



# Being an effective minister



“ We as ministers, particularly me with no ministerial experience, didn't actually know what was required of us. ”

**Caroline Spelman**  
Secretary of state for environment,  
food and rural affairs (2010–12)

## What is being a minister really like?

Taking on your first ministerial job can be daunting, no matter how long you've been in parliament. While the civil service will help you get up to speed with the policy area for which you are responsible, you probably won't have time to read all the briefings you are given before you plunge straight into detail and decisions. Even if you are already familiar with the policy issues, getting to grips with the day-to-day realities of being a minister can be tricky – ministers often receive little guidance about *how* to do the role.

“ I had no idea as to how government functioned, because I had never worked in a government department before. ”

**Dominic Grieve**  
Attorney general (2010–14)

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# Doing the job well

## 1. Work out and communicate your priorities



You probably won't have total control over your priorities in your ministerial role. You may get a strong steer from the prime minister or secretary of state, inherit policy projects from your predecessor, or have your plans swept away by external events. Regardless, it's important to identify a handful of key priorities at an early stage, and to tell your officials what these are. You should ask officials to provide updates on how the work on these is progressing.

## 2. Make timely decisions

The government machine relies on ministers making a huge number of decisions every day, and slow decisions can gum things up. If you want more information before making a decision, ask for it. Challenge officials to justify why they consider a particular decision 'urgent' – but make sure you don't delay them indefinitely.

## 3. Foster teamwork and openness

Share information with your ministerial colleagues and work together to make sure the department is delivering against your priorities. Work out which tasks you are comfortable delegating to officials and then empower them to deliver them. Make clear to officials that you expect them to consider all the options, not attempt to anticipate your preferences and therefore only present you with a limited set of alternatives. Encourage officials to let you know early about any potential problems or risks to the delivery of your policies and be careful not to shoot the messenger – it is better to deal with a problem sooner rather than later.

 **For the next few weeks I want to hear about the things that you're worried about, that you think are a bit of a mess and I want them on the table so we can resolve them.** 

**Justine Greening**  
Secretary of state for education (2016–18)

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## 4. Maintain relationships in government and parliament



Former ministers talk about the risk of neglecting relationships with colleagues in other departments or in parliament. It is easy to get swept up in departmental business and not make time for other parts of your work. Explain to your private office that it is important for you to have time to communicate with parliamentary colleagues – in the end this will be helpful for the department as well as for you. And if issues get stuck between departments, a text or call to a ministerial colleague can help unblock things much quicker than meetings between officials.

## 5. Think about styles of working

Your officials will want to adapt to how you like to work, but you'll need to tell them what your preferences are. Do you like lots of written material or do you prefer meetings to discuss a decision? Do you want lots of people in meetings or just a small group? Think about your preferred working style and explain it to your private office.

## 6. Think about implementation

Making a policy decision is only the start of the process. Think about how much you want to be involved in keeping track of how the decision is being implemented – do you want progress updates weekly, monthly or at some other interval? You can use intelligence from your constituency or parliamentary colleagues, your previous experience or other connections to keep an eye on how things are going. Even when services are outsourced, the authority of your role can be an effective tool to keep those responsible focused on delivering.

 **But the visits, constituency stuff, what other MPs tell you is going on – all of those are really, really important and you do build a picture.** 

**Nicky Morgan**

Secretary of state for education (2014–16)

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## Questions to ask yourself

To ensure you are able to do the job well, consider the following questions:

- Do you know what your priorities are, what support you need to achieve them, and what, if necessary, you will deprioritise to achieve them?
- How do they relate to the priorities of your ministerial colleagues?
- What relationships do you need to build to achieve these priorities?
- How do you like information presented, and how do you want to track the progress that is being made on your priorities?
- Who else should you be listening to when making decisions? Who are your key interlocutors outside government – how should you communicate with them and how often?
- Can you talk to your predecessors to find out what they thought about the role or department?

## Find out more

If you would like to discuss any of the above in more detail, or to talk about potential training we can offer on this topic, please get in touch via [ifgacademy@instituteforgovernment.org.uk](mailto:ifgacademy@instituteforgovernment.org.uk).

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