

Part A.

**CONFIDENTIAL**

(Circulate under cover and notify REGISTRY of movement)

AND MANAGEMENT - IN - CONFIDENCE

Begin: 10/2/79.  
Ends: 5/2/80



PO -CH /GH/0048



PART A

Chancellor of the Exchequer's Papers<sup>(G. Howe)</sup>

**HANDLING OF MINISTERIAL  
CORRESPONDENCE**

PO -CH /GH/0048

PART A

Disposal Directions: 25 Years

*D. H. [Signature]*

25/7/95



10/8/79.

PS/INLAND REVENUE  
PS/CUSTOMS AND EXCISE  
(Separate Copies)

cc Mr Battishill  
Mr Hall  
Mrs Diggle  
Mr Pirie  
Mr Brotherton  
Mr Cropper

#### CORRESPONDENCE

I have been asked by the Minister of State to consider during the summer break whether the burden of work associated with correspondence with MPs might not be rationalised and perhaps reduced. Treasury correspondence deals with a wide range of subjects, but the bulk of it concerns tax issues. It is correspondence in this field on which I intend to concentrate. The purpose of this minute is to set out my initial thoughts on this subject, on which I would welcome comments from all the recipients of this minute, and to suggest that it might be useful if we, and other interested parties, could meet shortly to discuss this problem. I would like if possible to be in a position to set out the options for Ministers by the end of August.

At the risk of stating the obvious, perhaps I could begin with a few general observations. Handling correspondence with MPs is extremely time consuming both for Ministers and officials. In the month of July this office alone received more than 1,500 letters (more than usual, but not greatly so) at a time when the Finance Bill was taking up most of our energies. The Minister of State was unable to sign many letters during that month and consequently he was faced with a large backlog of letters to sign in the short period of time before he left for

his holiday. Given the volume of letters being received, combined with the pressure of other work, this kind of situation is likely to recur, and the Minister of State feels that by and large correspondence is not a very productive use either of his time or of those who have to produce the drafts. It is against this background that I have been asked to look into the problem.

As a starting point, it seems to me that most letters, certainly in the tax field, fall into one of two categories; those which raise detailed individual cases, and those seeking comment on general policy issues. Letters of the former sort often require largely factual but nevertheless long and complex replies which the MP will often pass directly to his constituent without much ado. Letters falling into the second category very often arise from the activities of pressure groups, who circularise MPs as a matter of course, and consequently it is not unusual to send sometimes hundreds of virtually identical letters on one subject.

Bearing in mind this categorisation of letters, the problem of actually reducing the burden imposed by correspondence seems to fall into three parts:

- a. The allocation of correspondence between Treasury Ministers;
- b. The burden that correspondence places on officials;
- c. The burden that correspondence places on Ministers.

Adjusting the allocation of correspondence between Ministers is not a means of solving the overall problem, but I feel obliged to include it in this note since there does seem to be something wrong with the present division of work. I believe that this office handles over three-quarters of Treasury correspondence and I fear that that can only be disproportionate. Indeed,

I have already had to make ad hoc arrangements for the Minister of State (L)'s office to take on some of our backlog from time to time (and I am most grateful to them for doing so). I am afraid that in the short term at least I will probably have to pursue the possibility of more formally diverting some of the correspondence from this office to others. However, I am not primarily concerned here with questions of allocation and for the present perhaps we could leave this as something to pursue in discussion.

The substantive problem falls into two parts then - the burden on officials and the burden on Ministers.

Changes to alleviate the official burden of handling correspondence can to an extent only flow from what Ministers are prepared to accept in replying to MPs letters. The official burden might be reduced in some quarters if, for example, fewer letters were channelled through the Minister himself. But changes of this sort can only follow from decisions on how to reduce the burden of correspondence on Ministers.

Nevertheless there may be straightforward economies which could be introduced. Possibilities which have occurred to me are:

- a. a drastic shortening of replies;
- b. much greater standardisation of replies (possibly also allowing the use of word processors instead of typists);
- c. some arrangement to short circuit the correspondence "circle" - at present, a MP's letter probably passes through the hands of eight or nine people before being signed;
- d. (possibly) a centralised correspondence section.

I turn now to the core of the problem; the burden that correspondence imposes on Ministers. Given the two categories into which letters seem to fall, two immediate possibilities for reducing the burden occur to me. First, replies on a wide range of policy issues might be standardised, possibly in background notes which could be despatched under cover of a short standard personal letter (which could itself ultimately be cyclostyled or signed on behalf of the Minister). Second, and in relation to letters raising individual cases, Ministers might simply acknowledge letters in a standard form saying that they had asked the relevant Department to look into the matter and to reply direct to the MP. The substantive reply would then issue at official level.

More generally, while there will always be letters which Ministers must see and sign, it is less clear that the custom that Ministers should see and sign all letters to MPs remains a sensible use of resources in present day circumstances. A less close scrutiny of individual letters is implied by some of the options above. It is also possible to envisage an increase in the number of letters signed by Private Secretaries on behalf of the Minister; and (perhaps less likely) it is possible that the Parliamentary Private Secretaries may have a role here as well.

I have not touched in this minute on one further avenue which could be explored in attempting to reduce the burden of correspondence. That is to make some sort of approach to MPs themselves in an attempt to persuade them to write to the Minister only in the last resort; and possibly to write fewer letters altogether. By this latter point, I do not suggest that MPs should simply be told to stop writing letters. But it does seem to me that there are possibilities here. For example, in cases where lobbies are being organised on particular issues, it might be possible for some concise statement of Government policy to be placed in the House of Commons for Members to draw on rather than writing to the Minister concerned to elicit

precisely the same statement in an expensive and time consuming letter. But this is all much more delicate ground and goes beyond departmental considerations alone.

I am afraid that this minute has rambled slightly but I hope it serves as a starting point for discussion. I would be grateful if those who feel they have an interest could let me know whether they wish to comment now in writing, and in any case would they like to come to a meeting, hopefully early next week?

R J BROADBENT  
10 August 1979



MR BATTISHILL

CORRESPONDENCE

We spoke this morning on this subject. I explained that the Minister of State had asked me to consider in his absence ways in which the burden of correspondence might be reduced and to let him have a report on his return. He intended then to raise the matter with the Chancellor.

We agreed that if there is to be a general exercise on correspondence, it might be more appropriate for your office to take the lead. You may however like to see the attached minute with which I had intended to set the ball rolling.

R J BROADBENT  
10 August 1979

A



22/8/79. 7A  
3  
cc: Mr. Watts  
Mrs. Diggle  
Mr. Broadbent  
Mr. Brotherton

PS/Inland Revenue  
PS/Customs & Excise

Mrs. Kevan (DNS)

Mr. Coyle

For information:

Mr. Battishill (o/r) ✓

Miss Court

Mr. Enderby

Mr. F.K. Jones

Mr. Nelson (o/r)

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

HANDLING OF MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE

Representatives of the five Treasury Private Offices, together with representatives of the Inland Revenue, Customs and Excise, and DNS, met on 12th August to discuss ways of reducing the burden of correspondence, especially MP's letters, on Ministers, their Private Offices, and the official machine generally. We had two purposes in view:-

- (i) To assist Mr. Broadbent in meeting the Minister of State (Commons) remit to look at all this (though - subject to Ministers' views on the options set out below - the question of allocation between Ministers can only be sorted out by Ministers).
- (ii) To contribute to Mr. Enderby's current exercise.

2. We noted first the high cost of the present service provided for MPs. Customs and Excise working estimate is £40 per letter. It would be helpful if an authoritative figure for this is available. Ministers should be aware of it.

3. The following list comprises options, not recommendations. All imply a reduction in the direct personal service which MPs now receive from Ministers. Ministers will need to give detailed guidance, since the judgements involved are political.





A. Ways of reducing the number of letters reaching Ministers:

- (i) categorise MPs - e.g. Ministers reply only to Privy Councillors/Chairmen of Conservative backbench Committees/ Members of the Government. Other MPs get reply from Private Office or Chairmen/Inland Revenue or Customs and Excise.

Advantages: less work for Ministers and Private Offices; no more work for IR or CE.

Snags: Arbitrary; cumbersome sifting process; exempt category necessarily very large.

- (ii) deflect letters from Ministers. This would involve positively encouraging MPs to write direct to the Chairmen of Inland Revenue and Customs. DNS in fact already receive one-fifth of their letters from MPs direct. There are various ways of doing this. PPSs could speak to individual backbenchers; a circular letter, set in the context of the elimination of wasteful Government practice, could be sent to MPs by Ministers.

Advantages: less work for Ministers and Private Offices

Snag: perhaps politically counter-productive.

- (iii) Private Secretaries sign on behalf of their Minister. This would mean in effect that Ministers would not personally see letters being signed on their behalf. We had in mind here not "The Chancellor has asked me to reply" type of letter, but one where the Private Secretary signs pp [Peter Rees]. Where an MP has written on behalf of a constituent, it is customary to enclose a copy of the outgoing letter for the constituent. This would of course simply have the Minister's name on it without a signature, and the constituent would not know that the Minister had not personally signed the letter.

Advantages: much less work for Ministers; (but some increase in Private Office work .)

Snags: Ministers are unaware of what is being said in their name to colleagues.



B. Changes in types of reply

(i) Consciously categorise MPs' letters:-

- (a) letters about individual constituent's cases;
- (b) letters forwarding circulars on behalf of particular lobby groups;
- (c) letters making a particular point about Government policy, either on MPs' own behalf or a constituent's.

If Ministers were willing, category (a) could be answered by a short acknowledgement signed by the Minister (or his Private Secretary or in presentable facsimile of the Minister's signature) saying that officials, usually IR or CE or DNS, will reply direct. There are various ways of lightening the burden of categories (b) and (c). For the great majority of letters, a Minister (or PS) could send a very short acknowledgement, enclosing a photocopied statement of Government policy or alternatively referring to published material. Another approach, an extension of Customs and Excise existing practice of producing stock paragraphs, would be to incorporate the standard replies into programmes for a word processor. Some work would be needed here on relative costs, but probably a flexible combination of methods would need to be operated in practice.

Advantage: Ministers would not feel the need to read the letters they signed.

Snags: Letters would no longer be receiving a precise answer to the points raised.

Obviously if Ministers would agree to facsimile signatures a great burden or work would be saved for them.

- (ii) Ministers could issue a general instruction to shorten replies where possible, and encourage more use of standard paragraphs.



(iii) Ministers could take a conscious decision to change the tone of letters, from a detailed defence of particular rules or exceptions - eg VAT on older children's clothing - to a generalised statement of the Government's policy of reducing and simplifying the taxation machinery.

Correspondence unit

4. We did not discuss in any detail the pros and cons of setting up a centralised correspondence unit. Initial prejudices were mixed. We felt that it was difficult to discuss the idea in the abstract; it would depend on the precise form and staffing of the unit.

Letters from the public

5. On the whole, Ministers sign very few letters from the public, except for constituents. But it was noted that many of the expedients set out above would also relate, mutatis mutandis, to letters from the public.

Footnote

6. Whatever Ministers may decide on the foregoing options, it is perhaps worth restating the obvious point that there will always be some letters, both from MPs and the public, which are either politically sensitive, or require rulings or decisions, which will reach them in any case.

*M.A.H.*  
(M.A. HALL)  
22nd August, 1979

- No need to sound out L.S.  
Does not do or. dep't? The  
problem is not complex now:  
D.U.S.S., D.O.E., D.E.M.? Some  
man has tried to do it  
twice: what is common this afternoon



Chancellor, MST(C) and Wa 4  
to discuss the meeting with  
Peter Rees present. Have you any  
initial views on my note below? I  
thought of consulting you / Stewart  
on return about it. 30/8

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER

- + the two a week, as you say.

Meanwhile, we must deal with  
\* below a.s.a.b.

HANDLING OF MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE

I have seen the papers on this subject recording the discussions which have taken place at my behest about the possibility of reducing the burden of correspondence. I hope we can discuss all this very soon, and I hope too that at that meeting we can discuss the question of the present allocation of correspondence between Ministers. At present, I have to sign a very large part of the considerable correspondence on tax matters and I hope that some evening out of the allocation of this correspondence will be possible. I do not believe this is a matter of policy responsibilities (a question which I do not wish to reopen) but simply a matter of who carries out a rather burdensome chore.

2. I am afraid that I must add that whatever we decide to do in the medium term about correspondence generally, I must press the question of allocation urgently. With letters arriving at the rate of eighty or more a day, it is all too easy for backlogs to build up.

Done.  
An informal agreement to  
man between  
2 MSTs.  
OK

PETER REES  
29 August 1979



cc: PS/Chief Secretary  
 PS/Financial Secretary  
 PS/Minister of State (C)  
 PS/Minister of State (L)  
 Mr. Battishill  
 Miss Court

MR. ENDERBY

3/9/79.

HANDLING OF CORRESPONDENCE

I promised you some personal views on this before I went on leave.

2. You will already have seen the report of the meeting of the Private Secretaries to discuss ways in which the burden of correspondence, particularly with MPs, could be reduced, both for Ministers and for officials. The Chancellor is at present looking at this. The Minister of State has asked him to set up a meeting to discuss correspondence, though this is likely to centre on the question of ~~connection~~<sup>allocation</sup> as between Ministers. I also hope to consult the Chancellor's PPS, Mr. Ian Stewart, informally about all this. But I am not very optimistic that the burden can be very much reduced, since all the options would result in a reduction of the closeness of the relationship between Ministers and the Members of Parliament.

3. In principle, I am sympathetic to the idea of a Central Correspondence Unit to handle all Ministerial correspondence in the Treasury. But before giving a considered view, I should want to know precisely what was recommended, since the details are extremely important. Presumably you would not recommend such a Unit unless you thought it would improve on the present performance of the Private Offices. This certainly falls short in certain respects:-

- (i) There are unacceptable delays in the handling of correspondence.
- (ii) There is no effective bring-up system.
- (iii) Important letters are not always picked out and dealt with expeditiously.



(iv) Many letters are mis-directed.

(v) A large number of papers go astray.

4. The main reasons for these shortcomings are inadequate allocation of manpower to deal with correspondence, the low priority of the work, and a lack in most cases of supervision by someone with a broad enough view of the functions of the Treasury and the dealings of Ministers to recognise an important letter when he sees one.

5. A Correspondence Unit which did nothing else but handle Ministerial correspondence would presumably not accord it low priority, it would have no other priorities. (Though this would lead in turn to morale problems amongst the staff, since this is essentially tedious work.) But unless the total amount of man-hours spent on Ministerial correspondence were increased, and the quality of the staff assigned to the unit high, I am not convinced that some of the fundamental problems would disappear. The following seem to me to be some of the main considerations you will need to have in mind:-

- (i) At present letters are acknowledged first then distributed. The acknowledgement of letters is a low-priority task for our secretaries; some of them are sent to Hove. Letters are therefore often distributed several days after receipt. This should be done more efficiently. The new Unit will therefore need sufficient typing capacity to ensure immediate acknowledgement, or alternatively letters should be distributed first, then acknowledged. But again, unless the acknowledgement were immediate, there would be many occasions when the substantive reply arrived before the acknowledgement.
- (ii) Under the present system, the originals of letters and all papers are sent back to the drafter of the reply as soon as it is despatched. Despite the existence of ledgers, papers are often difficult to find. It would be an improvement if a new Unit had adequate storage facilities of its own.

/(iii)



- (iii) For all letters which will ultimately require a Minister's signature, there should be an effective bring-up system. Some of the delays at present are intolerable, and once the letter has been sent to a Division or Inland Revenue/Customs and Excise for action no check is kept of it until it returns with a draft reply.
- (iv) There is a problem about opening and registering letters addressed to Ministers. Many letters coming through the post or from the House of Commons are very urgent, and need to be picked out quickly. If such mail is to be opened in a Correspondence Section, Private Offices would need guarantees that the initial sift of mail would be done very fast, and letters delivered to the relevant Private Offices as early as possible in the morning. If, on the other hand, such letters continued to be opened in the offices to which they were addressed, for which there is a strong argument, a good deal of the work now done by correspondence clerks would remain in the Private Offices. This would be even more so if the office opening the letters also registered them. (It is a weakness in any paper-handling system if opening and registering are performed in different places.)
- (v) Even if all the difficulties listed above were overcome by the staffing and quality of the Correspondence Section, a good deal of residual work from existing correspondence clerks would still fall on the Private Offices, since they would still have to deal with and despatch all the letters for signature by their Minister.

6. It is certainly not my purpose to make your task more complicated, but I do not think present arrangements can be improved without extra manpower and a great deal of careful thought. In particular, if it were the intention to amalgamate a Correspondence Unit with the Parliamentary Section, we would need assurances that there would be no split of responsibilities in the Job Descriptions of people in a Correspondence Unit which would relegate correspondence to second

/place



place, particularly in the mornings when the mail was being sorted. I would also hope that it would be under the ultimate line management of this office, on behalf of all the Private Offices, rather in the way that the Parliamentary Section now is. This would enable us to keep a reasonably close oversight of procedures and performance.

7. Perhaps we could discuss this further as your work progresses.

*M.A.*

*M.A.* (M.A. HALL)  
3rd September 1979





cc: Chief Secretary  
Financial Secretary  
Minister of State (C)  
Minister of State (L)

146

Treasury Chambers, Parliament Street, SW1P 3AG  
01-233 3000

11th September, 1979

BF-21/9

12.11.79

Dear Don,

HANDLING OF MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE

Particularly since the General Election, Treasury Ministers seem to have received a quite unprecedented volume of correspondence both from Members of Parliament and members of the public. We have been trying to think of ways in which the burden on Ministers (and their Private Offices!) can be reduced, and we are keen to learn from the experience of other departments which must receive a similar, and perhaps even greater, volume of letters.

I do not want to waste much of your time on this exercise. Perhaps the simplest way from your point of view would be to annotate the enclosed copy of a note of a meeting we recently held, at which various possibilities for reducing the workload were canvassed. It would be helpful to know which if any of the modifications in procedures we discussed you have already adopted; and, equally, any other ways you have devised which we ourselves have not thought of.

Treasury Ministers are anxious to discuss this issue urgently. Could I therefore infringe further on your good nature, and ask you to reply within two weeks.

I am also copying this letter to Philip Hunter, Ian Fair, David Edmonds and Tony Butler; their observations would be equally helpful.

Yours aw,

MH

(M.A. HALL)  
Private Secretary

D. Brereton, Esq.,  
Private Secretary  
Department of Health & Social Services

B



CH/EXCHEQUER	
REC.	17 SEP 1979
<del>REC.</del>	<del>17 SEP 1979</del>
COMES TO	CSJ
	FSJ
	FSJ (C)
	FSJ (L)

HOME OFFICE  
QUEEN ANNE'S GATE LONDON SW1H 9AT

17 September 1979

Dear Martin

HANDLING OF MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE

You sent Tony Butler a copy of your letter of 11th September to Don Brereton in the Department of Health and Social Security, and asked for comments.

We too have noted an increase in the volume of our Ministerial correspondence in the present Parliament. In the three months ending 31st August 1979 it has been more than 20% higher than in the same three month period in any of the last five years (during which time it has, until now, been pretty steady).

You may like to know that we have a good deal of experience of the use of stock, or standard, replies discussed at B(i) of your note. The attached note shows something of the scope and method involved. In practice this has taken care of more than 10% of our total Ministerial correspondence (more than 2000 replies a year) over the past few years and the snag you mention has cropped up in only a handful of cases. I should say, however, that the effect of this practice is more in the nature of saving work in Divisions than in saving Ministers' time although it is true, as you say, that Ministers do not have to read every reply put before them once they have approved a standard response.

We are, of course, interested in the prospect of relieving Ministers, if possible, of the need to write so many letters. As your note says, this is a matter for Ministerial decision and in our experience it is indeed crucial that any proposal to adopt Private Secretary or official replies to M.P.'s should be acceptable to Members of Parliament as well as to Ministers. It also seems desirable that Departments should march pretty much in step.

Having said that, we think that in our experience both Ministers and M.P.'s might find Private Secretary replies to most letters in your categories B(i)(b) and (c) acceptable. For our part, however, we cannot envisage individual constituencies' grievances (your category B(i)(a)) raised by M.P.'s with Home Office Ministers being dealt with without Ministerial involvement and this consideration governs the approaches suggested at A of your note.

/I

I should very much like to know what Treasury Ministers decide and to be kept informed of any developments as we clearly have similar problems. I have not circulated this letter to the recipients of yours but have no objection to your doing so if you wish to.

Yours ever,



J. A. CHILCOT

## FUNCTIONS OF CORRESPONDENCE SECRETARY

*EO stock replies. ideal/pos*  
*[SPO] EO+6 clerks*

1. The Correspondence Secretary and his assistant are members of Private Office. They deal with those items of Ministers' correspondence for which the answers can conveniently be prepared within the Private Office and thereby speed up replies in straightforward cases and relieve Divisions of some work.

2. All letters which appear to be straightforward and capable of quick reply are retained in Private Office for action by the Correspondence Secretary; these letters fall into three main categories:

- (a) "campaign" correspondence arriving in considerable numbers over a short period dealing with a specific subject. The Correspondence Secretary usually deals with these on the basis of stock paragraphs, or a memorandum setting out policy, provided by the Divisions concerned;
- (b) the steady flow of correspondence (on such matters as general "law and order" issues, general immigration issues, experiments on animals, television licensing and similar topics) which the Correspondence Secretary deals with on the basis of stock material which he holds;
- (c) letters not in the above categories which nevertheless appear to be capable of a quick reply.

In addition the Correspondence Secretary co-ordinates replies to letters which raise points on more than one Home Office subject. It has not usually been possible for the Correspondence Secretary to give any help with individual personal cases except those giving rise to a large number of letters making similar points.

3. Where the Correspondence Secretary cannot prepare a draft reply from the information he already holds, he will send the correspondence direct to the principal in the division concerned to ask for information in any suitable form (eg a copy of a previous reply which could be adapted, published material, or a manuscript note) to enable a reply to be prepared. This request will take the form of a standard note which sets out the arrangements for handling the letter as a normal Minister's case if the Division consider that course to be more appropriate.

4. All completed cases which have been dealt with by the Correspondence Secretary are sent to the appropriate division (usually to the principal concerned); divisions are responsible for arranging for the file to be registered.

5. When the Correspondence Secretary is on leave it is usually necessary to allow letters which he would otherwise take to go through to divisions in the usual way; exceptionally this may also be necessary to a more limited extent in periods of heavy pressure.

6. Divisions are asked to co-operate by providing on request standard material for use in replies, to inform the Correspondence Secretary of any changes which may be required in standard material already held by him, and to alert him to the possibility of new topics which appear to be suitable for action by him.



cc: PS/Chief Secretary  
PS/Financial Secretary  
PS/Minister of State (C)  
PS/Minister of State (L)

MR. ENDERBY

MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE

.....

You may be interested in the attached correspondence. I understand from the Private Secretary to the Home Secretary that the Home Office has a correspondence unit comprising an SEO, designated correspondence secretary, plus an EO and six clerks, who handle correspondence addressed to all the Home Office Ministers. Additionally, an EO sifts the letters for those which can be answered by stock replies. As you will see from Mr. Chilcot's letter, more than 10 per cent of the correspondence is disposed of in this way *(The SEO is to be placed out)*

2. I will let you have any other helpful material that comes my way.

3. Although stock paragraphs in theory reduce work, in practice they produce a greatly inferior product. In many cases they merely transfer the work from the original draftsman to hard pressed Private Secretaries. I spend a good deal of time converting into comprehensible English suitable to a <sup>recipient</sup> recipient letters comprising different permutations of stock paragraphs from various sources.

*M.A.H.*

(M.A. HALL)  
10th September 1970



DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE  
 ELIZABETH HOUSE, YORK ROAD, LONDON SE1 7PH  
 TELEPHONE 01-928 9222  
 FROM THE SECRETARY OF STATE

189<sup>c</sup>

CH/EXCHEQUER	
REC.	21 SEP 1979
<del>PS/CST</del>	<del>SUBA AP</del>
PS/FST	
PS/NSC(C)	
PS/NSC(C)	
SIR D WASS	
MR <del>FOR</del> LENDERBY	

10 Downing Street  
 Whitehall Esq  
 Private Secretary to the  
 Chancellor of the Exchequer  
 Treasury Chambers  
 Parliament Street  
 SW1P 3AG

20 September 1979

Dear Minister,

HANDLING OF MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE

We too have been interested in reducing the burden of correspondence on Ministers and I was therefore very interested to see your letter and attachment of 11 September.

I have the following comments on the options outlined in the attachment to your letter.

A. Reducing the number of letters reaching Ministers.

You will see from the attached minute that we in DES are making some effort to deflect letters from Ministers. Because most of our correspondence deals with the affairs of local authorities, universities, research councils, etc I expect that it is easier for us than for you to take this line; we have not yet had enough experience to establish whether the new approach is having any impact on the amount of correspondence but I know that DOE are rather ahead of us in taking this line and David Edmunds, to whom you copied your letter, might have some views. I personally would be firmly against private secretaries signing letters on behalf of their Ministers when the Ministers concerned have not seen them. I think that private secretaries should not put their name to letters unless they are absolutely confident that their Ministers agree with the contents: if a Minister has not time to deal with all his correspondence, it is much better to have an official write in terms of "I am replying to your letter of...", which does not imply that the Minister has seen it.

B. Changes in types of reply.

You will see that the attached minute envisages the use of standard replies to many letters, as well as a reduction in the amount of Ministerial correspondence. We also frequently use stock letters and paragraphs for dealing with correspondence arising from organised campaigns on eg student awards or teachers pay.

C. Correspondence Unit.

We have a central correspondence unit for the four Ministers and the Permanent Secretary in DES. We think it works quite well, but I know that other departments work equally well without one. You are welcome to come across and see how the system works, if you would find that helpful.

Can I say that DES Ministers are aware of the risk that the use of short cuts of this kind might lead to complaints from MPs who feel that constituents' correspondence is not receiving individual attention. But my Secretary of State's own experience as a backbencher has convinced him that a quick and accurate reply, even if it is a standard one, is preferable to a long wait for a tailor made response.

I am copying this letter to the recipients of yours.

*Yours ever  
Philip Hunter*

P J HUNTER  
Private Secretary

cc Mr Bleach  
Mr Halladay  
Miss Dawkins  
Mr Syme  
SCI Miss Browne  
Mr Hudson  
Mr Thompson  
Mr Simpson  
Mr Ulrich  
Mr Robinson  
Mrs Pentland  
Mr Green  
Mr Wilson

ALL HEADS OF BRANCHES

TREATMENT OF CORRESPONDENCE

1. The Secretary of State has asked me to draw the attention of officials in the Department to the need for a more rapid treatment of Ministerial correspondence. He has concluded that many of the letters which are sent to Ministers do not require extensive research or consultation with outside bodies and could be dealt with more quickly than they seem to be at present. He would, therefore, be grateful if Branches could put the following arrangements for handling Ministerial correspondence into operation from the beginning of September.


2. When allotting a date by which a draft reply or advice should be submitted, Correspondence Section will in general continue to allow 8 working days (except in the case of iii below). However, on receiving Yellow Covers officials should decide which of the following categories they fall within, and treat them accordingly. (It should be noted that in the case of categories i and ii, drafts should be submitted earlier than the date on the front of the Yellow Cover.)

- i. Letters seeking information which can only be obtained from local authorities or other outside bodies, and which do not involve consideration of particular points or policy. These letters may now be answered by a standard reply of the kind suggested in the annex to this minute. It would be helpful if each Branch prepared a draft along these lines, to be sent to Correspondence Section as required. It should be possible to deal with correspondence in this manner immediately, but in any event drafts should be submitted within 5 days;
- ii. letters referring to matters where no research is required, either because there is a standard Branch draft available or because there is a simple yes or no answer. Draft replies to these letters should also be sent to Correspondence Section within 5 days;



- iii. letters asking for a meeting with a Minister. For these letters, Correspondence Section will ask for advice and a draft reply within 5 days. In some cases it will not be possible to meet this deadline, and the official concerned should telephone the appropriate Private Office to explain the circumstances and to give an indication of the date by which a draft will be available;
- iv. letters which refer to policy matters and which require more detailed consideration. These should be dealt with in the normal way with a draft reply or advice submitted by the date shown on the front of the Yellow Cover.

3. The Secretary of State recognises that many letters cover issues which could be regarded as falling within more than one of the above categories and that it will not always be easy to decide how to treat an individual case. He also recognises that there is a risk that a standard reply might be sent to a correspondent who would prefer a more personal approach. But he is anxious to ensure that correspondence is dealt with as quickly as possible, and would be grateful for officials' co-operation in the approach suggested above. He will review the arrangements after a four month trial period and decide then if any change is needed.



for P J HUNTER  
9 August 1979

OUTLINE LETTER TO MPs ON QUESTIONS NOT THE DIRECT RESPONSIBILITY OF THE DEPARTMENT

Thank you for your letter of ..... enclosing this one from ..... about .....

Since this is a matter for the Local Education Authority/UGC/ Research Council etc concerned, I should have some difficulty in answering your question/making a comment on what you say without writing to the responsible body and seeking information which I would then pass on to you. I believe, therefore, that you would receive a quicker reply if you made a direct approach to the responsible authority in the first instance.

The address of the authority in question is ..... You might like to contact Mr .....

Please come back to me if you feel that I can be of further assistance.

22 10<sup>D</sup>



CHIFFERBOURNE

REC.	-3 OCT 1979
	CST
COMES TO	FST
	NST (C)
	NST (L)

Sat 2.0

2 MARSHAM STREET  
LONDON SW1P 3EB

My ref:

Your ref:

3 October 1979

Dear Nedra

HANDLING OF MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE

Thank you for sending me a copy of your letter of 11 September to Don Brereton.

Given my own natural tendency to minimise work both for myself and the Department the question you raise is one that we also had already looked at. You may - or may not! - be interested to know that by the week ending 21 September the various Ministers' offices here had handled 12208 letters - hitting the peak of 500 a week in early July.

I do not think there is any possibility of giving MB a reply from anyone but a Minister. Private Secretaries cannot sign and indeed most Ministers would be unwilling to contemplate this as an option. On the other hand, I am sure it is quite right for letters which can be better handled by, for example, the Chairman of an independent body to be deflected to that body.

We also sift letters in our correspondence section - there are about 12 COs handling letters - so that a correspondent receives a reply from the "lowest level" of Minister. But at the end of the day it does mean that the Parliamentary Secretaries have a hefty burden of letter writing.

Stock paragraphs are quite useful in certain cases but MPs expect to get a personalised response and very soon the benefit gained through giving shorter more stereo-typed replies to letters would be nullified by the extra burden of PQ answers which would have to be given.

More specifically, my Secretary of State has already issued an instruction that no reply he signs should be more than a page long. It is the job of the Private Office to see that this rule obtains and any letter we put to him more than a page long has to be justified by us. That is a useful but simple discipline! However, I have seen no evidence that other Ministers in this Department have followed suit.

/ One innovation I have introduced is described more fully in the attached draft heads of division notice which has in fact now been promulgated. As you will see, this is a stock letter to MPs on questions not the direct responsibility of the Department. I had to get the agreement of all 6 Ministers in the Department before this stock letter was agreed to, but it is now been used quite often.

Another minor innovation I have introduced to save typing and checking time is to issue selected divisions with a stock of Ministerial note paper. Draft replies are typed clean and come forward in the hope that the Minister will sign without amendment. So far, we have found a pretty high success rate, partly by careful choice of the Heads of Division to whom this privilege is accorded!

One new problem we have to deal with is that Mr Heseltine frequently in his speeches asks leaders of Councils and members of the public should write direct to him or to his Ministers if they are getting what they believe is a raw deal from the Department. We have to look at all letters which originate in this way as clearly the correspondent expects - and gets - a Ministerial reply. At the end of the day, I fear you are probably not going to end up with dramatic changes and on the basis of two previous stints in Private Office would suggest that it is risky to upset Members - in the long term this simply leads to more work.

I am copying this letter to recipients of yours.

*Yours sincerely*  
*Dame*

D A EDMONDS  
Private Secretary

DRAFT HEADS OF DIVISION NOTICE

TSF!!

by 10-00-24

TREATMENT OF CORRESPONDENCE

1. The Secretary of State and Ministers are anxious to reduce demands made on official time. They have considered whether, and to what extent, it would be possible to deal more quickly and in less detail with queries from Members of Parliament which are properly the responsibility of another authority.

2. At least for a trial period, they will be content for officials to use the outline below as the basis for replies where there is absolutely no question of Ministerial responsibility. It is important that the stock reply is used only for really specific local authority/regional water authority etc points and not where an MP is using a local example to illustrate a more important point of policy. Heads of Division are therefore asked to be particularly ~~carefully~~ to see that the stock reply is used only where these considerations apply.

3. Ministers intend to gauge the reaction of Members to this sort of reply and, depending on this, the system may need amendment at some stage in the future.

---

OUTLINE LETTER TO MPS ON QUESTIONS NOT THE DIRECT RESPONSIBILITY OF THE DEPARTMENT

Thank you for your letter of . . . about . . .

I am afraid I should have some difficulty in [answering your question] [making a comment on what you say] in that this is a matter for the [local authority] [regional water authority] [NHBC] etc. All I can do is to ask my regional office staff [housing division] [planning division] to contact the [authority] for information which I would then pass on to you.

In these circumstances, I believe it would be quicker, and likely to be of greater help if you went direct to the [authority] in question. Given that the responsibility rests with that body, I hope that they

will be able to provide you with a full reply.

[The address of the [authority] in question is and you  
may like to contact [Mr ].

Please come back to me if you do feel that I can be of further  
assistance.

CONFIDENTIAL

26 11 E



Caxton House Tothill Street London SW1H 9NA

Telephone Direct Line 01-213 6400

Switchboard 01-213 3000

26 11 E  
u 11/5/79  
Sender 5/10  
on

REC.	5 OCT 1979
PS/CST	
PS/FST	
PS/MST(C)	
PS/MST(L)	
MR ENOCHBY.	

Martin Hall Esq  
Private Secretary to  
The Chancellor of the Exchequer  
Treasury Chambers  
Parliament Street  
LONDON SW1P 3AG

4 October 1979

Dear Martin,

#### HANDLING OF MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE

Thank you for copying to Ian Fair your letter of 11 September to Don Brereton. In Ian's absence I am replying on his behalf - though he may wish to provide a personal contribution at a later stage.

Before turning to your list of options, it might be useful to describe one or two features of our own conventions in dealing with correspondence from the public:-

- (1) We have cleared with the Secretary of State personally guidelines for the treatment of incoming correspondence (I attach a copy at Annex A). Using this our general office (which includes a correspondence section serving all our Ministers) can usually decide how to treat any incoming letter. In cases of doubt, the letter in question is brought to one of the Private Secretaries for a decision. Some correspondence of a particularly sensitive nature is handled directly by Private Secretaries who seek the advice of officials in preparing a draft for Ministerial signature. Correspondence received from the Secretary of State's Constituency Secretary is also allocated on the principles in our guidelines. You will note that our system provides for Ministers to sign quite a few letters to members of the public besides MPs.
- (2) We do transfer certain types of letters (including those from MPs) for reply by the Chairman of the Manpower Services Commission - but when this is done Ministers sign replies to the MP, informing them of the transfer.
- (3) We also provide draft "thank you" letters for Ministers to sign following functions attended or visits made - these drafts are prepared within Private Office itself.



It is also worth bearing in mind that we may deal with rather less correspondence than other Departments. As an indication, the chart below indicates the flow of Private Office cases (ie letters signed by a Minister - an underestimate of the real total since certain categories of correspondence are not included) and Treat Officially cases (ie correspondence dealt with entirely by officials):-

	PO Cases	TO Cases
May	283	548
June	515	395
July	610	507
August	442	397

NB - These figures could increase after recess is over.

With respect to your options, we would make the following comments:-

- A(i) - our feeling is that attempts to categorise MPs correspondence without their prior consent - would not be a good idea.
- A(ii) - we would support efforts to encourage MPs to accept non-Ministerial replies, but have doubts about the possible uses of contact through the PPS or the use of circular letters, which seem poor substitutes for a written and "personalised" response.
- A(iii) - we see severe difficulties, and few advantages, in having letters signed by Private Secretaries on a systematic basis. Even if Ministers could delegate subjects for such treatment, the fact remains that on occasion the authorship of an incoming letter is as important as its subject and may demand a Ministerial reply. The "snag" identified seems a major disadvantage.
- B(i) - and B (iii) - the chief objection to these proposals is that ~~they~~ would really result in a much poorer service, and we are sure that our Ministers would not be content to adopt such practices
- B(ii) - this seems a good idea and we are considering whether there would be value in instructions along these lines being issued to officials from Private Office.





I am sorry to seem so negative. Clearly it is desirable to reduce the burdens imposed by the need to obtain Ministerial signatures on correspondence as far as practicable, but this is a delicate area and it would be unwise to seek to over-ride an expressed Ministerial preference for the "personal touch".

Please feel free, if you wish, to arrange to come over and see our system in operation if you think this would be useful. I trust you will respect the confidential nature of Annex A.

Copies of this letter go to Phillip Hunter, David Edmonds, Tony Butler and Don Brereton.

Your Sincerely,

ANDREW HARDMAN  
Private Secretary

PRIVATE OFFICE CORRESPONDENCE

Correspondence received in Private Office is divided into two categories: Private Office (PO) cases and 'Treat Officially' (TO) cases.

CATEGORISATION

PO Cases - reply to be approved and signed by a Minister. (Occasionally a Private Secretary).

The following types of correspondence are registered as PO cases:

- (i) all letters from MPs;
- (ii) all letters from the TUC, full-time officials of trade unions and local trade union representatives;
- (iii) letters from the CBI and major employer organisations; and Directors of public companies (their equivalent
- (iv) letters from local branches of the Conservative Party
- (v) letters to which Ministers particularly want to reply themselves (eg from their own constituents, major charities, VIP's).

TO Cases - reply to be approved at official level and signed normally by a Principal or SEO.

TO cases are all the remaining letters that are not treated as PO's ie letters from individuals, particular firms and small organisations.

SIGNATURE OF REPLIES

Replies to PO cases are signed by the Minister who has responsibility for the particular subject involved. However, the Secretary of State himself signs the replies to letters from the following:

- (i) members of the Cabinet
- (ii) leader of the Opposition and leader of the Liberal Party
- (iii) former Secretaries of State for Employment

- (iv) certain leading members of the Shadow Cabinet (eg shadow spokesman on employment) and Privy Councillors on both sides of the house
- (v) General Secretary of the TUC
- (vi) General Secretaries of the larger trade unions
- (vii) Director General of the CBI, and Director, etc
- (viii) the Secretary of State's own constituents

In all the above cases the responsible Minister approves the reply before it is signed by the Secretary of State.

#### TIMETABLE

The draft reply to a PO case should be received back in Private Office within 10 working days of the correspondence being registered, but letters from category (i) to (viii) should be acknowledged by return and generally agreed by the Minister.

In addition, for letters which require more urgent action there is a 'fast lane' procedure where draft replies are requested within 5 working days.

#### REMINDER SYSTEM

In those cases where the deadline is not met, Private Office send pink slip reminders to the Section holding the file, asking the Section to request a standard interim reply if a full draft reply is not yet available.

If a full draft reply is not received within a further 10 working days (5 for 'fast lane' cases), another reminder is sent to the Section. At this stage, if a full reply is still not available, the Section are asked to provide an interim reply for the appropriate Minister to sign explaining the reason for the delay.



PS/CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER

cc PS/Chief Secretary  
PS/Minister of State (C)  
PS/Minister of State (L)  
Sir D Wass  
Mr Unwin  
PS/Inland Revenue  
PS/Customs and Excise

HANDLING OF MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE

The Financial Secretary has been interested in the papers on this issue, although, as you know, this office's interest is not very strong given the relatively small volume of the case work we handle.

The Financial Secretary has suggested that one substantial saving for all concerned - including Ministers - would be to reduce the length of draft replies put up for consideration. The Financial Secretary's experience is that, despite our exhortation to drafters, replies are still frequently quite unnecessarily long. You may like to bear this in mind against the proposed Ministerial discussion: it could not of course be more than a partial solution.

*PCD*

P C DIGGLE  
5 October 1979



**DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & SOCIAL SECURITY**  
 Alexander Fleming House, Elephant & Castle, London SE1 6BY

Telephone 01-407 5522

*From the Secretary of State for Social Services*

<b>CHECK-CHEQUER</b>	
REC.	21 NOV 1979 <i>Sent 22/11</i>
	CST PST
COPIES	NSC(1)18(L) NR Emery

Martin Hall Esq  
 Private Secretary  
 Treasury Chambers  
 Parliament Street  
 LONDON  
 SW1P 3AG

19 November 1979

*Dear Martin,*

**HANDLING OF MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE**

I have apologised for not replying more promptly to your letter of 11 September. As I explained we have been revising our guidelines for dealing with correspondence and it seemed sensible to conclude that before replying to your questions. Moreover as we both know this kind of issue can easily find its way to the bottom of the tray! Nevertheless, I have found the other replies you have received extremely interesting and may well experiment with some of the procedures described.

I attach copies of our latest guidance on the handling of both PQs and correspondence. The main changes are in the paragraphs sidelined concerning questions which could properly have been dealt with locally. I attach also copies of the instructions for dealing with correspondence in the office of the Supplementary Benefits Commission.

Whether these measures, including the covering letter to MPs encouraging them to refer local issues to the appropriate local office, will succeed in reducing the flow of correspondence (which averages 1,695 letters and 538 PQs a month) remains to be seen but in our view it is difficult to go much further than this without breaking constitutional proprieties. For example on options (i) and (iii) in your note it would be quite wrong in my view for Private Secretaries to sign letters on behalf of Ministers except in closely defined circumstances where it was clear that the content of the letter is known to have the complete approval of the Minister concerned. Similarly, I cannot see MPs accepting an acknowledgement from the Minister followed up by a reply from officials. Where would this leave accountability to Parliament? The use of standard background notes to reduce the length of Ministers' letters on the other hand seems perfectly acceptable and we encourage officials to prepare such material.

On the question of organisation and staffing of Private Office correspondence sections we have tried a central unit but at present have a unit in each of the Ministers' offices.

It is difficult to say which is the best system; in part it depends on the accommodation available, the managerial style, the quality of COs and CAs etc. I hope to produce shortly a note setting out our standard procedures for the mechanics of dealing with letters ie form of acknowledgement, time allowed for reply, distribution between Ministers etc and I would be happy to copy this round if it would be of interest. I take the view that we do not do enough to inform ourselves of procedures in other Private Offices but as I said at the beginning pressures of other work seldom allow time for airing these issues.

I am copying this letter to the recipients of yours.

Yours ever  
Don

BRANCH WITH MAIN INTEREST

M \_\_\_\_\_

NO PART FILES

Branch \_\_\_\_\_

The attached letter has been acknowledged by Private Office.

As the branch with the major interest, please consult other branches as necessary and prepare a complete draft reply, as soon as possible, and not later than the date indicated.

If the deadline cannot be met, please return a copy of the correspondence with a draft interim reply. Please do this immediately if delay is certain to occur. The interim reply should briefly explain the reason(s) for the (expected) delay, eg the need to consult at local level. Action on the file must not be delayed through providing an interim reply.

PREPARATION OF REPLY

Detailed guidance is given in Circular HQ60/72 Part XI paras 57-71. The reply should deal only with the points raised; it should be in simple, concise, non-technical language, using the active rather than the passive voice, and should be understanding in tone. Technical information may best be provided in the form of standard background notes or leaflets. Branches should consider preparing a standard note on subjects which attract regular correspondence requiring detailed replies.

On sensitive subjects, please clear stock replies with Private Office.

REFERENCE OF MPs TO LOCAL BODIES

Ministers are bound to reply to MPs letters but wish to encourage MPs to take up local issues with the appropriate authorities. Accordingly, Ministers have agreed that where the enquiry could properly and more economically have been made at local level an additional covering letter should be sent, signed by the Minister as follows:

"I am extremely sorry about the delay in responding to your enquiry, answered in the accompanying letter. It may help if I explain that these delays are due to the volume of cases now sent to Ministers at the Department.

I feel that you may find it speedier, if, in cases about constituents where information is individual and factual, you were to write, in the first instance, to

X (appropriate AHA Chairman or Administrator or DHSS local Office Manager)

or to ring him/her on (appropriate telephone no). If this does not resolve your constituent's enquiry, then, of course, I shall be happy to enquire about the matter and let you have a further reply as soon as I can.

I am anxious that the Department should answer all enquiries as thoroughly, speedily and efficiently as possible, and this procedure should help us with the increased volume and give you speedier information.

I enclose a second copy of this letter for your secretary."

If this procedure applies in this case please note the folder accordingly and provide the relevant references to the name, address and telephone number of the local point of enquiry.

FORM OF SUBMISSION

The draft reply should be typed, or in legible manuscript, with adequate spacing for later amendments or additions, on one side of the paper only. Amendments to the original draft should be made clearly.

TRANSFER OF FILE

If this is not for you, would you please forward it to the appropriate Branch and let me know.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Private Office

Ext \_\_\_\_\_

Room \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Alexander Fleming House



NOTES OF GUIDANCE ON THE PREPARATION OF REPLIES TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

PRIORITY WRITTEN QUESTIONS

A question marked with the letter "W" must be answered on the specified date. If it is not possible in the time available to provide a full reply a holding reply should be suggested. To promise to write to the Member is not normally an accepted form of reply but if exceptionally this is necessary an explanation of the circumstances should be given in a covering minute.

After the holding reply has been given, the file will be returned to the Division to prepare the substantive reply, which should be prefaced as follows: "[Minister's Name], pursuant to his/her reply [OFFICIAL REPORT, Date, Vol c ], gave the following information/reply:

OTHER WRITTEN QUESTIONS

These should be answered on the due date or within a working week of being Tabled. If you cannot provide a suggested reply by the deadline given on the cover of this file, you should inform Parliamentary Branch (tel ext 6399 AFH).

FORM OF REPLY

The draft answer should be calculatedly informative.

If the answer proposed is simply "Yes", "No" or wholly uninformative, a background note should be provided, explaining why this form of answer is suggested.

QUESTIONS ABOUT HEALTH AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Where the question requests information which has to be obtained from health or local authorities, Ministers will wish to consider referring the Member to the appropriate authority. In suggesting replies to such questions the following criteria should apply:

- (1) Ministers will expect to reply fully to questions which are concerned with
  - Government policies and priorities (including nationally determined norms)
  - Local policies, statistics etc where these are known to be readily available centrally, ie have already been collected by the Department in connection with a Working Group, Report or other centrally determined development.
  - Inter-Regional or inter-Local Authority comparisons affecting the scale of provision of services where the Department might be expected to know the answer in order to set and monitor national standards.
- (2) Ministers will refer Members of Parliament to the responsible health or local Authority for details of
  - Locally determined policies and priorities
  - the application locally of national priorities
  - statistics etc which would only be available locally

- operational cases where responsibility rests locally, and where the local mechanisms for enquiry have not yet been exhausted.

The fact that certain information might be provided in the PQ under (1) above, would not necessarily rule out a final recommendation in the Answer that "For further information the hon Member may like to consult the authorities concerned". Whenever this line is taken, an explanatory note should be provided.

QUESTIONS ABOUT GREAT BRITAIN OR THE UNITED KINGDOM

When a Question asks for information about Great Britain or the UK and all the information is not held in this Department, it is the responsibility of the Division providing the information in respect of England to liaise with the Department(s) concerned. If it will not be possible to obtain the missing information in time to incorporate it in the draft reply, it is the Division's responsibility to consult the Department(s) concerned and agree an addition to the reply: eg "I have asked my right hon Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland to let the hon Member have the information relating to Scotland."

OTHER DEPARTMENTS

When a suggested reply contains a reference to, or has been agreed by, another Department, a note should be put on the file giving the name, Branch and telephone number of the official with whom the reply was agreed.

TRANSFER OF QUESTION

(1) TO ANOTHER DEPARTMENT

If you consider that this Question is not a matter for this Department you should inform Parliamentary Branch immediately (tel ext 6904 AFH).

(2) TO ANOTHER BRANCH

If this file has been sent to you incorrectly, please redirect immediately and tell Parliamentary Branch (tel ext 6904 or 6399 AFH) to whom you are sending the file.

QUESTIONS SEEKING STATISTICAL INFORMATION

The file is sent to Policy Division and copied to the appropriate SR Branch. If the information is not readily available, the policy division should consider whether the cost of preparing the reply is justifiable - see next note.

COST OF PREPARING THE REPLY

There is a well established convention whereby Ministers may decline to answer a PQ when the cost of preparing an answer would be disproportionate to the importance of the question. The decision whether to answer each question must depend on the overall merits of the case but when information is not readily available it is important that consideration should be given to the cost of preparing a reply.

If it is suggested that the Minister should decline to give the information asked for on grounds of disproportionate cost, the circumstances must be explained in a covering minute.

37/14



cc: Mr. Battishill

MISS BIRNIE

MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE WITH MPs

..... You may find it interesting to have a first shot at the papers below, which have been around for some time. I hasten to add that I have been awaiting the contribution from the DHSS, which has only just arrived.

2. The story starts at the back of the file with Richard Broadbent's minute of 10th August. I then held a meeting with the Private Secretaries from the other Ministerial offices, resulting in my note of 22nd August. Other Ministers chipped in, and the Chancellor asked me to do a trawl of other Departments dealing with a lot of MPs letters to see if they had any lessons for us. Their ..... letters are below.

3. What is needed now is a draft report to the Chancellor picking out the ideas other Departments have, and any we might have ourselves, which reduce the burden on Ministers of MPs letters.

4. Let us discuss before you start work.

*MMA.*

(M.A. HALL)  
5th December, 1979

Mr Tolkien - Aug abs? 15  
38  
17/12

cc: PS/CST  
PS/FST  
PS/MST (C)  
PS/MST (L)  
PS/Inland Revenue  
PS/Customs and Excise

1. Mr Hall
2. CHANCELLOR

11/12/79.

HANDLING OF MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE

We have been considering ways in which the volume of letters Ministers receive from MPs (and members of the public) might be reduced. It was suggested that it might be helpful to learn how other Government Departments handle their correspondence. We have now received their replies.

2. Judging from their experience it looks as if there is little hope of making any dramatic changes in current practice. However there are some practices we might adopt which may help to make life easier.

(a) Official responses

3. The Treasury already asks MPs to send their queries direct to officials when they can, e.g. direct to the Inland Revenue. This has had some success but MPs naturally prefer their case to be seen by the Minister himself.

4. Some Departments have taken to sending an official response along with a covering note by the Minister, thereby reducing the amount of time the Minister must spend reading his correspondence.

5. However this procedure is not widely supported; such a note might suggest a Minister had read and approved the contents of the accompanying official letter when he had not. The consensus is that whilst one might encourage MPs to accept official replies this ought not to be enforced - where would this put Ministerial accountability to Parliament?

6. More popular is the idea of redirecting letters concerning local issues and individual cases to the appropriate local office. Ministers in most of the Departments we asked have agreed that where an enquiry might more properly be made at a local level (e.g. a local tax office) the MP should be sent a stock letter signed by the Minister recommending that he do this. However the MP is told to come back to the Minister if he or his constituent do not receive a satisfactory answer. This seems a far more acceptable way of reducing Ministers' reading time among those we approached.

(b) Use of Stock Letters

7. Customs and Excise and the Inland Revenue already rely on stock paragraphs in many of their responses. Other Departments have extended this and send replies which are entirely standard. The Home Office correspondence unit, for instance, replies to 10 per cent of the letters it receives in this way, with the help of a word processor. In replying to certain recurrent letters on Government policy this practice meets general approval and is regarded as more acceptable than the suggestion of sending the correspondent a personal acknowledgment with a photo-copied statement of Government policy enclosed.

8. The advantage with this practice is that once a Minister has approved such a standard response he does not have to read every reply in the future. Clearly such a short cut means the member of the public or the MP will receive a less personalized and precise reply which may be unacceptable. In particular, a more stereotyped reply might lead to more PQs and therefore, in the longer term, to more work

(c) Shorter Replies

9. Ministers could issue instructions to shorten replies where possible. The Secretary of State for the Environment has ruled that he will not sign any letter longer than a page! This would certainly cut down on reading time.

10. All these possible measures are risky. There is a danger of upsetting MPs by deflecting letters away from Ministers and by sending shorter standard replies too readily. We may also create even more work for ourselves by sending inadequate answers to queries, which might merely lead to a second letter or a PQ. Yet in appropriate cases some of the practices of other Departments do seem worth adopting. A key factor seems to be how sympathetic and co-operative MPs would be to such time-saving practices.

L E Birnie

(L.E. BIRNIE)

11th December 1979



1. *BT.*
2. *Chancellor - for 0945-*

*meety.*

*MMY.*

28/1/80 Meeting at 0945 tomorrow 41

CHANCELLOR

cc: Chief Secretary  
Financial Secretary  
Minister of State (C)  
Minister of State (L)  
Mr. Pirie  
Mr. Locke  
Mr. Warden  
Mr. Brotherton  
Mr. Ridley  
Mr. Cropper  
Mr. Cardona  
  
Mr. Wiggins  
Mr. Tolkien

PS/Inland Revenue  
PS/Customs & Excise  
Mr. Littlewood (DNS)  
Miss Cowt

MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE

✓ You asked me to consider how we might reduce the burden of "non-official" correspondence on Ministers, their offices, and on the official machine generally. This note is intended as the basis for an early meeting, which Louise Birnie is fixing up with Ministers, their Private Secretaries, the Advisers, and representatives of the Revenue, Customs and DNS.

A 2. Following my note of 22nd August 1979, you asked me to consult other Departments with heavy correspondence with MPs and the public. Their replies - which use the notation of my note of 22nd August - are below:-

Home Office	17th September	Flag B
DES	20th September	Flag C
DoE	3rd October	Flag D
DE	4th October	Flag E
DHSS	19th November	Flag F

They do not offer many new insights, except to show that our problem is very much a common one. I am sorry that so many have laboured so hard and so long in producing a - perhaps inevitable - mouse.

Scope - categories of "correspondence"

- A - Considered letters from national organisations and prominent individuals
- B - Letters from MPs



- (i) Setting out their own argued views on a subject
- (ii) Putting a constituent's case, either in a letter or (more commonly) by forwarding a constituent's letter under a proforma
- (iii) Forwarding a circular, or making a ritual contribution to a pressure campaign.

C - Letters from the public

General considerations

3. One or two general principles need to be taken into account. They do not all point in the same direction.

- (i) If the service to MPs becomes less personalised, this will be noticed. Some Members are likely to be annoyed and to say so.
- (ii) The public's image of the administration (Ministers plus civil servants) is strongly coloured by the way they are treated by it.
- (iii) Correspondence has a high cost (see paragraph 7 below).
- (iv) The more any change in handling correspondence applies across the board, the less exposed Treasury Ministers will be.
- (v) The higher the priority given to correspondence, the lower the priority which must be given to something else.
- (vi) The goodwill likely to flow from the kind of full replies we send at the moment is likely to be dissipated by the length of time it takes us to send them.

Present procedure

4. At the moment, all letters in categories A - C are acknowledged. Those in category A are then put in to the Chancellor to see, and officials are asked to submit draft ministerial replies. Ministers similarly reply to all letters in category B, on advice from officials. Most letters in category C are sent to officials for reply at official level. They are only put up to the Chancellor

/or another

or another Minister if they contain points of specific interest.

Possible ways of alleviating the burden

5. I see no alternative to continuing to treat categories A and B (i) as now, i.e. by acknowledgement followed by Ministerial reply. There may however be scope for economies in treatment of the other categories.

6. Greater use of stock replies will certainly help, but they are already used to a considerable extent in replying to letters in category C and B(iii). There are, however, other possible ploys which Ministers might find acceptable:-

- (i) Should category C get a substantive reply at all?  
(Some in category C already receive only a stereotyped Ack/Views reply; but this is hardly applicable to people who raise questions rather than asserting views).  
Recommendation - Yes, because they are taxpayers and electors, and have - in my view - a justifiable expectation that their legitimate enquiries should be answered.
- (ii) Would a copy of a relevant PQ/Statement/prepared paragraph, attached to a standard note, signed by a Minister, suffice as answer to category B(iii)?  
Recommendation - Yes, but probably risky to go beyond that, e.g. by using a facsimile or Private Secretary signature.
- (iii) Can Members be pressed harder in the direction of writing directly to Customs & Excise and Inland Revenue about constituency cases? How? Circular? Through PPSs?  
Recommendation - Yes, but a high risk policy. Probably best done individually and in response to a particular case. Worth general soundings first.
- (iv) Would Ministers rule out the possibility of official replies to B(ii) and (iii)?  
Recommendation - Reluctantly, Yes.

- (v) Are Ministers prepared to require that replies never be longer than one page (like Mr. Heseltine)?

Cost

7. It was not part of my remit to cost the handling of correspondence, though I have no doubt that the CSD would be able to give an average figure per piece of correspondence. Some of the costs are obvious - stationery, salaries of correspondence clerks, postage. The other resources - principally the time spent in gathering information and drafting - can also be costed in terms of hours. But the people concerned are not usually employed simply for the purpose of drafting such replies, and the real cost is the opportunity cost of work delayed or initiatives not taken.

Suggested action

- 8. (i) Issue Office Notice, with Ministers' authority, specifying:
  - (a) much greater readiness to agree to stereotyped replies, after literally so, under a very short standard Ministerial letter to Members of Parliament, and from officials to the public (categories B(iii) and C);
  - (b) draft replies not to exceed one page;
  - [(c) wider use of Ack/Views in reply to letters to the public, with no substantive reply to follow;]
  - (d) more rapid turnover of letters requiring Ministerial reply.
- (ii) Gentle sounding of a few backbenchers, to see how receptive they would be to a request to go more frequently direct to the Chairmen of Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise.
- (iii) [If Ministers are prepared to contemplate a much more radical reduction in the effort put into correspondence] Commission - by a letter from the Chancellor to the CSD, or to Sir Derek Rayner, an exercise on the cost of such correspondence Government-wide, and on how to reduce it.



(M.A. HALL)  
28th January, 1980

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