

Role of the Secretary

What is the role of the Secretary?

The role of an Agency Secretary in the Tasmanian public service is central to the effective and efficient operation of Government. It is a broad position with multiple dimensions. The accountabilities are substantial. The Secretary is concurrently a principal portfolio adviser to Government and their Ministers, an organisation head and a leader. Responsibilities lie beyond Agencies and portfolios, encompassing a wider leadership role in the Tasmanian public service.

The core elements of the Secretary role are:

- principal portfolio adviser to their Ministers, Premier and the Government
- Agency head
- the custodian of an apolitical public service and the integrity of interactions between the Agency and implementation of policy and the political process and
- leading and managing Commonwealth/State issues within the portfolio.

In undertaking these roles, Secretaries have widespread responsibilities as leaders, employers and office holders with legislated duties and powers.

In addition to these core responsibilities, Secretaries also have a role in providing 'thought leadership' for the Tasmanian Public Service. Secretaries, as the Heads of Government Agencies, are members of the Tasmanian public service leadership group – the Heads of Agency (HoA) group.

The HoA group works towards solving policy and implementation challenges across portfolios. It also facilitates the coordination of policy initiatives across the public sector, including cross-portfolio and Commonwealth/State issues, and promotes leadership and information exchange across the Tasmanian public service.

Secretaries are also accountable to the Premier for the performance of their Agency in delivering the priorities and expectations of the portfolios within their Agency. To achieve this, Secretaries require a clear understanding of the capability and capacity of their individual Agency.

Principal Portfolio Advisers to their Minister(s), Premier and Government

As a Principal Portfolio Adviser, Secretaries provide advice to Government on policy matters and assist Ministers to maintain an awareness of operations within their portfolios, often acting as the interface between Ministers, portfolio public entities and stakeholders.

In order to do this, Secretaries need to maintain an awareness of the range of advice that the Minister(s) may receive from various sources and the flow of information and advice.

Secretaries' responsibilities as Principal Portfolio Advisers include:

- keeping Ministers informed of significant issues within the portfolio
- playing a leadership role in developing major policy initiatives
- overseeing the development of policy solutions
- maintaining an awareness of the social and political landscape
- facilitating and supporting relationships between Ministers and Portfolio Agencies and
- supporting Ministers to manage relationships with portfolio stakeholders.

In their role as Principal Portfolio Adviser, Secretaries and their Agencies need to establish active relationships with public entities in their Ministers' portfolios to monitor their performance and identify significant initiatives, risks and issues as they emerge.

Agency Head

As the Head of an Agency, Secretaries have primary accountability for the delivery of publicly-funded services, for adapting programs and activities in accordance with the direction of the Government of the day and ensuring the Agency responds to the ways in which the Government seeks to develop and implement its policies and programs.

Secretaries' senior leadership teams play a critical role to support Secretaries in the stewardship of the Agency. As such, Secretaries will need to ensure they are comfortable with and well supported by those senior leaders reporting directly to them.

As the Head of Agency, Secretaries are responsible for:

- the leadership, direction, management and culture of the Agency
- equipping the Agency and its people to meet complex challenges confronting Government and the Tasmanian community
- driving the Government's legislative and regulatory agenda for the Agency's portfolios
- overseeing the efficient and effective delivery of Government policies, services and programs
- employing and developing staff to ensure they are capable of meeting the Agency's objectives.

Secretaries are also responsible for ensuring compliance with a range of Acts in areas such as Right to Information, privacy, human rights, occupational health and safety, and complaints handling. For those Secretaries leading departments with staff who have direct interactions with clients, ensuring compliance will often be more complex and resource intensive.

These roles are undertaken in an environment of intense public scrutiny. This can include agents of Government such as the Auditor-General, the Ombudsman, portfolio-specific regulators and integrity bodies. Committees of Parliament, the Opposition and the media also provide mechanisms for public scrutiny.

Custodians of an Apolitical Public Service

Secretaries are the custodians of the policies and practices that ensure appropriate relationships are established and maintained between those involved in the political process – Ministers, Ministerial Advisers and employees from political offices – and those in the public service or public sector. Secretaries must ensure the maintenance of an apolitical public service and public sector.

While it is incumbent on the Agency to take into account the political direction set by the elected Government, it is not the Agency's nor the Secretary's role to provide political advice. It is the responsibility of the Secretary and Agency officers to provide a Minister with professional policy advice that enables the best policy decisions.

Where Government policies are unlikely to achieve the Government's expectations, the Secretary must ensure that the Minister is provided with well researched and argued advice explaining the likely result of the policy. However, the final decision rests with the Minister and Cabinet, as elected representatives.

Commonwealth/State Relations

Secretaries are the key link between their Agency the Australian Government and other states and territories governments on portfolio related matters.

Constructive and focused relationships are required between state and Australian Government representatives, to allow Tasmania to play an influential and involved role in Australian Government policy development.

This complex task requires perspective of the wider context and dimensions of the portfolio. The work includes formal negotiations and discussions, consultations, shared learning and information exchange. There are periods of intense negotiations as multi-year financial agreements are developed and settled. There are also complex structures for continuing discussion and day-to-day decision making within and beyond the formal agreements.

The Relationship between the Secretary and their Portfolio Ministers

Ministers and Heads of Agencies have complementary roles. The strength of the relationship between Minister and Head of Agency, in terms of clarity of understanding of the priorities can be a significant factor in the achievement of portfolio goals. It is therefore incumbent upon both to maximise the opportunities that flow from productive working arrangements.

Effective management of the various interactions between an Agency and the Minister is a key factor in an Agency's ability to provide an effective and efficient client service to the Minister.

Within the Department of Health and Human Services, working arrangements are in place to support the Agency's role in assisting its Minister(s) in performing their roles as Members of the Government. These arrangements have been agreed between the Secretary and Minister(s) to ensure the Agency consistently delivers an effective and efficient client service to our Ministers.

The Secretary is required to assist the responsible Agency Minister to fulfil their accountability obligations to the Parliament by providing factual information about the operation and administration of the Agency with a strong emphasis on quality and responsiveness to the Government, the Parliament and the community; party-political impartiality; transparent and accountable practices; confidentiality; and well co-ordinated, efficient, effective and accountable public administration. This is facilitated through the management of ministerial and parliamentary workflow and support arrangements.

It is the responsibility of the Secretary and the Senior Executive of the portfolio Agency, advised by their Ministerial and Parliamentary units, to lead consultation on behalf of the Agency in the establishment or variation of all aspects of work arrangements that apply to handling of Ministerial and Parliamentary workflow.

This consultation process leads to the creation of formal guidelines or protocols between Ministers and Agencies on the methods by which information will be exchanged, presented and recorded and performance of the client service provided by the Agency measured. The [Communications Protocol between the Agency and Ministers' Offices](#) formally outlines the parameters in which communication and exchange of information between the Agency and the Ministers' Offices occur.

The Secretary provides high quality policy advice to Government and implements Government programs, including delivering services to the community. The Secretary has a particular accountability to ensure the delivery of outputs that contribute to the achievement of outcomes as determined by Government. They must be able to focus on the outputs specific to their Agency, and the links between these outputs and broader Government goals. This requires them to create a shared vision and sense of purpose for their organisations, to enable and motivate their staff to achieve high performance.