



Cabinet Office

# **Guide to Handling Correspondence**

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# Contents

<b>Contents</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Foreword</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Methods of communication</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Correspondence Definitions</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Handling Correspondence</b>	<b>6</b>
Performance	6
Substantive Replies	7
Holding Replies	8
Transferring Correspondence	8
Cross-Cutting Correspondence	9
Campaign Letters	10
Signatures/Duty Ministers	10
Correspondence in Welsh	10
<b>Reporting</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Freedom of Information (FOI) Requests</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Data Protection</b>	<b>12</b>
Privacy notices	12
Legal basis	12
Sensitive personal data	13
Sharing and transfers	13
Confidentiality and data protection	14

# Foreword

An essential part of our representative democracy is the right of citizens, and MPs on their behalf, to write to Ministers, and even more importantly, the right to receive timely, accurate, and understandable replies. This goes to the heart of our drive for accountability and our ability to respond to our citizens.

People have a right to be heard, and should expect a consistently high quality of response. This quality standard must apply across all government departments and agencies. I know from my own work as a Member of Parliament, and now as a Minister, that when people write to the Government, it is often the last resort. They sometimes feel all other options have been exhausted. Sometimes, people are desperate for information and answers. And our responses are the most important correspondence they will receive that month. In short, if someone writes to a Minister, it really matters to them, and therefore it must really matter to us.

This Guide to Handling Correspondence sets out how government departments should handle correspondence. It covers not only the process, but also how to approach the crafting of responses. When I have written to Ministers as an MP, on behalf of my constituents, I always view the responses in terms of timeliness, accuracy, attention to detail, and crucially ‘did it answer the question?’ Even when the answer is not the one the constituent is hoping for, the manner in which it is handled can help soothe a difficult situation. People don’t expect miracles, but they should expect courtesy and respect.

As the Parliamentary Secretary within the Cabinet Office, I am pleased to have responsibility for the Government’s policy on correspondence. It is encouraging to see that the figures on timeliness for 2023 show improvement on the previous year. I know this is down to the hard work of many officials, which I recognise and applaud. We all know we can do even better. This Guide will be a useful tool in achieving even better results.

As an MP I have seen how responses to correspondence are treated by the ‘end user’. They are scrutinised for every drop of meaning. They are passed around family members for comment. They are sometimes shared with Members of Parliament or local councillors. On occasion the local media may get involved. They are placed on mantelpieces or stuck on fridge doors. Every word we write counts. So of course, we hold to the mantra of ABC – accuracy, brevity, clarity. I would add something else – empathy. Always consider how you would feel if you received this response. Put yourself in the shoes of the person receiving it. That way, we will continue to improve our service to the British people, and ensure the smooth running of Government.

**Abena Oppong Asare MP**  
**Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office**

# Introduction

1. MPs, Peers and members of the public have the right to write to the Government to challenge or seek clarity on the Government's position on any issues. Timely responses to correspondence are of great interest to all correspondents, including MPs and Peers, and so it is important that Government departments and agencies work effectively to ensure responses to correspondence are of a high quality and sent in a timely manner.

2. This guidance has been prepared by the Cabinet Office for officials working in Government departments and agencies, particularly those in Ministerial and Public Correspondence Units. This guidance sets out the principles departments must follow when handling correspondence from Members of Parliament (MPs), Peers, Members of the Devolved Parliaments or Assemblies and members of the public. It also covers the transferring of correspondence between Government departments and agencies, correspondence that falls under the remit of multiple departments, correspondence campaigns, and handling personal data in line with data protection guidance.

3. Any questions on this guidance or the handling of correspondence should, in the first instance, be directed towards the Correspondence Unit of the relevant Government department. Where necessary, questions should be addressed to the Parliamentary and Correspondence Team (PCT) in the Cabinet Office. Contact details for PCT can be found on the [Cabinet Office's GOV.UK page](#).

## Methods of communication

4. The default method for MPs, Peers, Members of the Devolved Parliaments and Assemblies and members of the public to correspond with Government departments is via official departmental email addresses, rather than by hard copy. The default method for departments to respond to correspondence should also be via email. There will be some limited instances where hard copy is the only option for corresponding with a Government department.

5. Departments may wish to consider offering the public the ability to submit issues via an online web form on their GOV.UK webpage as an alternative to email. Submissions via online forms should be handled in the same manner as all other public correspondence.

6. Departments may also wish to offer the public the option to contact the department for advice via a telephone line, but this is not a requirement.

# Correspondence Definitions

7. **Ministerial correspondence** consists of any correspondence that requires a response from a minister, including letters and emails from Members of Parliament (MPs), Members of the House of Lords (Peers), and Members of the Devolved Parliaments or Assemblies.

8. **Public (or 'Treat Official') correspondence** consists of letters or emails from members of the public or organisations and is replied to by officials rather than ministers.

# Handling Correspondence

## Performance

9. Government departments and agencies should set a deadline, with agreement from their ministers, for replying to ministerial and public correspondence. The deadlines set by departments and agencies for responding to correspondence should not exceed 20 working days. The clock (i.e. the first working day) starts the day after a piece of correspondence is received.

10. When calculating the response date for correspondence that has been transferred from another department, departments should treat such correspondence in the same way as correspondence sent directly to their department. Once the correspondence has been transferred to the relevant department, the receiving department must notify the MP which department is leading on the response.

11. While departments should respond to correspondence within 20 working days, there may be occasions where it is not possible to do so (for example, when the nature of the correspondence is very complex). In these instances, departments must ensure the correspondence is responded to as quickly as possible and must keep the correspondent informed, particularly when there is likely to be a significant delay in sending a full reply.

12. Following the significant increase in volumes received by many departments since 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, departments are strongly encouraged to set internal targets to improve their handling of correspondence and overall timeliness of responses.

## Substantive Replies

13. A 'substantive reply' is where the response answers all or most of the points or questions raised in any correspondence. All correspondence within a department's remit should receive a substantive reply.

14. Departments may wish to, with the approval from their ministers (for ministerial correspondence) or head of correspondence unit (for public correspondence), decide it is not appropriate to respond to a piece of correspondence if it:

- contains offensive language;
- is illegible;
- is selling or promoting a product;
- is for information only;
- is in a foreign language; and/or
- is vexatious (in these instances, however, departments should ensure they have fully responded to the correspondent on the matter and then informed the correspondent that they will not be issuing any further replies as the department is unable to provide any additional information).

15. Departments must ensure that:

- all replies to correspondence are high quality - clear, accurate, and helpful;
- every effort is made to reply promptly and in line with departments' own published standards for answering correspondence;
- where the incoming correspondence has a reference number, this is quoted in the reply;
- letters and emails sent by individuals outside the UK are treated the same as letters sent from within the UK;
- where correspondence is from an MP or Peer, the response is sent to their office (by email unless advised otherwise); and
- where an MP has included a constituent's details in their correspondence, the response refers to the constituent's full address (including postcode) so that the MP can easily identify the constituent.

16. Correspondence from Members of the Devolved Parliaments and Assemblies should receive a ministerial response, apart from correspondence referred to agencies where a Chief Executive response may be more appropriate.

17. Departments should have procedures in place for the handling of correspondence from members of the Devolved Parliaments and Assemblies, which reflect the following principles:

- correspondence to UK Ministers from Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish Ministers should receive a Ministerial reply;
- correspondence from First Ministers (and the deputy First Minister in Northern Ireland) should receive a response from the Secretary of State (subject to para iv with regards to Northern Ireland);

- correspondence to UK Ministers from members of the Devolved Parliaments and Assemblies who are also Privy Counsellors should receive a Ministerial reply; and
- all correspondence to UK Ministers from the First Minister and deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland should receive a Ministerial reply, and responses must always be sent to both ministers.

## Holding Replies

18. Every effort must be made to reply to correspondence promptly and within the original deadline. However, on the rare occasion that it might not be possible to provide a substantive reply to a case within the departmental deadline, which may be the case if the matters raised in the correspondence require substantial investigation, departments may wish to issue a holding reply.

19. 'Holding' replies should:

- apologise and state that it will not be possible to send a substantive response within departmental targets; and
- explain the reason(s) for the delay, set out the action that is being taken to answer the correspondent's enquiries, and tell the correspondent when they can expect a substantive reply.

20. A 'holding' reply will not count as clearance of a case or towards a department's performance on handling correspondence. The original deadline for reply will remain the same regardless of whether a 'holding' reply is issued.

## Transferring Correspondence

21. Correspondence will sometimes need to be transferred to another department for a reply; this will only happen if the receiving department does not hold policy responsibility for all or the majority of the matters raised in the correspondence. Where this is the case and another department can be identified as having that responsibility, the receiving department should send a transfer request to that department within one working day and that department must respond within three working days for ministerial correspondence and five working days for public correspondence.

22. Departments can refer to the [List of Ministerial Responsibilities](#) to help identify the correct department to lead on a particular piece of correspondence, and must adhere to the guidance below when sending transfer requests:

- the responsibility for a case remains with the transferring department until another department has accepted the transfer;
- any request for transfer to another department should clearly state the reason for transfer, and where possible the minister or business unit that would be responsible for the subject matters raised in the correspondence;
- departments must not refer a correspondent to another department and must always transfer the correspondence to the relevant department. For public correspondence,



you must only refer a member of the public to another department if you are also providing a substantive reply to the correspondence; and

- departments should only transfer public correspondence if they do not hold policy responsibility for the matters raised in the correspondence and they cannot respond with a substantive reply.

23. Departments responding to a transfer request from another department must adhere to the guidance below:

- departments must accept transfer requests from other departments if the matters raised in the correspondence fall within their remit, regardless of the age of the correspondence or case type;
- departments must provide an explanation to the transferring department as to why they are rejecting the request; and
- departments must not reject a transfer request on the basis of GDPR.

24. If departments are not transferring a case to another department but need a contribution on particular points raised in a piece of correspondence, they should contact the relevant departments to request a contribution rather than refer the correspondent to that department in the response. A return to a request for contribution should be provided within three working days.

25. Where it is unclear which department has the lead policy responsibility for a piece of correspondence, relevant heads of correspondence units should attempt to agree on a lead department as soon as possible. Where this is not possible, the receiving department should raise the matter with its Private Office, to resolve with relevant counterparts.

26. It is recommended that departments that have close links on similar policy areas work together to ensure the transfer handling process works quickly and smoothly, particularly when large volumes of correspondence are received on one topic.

27. For transfers of ministerial correspondence, the MP must be informed about the transfer of their letter by the transferring department as soon as possible. The reason(s) for the transfer should be explained. This will help the offices of MPs when tracking the progress of their correspondence and in the allocation of future correspondence.

## **Cross-Cutting Correspondence**

28. Correspondents will sometimes write to a department raising issues that cut across the responsibility of multiple departments. If the receiving department is responsible for responding to any part of the correspondence and can respond to the remainder by obtaining contributions from relevant departments, they should do so in order to provide a single response.

29. Contribution requests from other departments should be acknowledged and fulfilled within three working days. Departments should ensure all contributions are subject to the same quality clearance as other correspondence. When departments are issuing a

coordinated response, they should make clear in the final reply which department or minister is responsible for any issue that does not fall within their remit.

## **Campaign Letters**

30. Correspondents may write to departments as part of a campaign, and departments should apply a reasonable threshold when grouping campaign cases. All types of correspondence should be treated equally, and any response should be sent within departmental deadlines.

31. When a campaign originates from an individual or specialist interest group other than an MP or Peer, departments may be able to identify the source of the campaign and provide a single response to the campaign organisers in the interest of efficiency.

32. Departments can also use a formulated standard reply when responding to identical or similar campaign letters on a particular subject.

33. Departments may also wish to respond to campaigns by issuing a 'Dear Colleague' letter to all MPs. For further guidance, see the [Guide to Parliamentary Work](#).

## **Signatures/Duty Ministers**

34. All correspondence to ministers from MPs, Peers and Members of the Devolved Parliaments and Assemblies should be signed off at an appropriate ministerial level. In addition, it is customary that when correspondence is received from Privy Counsellors, a Privy Counsellor will respond. Departments should be aware of the potential reputational risk when this expectation is not appropriately adhered to.

35. Official replies to letters from MPs, Peers and Members of the Devolved Parliaments and Assemblies should only occur where the correspondent has written about the day-to-day operations of an executive agency or a non-departmental public body, in which case the relevant Chief Executive may be asked to reply, or where a minister determines that the particular circumstances mean an official reply would be more appropriate.

36. Where the appropriate minister is unavailable to sign off correspondence because of absence, departments should make arrangements for a duty minister to sign in their absence. During periods of Parliamentary recess, departments should ensure they have a formal duty process in place.

## **Correspondence in Welsh**

37. English and Welsh languages should be treated on a basis of equality in Wales, as per the Welsh Language Act 1993. Therefore, departments are encouraged to have a Welsh Language Scheme and a Welsh Language Coordinator to handle correspondence received in Welsh. If a department does not have its own scheme, the [Cabinet Office Welsh Language Scheme](#) should apply.

## Reporting

38. The Cabinet Office publishes [correspondence performance data on GOV.UK](#) on a regular basis, detailing departmental performance in handling correspondence. All departments and agencies are expected to comply with reporting and data requests, and to provide timely and accurate returns.

39. Departments are also encouraged to regularly publish their own performance data, for example in their departmental annual report and accounts.

## Freedom of Information (FOI) Requests

40. All requests for information under the FOI Act including letters from MPs and Peers should be handled in accordance with the requirements of the Act. The performance on the handling of FOI and EIR requests will be recorded separately to correspondence.

41. Departments should ensure that they adhere to [guidance produced by the Information Commissioner](#) on dealing with requests for MPs' correspondence relating to constituents. When dealing with requests for, or about MPs' correspondence, where it is proposed that information be released, departments should consult the MP(s) concerned.

# Data Protection

42. Data protection legislation (principally the UK General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018) imposes specific responsibilities on those organisations (known as 'data controllers') responsible for collecting, receiving or holding personal information. Each Government department is a separate data controller and is in law responsible for its own handling of personal data. Each department will have a data protection team and a Data Protection Officer (DPO) responsible for providing advice on data protection issues, and where you have concerns, you should first seek advice from them. The following advice is intended to be helpful but does not supersede or remove your responsibilities as a data controller for ensuring that you comply with data protection legislation.

## Privacy notices

43. Data protection legislation requires that data controllers tell individuals what they will do with the individuals' personal data. The content of such notices are prescribed by law, and they must include, for example, the purpose for which any personal data will be used, the legal basis or bases relied upon to use the data, who the data will be shared with, and how long it will be retained. This should include the fact that correspondence may be transferred to another public body, or shared with them to obtain a contribution to a response.

44. Privacy notices should be provided before any individual provides personal data. As a public body will not know who will write to them until after they have done so, it is unlikely to be practical to provide such information beforehand. Instead, public bodies should ensure that such information is prominently available along with the organisation's contact details. This could be achieved, for example, by including a link to a privacy notice next to the organisation's contact details on its GOV.UK page (or equivalent), or web contact form. Alternatively, those organisations with published "Personal Information Charters" on GOV.UK could update them or add the relevant privacy notices there.

## Legal basis

45. There are various legal bases available for receiving or using (etc.) personal data provided in the context of public correspondence. Public authorities are generally discouraged by the Information Commissioner from solely relying on the legal basis of 'consent'. This is because of the imbalance of power between individuals and public bodies. Instead, public bodies should consider relying on the 'public task' legal basis (Article 6(1)(e) UK GDPR). That is that the processing of the personal data is necessary to perform a task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the data controller. The task, in this case, is being accountable and transparent about the functions and policies for which the department is responsible.

46. In relation to correspondence that includes requests made under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, Environmental Information Regulations 2004, or data protection legislation (subject access requests), public bodies should consider relying on the legal basis

that processing of the personal data is necessary to comply with a legal obligation placed on the data controller (Article 6(1)(c) UK GDPR).

## **Sensitive personal data**

47. Correspondents may volunteer personal data deemed special category (or sensitive) personal data or volunteer information about criminal convictions. Special categories of personal data include information about racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, health information, or sex life or sexual orientation.

48. In relation to processing special category or criminal convictions data, public bodies must identify a further lawful basis to allow them to do so. For example, public bodies could consider relying on the legal basis that the processing is necessary for reasons of substantial public interest for the exercise of a function of the Crown, a Minister of the Crown, or a Government department (paragraph 6, schedule 1, Data Protection Act 2018). The substantial public interest is being accountable and transparent about the functions and policies for which the department is responsible.

49. In relation to letters from Members of Parliament on behalf of their constituents, an additional specific legal basis is available at paragraph 23, schedule 1, Data Protection Act 2018 . In those cases (and only those cases), it is possible to rely on the legal basis that the processing consists of the disclosure of personal data to an elected representative or a person acting with the authority of such a representative; and it is in response to a communication to the data controller from which was made in response to a request from an individual.

50. There is no particular advantage in relying on this more specific legal basis. As long as at least one legal basis is identified to legitimise the processing of the special category or criminal convictions personal data, it should be lawful.

## **Sharing and transfers**

51. It is entirely appropriate for public bodies to share correspondence including personal data where it is necessary for the purposes for which it was received. For example, if an executive agency holds the relevant information needed to respond. It is also appropriate to transfer correspondence to another public body when it is responsible for the matter in question. This includes transferring correspondence to a devolved administration if the matter sits with them. In each of these cases, sharing is necessary so that accountability and transparency about public functions can be discharged.

52. It is necessary to ensure that individuals are aware that their data may be shared with another public body or devolved administration. This should be made clear in your privacy notice.

## **Confidentiality and data protection**

53. There is an overarching requirement that the processing of personal data by Government departments and agencies must be compliant with data protection legislation, namely the UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. This means that personal data must be processed fairly, lawfully and transparently. Personal data must also be handled in compliance with all other applicable laws.

54. The area in which this additional requirement is most likely to arise is in relation to the law of confidence. For example, if a correspondent provides personal data and requests that it be handled in confidence, or they do not request that but it is clear from the context that they would reasonably expect it to be handled confidentially, then departments should treat the information as confidential. That means that it may be inappropriate to share such information with another public body or devolved administration without first seeking consent. In such cases, you may wish to seek advice from your data protection team, DPO or legal team.