

The National Security Council - Guidance

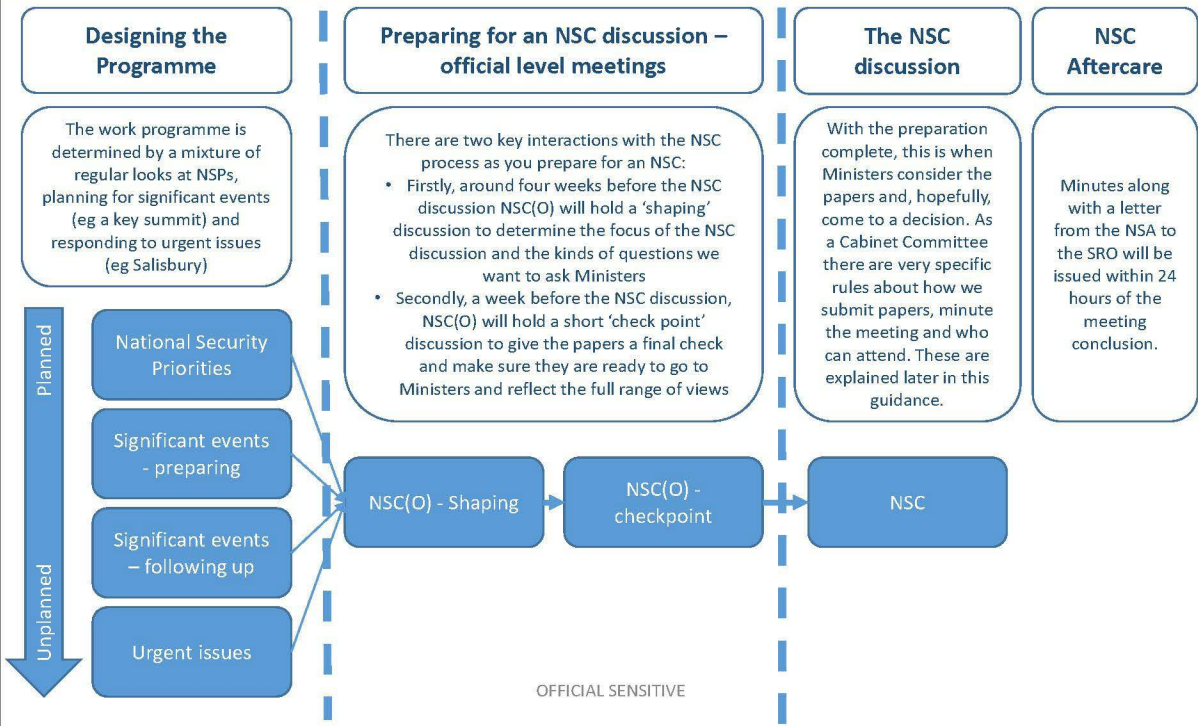
Internal

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How the NSC works

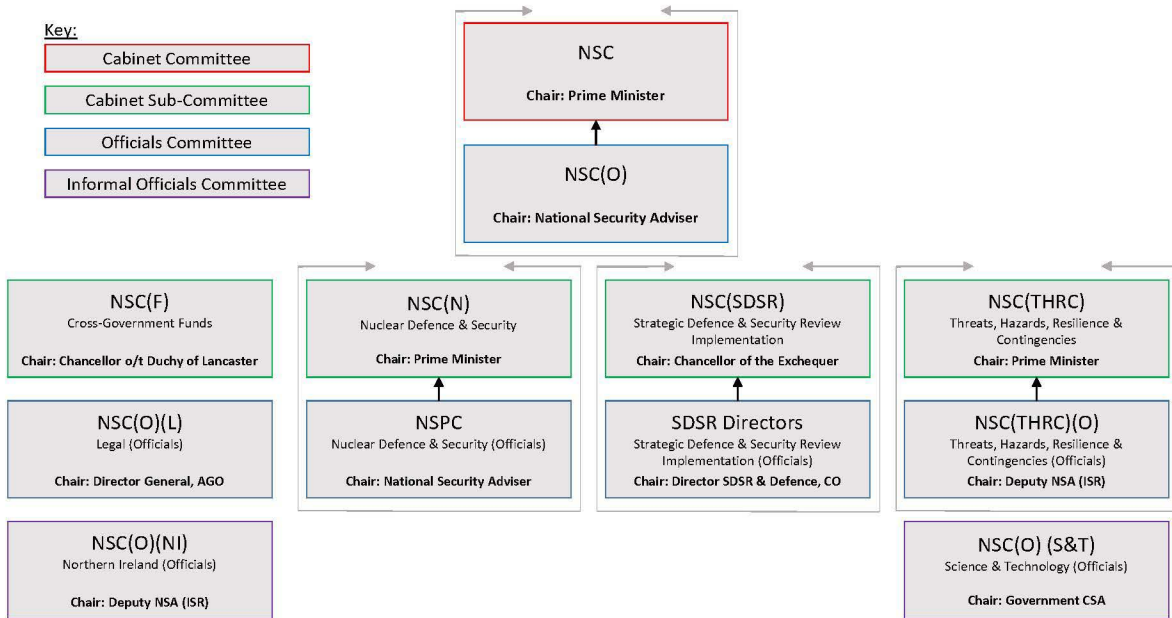
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The NSC Process



The National Security Council Structure

Key:



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The National Security Council and Collective Responsibility

The National Security Council is a committee of Cabinet, chaired by the Prime Minister and bound by the same rules and conventions as all Cabinet Committees.

The most important principle of Cabinet decision making is collective responsibility – that means that a decision made by NSC is binding on all members of the Government. A key aim when running NSC is to uphold the conditions which allow the principle of collective responsibility to be maintained. This means creating an environment within NSC where Ministers can have frank and informed discussions about the issues at hand. They should be able to disagree, argue and express views freely in the privacy of the NSC whilst maintaining a united front externally. To this end, papers must be circulated on time (so Ministers feel properly informed) and attendance must be strictly controlled (to allow Ministers to speak openly).

This also means that details of the discussions that take place within NSC are confidential, as are all related briefings and correspondence.

More detail on collective Cabinet Decision making is available in Chapter 4 of the Cabinet Manual

Can we have more time please?

For NSC, deadlines are set by the Cabinet Manual which states:

- All papers must be with Ministers 48 hours prior to the start of the meeting; and
- Minutes must be circulated no later than 24 hours after the meeting concludes

Both of these are crucial in maintaining the principle of collective responsibility – Ministers must have time to read and digest the papers beforehand, and decisions (into which they are bound) must be communicated promptly.

For NSC(O) we have a little more flexibility on timings but only in exceptional circumstances and, with Chilcot in mind, we need to make sure we are giving people sufficient time to read and digest papers so they can contribute effectively to meetings.

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The National Security Council - Practicalities

The National Security Council meets once a week, usually on Tuesday afternoon at 1pm. Except very occasionally, NSC meetings are held in the Cabinet Room at No10.

The NSC agenda is set by a Forward Work Programme, which is updated every quarter, although this will often change during the course of term in response to changing priorities and urgent issues. We aim to give departments as much certainty as possible, but will often get overtaken by events.

34

Number of times NSC met in 2017

Members:

- Prime Minister
- Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
- Chancellor of the Exchequer
- Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
- Secretary of State for Defence
- Secretary of State for the Home Department
- Secretary of State for International Development
- Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
- Attorney General

Regular Attendees (NB these are not members):

- The National Security Adviser
- The Deputy National Security Adviser (CSD)
- The Deputy National Security Adviser (ISR)
- Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office
- Chief of the Defence Staff
- DG, MIS
- Chief of SIS
- Director, GCHQ
- DG, NCA

Can I/my Director come to NSC to watch?

Usually not. Attendance is strictly limited – beyond members and regular attendees, only those taking the minute (normally 2 or 3 members of NSS) are usually permitted to attend. This helps protect the principle of collective responsibility by creating an environment where Ministers feel free to challenge, argue and reach agreed conclusions.

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The National Security Council (Officials) Practicalities

Irrelevant

The purpose of NSC(O) meetings is to (a) prepare for NSC discussions through shaping discussions and checkpoints; (b) discuss current hot topics (including sometimes scheduling a more detailed future discussion; and (c) consider wider issues which may not (at the time) merit a full Ministerial discussion but are still relevant to the national security community. Alongside full members, NSC(O) may also be attended by the relevant SRO or official to present (and sit at the table) and by a limited number of observers (to sit on the back row).

Attendees

National Security Adviser (Chair)
Permanent Under-secretary, Her Majesty's Treasury
Permanent Under-secretary, Foreign and Commonwealth Office
Permanent Under-secretary, Home Office
Permanent Under-secretary, Ministry of Defence
Chief of the Defence Staff, Ministry of Defence
Permanent Under-secretary, Department for International Development
Permanent Under-secretary, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
Permanent Under-secretary, Department for International Trade
Permanent Under-secretary, Department for Culture Media and Sport
Executive Director, Government Communications
Head of EU and International Law, Attorney General's Office
Chairman, Joint Intelligence Committee
Chief, Secret Intelligence Service
Director General, MI5
Director, Government Communications Headquarters
Director General, National Crime Agency
Private Secretary (NSC) to the Prime Minister, No10
Deputy National Security Adviser (CSD)
Deputy National Security Adviser (ISR)

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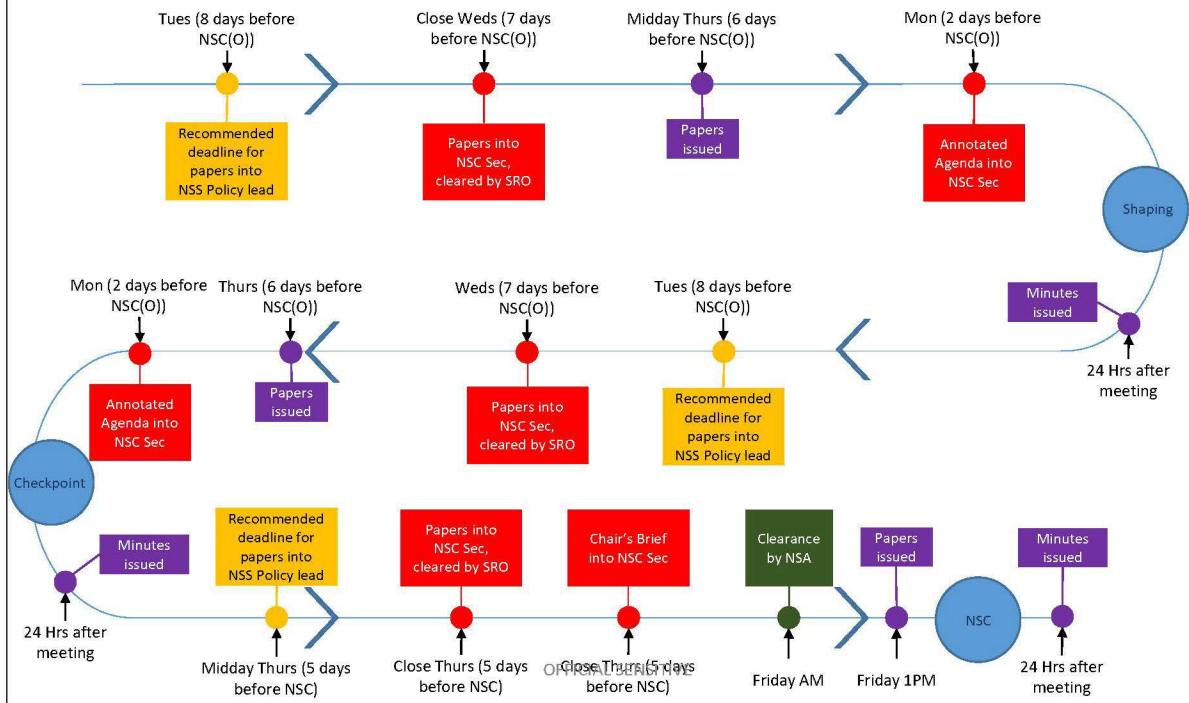
Can we have more time?

Whilst we are not as constrained by Cabinet Rules when preparing for NSC(O), getting papers on time is vital to ensure NSC(O) members are well briefed. Late submission is therefore by exception only and must be agreed in advance with the NSC Secretariat

Can I come to observe?

Observers are permitted at NSC(O) and the rules are slightly more relaxed, however attendance at NSC(O) must be agreed in advance with the National Security Council Secretariat

The NSC Cycle – Deadlines and Clearances



NSS/NSC(O) – Getting Internal Clearance

Meeting	Papers	Chair's Brief	Minute
NSC(O)	Papers for NSC(O) should be cleared by the SRO. They do not need to be cleared by the NSA or the DNSA ahead of circulation. The deadline for getting these to the NSC Secretariat is close on the Wednesday before the NSC(O). However, we recommend that you check in with the relevant DNSA a couple of weeks in advance to get views and feedback to feed into the SRO	This goes to the NSA on Tuesday, and needs to be with NSC Sec by 12pm on Monday. There is no formal clearance requirement, but our recommendation is SCS clearance before submission to NSC Sec	We aim to issue this 24 hours after the meeting. Contributions to the minute need to be with NSC Sec by 10am on Thursday. There is no formal clearance process but our recommendation is SCS clearance before submission to NSC Sec
NSC	Papers for NSC should be cleared by the SRO and then cleared by the NSA (as Secretary to the NSC). NSC Sec will manage the NSA clearance process, and will need papers by 4pm on Thursday.	This will need to be cleared by the NSA before submission to Number 10. NSC Sec will manage clearance with the NSA, and will need your contribution to the Brief by 4pm on Thursday.	This will need to be cleared by the NSA. NSC Sec will manage the clearance process. Contributions to the Minute should be with NSC Sec by close on the day of the NSC.

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Preparing for an NSC discussion

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NSS should engage all the way through the NSC process

External

- Engage with counterparts from other departments as early as possible
- Attend NSSIGs and other relevant meetings to challenge and support work being carried out
- Provide the 'view from the centre'
- Promote Fusion by ensuring the five steps are being followed and ensure thinking does not take place in Silos - for example drawing on external expertise where appropriate
- Help make links across NSSIGs and to other relevant pieces of work/events
- Channel our collective experience of the NSC process to provide specific and early help to drafters and SROs to develop good papers for NSC(O) and, where appropriate and needed, supporting SROs in preparing to present
- Support and enforce deadlines to ensure NSC(O) and NSC meetings can run effectively
- Support the SRO and team in delivering any actions from NSC(O), ensuring they are well understood and clarifying internally where necessary
- Ensure NSC actions are understood and support development of plans to deliver

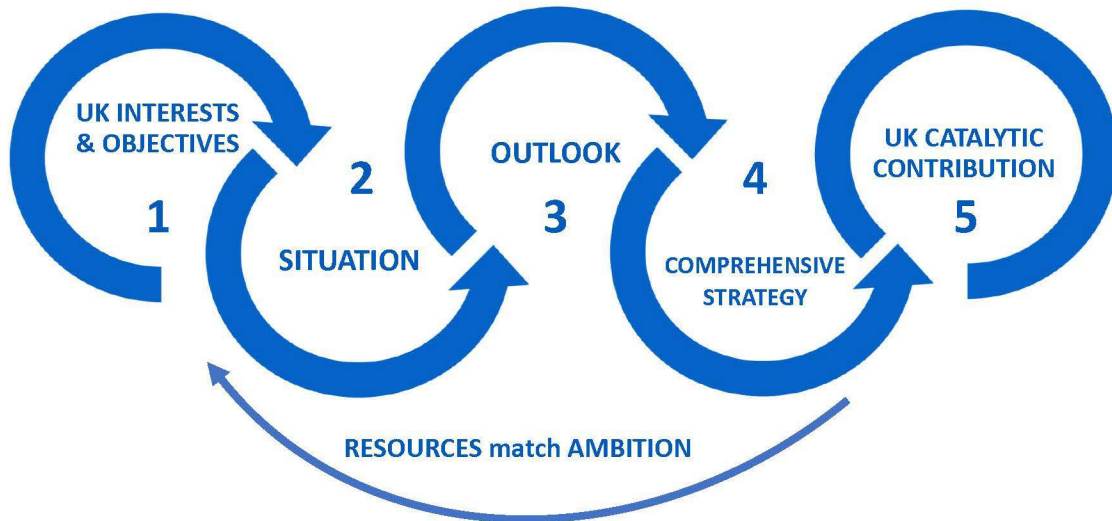
Internal

- Understand the 'view from the centre' – what do the NSA/DNSA/PM/NSC want to see?
- Keep Directors and DNSAs in the loop as work is developing
- Escalate to Directors/DNSAs when things look to be going off course
- Final check on papers
- Provide a short (one page) annotated agenda to help the NSA run the NSC(O) discussion
- Provide a concise Chair's Brief for the PM to help her run the discussion, including highlighting remaining areas of concern/disagreement

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Material submitted to NSC should be focused around five stages of thinking...

Material submitted in support of NSC discussions should follow the chain of thinking set out below. **This is more than just a slide template.** Thinking through your topic using these headings from an early stage will make sure it is relevant to NSC and that it gives Ministers what they need to make good decisions in full possession of the facts.



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Within those five stages, you should consider the following

- 1 UK Interests & Objectives** This is where you should consider the question of why this matters to HMG and UK National Security. There are lots of important and difficult issues to consider across the world, but when we think about what we want to put in front of the National Security Council we need to be clear about why it matters to the UK.
- 2 Situation** Before we jump into strategy and action we need to make sure we fully understand the current situation. We need to be thinking about and then giving Ministers as full a picture as possible. This is where collaboration really matters – this bit cannot be done in isolation.
- 3 Outlook** We need set out to Ministers our analysis of what could happen next. This should cover a range of possibilities including best case, worst case and minimum acceptable outcomes. This is where we should see the Fusion Doctrine in action and this is the point at which we should try to bring in as many views as possible – both inside and outside Government.
- 4 Comprehensive Strategy** This is where we think about and set out the comprehensive strategy in response to the situation we've identified. This is more than just what the HMG should do – it's what the collective effort looks like across all of our allies and partners.
- 5 UK Catalytic Contribution** This is where we identify the UK's contribution to the comprehensive strategy. The 'catalytic' part here is about identifying the things the UK can do that others can't and how to use those to really drive progress in the context of the wider comprehensive strategy, including what contributions we can leverage from others through what we can bring to the table.
- 6 Questions for Ministers** Although it is the last thing you will put in the slide pack it's the first thing you should think about as you start to prepare for an NSC. Here, as far as possible, we should look to offer Ministers choices rather than closed questions and above all else the questions we pose here should be a natural conclusion to the papers/slides.

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How to write good papers and slides...

Think and discuss before putting pen to paper

Once an idea is down on paper it becomes a reference point, and often many hours need to be invested in track changes as thinking develops. That is of course part of the process towards the end but we strongly recommend that more time in the early stages is devoted to discussions, workshops and exchanges of ideas before things start getting committed to text.

The five steps are not just a template for slides

While the five steps are a useful template for slide packs, it is also a sensible way to organise thinking. Use the five stages to plan your preparation and make sure you are hitting each of them as you build your products.

Work backwards

Start by thinking about what you'd like the outcome to be at an eventual NSC and work backwards from that. If you want a particular decision, what questions do you need to ask? If you want those questions answered, what kind of discussion do you want to provoke? What kind of information do you need to provide to support that discussion? Who do you need to get involved to generate that information?

Engage potential information sources early

We should be thinking broadly and creatively about who we involve as we develop our approaches to national security priorities, including thinking about those from outside HMG. In particular, we recommend speaking to JIO as early as possible in the process to see what products they have or could develop to support an NSC discussion.

Clarity

Even when we are presenting a lot of complex information, we should offer absolute clarity on why we are putting information forward. We should be clear about what information is essential for the decisions we are asking Ministers to take and what is background information. With weighty issues annexes are a good way of bringing the really key stuff to the fore.

Brevity

Some of our issues are complex and do require a fair bit of background material, but as your NSC approaches you should know your 'elevator pitch' and be able to articulate concisely, and without the need for supporting information, what you are bringing to Ministers. This should be the foundation of your paper. We should be aiming for six slides and papers of ten sides.

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What are good questions for Ministers?

Keep them concise and to the point - We should be aiming for three to four questions.

Avoid **closed** questions where the answer is obvious – for example “Our analysis shows that Serious and Organised crime is a growing issue – do you agree?”

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Where possible, give Ministers choices and decisions to make, but make sure all the options are feasible - we shouldn't create them for the illusion of choice.

Make sure the questions follow on from the papers/slides – the information presented should naturally build towards the questions at the end.

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How to write a good Annotated Agenda/Chair's Brief

1

Understand the purpose

Think about why you are writing the briefing. It's not a chance to make sure you tell the PM or the NSA everything they might need to know about a subject. Think carefully about what they will want to get out of the meeting, and then think back through what support and information they will need to do that, and then how you can craft the brief accordingly.

2

Be honest

Once we are writing the Chair's Brief or Annotated Agenda we are at the end of the process. Hopefully by this stage we have been able to iron out any flaws and resolve or factor in disagreements but if we haven't now is not the time for pulling punches. Our job in NSS is to get the right outcomes from NSC and NSC(O) meetings – if we think the right outcome is to send the SRO away to rethink then the briefing should be explicit about that, particularly at the shaping stage.

3

Understand your audience

Different chairs need different things, this is reflected in the templates but we need to make sure it is also reflected in the content. A PM Chair's Brief will look very different from an Annotated Agenda for the NSA in the way we set it out, the level of detail and the language we use.

4

Keep it short

Brevity in meeting briefs is key but it takes a lot of work to make briefings concise and comprehensive. Really challenge yourself to think about what does and doesn't need to be included – think about what knowledge the chair already has and what the really key outcomes are and tailor your brief accordingly. It can be difficult to leave things out, but if you know your stuff then you can make the call. For the PM, while we should still favour brevity, we do need to provide more background. For the NSA, we should limit the brief to one side per topic, focusing in on handling.

5

Be bespoke

When we do lots of briefing about the same topics there is always a temptation to reach for the last brief you did and copy and paste it over. We should of course be consistent and there is no harm in reusing good material, but you should really challenge yourself to think about whether what you are providing is right for the person using it.

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NSC Configurations

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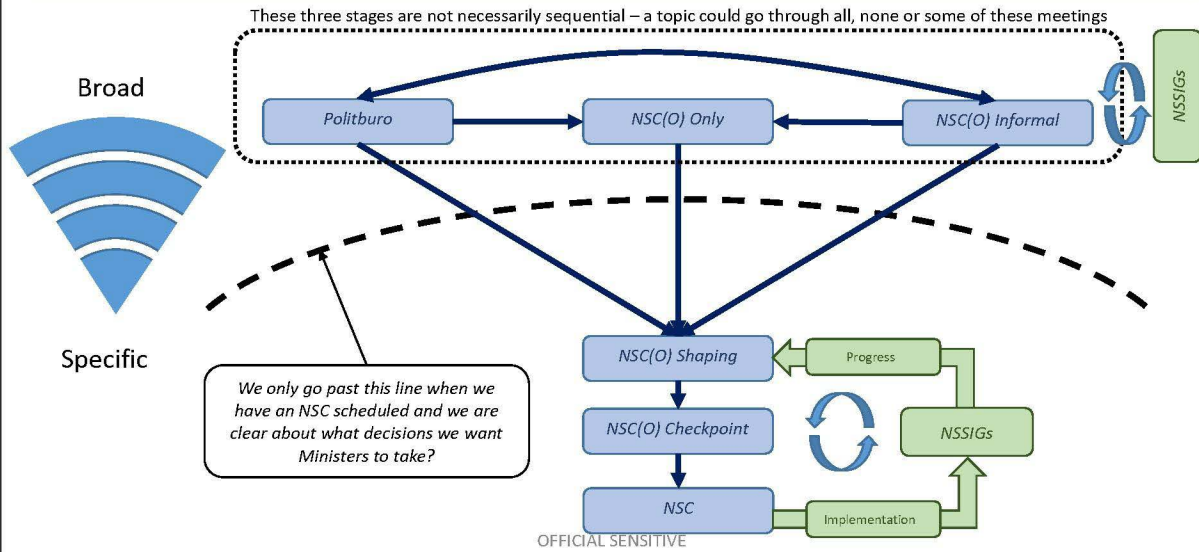
Overview of NSC configurations

Meeting	Purpose	Products	Deadlines
NSC(O) Shaping discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agree what is and isn't in scope for the NSC discussions Get top level views/interests from across NS community Agree broad shape questions for Ministers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paper (SRO) Annotated Agenda (NSS) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paper to NSC Sec by late Thursday Annotated agenda – submit to NSC Sec Tues
NSC(O) Checkpoint	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agree the slide pack and paper for NSC Sense check the questions/decisions we are presenting to Ministers Check the information provided fully supports those decisions Make sure everyone's views have been reflected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Draft NSC paper and slides (SRO) Annotated Agenda (NSS) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paper and slides to NSC Sec by late Thursday (for issue on Friday) Annotated agenda – submit to NSC Sec Tues
NSC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Present papers/slides to Ministers Give Ministers opportunity to discuss Get to a decision/answer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Slides and papers (SRO) Chair's brief (NSS) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paper and slides to NSC Sec by late Thursday (for issue on Friday) PM Chair's brief to NSC Sec by Friday morning (for issue to No10 by Friday PM)
NSC(O) Informal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider big strategic themes Hear from external speakers to offer a fresh perspective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very short paper to frame discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not set – but ideally paper circulated in advance of the meeting
Politburo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Smaller group (limited to 'policy Perm Secs') Shape some of the bigger, cross-cutting Help define very big issues into focused NSC discussions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very short paper/ one or two slides 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not set – but ideally paper circulated in advance of the meeting

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How do the various meeting configurations fit together?

We can use the various meeting configurations to help us shape a topic and get it ready for NSC discussion. For some issues, the ask of Ministers may be fairly clear and we can get it scheduled for NSC and go straight to an NSC(O) shaping discussion. For other issues, where the ask is less clear or not so well defined, we can use some or all of the more informal configurations to help bring some clarity and get consensus on what decisions we want to take to Ministers. At each stage, there should be a flow of information between these meetings and the relevant NSSIGs, with NSSIGs also taking responsibility for implementing the outcomes and actions from NSC meetings.



The NSC Process – NSC

Having done most of the groundwork through the NSSIG and NSC(O) process, the NSC discussion is where the decisions get made.

NSC usually takes one substantive item and, where appropriate, one topical update. The meeting will begin with an introduction from the Prime Minister after which the SRO will be invited to present the slides, other relevant contributors will then be invited to speak after which Ministers will discuss the questions and come to a conclusion which the PM will sum up at the end.

The key thing to remember when presenting to NSC is that the SRO is only expected to introduce the slides and should not plan to speak for more than five minutes. Time is limited and it's important that Ministers are given sufficient time to discuss and come to a decision.

After the meeting, we have 24 hours to issue the minute. The minute will be taken by NSS officials, and cleared by the National Security Adviser before being circulated to NSC and NSC(O) Members. The National Security Adviser will also write to the SRO following the NSC meeting to clarify outcomes and next steps. This will also capture any actions arising from the meeting.

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The NSC Process – NSC(O) Shaping Discussion

The NSC(O) Shaping discussion is the first stage in finalising the approach to the eventual NSC discussion. It takes place around four weeks before the NSC discussion itself although this timeline might be shortened in times of crisis or where urgent discussions are necessary.

This is the first opportunity for the SRO to present, on behalf of the whole of government (and not their home department), their proposals for the eventual NSC discussion. It's important to note that it is not a rehearsal for the eventual full NSC. NSC shaping discussions are intended to give the NSC(O) community the chance to consider the issue and give the SRO some direction and challenge on the approach to the discussion. An ideal shaping discussion would cover:

- Are we focusing on the right elements of an issue?
- Are we asking the right questions of Ministers?
- Are we providing the right level, amount and kind of information to support the discussion we want Ministers to have

As such, it isn't necessary (or indeed advised) to submit a full set of draft papers and slides for the shaping discussion. Ideally we would table a paper only, supported by a short and focused presentation from the SRO. Without turning it into an exact science, we'd expect the paper to be 70-80% settled going into NSC(O).

The presentation from the SRO should be around five minutes long, bringing out the key points from the paper and finishing on the key questions/issues on which you'd like the NSC(O) to focus. Our experience is that an unfocused presentation or one that is too long tends to lead to an unfocused discussion, so how the paper is tabled is as important as the content.

After the Shaping discussion, NSS will write up the minutes which we will aim to circulate within 24 hours. This, along with any feedback direct from the meeting, should form the basis on which the paper and subsequent slides are updated and drafted.

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The NSC Process – NSC(O) Checkpoint

The NSC(O) Checkpoint discussion is intended to be a short discussion, one week ahead of the NSC to make sure the papers are in order and that the questions for Ministers are sharp and supported by the right information. However, how extensive and detailed the checkpoint discussion will be will depend on the quality and clarity of the shaping discussion and the degree to which views from around the community have been taken into account (or where they haven't, how well other departments have been handled). Of course on occasion events will have moved on since the shaping discussion and the check point will naturally have to take this into account.

A good checkpoint will start with a short and clear presentation outlining the key points from the slides and paper and highlighting any major changes since the shaping discussion. In terms of papers, at this point we would expect to see the full NSC pack on the table with 90-95% certainty on content. Again, this is not a rehearsal for the NSC but this is the point where NSC(O) can look at the totality of the material being offered and satisfy themselves that it is comprehensive and offers the right information.

The key focus for the Checkpoint however is often about whether we are asking the right questions of Ministers. Our experience is that closed questions are most often challenged, especially where the answer is obvious (ie variations of questions like 'Do Ministers agree that Organised Crime is bad'). It is much better to ask Ministers to make decisions, in particular where there are genuine choices on offer between two or more viable strategic directions. As with the closed questions though, there is no point offering Ministers choices for the sake of doing so - if we are offering an option it should be genuinely viable.

After the Checkpoint, NSS will again write up the minutes but there is likely to be a very short turnaround to make any changes. The deadline for NSC papers is usually Thursday, so with NSC(O) on Wednesday morning policy leads will have around 24 hours to clear papers

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The NSC Process – NSC(O) Informal & Politburo

NSC(O) Informal

NSC(O) Informal meets quarterly, with the location depending on which department is hosting and who is speaking.

NSC(O) Informals are attended by all NSC(O) members and are set up to look at the big strategic issues facing the national security community, and provide an opportunity for NSC(O) members to think about those issues more broadly. The discussion will often be led by an external speaker who can offer a different perspective and help the NSC(O) community look at things from a new or different angle.

NSC(O) Informals will consider big ticket topics such as demography or climate change as well as looking more broadly at the landscape (for example an Informal was held on 'the world in 2018) and what it might mean for our national security.

Discussion will usually be supported by a very short paper or slide pack.

Politburo

Politburo meets monthly in the National Security Adviser's office.

Politburo meets to discuss and shape our approach to significant and wide-ranging issues that cut across the national security community. It is not attended by all NSC(O) Members, with attendance restricted to the eight policy Perm Secs (LIST).

Meeting in this configuration allows for a more policy focused discussion. Part of Politburo's purpose is to help turn the overarching strategic themes running through most of our work into focused, NSC discussions by starting to identify the big choices and decisions they think Ministers will need to consider.

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