

8. MINISTERS AND OFFICIAL INFORMATION

General Principle

- 8.1 **Ministers must at all times adhere to the rules regarding the management of official information.**

Handling of Information

- 8.2 Ministers have a personal responsibility to safeguard the integrity and confidentiality of official papers, including Executive papers. Failure to maintain good security can cause damage to the interests and reputation of the Executive Committee and Northern Ireland departments, and may prejudice the effective conduct of official business.
- 8.3 It is a criminal offence for a Minister to communicate official information for the improper benefit of any person. The offence can be committed by communicating to one person for the benefit of another, so it includes indirect communication as well as direct. Communications in the discharge of a statutory obligation (such as FOI) or in the lawful pursuit of official duties (such as on-the-record briefing of the news media) are permitted.
- 8.4 Ministers must use official email systems for all communications relating to official business. Exceptionally, where this is not possible, the Minister must copy any message to their official email account. Information generated in the course of government business must be handled in accordance with the requirements of the law (including the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FoI), the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIR), GDPR and Public Records Act (NI) 1923), regardless of how it is communicated.
- 8.5 When a Minister leaves office, he or she should ensure that all papers received in his or her Ministerial capacity are returned to the department.