



Supporting Lords ministers



“ There was definitely help in suddenly having a private office to myself. I had been previously tasked with various things either in the House, or looking into things for the department, where I didn't have a desk, so I was sort of sitting in reception on my mobile phone. ”

Lord Bethel

Parliamentary under-secretary of state for innovation (2020–21)

Lords ministers face specific challenges

In many ways, the support a Lords minister needs from their private office team is very similar to what's needed by ministers in the Commons. Both need their private office to organise their time and paperwork according to their policy priorities; to adapt to their preferred ways of working; to act as an effective line of communication between them and the wider department; and to make sure they have time to carry out their parliamentary duties alongside their ministerial ones.

However, Lords ministers face some specific challenges in their roles, which they have to navigate with less support than Commons ministers enjoy. They do not have constituency or parliamentary offices, and as they are typically junior ministers they are generally unable to appoint special advisers. As a result, Lords ministers are particularly dependent on the support provided by the civil servants in their departmental private office. There are some key ways that you as a private office team can make the job easier to navigate.

1. Keep up to date with what's going on across the department

All ministers find it useful to have a sense of departmental activity, progress and challenges outside their own brief, and private office teams play a crucial role in helping them to stay abreast of those wider developments. But this is particularly vital for Lords ministers, who will be expected to answer all questions about the work of their department in the upper House, not just those relevant to their specific portfolio.

However, Lords ministers say that officials are usually more focused on the reception of policies in the Commons, rather than the Lords, and that it can be a struggle to get sufficient levels of briefing. Push the rest of the department to provide briefing materials in enough depth for the minister to carry out their duties in the chamber, and remind them to pay attention to how issues or legislation might play out there.



One of the things I think my private office really managed to do was to put the Lords and Lords' business on the map.



Lord Faulks

Minister of state for civil justice and legal policy (2014–16)

2. Learn how the upper House works

Procedures and etiquette are very different in the Lords from those in the Commons, and are taken very seriously by peers. Lords ministers are expected to grasp these procedures without much formal instruction, and although former Lords ministers report that their parliamentary colleagues are usually generous to those who are still learning the ropes, it remains crucial to get those details right. Take the time to understand how the upper House functions, how your minister is expected to behave, and what this means both for their diary management and for the nature of the briefing they need from the department.



The domain of Westminster was a completely strange animal and the Lords particularly, a strange part of that strange animal!



Lord Green

Minister of state for trade and investment (2011–13)

3. Explain the 'nuts and bolts' of the job

Getting to grips with a new ministerial role is a challenge for anyone, particularly for those who have no prior experience of working in government. Even those who have held ministerial jobs before often find that they can't approach their new position in quite the same way. And first-time Lords ministers have an even steeper mountain to climb than ministers from the Commons. Many have never been an MP, and if the prime minister has ennobled them so that they can be appointed as a minister, they may have very little experience of sitting in the House of Lords either – so they might be coming into the job with next to no exposure to the inner workings of government.

Moreover, Lords ministers are often taking on the role after a career in the private sector, where processes and structures – and the levers they have available to change them – were starkly different to those in government that they encounter. Make sure to explain the logistics of ministerial life – like the *Ministerial Code*, the roles and responsibilities of private office team members, and how this particular ministerial position fits into the wider departmental and government ecosystem.

Questions to ask yourself

- Are you clear on which key departmental processes and structures the minister needs to be familiar with, and have they received any necessary training or briefing on these?
- Do you understand what is expected from the minister in the chamber, and what your team needs to do in order to support them in that?
- Are you getting what you need from the department in terms of scope/depths of briefing?

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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