



# anglo-corporate: briefing

*ideas to help companies, associations and societies communicate*

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## WRITING FOR POLICY MAKERS: HOW TO BE EFFECTIVE

### AND WE THINK WE'RE BUSY!

Policy makers are a diverse bunch, but if there's one thing that unites them, it's time pressure. With deep cuts to the public sector, officials have more files on their desks than ever; MPs have to deal with an ever-more complex modern state; and ministers, long-used to a five-minute, back-of-the-car briefing, are no fans of long copy. If you write for these audiences, your aim should be to tell them what they need to know, quickly and well. Here's five ideas to maximize your impact.

#### 1. HAVE A SINGLE PEN HOLDER

Companies can be highly polished when it comes to marketing copy, but documents for policy makers can be another matter. In the absence of a strong public affairs team, documents may have numerous authors and drift can set in; a problem often made worse by numerous levels of approval for submissions that are sensitive. Membership bodies are doubly liable to this problem, as they try to balance what individual members think is important. Consulting widely internally makes sense, but counterbalance this by choosing someone with clear editorial authority. They should hold the pen, have the backing of the approver, and the remit to ensure a sharp and succinct submission.

#### 2. STAY FOCUSED

If you're writing to an MP, stick to one or two pages; additional information can be attached. When responding to a consultation, answer the questions. Officials sift thousands of responses, and simply getting to the point, backed by a few relevant facts, might mean your material makes a minister's briefing. Avoid the temptation to wax lyrical about your organization: you can put that in an annex. And don't use a submission as an opportunity to work through your public policy shopping list: there'll be plenty of other occasions.

#### 3. RESEARCH, RESEARCH, RESEARCH

Despite the negativity around government, and the reality that politics is... well... political, the UK is blessed to have policy makers who value evidence. But the effects a proposed policy might have on this or that group can be hard to discern from deep within Whitehall. If there's one currency that's in short supply, it's facts. Avoiding the temptation to dash-off an opinion-heavy response, and investing extra time in research, can reap rewards. Backing your arguments with relevant facts, linked to your views, is key. Officials will thank you for making their job easier; and deciders will have something—quite possibly your something—to base their judgments on.

## 4. DON'T GO "STRAIGHT TO THE TOP"

"I wrote to the minister last month and here's the response", says an upbeat CEO, waving a piece of ministerial headed notepaper, rather like a latter-day Neville Chamberlain. The only problem? The minister never really saw it, except for a couple of seconds when they signed it, along with several dozen other letters in that night's red box. On all but the show stopping issues, going "straight to the top" is just a more roundabout way of corresponding with officials; and probably more junior officials at that—no disrespect here: they're the most likely people to have a proper command of the detail on your matter. Instead of this, find out who that official is and contact them. Public sector websites have improved in recent years, so a search and a bit of persistence on the phone ought to get you there. Ask them what the important points about the matter are from their perspective. This can be very revealing. It might be that they desperately want to go ahead with the policy that your organization so badly needs; but they're short of statistics on... which might be just the sort of figures you have to hand. This route might not have the kudos of the headed notepaper, but it can be more efficient and effective.

## 5. SET IT OUT WELL

When your submission is ready, spending a bit of time at the end to format it and set it out well is another high return activity. First, make sure it's well structured. Common sense rules apply here. Use short paragraphs and make one point in each. If you're answering the questions in a consultation, head the paragraph with the question and its reference. Number your paragraphs so readers can refer back to them. Simply going from paragraph "1" to "X" is simple and effective; parliamentary scrutiny committees do it this way. Give the document an informative title; for example, "Submission from organization X on regulatory document Y, May 2016." Number your pages. Bold-up any key facts, statistics or sentences so that readers (especially the busiest ones) can scan down to bits they need to read. Reference your sources. Can you cite some research and add a link? Pass through your document and put a ruthless hat on to decide if anything can be stripped out and annexed. If it's written long-hand, would it be clearer in a table? Is there a diagram that could be switched in and some words taken out. Finally, make sure you include relevant contacts (phone and email) in case your readers want to follow up.



Rob Siddall is a former trade association professional, who has served as a policy director and chief executive. He now works for himself as 'Anglo Corporate', helping companies, associations and societies, small and large, communicate and operate more effectively. Anglo-Corporate can offer a 100% reliable, flexible and affordable addition to your in-house resources.

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