



**CabinetOffice**

# GUIDE TO CABINET AND CABINET COMMITTEES



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# INTRODUCTION TO CABINET AND CABINET COMMITTEES

This section provides background on Cabinet and its Committees

## Collective responsibility

Government is a large and complex organisation and so it needs formal and informal mechanisms for discussing issues, building consensus, taking decisions, resolving disputes and chasing progress. Cabinet and Cabinet Committees are the only groups formally empowered to take binding decisions on behalf of the Government. Cabinet and Cabinet Committees consist of UK Government Ministers. Only they – since they are accountable to Parliament – can take binding decisions. Collective responsibility allows Ministers to express their views frankly in discussion, in the expectation that they can maintain a united front once a decision has been reached.

Further Information on collective responsibility can be found in the [Ministerial Code](#)<sup>1</sup>.

## Coalition government

All government ministers are bound by the collective decisions of Cabinet and Cabinet

Committees, **save where it is explicitly set aside**. Every Minister with an interest in an issue should be informed and have a chance to have his or her say before a decision is taken, irrespective of which Party they belong to. Collective responsibility also means that, once a decision has been announced, all Ministers are required to abide by it and to defend it as necessary.

Each Committee has a Chair from one Party and a Deputy Chair from the other Party. The Chair and Deputy Chair have the right to remit an issue to the Coalition Committee if it affects the operation of the Coalition and cannot be resolved by the originating Committee.

With the approval of the Chair (with the exception of those Committees requiring limited or specific attendance due to the nature of the discussion) Ministers are able to send a deputy from **either their department or from their Party (where that person is a Minister from another department)**, as appropriate, to Committee meetings.

The Coalition Operation and Strategic Planning Committee is a working group and not a Cabinet Committee. However its

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<sup>1</sup>  
<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/409215/ministerialcodemay2010.pdf>

members are still bound by the principle of collective responsibility.

### **Cabinet Committees and the devolved administrations**

Members of the Devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are not members of Cabinet Committees.

Exceptionally, with the consent of the relevant Chair, they may be invited to attend, for example, Committee meetings dealing with emergency response.

Formal discussions of policy issues with the devolved administrations takes place through the Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC) established under the Memorandum of Understanding between the UK Government and devolved administrations. Further information can be provided by the Devolution Secretariat in the Cabinet Office.

**A full list of Cabinet and Cabinet Committees can be found on the [Cabinet Office website](#)<sup>2</sup>**

### **The Cabinet Secretariat**

The role of the Cabinet Secretariat is to ensure that proper collective consideration of policy takes place when it is needed before policy decisions are taken and to ensure that

the business of government is taken forward in a timely and efficient way.

The Cabinet Secretariat prepares the agenda of Committee meetings, with the agreement of the Chair and the Deputy Chair; it also provides them with advice and support in their functions as Chair and Deputy Chair; and it issues the minutes of the Committees, in addition to providing wider support as set out in this guidance.

The Cabinet Secretariat is located in the Cabinet Office and reports to the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and Ministers who chair Cabinet Committees. The head of the Secretariat is Sir Gus O'Donnell, Cabinet Secretary.

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<sup>2</sup>

<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/409188/cabinetcommitteesystemmay2010.pdf>

# OBTAINING POLICY CLEARANCE THROUGH CABINET AND ITS COMMITTEES

This section is designed to help you obtain policy clearance for decisions requiring collective consideration by Ministers. It will help you decide:

- whether a policy should be cleared by a Cabinet Committee
- how to obtain clearance

## Which Policies Require Clearance?

Not all government business requires formal clearance through the Cabinet Committee process. All proposals should be considered on a case by case basis and the lead Minister and his department are responsible for seeking clearance if it is needed. Matters wholly within the responsibility of a single Minister and which do not significantly engage collective responsibility need not be brought to the Cabinet or to a Ministerial Committee unless the Minister wishes to inform his colleagues or to have their advice. In borderline cases, the Ministerial Code advises Ministers to seek collective consideration.

In considering whether an issue should be put to the Committees for collective agreement, departments will need to be sensitive to the needs of the coalition. Officials should consult departmental Special Advisers and the Cabinet Secretariat when coming to particularly balanced judgements.

Departments should use their judgment in determining whether an issue requires Committee clearance. This may include consulting with other departments on whether their Ministers are likely to have a view on the issue. They should also consider whether an issue merits discussion at a Committee to inform policy development, before final clearance. Where there is any doubt officials should seek advice from the Cabinet Secretariat. However, there are some general guidelines:

Policy or other proposals will require consideration by a Cabinet Committee where they meet one or more of the following conditions:

- the proposal takes forward or impacts on a Coalition agreement

- the issue is likely to lead to significant public comment or criticism
- the subject matter affects more than one department
- the Ministers concerned have failed to resolve a conflict between departments through interdepartmental correspondence and discussions.

With particularly difficult or complex policy, clearance may need to be sought at more than one point in a policy's lifecycle.

The kind of proposals which **will almost certainly require** collective consideration include:

- any issue which would have an impact on the good operation of the Coalition, or which takes forward government policy in an area covered by the Coalition Agreement
- publication of consultation documents and Green and White Papers
- responses to Select Committee Reports
- adoption of negotiating stances for international meetings
- agreeing final policy proposals before legislation is introduced
- new regulatory or deregulatory proposals

- intention to make a public announcement of new or changed policy
- proposed implementation of European legislation.

The kind of proposals which **do not require** collective consideration include:

- publication of research, data, analysis of consultation responses or factual information
- government amendments to Bills which are largely technical in nature and do not affect policy previously agreed
- draft secondary legislation, and any accompanying Ministerial statements, which gives effect to policy previously agreed
- routine press announcements of policy already agreed.

Where they touch on other department's interests, cross-departmental agreement for these proposals can be achieved through alternative mechanisms, for example:

- bilateral or multilateral discussions between departmental Ministers
- cross-departmental official groups
- discussion between the Private Offices of Ministers with an interest.

The Cabinet Secretariat should be informed of these agreements when there is any doubt as to whether the matter should be discussed instead through formal Committee.

Agreements reached through these routes may, if appropriate, be formalised through Cabinet Correspondence “for information only”. Ministers may also wish to write for information to:

- alert colleagues to a development over which there is no control
- invite colleagues' views on draft proposals before seeking clearance
- request colleagues' comments before any action is proposed.

### **Requesting Clearance**

Departments should decide at an early stage whether an issue needs to be considered by a Cabinet Committee. Pressures on Ministers' time may make it difficult to get clearance at short notice.

**The Cabinet Secretariat should be notified (by phone is fine) as early as possible of all requests for clearance prior to clearance being sought.** They will be able to advise on the appropriate Committee and whether the issue requires discussion at a meeting or clearance through Committee correspondence. The Committee Secretariat can require policies to be subject to collective consideration where they see it as necessary. The Cabinet Secretariat can also

advise on the practical arrangements for handling clearance through Committee meetings.

Officials should consult informally with other departments before submission to a Ministerial Committee, so that the decisions required can be clearly defined and the information which Ministers need to enable them to take a decision can be identified. It is good practice to ensure officials in other departments with an interest are aware that Cabinet clearance is being sought and when to expect it.

### **Proposals with financial implications**

should be cleared by Treasury before being submitted for collective approval. Where the department proposing the policy and the Treasury cannot agree in advance, any proposal for collective Ministerial consideration must record the Treasury position in terms which are acceptable to them. The Cabinet Committees will not sign off policy proposals with public expenditure implications unless Treasury Ministers are content. If necessary, issues will be referred to the Prime Minister, or, if he so decides, Cabinet for decision.

### **Proposals with regulatory implications**

should be discussed with the Better Regulation Executive in the department for Business, Innovation and Skills before being submitted for collective approval to ensure strong analysis of costs and benefits.

Committees will not sign off policy proposals that do not comply with the Government's established policy on better regulation.

### **How Can Clearance be Obtained?**

Collective agreement can be sought:

- through Ministerial correspondence
- at a meeting of Cabinet or a Cabinet Committee, through a paper for discussion by Ministers.

Correspondence should be used as the means of seeking clearance in most cases as it is less time-consuming than discussion at a Ministerial Committee. Committee meetings will only be set up by the Chair (or, in his or her absence, Deputy Chair), on the advice of the Cabinet Secretariat, where there is a need for a Ministerial discussion. This may be where a collective decision cannot be reached by other means. If departmental officials consider that a Cabinet Committee meeting is required, they should discuss the following points with the Cabinet Secretariat:

- is it an issue where there are differences of opinion between a number of departments?
- is it a policy where Ministers will have views unrelated to their departmental responsibility, e.g. constitutional reform?
- is it a policy on which key questions remain, e.g. on funding or implementation?

- is it a proposal or strategy which requires cross-government Ministerial buy-in before proceeding?
- is it a proposal that alters or reverses a commitment in the coalition agreement?

If the Cabinet Secretariat is satisfied that a meeting is the right option, they will advise the Chair (copying in the Deputy Chair).

### **Which Committee to seek clearance from**

The majority of policy decisions to be taken collectively will go to a policy Committee, such as the Home Affairs Committee. The Cabinet Secretariat will be able to advise on which Committee is appropriate. A full list is provided on the [Cabinet Office](#) website.<sup>3</sup>

The Coalition Committee manages the business and priorities of government and the implementation and operation of the Coalition agreement. Issues that may be appropriate to go to the Coalition Committee are:

- when the policy Committee has been unable to resolve an issue due to a difference of view along Party lines

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<sup>3</sup>

<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/409188/cabinetcommitteesystemmay2010.pdf>

- where a significant change in direction on a coalition agreement commitment is proposed.

Unresolved issues may be referred to the Coalition Committee from any other Cabinet Committee by either that Committee's chair (who will be a member of one coalition Party) or its deputy (who will be a member of the other Coalition Party).

Substantial issues on which a Cabinet Committee has not reached agreement are likely to be referred to Cabinet.

### Legislative Proposals

All legislative proposals (potential Bills and amendments to Bills during their passage through Parliament) require legislative clearance through the Parliamentary Business Committee. Final policy proposals for legislation require clearance through the appropriate policy Committee. The two Committees will usually issue two separate clearance letters and **clearance is not obtained until both letters have been issued.**

Amendments to Bills which make significant changes to policy also require policy clearance. All other amendments require legislative clearance only, with relevant departmental Ministers being copied papers for information only. Bill teams should seek

advice from the Cabinet Secretariat about when policy clearance is required.

For more information on clearing legislative proposals, please refer to the [Guide to Legislative Procedures available on the Cabinet Office website.](#)

### European Proposals

The UK position in European negotiations needs to be agreed collectively where the matter in question affects the responsibilities of more than one department or has implications for the Government's strategic approach to the European Union (EU). Clearance should be sought for the initial line to take in negotiations, if a significant change in the UK's line is proposed, and towards the end of negotiations if a compromise position emerges. It should also be sought for decisions on:

- whether the UK should opt-in to Justice and Home Affairs measures under Title V of the Treaty
- issues concerning EU litigation, in particular infraction proceedings against, and cases initiated by, the United Kingdom
- the UK approach to proposals for EU legislation which would impose a significant regulatory burden on the UK private, public or third sectors, as set out below.

## **Regulatory Proposals**

The cabinet sub-Committee on reducing regulation has been established to manage the government's de-regulatory programme. All requests for clearance that propose a new regulatory or deregulatory measure should be submitted to the Regulation sub-Committee in parallel to the main policy Committee.

Where a proposed EU measure would impose a significant regulatory burden on the UK private, public or third sectors, the clearance letter should be addressed to the Europe Committee and also be copied to members of the Regulatory sub-Committee of the Economic Affairs Committee. They will have the opportunity to make comments according to the same deadline as members of the Europe Committee.

A single response from the policy Committee will sum up responses and any conditions of clearance from both Committees.

# REQUESTS FOR CLEARANCE THROUGH CORRESPONDENCE

## Timing

All letters should allow no less than **6 clear working days** (and **9 working days** during recess) for comment. Departments should also remember to build in sufficient extra time for finalising clearance (see below). The relevant Committee secretary must be contacted if a shorter deadline is required and **good reasons must be given in the letter if less time is allowed**. The Cabinet Secretariat has the right to reject the request or assert the 6 day deadline when finalising clearance. The Principle Private Secretary of the Chair or Deputy Chair also has the right to withhold the clearance letter until they are satisfied they have received a sufficient explanation as to why the timetable has been reduced.

When sending out clearance letters, departments should ensure that their covering email includes the contact details of the lead policy official and the person who will complete the ring round.

Papers at a high security classification will take longer to distribute and departments should make allowance for this in considering the deadlines they set.

Confirmation is needed from all members of the Committee that they are content with the proposals. This can be in the form of a 'nil return'.

Once all responses have been received, the Cabinet Secretariat will need additional time to secure clearance. **Receipt of all responses does not equate to clearance.** All departmental objections must be resolved and a clearance letter must be issued by the Chair.

## Format

Most Committee correspondence should be classified as RESTRICTED but departments should give a marking appropriate to the content. Letters should not be marked Committee Members Only (CMO) unless there are valid reasons. These must be discussed with the Cabinet Secretariat given that the difficulties of distributing CMO correspondence mean that clearance deadlines can be put at risk.

Templates are available from Cabinet Secretariat and Cabinet Documents Officer for letters seeking clearance. All letters should start with a short initial paragraph in bold which sets out upfront what clearance is

being requested for. This paragraph should summarise any key issues and recommendations in the letter and clearly state a specific date by which responses are sought.

## **Content**

The letter should set out what discussion there has been with departments in the development of policy. In particular, there should be a paragraph on the funding implications indicating what discussion there has been with HM Treasury.

Any regulatory/deregulatory impacts should be clearly set out.

## **Addressees and copy lists**

The letter should be addressed to the Minister who chairs the relevant Committee and copied to the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, members of the Committee and the Cabinet Secretary, currently Sir Gus O'Donnell.

Where proposals come from the Chair's own department, the letter should be signed by a junior Minister in that department and addressed to the Chair.

Requests for clearance can and should be copied to more than one Committee if the request is relevant to both; there is no need to write to both Committees separately. Ministers who are not members of the relevant Committees but who will have an

interest can also be added to the copy list; their interest should be flagged up explicitly. When a request is copied to more than one Committee, one clearance letter covering all policy issues will be cleared by the most senior Chair, unless the Prime Minister is the Chair, in which case the next most senior Chair will respond.

Usually correspondence is sent only to Ministers although for some policy areas there may be others who should be included. Letters to the European Affairs Committee should be copied to the Prime Minister's Advisor on International Affairs and Europe. Letters to the National Security Council or its sub-Committees should be copied to the National Security Adviser. Where a proposal has implications for the drafting of legislation the letter should be copied to First Parliamentary Counsel. The Cabinet Secretariat will be able to advise.

E-mail distribution lists for Cabinet and Cabinet Committees are maintained by the Support Team for the Economic and Domestic Affairs Secretariat and are distributed when updated. For the latest e-mail distribution lists, please e-mail [room055@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:room055@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk) .

## **Devolved Administrations**

The Devolved Administrations are not part of the Westminster decision-making process and letters should not be copied directly to them. However, where Cabinet Correspondence covers an issue that has

some bearing on the responsibilities of the Devolved Administrations, consideration should be given to writing to them separately. Depending on the purpose of the letter, Ministers could write for information, to invite a view or propose action to align policy (e.g. where it relates to legislation). The Cabinet Secretariat's Devolution team should be consulted on when it is appropriate to write.

The Devolved Administrations should be consulted on the formulation of the UK's policy position on EU issues that touch on devolved policy areas in time for their views to be considered before the UK Government has finalised its policy position.

Where Ministers intend writing to the Devolved Administrations, the Cabinet Correspondence should state 'I am writing in similar terms to the Devolved Administrations'. Letters to the Devolved Administrations should be addressed to the First Minister (and Deputy First Minister for Northern Ireland) and must always be copied to the relevant territorial offices in Whitehall (the Scotland Office, the Wales Office and the Northern Ireland Office) and to the Cabinet Secretary.

It is the responsibility of the department originating the correspondence to inform the Devolved Administrations of the decision.

### **Letters “for information only”**

Where Ministers are writing for information only they should make clear that they are not requesting clearance. They should be addressed and copied to colleagues in the same way as a normal clearance letter. They should make clear if the full collective approval of the relevant Committee will be sought in due course.

# RESPONDING TO A REQUEST FOR CLEARANCE

## Timing

Officials should draft the proposed response with sufficient time for it to be considered and cleared by the appropriate Ministers within their department and issued within the deadline stated in the original letter seeking clearance.

## Addressees and copy lists

Responses should be sent to the Chair of the Committee, copied to the recipients of the Request for Clearance letter. Departments should ensure that their response is sent from a Minister who is not either the Chair or Deputy Chair of the Committee.

## Contents

A nil return is a sign that a Minister is content with a policy. It is not necessary for Ministers to write merely to support a proposal. It is the responsibility of Private Offices to ensure that full written responses have substantive comments to make.

Where possible, keep replies short. Where this is not possible, start the letter with a summary of the department's concerns.

The response must distinguish whether a particular comment is one the Minister:

- requires to be addressed as a condition of agreeing to clearance; and
- believes should be addressed, but does not insist on as a condition of clearance.

Where a Minister is not content to agree clearance, even subject to conditions, this should be clearly stated.

If any member of the Committee objects to a proposal and their objections cannot be resolved, the proposal will not receive policy clearance without a meeting of the Committee. It is therefore important that, where there are disagreements between departments, the issues are discussed as soon as they emerge and a compromise is sought prior to the Minister responding to the original letter. Objections cannot just be dismissed. The Cabinet Secretariat will need to confirm that all parties are content before policy clearance is granted.

Whilst a Minister is entitled to reserve his or her own position until an issue is resolved, it is not generally consistent with the principles of Ministerial responsibility for a Minister to

require that officials are satisfied on an issue of policy. On matters of detail, however – for example on the drafting of documents – a Minister may want to ask that they are resolved between officials.

### **Managing the Ring Round**

It is for the originating department to ensure responses from Committee members are received by the deadline. This process is known as the ring round.

Those responsible for ring rounds should:

- chase departments for responses **two days before the deadline** stated in the original request for clearance
- give the Cabinet Secretariat regular updates as to the status of the ring round, especially if problems are encountered.

Once the ring round is complete, a completed ring round sheet setting out which members gave nil returns or responded and all the formal responses should be sent through to the Cabinet Secretariat.

### **Finalising clearance**

A completed ring round does not mean that proposals have clearance.

In order to secure clearance, the Cabinet Secretariat will

- ensure any conditions on clearance are agreed between departments. If no agreement can be brokered, the proposals will not receive clearance
- issue clearance letters on behalf of the Chair and Deputy Chair (if they have agreed this responsibility should be delegated) in uncontroversial cases (where only nil returns have been received), having first informed their Private Offices of the intention to do so
- advise the Chair and Deputy Chair on whether clearance should be given where responses have been received.

The Chair or Deputy Chair will write to the Committee to confirm the collective decision. It will not repeat everything in the responses received but will summarise the key points raised in those responses and set them out as conditions to clearance. This letter is equivalent to the summing up at a Committee meeting; no decision should be assumed until the clearance letter is issued and therefore nothing should be announced publicly. This will usually be a couple of days after all responses have been received.

# DECIDING POLICY THROUGH COMMITTEE MEETINGS

Cabinet Committee meetings provide an opportunity for Ministers to discuss issues:

- at an early stage of policy development, or
- where there is disagreement that cannot be resolved through correspondence.

Committee meetings are set up by the Chair (or, in their absence, Deputy Chair), on the advice of the Cabinet Secretariat. Details of meetings are confirmed by way of a meeting notice on the cross-Whitehall electronic communications system, CabCom2, but the Cabinet Secretariat will always ring round private offices the day before the Committee to confirm final attendance. Papers and minutes are circulated by the Cabinet Secretariat. Special procedures apply to this which can be found in the Cabinet Document Officer handbook.

The Cabinet Secretariat prepares the agenda for a Committee meeting on the basis of issues for discussion and the number of papers commissioned. Departments should contact the Cabinet Secretariat with at least **seven days notice** if a Minister wishes to raise any business orally at a meeting that has been scheduled. If the purpose of a meeting or agenda item is not clear, the

Secretariat may request a draft paper before agreeing to set up a Committee meeting.

Issues and appropriate papers will be grouped as an agenda item. Departments must inform the Committee Secretariat of the title of their paper at least **seven days** before the meeting so that the agenda can be circulated in good time. Titles of papers should be short and self explanatory.

The Secretariat will request to see draft papers in advance of arranging a meeting. The Cabinet Secretariat can also commission an explanatory paper or presentation if the issue is substantial and requires background information to facilitate an informed decision. The Secretariat may also contact departments to understand Ministers' views on specific issues, which will be used to inform the Chair's brief.

## 'Official' Committee Meetings

Rigorous scrutiny and discussion of the issues by a strong interdepartmental official-level Committee can have a significant impact in making a Ministerial meeting more effective. In some cases, these official Committee meetings may resolve all the issues so that it no longer proves necessary

to get Ministers together to discuss. The issues can instead be cleared by correspondence or brought back to the Committee at a more appropriate stage.

They are organised and chaired by the Cabinet Secretariat.

Formal official Committees can be established for most Cabinet Committees to:

- monitor policy development, particularly in cross-departmental priority areas, in order to identify when a Committee meeting is required
- monitor progress on departmental action points from previous Committee meetings
- canvass views and developments to inform the future work programme for the Committee
- resolve interdepartmental disputes where possible in a neutral setting before elevating the issues to Ministers
- identify areas that a Committee paper needs to cover to allow Ministers to focus their discussion on the key issues
- road test the effectiveness of draft Committee papers in advance of the Committee meeting
- provide briefing for the Chair or Ministers which is informed by issues likely to be raised by other Ministers.

It is important that officials of sufficient seniority who are able to represent and reach agreement on behalf of the department attend official Committee meetings to ensure that there is thorough discussion and that decisions can be taken.

Papers for official Committee meetings should also be circulated with adequate notice and should be focussed and concise in presentation.

For the main domestic policy Cabinet Committees, those invited to the supporting 'O' Committee will include as appropriate representatives from Number 10 (private office and policy unit), the Deputy Prime Minister's office, Strategy Unit, Treasury, lead department(s) and other departments whose Minister is a member of the Committee.

### **Preparing Committee Papers**

There are two types of paper that are considered in Cabinet Committee. Usually, a paper setting out the policy proposals of a department is prepared by a lead department. In some cases, for significant cross-cutting issues, a paper may be prepared by the Cabinet Secretariat.

The paper should:

- enable other departments to assess the implications of a proposal or a change in policy ahead of the meeting and brief their Minister accordingly, and

- enable a fully informed discussion at the meeting and improve the likelihood of a decision being reached.

Papers need to be:

- clear - set out the purpose upfront and provide precise recommendations for Ministers to consider
- concise - no more than three pages (with detail, if necessary, in an annex)
- available **48 hours** before a meeting takes place. Papers with a high security classification will take longer to distribute and allowance should be made for this.

Further guidance on preparing Committee Papers can be obtained from the Cabinet Secretariat.

To ensure that the paper is fit for purpose and properly formatted, departments should submit a draft to the Cabinet Secretariat at least **5 working days** in advance of the meeting for comment. This should be done before it is submitted to Ministers for clearance. In exceptional cases, e.g. if a meeting has to be scheduled at very short notice, these timelines may be compressed, but departments must consult with the Secretariat in advance.

The Chair may postpone a meeting on the advice of the Cabinet Secretariat if:

- the paper is not provide with sufficient time for other Ministers to consider it; or
- the paper fails to clearly bring out the main purpose and options for Ministers to consider.

The Cabinet Secretariat may refuse the paper, substitute their own note, or produce a cover sheet to the paper, highlighting the key issues for Ministerial consideration, if it does not meet the appropriate standard. Fuller guidance on how to draft a paper is available from the Secretariat.

### **Presentations and other material**

If a Minister wishes to deliver a PowerPoint presentation at a meeting or to hand out any additional material, the Secretariat must be informed in advance. Copies of slides must be provided for the Secretariat in advance so that they can be circulated to Committee members - the same deadline of 48 hours applies.

Copies of slides and any other documents brought to the Committee by Ministers will be logged officially as Cabinet Committee documents and will be circulated for information to all attendees after the meeting, along with the Minutes.

### **Minutes**

The Cabinet Secretariat is responsible for taking minutes of Committee meetings; these form part of the historical record of the

Government's business. Committee members or their officials do not comment on or clear the minutes in advance of their being issued; this is to maintain the impartiality and objectivity of the Secretariat as minute-takers and, on a more practical level, to ensure that the minutes can be issued **within 24 hours of the meeting**. However, if a Minister present at the Committee has a factual correction to make, such amendments must reach the Committee secretary **within 24 hours of circulation of the minutes**.

Decisions at Cabinet Committees are binding. It is not possible for officials to attempt to reopen any agreed issue on the grounds that their Minister was not properly briefed.

Committee secretaries will ensure that the actions agreed at the meeting are clearly flagged in the minutes and accompanying documents. It is the responsibility of Committee members' private offices to ensure that their Ministers clearly instruct their departments to implement the decisions of the Committee. If a department did not attend the meeting, but an action has been placed upon it, the Committee Secretariat will notify the department concerned.

# CLEARING POLICY THROUGH CABINET

Cabinet is the ultimate arbiter of government policy. It discusses issues which a Cabinet Committee has been unable to reach agreement on or, more generally, considers matters of significant national interest.

The Prime Minister decides on whether a matter requires discussion at Cabinet on the advice of the Cabinet Secretary. However, all Cabinet Ministers are responsible for proposing issues that Cabinet could discuss.

## Cabinet Agenda Items

As a first step, departmental policy officials should ensure that the Cabinet Secretariat is informed of business their Minister is proposing for Cabinet prior to a formal request being made.

Ministers should give **five days' notice** to the Cabinet Secretary's office of any business likely to require substantive policy discussion (including business to be raised orally). Cabinet usually meets on Tuesday morning so agenda items should be suggested by the Wednesday prior to this.

The Cabinet Secretary's office manages the process of organising Cabinet meetings. With advice and assistance from the Cabinet Secretariat, they circulate papers, prepare the agenda (under the Prime Minister's direction) and the Prime Minister's brief, circulate the minutes, and store them.

The Secretariat will contact the offices of Secretaries of State to request that a Secretary of State make a presentation, present a paper or raise an issue orally.

Where a Minister wishes to tell Cabinet about an issue on which no substantive policy discussion is expected, the private office should alert the Cabinet Secretary's office, copying in the relevant secretariat and the Prime Minister's Principle Private Secretary on the morning of the day before Cabinet (usually a Monday morning).

Once an item has been logged in this way, the Minister concerned must be briefed by their department and ready to contribute to the meeting. Failure to do so, or raising issues without notice, can disrupt the Cabinet agenda.

## **Cabinet Papers and Presentations**

The Cabinet Secretary's office is responsible for circulating papers and ensuring presentation equipment is available. Papers and presentations must be with them on Friday before the Cabinet meeting to allow distribution in time for Ministers' weekend boxes. In very urgent cases, and with the agreement of the Cabinet Secretary's office, papers can be provided by noon on Monday before Cabinet meets.

Distribution of Cabinet Minutes is kept to a minimum.

## **Cabinet Brief**

The Cabinet Secretary briefs the Prime Minister for Cabinet. Departments must make any draft papers, presentations or speaking notes available to the area of the secretariat that is preparing the Prime Minister's brief two days before Cabinet. The secretariats may need to ring round private offices and officials to understand the detail of agenda items. Which secretariat is engaged will depend on the subject matter and the Cabinet Secretary's office will be able to advise. The Economic and Domestic Secretariat usually coordinates contributions to the brief.

## **Cabinet Minutes**

The Cabinet Secretary along with the Deputy Secretaries will write, circulate and store the conclusions from Cabinet meetings.

# CONFIDENTIALITY AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

Papers or information relating to the proceedings of Cabinet or Cabinet Committees, or any briefing or correspondence relating to them, are generally classified Restricted or above, and are not for public disclosure.

Where the classification is Secret or above, the Secretariat is responsible for distributing Cabinet papers to Cabinet Document Officers (CDOs) as numbered paper copies. These must not be copied. Extra copies can be requested from the Secretariat if needed.

Departments likely to receive papers at high classification are advised to have facilities to prepare, receive, hold and distribute such papers.

Where the papers are classified as Restricted or Confidential the papers will either be distributed as numbered paper copies or made available on Cabcom2 by the Secretariat.

Within a department, papers and minutes relating to Cabinet Committees should only be shared with those officials who justifiably need to see them (i.e. for briefing / taking forward actions).

Papers can be marked as Restricted - Committee Members Only or Confidential – Committee Members Only. There are special rules for handling these.

A Cabinet Documents Officers Handbook is available on the Cabinet Office website.

The working assumption is that Cabinet and Cabinet Committee papers are not released in response to Freedom of Information requests to protect the confidential nature of collective decision-making. Further information about Freedom of Information and Cabinet Committee information can be obtained from the Ministry of Justice FoI team.

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[www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk)