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Freedom of Information Request – F0008432

Dear XXXXX,

I refer to your request for information as follows:-

- Copy of a five-page DfT internal document offering grammatical advice.

I am writing to confirm that the Department for Transport has now completed its search for the information that you requested on 15 December 2011. Following this search of our paper and electronic records, I have established that the information you requested is not held by this Department

There is no formal 'document' offering grammatical advice. Instead, staff in Ministers' private offices provide regularly-updated guidance on the Department's internal website, covering a range of matters. This is to enable private offices to process briefing, correspondence etc in the most efficient manner. A current version of this guidance is attached at Annex A.

If you are unhappy with the way the department has handled your request or with the decisions made in relation to your request you may complain within two calendar months of the date of this letter by writing to the department's Information Rights Unit at:

Zone D/04
Ashdown House
Sedlescombe Road North
Hastings
East Sussex TN37 7GA
E-mail: FOI-Advice-Team-DFT@dft.gsi.gov.uk

Please see attached details of DfT's complaints procedure and your right to complain to the Information Commissioner. If you have any queries about this letter, please contact me. Please remember to quote the reference number above in any future communications.

Yours sincerely

XXXXXX

Your right to complain to DfT and the Information Commissioner

You have the right to complain within two calendar months of the date of this letter about the way in which your request for information was handled and/or about the decision not to disclose all or part of the information requested. In addition a complaint can be made that DfT has not complied with its FOI publication scheme.

Your complaint will be acknowledged and you will be advised of a target date by which to expect a response. Initially your complaint will be re-considered by the official who dealt with your request for information. If, after careful consideration, that official decides that his/her decision was correct, your complaint will automatically be referred to a senior independent official who will conduct a further review. You will be advised of the outcome of your complaint and if a decision is taken to disclose information originally withheld this will be done as soon as possible.

If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review, you have the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner for a decision. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at:

Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF

Annex A

Drafting correspondence for the Secretary of State

- Please keep letters as brief as possible but ensure all points or issues are at least addressed, if not answered in elaborate detail. The style should be clear, helpful and engaging.
- For letters to Members of Parliament, try to keep letters to under a page where possible. They should be written in such a way that they could be sent on to a constituent.
- Please always re-read the letter before submitting it to ensure all the grammar and punctuation is correct.
- Covering notes (for letters to MPs/stakeholders/interdepartmental correspondence) should be avoided as a rule. The only exceptions would be instances where there are complex issues which Ministers need to consider before responding to a letter. In this situation, please add a note to the case on Chapter and speak to the relevant private secretary.
- Use simple, direct language and avoid jargon. Always spell out acronyms the first time they are used.
- Please avoid abbreviated forms such as “don’t” or “couldn’t”.
- Draft responses should be sent via the Chapter system.

Correspondence for Theresa Villiers

The minister considers her correspondence to be very important. She is focusing her time and attention on ensuring that all her correspondents, receive a **considered response** that answers the key points raised.

General points:

- Check that letters **answers the question**. While this may sound obvious, sometimes template letters and paragraphs are used without sufficient attention being paid to whether the question has actually been answered. Please double check that all key elements have been addressed.
- **Use the right level of detail**. Obviously there is no hard and fast rule on this, but if cutting and pasting from other documents please ensure that the information left in is relevant to the question, not just lifted from a previous response, and that the letter flows. While responses should be helpful and factual, avoid the temptation to simply write everything you know, particularly where issues are contentious.
- **Pay attention to previous letters**. Please compare final versions of cases against drafts to see how they have been changed and use the new phrasing in subsequent letters.

- Consider general style and tone. The minister would like letters to have a **courteous and helpful tone**, while remaining **assertive** when delivering difficult messages.
- Where a correspondent is agreeing with Government policy this should be acknowledged up front in the response.
- Where correspondents' concerns can be usefully directed to another body, such as Passenger Focus or the CAA, this should be included in the letter.
- Use plain English, avoiding jargon and technical terms. Where acronyms are used it is usually useful to write these in full in the first instance, or to explain who they are, unless they are very common eg EU.
- Try to avoid repeatedly using the same words in close proximity, for example 'challenges' and 'challenging'.
- When referring to other ministers use their full name, for MP cases, and their title for other correspondence (ie industry) eg Secretary of State; except the Prime Minister who should always be referred to by that title.
- Please proof read your final versions, checking punctuation, grammar (particularly the use of commas and apostrophes), and for basic typos. The minister tends to prefer short paragraphs and sentences, as these are usually far easier to read and understand, so please try to **ensure paragraphs and sentences are not too long**.
- Please check how to address the correspondent – letters to members of the House of Lords should normally be addressed to 'The Lord [x]' or 'The Baroness [x]'. For MPs, please double-check whether the recipient should be addressed as a 'Rt Hon' or neither. This will usually be clear from the MP's original letter.

Suggested preferred phrasing:

If directing a correspondent to another body for information:

- 'I would recommend that you contact XXX directly about this matter to express your concerns.'

Examples of closing lines:

- 'Thank you for taking the time to contact me setting out your views and concerns.'
- 'I trust this is helpful. Thank you again for taking the trouble to contact me on this important issue.'
- 'I hope that this is helpful. Thank you for taking time to draw the concerns of your constituent to my attention.'

Don't like	Suggested alternatives
'With regards to'	'with regard to' or 'as regards'
'whilst'	"while" or "although"
'Legally'	"in legal terms"
When unable to provide assistance: "I am sorry that" or "unfortunately"	"I am afraid that"
	"Please let me assure you that..."
Onto	On to

Drafting correspondence for Norman Baker

- Please avoid the use of contractions in formal writing. **Example:** "that's" should read "that is".
- Avoid the use of hyperbole and keep language as 'down to earth' as possible. **Example:** "I am absolutely delighted that this new scheme has the potential to be a true gateway to increased public transport." Should read "I am pleased that this new scheme will help get more people on to buses."
- In general, letters should be ended with either "I hope that this reply helps to clarify the position." (Where we are being factual rather than particularly helpful) or "I hope this reply is helpful." (Where the recipient is likely to welcome the response.)
- MSU responses should be one page in length where possible. However, two pages are fine where needed. Letters should only run onto a 3rd page if exceptional detail is required.

Drafting Correspondence for Mike Penning

Letters

- The Minister likes to make his responses to correspondence as personal and as helpful as possible, so please bear this in mind when you are drafting replies; please use the first person where possible.
- Aim to limit responses to one page. The Minister accepts that some replies will run to two pages where a detailed answer is required, but has asked to try to keep to one page wherever possible.
- If you make reference to a document, speech or leaflet in your reply, please enclose a printed copy for the MP and constituent's reference, rather than just

providing a web link – some people will not have access to the internet and the Minister prefers to include documents, within reason, so that they can have easy access to all the necessary information. If the letter refers to an enclosure/attachment, make sure this is attached to the case when you return it to MSU.

- Your draft should address all the questions posed by the MP and/or constituent. If one of the questions is not within your policy area, please liaise with whoever the responsible policy lead is. Private Office and MSU can help you find the right person if you are having difficulty.
- If there is a campaign on any topic, standard lines must be agreed with Private Office before any responses are submitted on Chapter. This ensures each campaign letter receives the same response from the Minister. If you become aware of a campaign affecting your policy area, please inform Private Office so that they can make the Minister aware of it.
- First paragraph should always read along the lines of: 'Thank you for your letter of 18 February enclosing correspondence from your constituent Mr A Smith, address and postcode, regarding the M4 bus lane.'
- If the MP originally wrote to SofS, MoS or the other PUSS, first paragraph should read 'Thank you for your letter of 18 February to **SofS/MoS/PUSS name** enclosing correspondence from your constituent Mr A Smith, address and postcode, regarding the M4 bus lane. I am replying as Minister responsible for the Strategic Road Network.' Duty Minister letters should use: 'I am replying as Duty Minister'.
- First mention of the Department should read 'Department for Transport' – further mentions just 'the Department' or 'DfT'. If abbreviations e.g. DfT, VOSA, MCA appear in the letter, make sure the full name is spelled out at the first mention, with the abbreviation in brackets e.g. 'this matter is the responsibility of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA)'.
- Please ensure you use the addressee's full name and correct title. For Right Honourable MPs, letters should be addressed to "Rt Hon Joe Bloggs MP". If in doubt, refer to the header on the MP's original letter.
- Please avoid referring to constituents in letters to MEPs. Use instead '...enclosing correspondence from Mr Smith, address and postcode...'.
- Where MPs have written to both the Minister and a Chief Executive of a Departmental agency, the Minister prefers to respond on behalf of both.
- If referring to previous 'Treat Official' correspondence in a letter, please summarise the key points as well as providing a copy of the correspondence.

General style preferences

Please bear the following table in mind when drafting letters and speeches:

Avoid:	Consider using instead:
My Department	The Department
It is thought that...	The Government/We/I think...
My officials	Officials
[eg] Vehicle Certification Agency's (VCA's)	[eg] Vehicle Certification Agency (VCA)'s
I hope you/your constituent finds this helpful	-
I hope this clarifies the position	-
In due course	As soon as possible / when the information is available / -