

A job like no other

How government ministers
can be supported to succeed





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The role of a government minister is unlike any other job. Ministers lead organisations of hundreds or thousands of people; they make life-changing policy decisions every day; they represent the government in public and in the media; and most of them also represent their constituents in the House of Commons.

Many ministers come to the role with deep political experience. They are good at building coalitions and can articulate a vision. But much of the job is unlike anything ministers have done before and taking the time to work out how to do it can deliver huge rewards.

Some things can only be learned by doing, but new and potential ministers must also think clearly about their goals and the tools at their disposal. In business, senior leaders regularly spend time building their skills in order to develop new strategies and get the most out of their teams. Similarly, leaders in the public sector – from chief constables to headteachers to senior military officers – learn from their peers and their predecessors to become more effective in their role.

Government ministers too can benefit from professional development and support. Many ministers in the UK and other countries have decided to seek out this support to increase the impact they have throughout their ministerial careers. This brochure looks at how ministers benefit from professional executive support, the skills and areas this support can cover, and how ministers can access it.

51%



The proportion of senior executives surveyed by Stanford Business School who received coaching or leadership advice in 2013

1 month



Induction for senior civil servants, including two-day residential module

75 hours



Annual training per employee at 'best-in-class' organisations according to McKinsey

“

Don't occupy the post,
do something with it.

”

Lord Pickles

Secretary of state for communities
and local government, 2010–15





“ When I became secretary of state, each summer I arranged my own summer school... I also did a session on leadership there and that really was what encouraged me to turn my private office much more into a ‘cabinet’... I had the best administrative machine that was possible to imagine. ”

Baroness Jowell
Secretary of state for culture,
media and sport, 2001–07

Why spend the time?

Ministerial jobs are full-on – but so are leadership jobs in other sectors. Taking time to identify the best way to approach a role, and to avoid the mistakes of predecessors, is common in business and the public sector. There are many benefits for ministers in doing the same things.

Make the system work for you

The government machine is complex. It’s key for new ministers to understand how the system works, from taking legislation through parliament to getting the most out of the civil service. Improving this understanding will help you ask the right questions, pull levers effectively and hold your teams to account.

Develop your skills in government

Many ministers draw on deep experience gathered in politics, business and elsewhere. The most effective ministers reflect on the skills they already have and put them into practice when leading their departments.

Once you’re in the job, you’ll build on those skills every day. But going beyond this ‘on the job’ learning will help you adapt to any policy or institutional challenge, as well as build your personal resilience. It will also help you to prepare for changes in how government works, including the challenges which result from the evolving technological and digital landscapes.

Deliver transformational change

Move beyond the day-to-day

Some ministers fall into the trap of going from one crisis to another. Taking the time to step back and reflect on your priorities will allow you to set direction and make the most of your time in office.

As governments face increasingly complex challenges, ministers need to move beyond reacting to the latest issue to arrive on their desk if they are to bring about transformational change. Being more strategic about the decisions you make can deliver better value for money for taxpayers – and help you to achieve more throughout your ministerial career.

“You have got to move on from just reacting nervously, event by event, document by document, dossier by dossier, submission by submission... you need to have some idea of what it is you want to do whilst you are in this portfolio.”

Lord Clarke of Nottingham
Chancellor of the exchequer, 1993–97

Break down silos

All too often, different parts of government fail to communicate or learn lessons from one another. Sharing your insights and experiences with ministers in other departments can build connections, boost performance across government and develop your personal network.



Sometimes in a ministerial role, it can feel a bit lonely actually... and sometimes just being able to kick things about and talk about stuff is helpful.



Damian Hinds
Secretary of state for education, 2018–19



“

**Be realistic about the fact
that being a minister is damn
hard work.**

”

Jacqui Smith

Home secretary, 2007–09

What makes an effective minister?

All ministers come with different backgrounds and experience. There is never a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to preparing for and improving in each ministerial role. Different types of support will be useful depending on the position you find yourself in and your own personal preferences.

The support you need will also change throughout your ministerial career. It will be worth thinking regularly about what support you would find useful as you tackle different challenges.

There are many aspects to being a minister, lots of which you will already have experience in from your previous roles in politics or beyond, but many of which must also be learned. Former ministers have told the Institute for Government that they have found the following skills, knowledge and actions useful to excel in the role.



"I had absolutely no understanding of the arcane public accounting concepts that they used: DEL and RDEL and CDEL."

Sir Vince Cable

Secretary of state for business, innovation and skills, 2010-15

"Everyone's got strengths and weaknesses, everyone brings different things."

Justine Greening

Secretary of state for international development, 2012-16



What do you need to understand?

How to:

- Make government processes work for you
- Get what you want in financial negotiations
- Avoid pitfalls in the legislative process
- Navigate crisis management in government
- Deliver through arm's-length bodies
- Commission robust, useful advice
- Stick to codes of conduct to maintain trust
- Clarify your own responsibilities and how they relate to others'



What do you need to do?



- Use your political judgement
- Set clear priorities
- Ask the right questions
- Take action
- Communicate your strategy
- Oversee delivery
- Hold officials to account



“Be capable of using the machine to produce and to implement the best possible decisions.”

Jack Straw
Foreign secretary, 2001–06

“Quite early on I learned what you need to do to be a minister effectively is about asking the right questions.”

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



How can you get it done?



- Articulate your vision
- Learn from mistakes
- Lead high-performance teams
- Create a culture of constructive challenge
- Work across barriers
- Adapt to change
- Build your own and your team’s resilience
- Model ethical behaviour



“ Every single time I’ve taken over a role from somebody, I’ve sought them out and asked them about the role. To me, it makes absolute sense that you find out who’s been doing the job before, because you want to know what the burning issues are. ”

Dame Caroline Dinenage
Minister of state for digital and culture, 2020–21

What can this support look like?

Just as there is no one thing that ministers need to know, there is also no set pattern in which these skills and knowledge can be developed. Different kinds of discussion and materials will be useful for different individuals and in different moments.

When starting a new leadership role, there are different tools you can use to get to grips with your new field and responsibilities. Throughout your time as a minister, building self-knowledge about your strengths and weaknesses can help you sharpen your capabilities. And many executives use leadership courses to set strategic priorities and think about how they want to support their organisations work towards their goals.

The next few pages look at some of the different ways in which ministers in the UK and other countries, and senior leaders across the public and private sectors, have been supported to develop their leadership skills. You may find these examples to be useful models when thinking about how you would like to build your own skills and expertise as a minister.

Initial support

Induction



Governments around the world often offer short induction sessions for new ministers – in the UK this is generally led by the Cabinet Office, with input from other senior officials. At the Institute for Government, we also support new ministers to understand how to make the most of their time in office.

Speaking to predecessors



Nobody approaches the ministerial role in quite the same way, but understanding how people have done the role before you can help you get your head around key issues and understand the department in more detail.

Ongoing support



Trusted confidants

While ministers may face unique challenges, it's not just predecessors who can offer useful advice. Like other senior leaders, many ministers rely on trusted contacts to act as a sounding board. Whether a non-executive director of your department, an executive coach or someone who has been a minister in the past – anyone you trust can become an

effective confidant. By offering an outside perspective, these confidants can listen to your thoughts about the role and help you get the most out of the job throughout your ministerial career.



“Having self-knowledge about how you work is really important. I undertook 360-degree appraisals and requested that that went all the way to the cabinet secretary.”

Douglas Alexander
Secretary of state for international development, 2007–10

“Having somebody who is there for you and completely confidential, I think, makes very good sense.”

Harriet Harman
Leader of the House of Commons, 2007–10



Tools for self-reflection



Inviting feedback from your ministerial peers and senior officials can help you strengthen your relationships with your team. The Institute for Government has supported ministers and their teams to provide feedback to each other in the past and would be happy to help if you would like to explore this option.

Time-pressed executives in a range of industries use self-assessment tools to understand how they approach their roles and identify their areas for development. The Chartered Management Institute, for example, offers an online diagnostic tool which designs a personalised learning plan to enhance leaders' expertise.

“I did Oxford Business School training on project management, which I found really good... I thought that was a really good example of training that I think ministers could benefit from.”

Sir Robert Buckland
Justice secretary, 2019–21



Technical courses



Ministers can build their expertise and capabilities in key aspects of the job, helping them better understand technical areas and more effectively interrogate civil servants' advice. There are a number of existing examples of such support:

- **Major Projects Leadership Academy** – more than 50 ministers overseeing major infrastructure projects have attended the programme at the University of Oxford since it was launched in 2020.
- **Legislation training sessions** – provided by the Cabinet Office to support ministers taking a bill through parliament, allowing them to hear practical insights from experienced colleagues.
- **Masterclasses on scientific advice and data** – delivered by the government chief scientific adviser and chief statistician to develop ministers' abilities to best draw on civil service expertise.

Leadership courses

Other public sector leaders in the UK and ministers in other countries use leadership courses to step back from their demanding roles and reflect on how to best lead their organisations. Participants generally set the agenda and are able to learn from one another, as well as experienced predecessors and expert speakers, to address the complex challenges they face. These courses allow leaders to test new ways of directing their organisations and think about practical changes they can make. Examples of leadership courses include:

- **Harvard Ministerial Leadership Programme** – a discussion-based forum for ministers from around the world to set strategic priorities and understand how to oversee policy implementation.
- **McKinnon Institute for Political Leadership** – based at Monash University in Melbourne, the McKinnon Institute provides courses for potential future ministers, covering government processes, leadership skills and getting the right expertise into government.
- **Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative** – in-person and virtual sessions for city mayors from around the world. Participants choose specialist tracks based on their development needs.
- **Local Government Association Leaders' Programme** – a three-month programme, delivered across three modules, for council leaders.
- **College of Policing's Executive Leader Programme** – a 12-month development course, delivered across four modules, for senior leaders in law enforcement.
- **Windsor Leadership's Experienced Leaders Programme** – two two-day residential courses at Windsor Castle for senior executives.

How can you make this happen?

For ministers who want to develop the skills they need to excel in the role, the next question is how to create the time and space to make this happen. There are many different groups who can support ministers in this:

Political parties

The role of a minister is unique, but political parties can learn from other sectors to make it more like a profession – with the induction, support, career paths and talent management that professionalisation entails.

Large private sector organisations **develop skills strategies and often have chief talent officers**. Political parties should likewise take a strategic approach to ensure that their MPs – from backbenchers to secretaries of state – are supported in developing the capabilities they need in government. This will also help **aspiring politicians bring their diverse backgrounds and experience** to bear on the work of government in the most effective way.



“Give people a chance to build up experience, because they are the future for your party and for future governments, and you know they need to be given their chance to build up experience and judgement.”

Dame Margaret Beckett
Foreign secretary, 2006–07



Governing parties can develop the talents of promising backbenchers by **creating opportunities for them to find out more about ministerial life** – involving parliamentary private secretaries more significantly in the work of the department would be one way to do this.

Parties in power and opposition can both **make the most of trusted former ministers** to draw on their experiences and expertise. And rewarding politicians who take the time to develop their knowledge and skills – through formal recognition and more opportunities – will help build the demand among individuals for the benefits of professional development.

The prime minister can play a significant role here by recognising where their MPs have invested in their professional development. He or she can **use reshuffles as an opportunity to assess ministers' performance** against particular standards of leadership and reward those who have excelled in their roles.

The civil service

Professional development can help ministers to get the best out of the civil service, make effective decisions and ensure policies are delivered. Having a minister who is clear and reflective about their priorities can be useful in directing the work of the department.

Civil servants already recognise that they can't do everything to help new ministers settle into the job. There is a benefit to ministers being able to speak candidly with people outside of government to strengthen their approach and improve their abilities.

Private offices manage ministers' diaries and assess all the requests and advice that go to them. Where ministers express an interest in professional development, **private office teams need to react to that by reaching out to relevant organisations or individuals, and setting aside time.** Private secretaries need to work with their civil service colleagues to **signpost ministers to relevant support.**

Ministers and politicians

If you are a minister, or a member of parliament who hopes to be a minister one day, **you have the power to access this kind of support.** As a minister, talking to your private office to make clear that you want to find time to attend a seminar, arrange a conversation with your predecessor or a discussion with the private office team themselves about how you can work together to achieve your priorities will set the tone and show that this matters to you. And backbenchers hoping to become ministers can also **take the time to learn about how government works** and what the roles and responsibilities of ministers are, so they can make the system work for them once they get into office.



Where to go next

So, what can you do as a minister or a hopeful minister to find out more about how to develop your skills and knowledge to make the most out of your time in office? There are many possible avenues to explore next:

Talk to the Institute for Government

We have worked with many ministers, shadow ministers, special advisers and private office teams to help them think about how to work more effectively and build their understanding of key aspects of government.

If you would like to find out more about how we can help you, get in touch at ifgacademy@instituteforgovernment.org.uk.

Talk to your peers

Within your party, across government including non-executive directors (where relevant) and predecessors – find out what others have found useful and consider whether you would like to discuss your ambitions for your time in office with them.

Talk to other providers

As set out on p.21, there are many organisations that support leaders to be more effective in their roles – they each focus on different aspects of leadership and will be able to advise on how they can best support.

Talk to civil servants

Current ministers can talk to their permanent secretary, private office teams and other senior officials to work out what might be useful for them.

Ministerial jobs are like no other role – but that does not mean you cannot prepare for them and adapt how you approach them. Take the ideas in this booklet as inspiration and think about how you will make the most of your time in office.



The Institute for Government is the UK's leading think tank promoting government effectiveness.

Founded in 2008, we work with all the main political parties and with public servants in Westminster, Whitehall and across the UK, providing fresh thinking through research, events and leadership development.

Find out more about our work:

 www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ifg-academy

 ifgacademy@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

 [@ifg_academy](https://twitter.com/ifg_academy)

