in your approach and don't make any promises you can't deliver.

Offer solutions: Avoid any desire to simply complain about the failures of current policy without offering clear alternatives, in the form of realistic, deliverable policy recommendations. Demonstrate how your suggestions will contribute to civil servants achieving their objectives. Even the most well argued case will fall short if it doesn't offer a practical way forward that is supported by a strong evidence base.

Be an expert: Don't forget how useful your knowledge and experience can be to civil servants. They generally have a breadth of knowledge rather than a depth of knowledge and the internal focus of Whitehall means that they often don't have much time to immerse themselves in issues on the ground. Be clear about what you have to offer and where your particular area of expertise lies, and consider the most effective way of presenting your knowledge in an accessible, easily digestible format.

Be patient with Whitehall reshuffles: Civil servants have a frustrating habit of moving position just as they are beginning to understand an issue. While this can be exasperating, it's important that you persevere and don't just lose contact with them. Civil servants don't necessarily drop an agenda when they move, and you never know when the relationship might prove useful in the future.

Work in collaboration: Inevitably civil servants only have the time to speak to a finite number of organisations, so putting forward joint agendas can help get your voice heard and also gives you a chance to share information and ideas with other organisations. Joint events give civil servants direct access to a large number of individuals and organisations in one place.

And finally: Forming partnerships with civil servants takes time and effort, so keep in mind the resource implications from the outset. Like any relationship, both sides are in it for something so always be clear about what you can offer as well as what you want them to do for you.

Where to go next

- Join our online discussion group around Working with Whitehall at www.ncvopolicyforum.org.uk/group/workingwithwhitehall
- Read Lionel Zetter's book, *Lobbying: The Art of Political Persuasion* for a detailed guide to the mechanics of lobbying and the various techniques you can employ
- Look through some of our related resources around evidence-based policy and campaigning in collaboration: www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/campaigningeffectiveness/projects/index.asp?id=10368
- Watch a few episodes of the BBC sitcom *Yes, Minister* for a more satirical view of life in the civil service!

