

GOVERNMENT OF NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

Briefing Note Guidelines



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I OVERVIEW

The Premier and all Cabinet Ministers must be briefed on significant developments/issues within departments in the event that they are asked to address such developments in a public forum. A concise, well-written briefing note is an effective communications tool for that purpose.

Briefing notes are intended to provide the Premier/Minister/Senior Executive with an at-a-glance clear understanding of a specific issue, as well as a suggested approach to addressing the issue publicly by focussing on key messages.



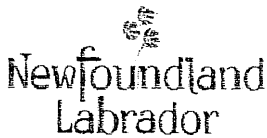
II WHEN TO PREPARE BRIEFING NOTES

Briefing notes are usually prepared upon request from the Executive, but can/should also be generated by other staff as appropriate. Circumstances generally determine when one should be prepared. These include:

- When informing the Minister/Executive of new developments, or new developments on an ongoing issue.
- When a Ministerial or Executive decision is required on a client or project file.
- When an issue has not yet been made public, but is of such a nature that Government should be prepared to take a position if it does become public.
- When issues have been raised publicly (e.g. in the media, the House of Assembly, at a public meeting).
- When preparing the Minister for interviews or news conferences on some issues; in this context, a briefing note would likely be one of several communications tools used.

Ideally, briefing notes are prepared in advance of an issue being made public -- proactive communications management. Frequently, however, an issue is already public or is about to become public when briefing notes are prepared -- "crisis" communications. In the latter circumstances, there are inherent time constraints imposed upon everyone involved -- from the person who drafts the note to the person who gives final approval.

Tight deadlines notwithstanding, the approved briefing note format must still be followed, with due care and attention to concise wording and accurate background information.



III TYPES OF BRIEFING NOTES

There are two types of briefing notes used within Government:

- Those used to brief Ministers and others on general issues; and
- Those designed specifically to prepare Ministers/Premier for Question Period in the House of Assembly or for questions raised by the media.

Both types contain a short background on the issues. Those used to prepare Ministers for Question Period will also contain suggested responses to questions that may be raised in the House of Assembly or by the media.

IV POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND FOR ALL BRIEFING NOTES

- Briefing notes should be no longer than one page (letter size).
- Notes must be readable, to the point and address all the relevant issues.
- Sentence length is a key factor in readability. A sentence is more likely to be clear if it is short and conveys one idea. If a longer sentence is necessary, be sure that it relates to the same subject and the language is simple.
- Avoid departmental/bureaucratic jargon if at all possible.
- Use active voice.
- Be alert for words, phrases and sentences that will cause the reader to stumble.
- Include in the background only information that is relevant to the issue at hand and is critical to having an understanding of the issue.
- Briefing notes must be prepared in a timely fashion.
- Ideally, briefing notes should be prepared or reviewed by the Director of Communications.



V FORMAT FOR QUESTION AND ANSWER BRIEFING NOTE
Department of.....

Title:

Issue:

Anticipated questions:

-
-
-

Key message::

-

Other Suggested response(s):

-
-
-

Background:

-
-
-
-

Drafted by:

Approved by

Date:



VI WRITING A QUESTION AND ANSWER BRIEFING NOTE

Title:

As shown on the format sheet.

Issue:

One sentence that clearly identifies the key elements of the situation the briefing note is about.

Anticipated Questions:

This section identifies questions most likely to be asked of the Premier/Minister by the media or in the House of Assembly. Questions could be broad-based questions relating to policy, or they could be specific to a situation or issue.

Use traditional journalistic questions **WHO? WHAT? WHEN? WHERE? WHY? HOW?**
For example:

- Who will be affected? Who will benefit?
- What is being proposed? What is being done about it? What has Government done about it? What will Government do about it? What is Government doing to ensure this won't happen again?
- When will it come into effect? When will it happen? When is Government going to do something about it?
- Where will the greatest impact be? Where is it being done? Where does Government stand on this issue?
- Why did Government intervene? Why did Government not intervene? Why did Government take a particular course of action? Why won't Government take a particular course of action? Why is Government allowing this to happen?
- How is this going to work?



- If you were a reporter, or a member of the Opposition, or a member of a lobby group or other stakeholder group with a vested interest in this issue, what questions do you think you would ask? This is not the time to be timid.

Asking yourself such questions will help determine the precise questions to apply to the issue/situation/development that is the subject of the briefing note.

In the briefing note, the specific questions should be asked in bullet form.

Key message:

This section should include the key message that needs to be presented on this particular issue.

Other Suggested response(s):

- This section suggests what Government's response should be to the questions anticipated. Like the Anticipated Questions, they should be in bullet form, with one message in each bullet point.
- There is usually more than one response for each question asked.
- Each response should be short -- one line if that is possible to convey a particular key message.
- Keep the language simple. *"The report contextualizes the east coast industry through cross-jurisdictional comparison"* just won't cut it.

Ask yourself some questions:

- Who is the audience?
- What are the key messages Government would want the public, or a particular audience, to hear?
- What will be the response of the public/stakeholders if a particular position is taken?
- What is Government's policy on this issue?



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- Is there a link between this issue and the Department's/Government's overall priorities?
 - Does this issue have some bearing on the policy of another Department? Work being done by another Department?
 - Does Government have a good track record on this issue? Is this a precedent-setting case?
 - What is Government trying to accomplish with a particular policy or course of action?
 - Is this something the Minister/Premier would/would not want to be definitive about (ie give a yes or no answer)?
 - Is there confidential information that should not be given to the public? How should that be handled?
 - Is legal action involved? Likely to be involved? How does that affect what the Minister/Premier can say?
 - Should Government acknowledge there is some basis in fact to any allegations raised in the questions?

Background:

The background section provides the key elements of information that the Minister will need to have a quick but very clear understanding of the issue/situation. It must focus on those points directly relevant to the Issue identified in the first section.

Use bullets to present concise pieces of information.

Drafted by:

Approved by

Date:



VII FORMAT FOR BRIEFING NOTE FOR GENERAL ISSUES

Title:

Issue:

Background:

Status:

Action required:

Drafted by

/Approved by

Date:



VIII WRITING A BRIEFING NOTE FOR GENERAL ISSUES

Title:

Issue:

As per discussion of this section for Question Period briefing notes.

Background:

As per discussion of this section for Question Period briefing notes.

Status:

This section summarizes the most recent events/actions that have triggered the current situation/issue. It should not repeat information provided in the Background section.

Action Required:

This section should be a concise sentence or two to identify what next steps are required to move a project forward, resolve a situation/issue, or formulate a policy. Be specific about the action(s) required.

Some questions:

- Why is action needed?
- What will happen if action is not taken?
- What will the impacts of specific actions be?

Drafted by
Date:

/Approved by