



Understanding ethical standards in government



“ We are all here to serve and we must all serve honestly and in the interests of those who gave us our positions of trust. I will expect all ministers to work within the letter and spirit of the code. ”

Tony Blair, *Ministerial Code*, 1997
Prime minister of the United Kingdom (1997–2007)

Upholding ethical standards is a key responsibility for ministers. Public trust in government is low and how ministers behave is an important part of that. From a personal point of view, ensuring you understand the rules that apply to ministers can help you avoid difficult situations that distract from your ability to get things done.

1. Read and understand the Ministerial Code

The *Ministerial Code* is published in the name of the prime minister and sets out the standards that ministers are expected to adhere to in the course of their duties, as well as explaining key processes in government.

Every minister is given an introduction to the code when they are appointed, but it is easy in the whirlwind of the first few days to give it just a cursory glance and move on. Given how important the code is to the functioning of government, however, taking the time to digest it fully is important. Rishi Sunak introduced a requirement for ministers to “attest... they accept the provisions of the *Ministerial Code*” after being appointed.



I know Ministers enter government because they believe in public service. They work hard because they want to make a difference to others. They do their jobs knowing it is an incredible privilege to serve.



Rishi Sunak, *Ministerial Code*, 2022

2. Ask for help if unsure

At first glance, the rules around the ethical standards expected of ministers are simple, but there are lots of areas of complexity and it can be difficult to know how it applies to each circumstance. There are plenty of people who can help advise on particular questions.

Your first port of call for any question about any aspect of your government role should be your private office team – the head of your private office will be able to provide advice, as will the permanent secretary of your department.

For more specific questions your private office may get in touch with others, such as the propriety and ethics team in the Cabinet Office. This team works with Sir Laurie Magnus, the independent adviser on ministers' interests. The adviser publishes a list twice a year that sets out the financial and other interests of ministers and their family members that are, or may be seen to be, related to their ministerial responsibilities. It is not a comprehensive register of every interest that you declare to your department.

The independent adviser also advises the prime minister on wider matters relating to the *Ministerial Code*, and supplies ministers with general advice in relation to the code.

If you have any questions about how to manage a particular situation, it is always better to ask and make changes rather than ploughing ahead and ending up regretting it.

3. Much of it is common sense

While there are many ways to get extra advice and support, the broad rules for how ministers are expected to behave in office are fairly straightforward: avoid conflicts of interest and treat those you work with well. Government is a workplace like any other and behaviour that would not be acceptable in another field is also not acceptable in government. It is always worth bearing this in mind when considering how to approach the ministerial role.

Questions to ask yourself

- Are there any aspects of the *Ministerial Code* where I am unsure how they apply to me?
- How can I ensure that my policies and priorities are not threatened by allegations of unethical behaviour?
- If I am unsure, who can I ask for guidance? Can my private office help or do I need support from the propriety and ethics team or the independent adviser?

Find out more

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

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