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Briefing for Press Secretaries to [insert Minister(s) names]

[insert name of communications unit]

[insert date and/or version number]

[insert footer with name of document and date]

This briefing is to tell you how the communications staff of the [insert agency name] are organised, how we can support you in your work, and things you can do which will help us in ours.

All press secretaries and non-seconded staff in ministerial offices are employees of the Department of Internal Affairs. In your employment relationship with the Department, you work with Ministerial Services, which also provides communications logistic support to you in your office. This briefing is about your professional relationship with the communications staff of [insert agency name]

Who we are

[Describe the communications function within your agency in some detail so that a new press secretary can understand what is behind the people they may ring. Explain who works for whom.

Describe the services provided by your communications function: for example: “we provide internal, external, and stakeholder communications advice to managers, manage website and intranet content, produce publications, manage marketing campaigns, deal with media inquiries and provide other support where our skills – such as writing – are useful”.]

Our work with Ministers’ offices

[modify these to suit your agency culture and expectations]

- Any request from a Minister’s office is our top priority and we will always work to meet your deadlines.
- We will listen carefully to guidance from Ministerial staff about the Minister’s preferences and try to incorporate these in the material we deliver for you.
- As public servants, we cannot provide party political material, but we can provide material which is in line with, supports, and advocates government policy.
- We will always arrange for communications material sent to us for fact-checking (this might include political material) to be turned around as quickly as possible.
- Senior communication staff are always available to you. Our after-hours numbers are supplied.
- We will give you free and frank advice on communications strategies, plans and material. You are responsible to your Minister, not to us, and our expectation is only that our advice be listened to. The final decision is yours.
- We understand that as ministerial staffers you have a range of things to consider which we do not. All our material is supplied to you in the

expectation that you may have to make changes. If you do, we are happy to have those changes fact-checked for you. We will advise you if we consider any changes to be unwise.

- We work within the framework of a politically-neutral public service. You work in a political environment. There are things it is not appropriate for us to be involved with, but in nearly all cases we can be helpful, without breaching the requirements of our role.
- Where press secretaries consider it useful, we're happy to have a regular catch-up meeting in your office. These may be joint meetings with communications people from ministers' other portfolios. Mondays seem to be a good day.

Our approach to issues

[modify these to suit your agency culture and expectations]

Planned communications

Predictable significant issues will usually have a communications strategy or plan produced and approved. Typically these will include a description of the situation, a timeline, key messages and risks and mitigations. These are written in the knowledge that they are able to be accessed under the OIA. These plans, or their relevant parts, are available to you. The messages in the plans will follow closely the approach taken in any relevant Cabinet papers.

Alerts of potential issues

We will alert you to issues which may produce media coverage involving your Minister, or about which your Minister may approach you for information or support. Draft copies of [insert agency name] news releases are usually sent to Ministers' press secretaries for comment in advance.

Response to requests

When any request for information or comment is made by the media, the Minister is always able to talk on the issue if it affects the Minister's portfolios, or government policy in general. Without in any way limiting what the Minister may choose to do, the following notes may help in decision-making:

- The **State Sector Act** clearly indicates the responsibility of a department's chief executive for staff matters and the general conduct of the department. It will often be more appropriate for the Department to respond to such matters. Section 33 is particularly relevant.

33. Duty to act independently---Notwithstanding anything in section 32 of this Act, but subject to sections 51 and 52 of this Act, in matters relating to decisions on individual employees (whether

matters relating to the appointment, promotion, demotion, transfer, disciplining, or the cessation of the employment of any employee, or other matters), the chief executive of a Department shall not be responsible to the appropriate Minister but shall act independently.

- The portfolio Minister is not directly responsible for any activity done by an agency under specific **statutory responsibility**. An official has statutory responsibility when a statute identifies the position and the responsibilities of the position. Statutory officers are normally responsible to their relevant Chief Executives for the effectiveness of their work.
[give examples or list your agency's statutory officials]
- A useful distinction can be made between matters of settled **government policy** and **operational matters**. Many Ministers' offices will routinely refer operational matters to the agency. A standard tactic used by media, when faced with perceived reluctance or slowness on the part of an agency, is to ask to interview a Minister on the issue. Cooperation between the agency and Ministers' offices usually gets good results when this happens.
- **OIA requests** will normally be handled by [insert agency name], even when addressed to the Minister. This is because the Minister's office does not hold most records. The agency holds these. There will be consultation throughout OIA processes. Where necessary formal communications plans will be developed. Ministers typically will be informed of any OIA request which is related to their responsibilities or has the potential to trigger media interest. The [insert agency name] will always begin from the principle of availability: i.e. unless there is a lawful reason to withhold, information should be made available.

Resources

Briefings to Incoming Ministers are provided to you with this briefing. They cover all the main activities and roles of [insert agency name] and your Minister.

[insert agency name] maintains [insert number] main **websites** and a number of smaller sites. All websites are listed at the end of this document. The main websites are [insert names of websites].

Often the material you need will be on these sites. You can ask any of us where material on the sites can be found.

The key [insert agency name] accountability documents are the **Statement of Intent** and the **Annual Report**. Copies of the most recent are provided to you with this report.

Formal Departmental reporting to the Minister

Describe the way your agency reports to Ministers. For example:

The Department makes regular written reports to the Minister. These **Status Reports** can be forwarded to you by the relevant private secretaries in the Minister's office or we can arrange for them to be forwarded directly to you when this is approved by the Minister. Information in these will normally be classified as sensitive.

The Department prepares formal **papers** for the Minister's approval. These are either papers requiring the Minister's final decision, or papers for the Minister to in turn take to Cabinet Committees or Cabinet. These papers should always be the basis of related news releases. Senior Department staff visit the Minister to give **briefings** on issues. Press Secretaries attend these meetings at the invitation of the Minister. The Department believes it is always valuable for Press Secretaries to be aware of the content of these meetings.

Parliamentary Questions

On the day, oral questions will be a priority for both Ministers' offices and the **[insert agency name]**. Typically, Ministers' offices become aware that there is a question or questions after 10:30 in the morning, and know the question itself by 11:00. There is sometimes a delay if questions are transferred between Ministers.

Communications staff in the Department provide active support to the answering of oral questions, but should NOT be the first or main point of contact. The point of contact in **[insert agency name]** for oral questions is **[insert names and phone numbers for contact and back-up.]**

As soon as an oral question is received in your office, the relevant private secretary will send a copy to **[insert official's name]**, accompanied by any instructions on the sort of material required. Typically, **[insert agency name]** will draft answers to the question, and expected supplementary questions and return these to your office, through the relevant private secretary by the time required by the Minister.

Staff from **[insert agency name]** will if requested come over to the Minister's office to work on the answer to the question, or discuss draft answers with the Minister or Minister's staff. Remember that communications staff are usually not the main holders of the information required to answer questions. That is typically the role of **[insert agency name]** policy staff. But we are available to assist in research and wording in cooperation with policy people.

[insert agency name] requires people in a position to answer questions to be available in late morning whenever Parliament is sitting in case there are oral questions. Our senior staff will interrupt any other activity to provide the support needed.

Both oral and written questions can trigger media inquiries, so it is important that both press secretaries and communications staff are aware of the questions, and the answers.

Events

Press Secretaries and [insert agency name] communications staff must cooperate on various set piece events which follow fairly predictable paths such as ministerial or department appearances at **select committees** and the passage of **legislation** through the house.

Sometimes Ministers may want assistance with organising news conferences, events to accompany announcements, launches of new policies etc. We can help.

Professional Development

[Insert information on any help that can be given to press secretaries interested in professional development – attendance at courses, planning days, access to material such as templates etc.]

Contacting [insert agency name]

Please contact communication staff on communications issues. Policy and other staff will be involved by communications advisors as needed. **Do not hesitate to call us at any time.**

Are you getting what you need?

We want to provide the best service possible to you and the Minister. If you ever feel that you are not getting the support you need from a [insert agency name] communications advisor, [insert agency name] wants you to let the [insert manager position name] know of the problem as soon as possible.

Appendices

1. **Staff names positions and contact numbers**
2. **Websites by portfolios**
3. **Agency publications**