



Working with the Treasury



“ The Treasury was a frequent frustration. Even when you wanted to do something that was relatively modest and you could demonstrate made sense, often there was just an automatic block.

George Eustice
Secretary of state for environment,
food and rural affairs (2020–22)

The Treasury, as both the economics and finance ministry, plays a major role in UK government. You will have to work with it to achieve your goals. The department runs the budget and spending review, which define how much money your department has to spend on your priorities. It is also home to civil servants charged with ensuring your departmental budget is spent well on a day-to-day basis, who can have influence over policy decisions being made by your department.

How to win (and pick) your battles with the Treasury

1. Make use of its expertise

The Treasury's job in government is to promote financial probity and economic growth across government – priorities that align well with those of many ministers. It can be a useful source of alternative views to your departmental officials, especially as it will often have some policy expertise in the areas covered by your department. Seek out alliances with relevant Treasury ministers and civil servants – they can help you hold your departmental officials to account.

“ I learnt in the Department for Transport that the Treasury transport team actually had some really very important skills, and in some respects understood some of the projects better than the transport department people did themselves... By plugging into the Treasury team and meeting with my Treasury [opposite number]... I was able to understand more about the projects that my own civil servants were presenting to me and to challenge them. ”

Philip Hammond
Secretary of state for transport (2010–11,
and later chancellor of the exchequer)

2. Come prepared


The Treasury will want to make sure you are spending money wisely, so its civil servants and ministers won't be afraid to be directly critical of your ideas. You should make sure that you are prepared for this. Ask your private office to provide a detailed brief for key meetings with the Treasury, including the critical financial details, and make sure you have taken the time to absorb it. Treasury ministers and officials will often want to get into the concrete details of the policies you are discussing.

“ I remember arriving [at No.10] with the [Department of Trade and Industry] brief as to why we should spend these hundreds of millions, which stretched to about three or four pages, and sitting on the sofa in Downing Street in Tony [Blair]'s study with Gordon [Brown], who arrived with a briefing from the Treasury... stretching to about 80 or 90 pages, and being fairly quickly eviscerated by the chancellor in front of the prime minister. ”

Douglas Alexander
Secretary of state for international development
(2007–2010)

3. Speak the Treasury's language

When going into meetings with the Treasury, and especially when asking for additional funding, it can help to think about your policies in terms that will appeal to the officials you are dealing with. Think about how what you want to achieve will deliver value for money and long-term savings – Treasury favourites – or contribute to equally prized growth. This will make it more likely that you get what you want from the meeting.

 **What the Treasury looked for from a spending minister [was] someone who takes their concerns seriously, is seeking value for money, is wanting to ensure that things are sustainable, is trying to spend money now in a way that's going to reduce spending pressures down the line.**

David Gauke

Financial secretary to the Treasury (2014–2016)



4. Pick your battles

The Treasury will be likely to express an opinion on your decisions, and much of your departmental spending will require its approval. This can be frustrating for ministers who want more control over their own budgets – but you have a limited amount of political capital, so use it wisely.

Don't debate every decision, but be prepared to stand up for your department at crucial points – particularly around budgets and spending reviews, where the overall shape of your departmental budget will be decided.

Questions to ask yourself

To ensure that you work well with the Treasury, consider the following questions:

- How can I make good use of the Treasury's expertise on this issue?
- Have I got all the information I need to defend the value for money of this policy or decision?
- Is this an essential priority that I want to use my political capital defending?

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

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