

# Ministers Reflect Caroline Dinenage



14 June 2022

# Biographical details

## Parliamentary history

2010 – present: MP for Gosport

2012 – 2013: Member, Science and Technology Committee

2012 – 2015: Member, Business, Innovation and Skills Select Committee

2021 – present: Member, Cultural Objects bill

2021 – present: Member, Women and Equalities Committee

## Government career

2015 – 2016: Parliamentary under secretary of state for women, equalities and family justice at the Government Equalities Office and the Ministry of Justice

2016 – 2017: Parliamentary under secretary of state for women, equalities and early years at the Government Equalities Office and the Department for Education

2017 – 2018: Parliamentary under secretary of state for family support, housing and child maintenance at the Department for Work and Pensions

2018 – 2020: Minister of state for social care at the Department of Health and Social Care

2020 – 2021: Minister of state for digital and culture at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

**Caroline Dinenage was interviewed by Catherine Haddon and Paeony Tingay on 14 June 2022 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project.**

**Caroline Dinenage talks about being in government during the pandemic, how Number 10 differed under David Cameron, Theresa May and Boris Johnson, and the support provided to ministers by the civil service.**

**Catherine Haddon (CH):** So, can we go back to when you first started as a minister in May 2015. You became parliamentary under-secretary of state for women, equalities and family issues. As we understand it, this was a joint ministerial role at the Department for Education (DfE) and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), is that right?

**Caroline Dinenage (CD):** Yeah, so the job title was ‘women, equalities and family justice’, and it was a joint role in justice and education ... well, the Government Equalities Office (GEO).

**CH:** Right, and what conversation did you have when you were first appointed? What was the thinking behind giving you that role?

**CD:** So, within the Ministry of Justice, I was responsible for female offenders, so, within the prison system, just the female aspect of it. As it turned out – although it wasn’t formally decided, but because I was women and equalities minister – I also became responsible for trans prisoners, which was an issue that hadn’t necessarily arisen prior to me being appointed. We had a very high-profile case of a trans woman who was in a man’s prison, so that suddenly became part of my portfolio. And then, [there was] a tonne of other justice stuff that wasn’t really related, other than the family justice role.

I suppose David Cameron wanted me to approach that aspect of the portfolio with, I suppose, a kind of emotional intelligence. So, I think that was behind my appointment. I’d been a PPS in the Women and Equalities Department for Nicky Morgan. So, the Government Equalities Office speaks for itself but the MoJ bit, I think, was a weird combination, and a weird choice, on the basis that I was, I think, probably one of the only people to go into the Ministry of Justice that had literally no legal background whatsoever. I come from a nice, normal business background, and suddenly I was in a department with Dominic Raab and all these people that had sparkling careers within the judicial system and the legal system, and I literally don’t think I’d even asked a justice question before I became a justice minister *[laughs]*.

**CH:** You say you’d been a PPS before, so you’d had a bit of an insight into the portfolio, and perhaps into departments, but how much of a change was it becoming a proper minister going into the department? How prepared did you feel?

**CD:** So, I’d been a PPS, first in the Treasury and then in the women and equalities aspect of what Nicky Morgan did – because Nicky did education and women and equalities, so I covered the women and equalities bit. So, I felt on that aspect of it [the role], I was quite up to speed on the issues. But going into a department that you don’t have any background in was really, really difficult and unexpected. If you’d have said to me, “Caroline, in May 2015 you’re going to get promoted”, and I had to write a list of the departments that I thought I was likely to be promoted into, justice would not have even

been on the list. I mean, I probably wouldn't even have remembered it was a department *[laughs]* because it was so out of my realm of expertise or interest.

And then, suddenly, you literally go from that conversation at Number 10 into your new department, where you meet your new private office team, who are all lovely and charming and sweet, but it's utterly terrifying. They said to me, "Oh, we've got a stand-up [meeting] this afternoon, where you'll be talking to all the people who work in the Ministry of Justice, either digitally or in real life, about your priorities as a new ministerial team." And I was thinking, "Up until half an hour ago, I'd never even asked a justice question, I don't have any priorities *[laughs]*." And I thought to myself, "If somebody who loves me rings me now, like my mum, and goes, "How are you getting on?", I think I am just literally going to cry. Because the pressure felt so crazy and insurmountable. But then, you sort of somehow just have to adjust and wriggle your way into this new shape of the life that you now have to lead *[laughs]*.

**CH: And what was the support like from the department? You said your private office was lovely, but how did they cope with the joint minister aspect of it?**

**CD:** Yeah, that worked actually quite well. Because I ended up working in six different government departments in total – if you count the Government Equalities Office as a department – with seven different bosses, it's only later on, when your private office isn't working very well, that you realise how lucky you are if you move into a private office that works well. And they'd set it up cleverly, so I had a private secretary, and then I had an assistant private secretary for each bit of the portfolio. So, I had somebody that had come over from the Government Equalities Office, and she knew the GEO, and later, actually, when I was in the Department for Education alongside the women and equalities role, she became my senior private secretary. And she was excellent, because she knew the GEO aspect of the role. The rest of my team were an MoJ team. So, that worked out well. And I had a brilliant private secretary called Ben, who was my first one, and actually, just because of other reasons, had a sympathy to the GEO portfolio too, so that was helpful. He wasn't tunnel vision MoJ. He was a very smart guy. And so, that actually was fine.

I mean, I came from a business background, so I would probably have settled in better initially in a business department. Or, I represent a constituency where virtually all our employment is in the defence industry, so the MoD [Ministry of Defence] may have been a better fit *[laughs]*. But there we are. Here I was, and you just had to make the best of it. And there were bits which I had no understanding of how they worked up until that point. So, for example I was responsible for coroners – for the coronial system – which is literally a law unto itself, and things like burials and bereavement and cremations and all sorts of crazy things. You look for areas where you feel that you have got some form of personal experience that you could bring to bear on it. So, for example, the family justice system; I'd gotten divorced, I had experienced that, so I thought, "Well, here's a starter for ten, I'd really like to bring in some form of no-fault divorce, so we don't have to conjure up in our mind thousands of reasons why our ex-husband or ex-wife is a dreadful person in order to get the law changed." So, you bring your own personal experience to bear on the portfolio in order to make things better. I was really interested to see that female offenders were different from the sort of prisons portfolio which, up until then and ever since I think, have all been lumped together. There are so many differences with womens' prisons and the female offender. So, it made a lot of sense really.

**Paeony Tingay (PT):** So then, as part of your women and equalities brief, you helped to introduce the gender pay gap regulations. How did you engage with stakeholders to implement that?

**CD:** I spoke to a lot of businesses. I did tonnes and tonnes of business roundtables. And that particular role [in women and equalities], first I did it with justice, then I did it jointly with education, and the engagement was really, really strong. And it basically appeared that it [the gender pay gap regulations] had been kept back as a reserved piece of the original legislation from the Equalities Act, and it could be compelled. At the time, it was sort of a voluntary thing, but clearly only the businesses that were doing the right thing gave their gender pay gap details voluntarily, and those that had no mentoring schemes and no positive pipeline to encourage their female staff to achieve the best of themselves, were not going to be declaring their gender pay gap. So, that's when it became apparent that we needed to trigger the compulsory aspect of that.

**CH:** We'll come back to some of the specific roles you held but, as you say, you worked as junior minister in six departments, if we include the Government Equalities Office, and you were in some of those roles for less than a year. Do any of the conversations you had when you were moved particularly stand out to you, in terms of whether there was logic? Or did you feel frustrated when you were moved again?

**CD:** Yeah. So, there was an element of logic, I think, to the first role, even though it slightly escaped me when I first heard about it. And then I guess my reputation became one of emotional intelligence, but also being able to fulfil a brief and get stuff done, because I came from that business background. And so moving into the Department for Education with the direct instruction that you need to deliver the 30 hours' free childcare commitment, that made a lot of sense. And that was great, I really enjoyed that.

Then the prime minister changed, there was a reshuffle, and I almost feel like they forgot me. I mean, I think I was probably the name that fell off the board, because I think I was the last person to be given a job. And they moved me into the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), which made no sense because it did not, in any way, lend itself to my skill set. By background I am an entrepreneur and a business owner. I can take a brief and I can deliver on it. I am a communicator; I can go out there into the wider population and sell government policy to stakeholders and to the wider population. I am really good at bringing people with us and communicating the vision.

But what I am not good at is those painstakingly detailed pieces of policy wonkery which require endless meetings with officials and poring over government legislation – all that kind of real nitty gritty, logistical stuff. And suddenly, the DWP role gave me an entire portfolio of the stuff I was rubbish at, and I think none of the stuff I was any good at. In literally six months I think I spoke at a public event once and I never had any sort of real engagement with the wider population. It was all kind of sitting around tables with government officials, trying to work through changes to the housing system or the child maintenance system. It made literally no sense to me, and I was utterly miserable for six months. And it was really, really complicated. And then, the first day that I really felt that I'd got my head around the portfolio – I'll never forget it – was in January 2018 and it was a debate in Westminster Hall about the impact of Universal Credit on the private rented sector. So, a little bit niche. And it was the first time in six months that I'd actually done a debate where I felt like, "Yeah, okay, I've got this now, I've got my head around this, and

I think I could probably answer any question that comes from around the room.” And literally in the middle of that debate I got a WhatsApp message saying, “As soon as you’ve finished this meeting, can you go straight to Number 10?” And that was when I got reshuffled into the Department of Health. So, most bizarre!

**CH: And what were the secretaries of state like, in terms of helping you to acclimatise? David Gauke was the secretary of state when you were in DWP. Did he understand the position you were in?**

**CD:** Yeah, David Gauke was a really good boss. He was really, really good, and he was really collaborative. And we met twice a week as a ministerial team. We would meet on a Monday and again later on in the week. He kept us up to speed on all of his thinking and he involved us in the running of the department. So we all had a good understanding of everybody else’s portfolio, which is really important in an area like DWP, because the benefits system is all so intertwined. He was actually a really, really good boss, and not all of my bosses were such team players, as collaborative, and as good at explaining what they wanted to achieve.

One [of the secretaries of state] in particular, I literally never had a one-to-one meeting with them until about six months into the role. And I never got any kind of steer as to what it was that they wanted me to be working on in particular, so I just basically did my own thing. Another of my bosses would sort of largely let me get on with doing my own thing and then, just at the point something was getting exciting and ready to be unleashed upon the general public, they’d then take it [as their own], and I would get none of the credit or excitement for any of the good stuff. So, I’ve had a real mixed bag. I’ve had some bosses that really micromanaged what I was doing and didn’t really give ministers any autonomy or ability to make their own decisions or judgements. And I’ve had others that were really excellent at delegating and trusting and allowing ministers to really understand their own portfolios and drive the changes that were needed.

**CH: What were the roles that you felt you had the most impact in? And why?**

**CD:** When I became the minister of state in the Department of Health, it was utterly terrifying because the portfolio was gigantic and really hard, but actually there was the most scope to make really positive changes. And certainly, at least one of the secretaries of state that I worked with was really, really good at delegating and trusting and allowing ministers to take ownership of their portfolios, to really sort of drive what was needed, trusting them to have that understanding of their own field of expertise and to really get inside it, and trusting their judgement. And I think you really need that as a minister, to be able to drive changes. And so, that would be the department where I felt like I really was able to sometimes challenge the recommendations that were coming from officials, and sometimes push for more and for better, and certainly break down some of the barriers between government departments as well, which can be a massive silo problem.

**PT: So, you were the first person to become minister of state rather than parliamentary-under secretary of state for social care, and that was also when the Department of Health became the Department for Health and Social Care. What did that mean in terms of the role and your responsibilities?**

**CD:** Well, I think it was the first time that there was this recognition by the government that this [social care] is one of the biggest challenges as a nation that we face: how we live up to the challenges of an aging population, a population that is living longer with much more complex health needs. And the whole sector is in crisis point, and successive governments have tried and failed to address it, because there is no silver bullet for how to deal with the issues that it presents, without it being ever so expensive. And so I think it was a very brave recognition of the fact that it needed extra emphasis and focus from the government.

**CH: And what did that mean in practice? Were you given quite a bit of time to actually get to grips with it and to, as it were, create a portfolio? Or, because there was so much attention on it, was there actually quite a lot of control from your secretaries of state, and even from Number 10?**

**CD:** So, I had two secretaries of state that I worked with in the Department of Health and Social Care, both of them really keen to try and find a solution, both of them very open-minded as to what that solution should be. Both of them were really keen that I got inside the, sort of, mind of the problem. We had an advisory group for adult social care which involved some really big people like Andrew Dilnot and tonnes of others who had experience of the sector from a whole range of different perspectives, from professional insurance companies through to geriatricians etc. And so I spent a lot of time speaking to them as a group, but also individually, to get inside the issues and to start to build recommendations. But the problem we had was, of course, that the Department of Health and Social Care can come up with a solution, but then that solution has to be backed by both the Treasury and Number 10, and there are no solutions to the challenges of adult social care that do not require both huge political bravery and a lot of money. And so, during the time that I was there, we were never able to get it over the finish line.

**CH: And was your time at DHSC [the Department for Health and Social Care] dominated by the green paper that you were working on there, because there were quite a few delays to that?**

**CD:** Yeah, we had a green paper that was ready to go and was much more in depth in terms of, not just changes to the way the system is funded, but fundamental changes to the system that were needed to be able to improve how it works. The whole system is broken, not just skint; it's broken, and the changes need to be systemic. Anyway, the paper that was eventually delivered was wildly different from the one that I was working on.

**CH: And how much of a crossover did you have with the 'Health' part of the department? Obviously health and social care are very much intertwined.**

**CD:** Yeah, so my portfolio covered health and social care. My portfolio covered things like patient safety, so I was responsible for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians [which supports workers to speak up about issues they face] – I was actually just literally on a call with



them a minute ago. I covered things like learning disabilities, autism, and other disabilities. So I covered things like the Transforming Care programme, which focused on how we support adults with learning disabilities in an inpatient setting. I covered things like dementia. And I covered community healthcare as well at one stage. So I had a massive portfolio.

**CH: Yeah, I was going to ask about working with MHCLG [the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government] and local authorities, as well. What were those relationships like?**

**CD:** Yeah, so we worked very collaboratively with MHCLG, because with social care, obviously the policy comes out of the Department of Health, but quite a lot of the delivery happens at the local authority level. And so, depending on the issues that we had at hand, I had quite a lot of meetings with my counterparts in MHCLG, and it was really important to work collaboratively with them. And at various times we did have different views as to the scale of the problem and how to solve it.

**CH: You said a minute ago that you didn't manage to solve the social care crisis when you were there but, when Boris Johnson came in as prime minister, he did talk quite a lot about social care. Did that give the whole thing an extra kickstart – a sort of renewed impetus – or were you still stuck on the same issues?**

**CD:** Yeah, it did feel when Boris came in that there was a renewed focus on actually getting something delivered. It felt very much like it was stuck before. But then, of course, we went straight into the wranglings over Brexit, so it felt like there was no capacity within Number 10 and the Treasury to be able to think about anything outside of that. And so, it felt like it was in stasis again.

**CH: And you left DHSC just before the pandemic and Helen Whately took over your role. Did you talk to her at all about any of the issues she would be facing? And in any of your other ministerial roles, did you either talk to those who took over from you, or talk to people you'd just taken over from?**

**CD:** Yes, this is interesting. So, 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. Sometimes the civil servants that you work with will not necessarily tell you everything, because there are some things that they don't really want to be brought back to the forefront. So, there might be something that your predecessor cared deeply about, but then they move on and they [the civil servants] are like, "Phew, thank God they've gone, let's just put this to the bottom of the pile *[laughs]*."

So, it's really important to know what the burning issues are and who's really good to work with. There are some people who talk a good game but don't really deliver, and there are others who are really shit hot, and you want to be able to make sure you harness their creativity and their abilities. So, those conversations, to me, were absolutely vital. And I was really lucky. When I took over the women and equalities role, Jo Swinson sat down with me for ages. Sam Gyimah sat down with me when I took over from him on education. And Caroline Nokes in DWP. Everybody whose role I took over was generous enough to have that conversation with me. What surprised me, what really surprised me



– it was one of those things that’s never failed to surprise me – is how few people have sought me out when I’ve left a portfolio, to have that same conversation.

**CH: I guess it seems the culture isn’t really there in government, to do that.**

**CD:** To be fair, Helen was one of the people where we did end up having a chat about the role, but it was a very cursory conversation about stuff. Nobody has ever said, “Can I come and ...?” in the same way that I did. I would come along with my little notebook, and I would write everything down [*laughs*], because I just really wanted to start off on the right foot and know what I was dealing with.

**PT: So then, as you mentioned, you left DHSC in February 2020 and joined DCMS as a minister of state, just as the pandemic was kind of kicking off. Could you tell us about your experience helping to secure the Culture Recovery Fund and what it was like dealing with stakeholders in the arts who were obviously very invested in that at the time?**

**CD:** So, you’re right, I left the Department of Health and Social Care the second week of February and I was heartbroken because I felt I had unfinished business, and the trouble is, with the way that the reshuffle system works, you literally don’t even have chance to go back to your old team and say goodbye, or even gather your stuff. Your stuff gets shoved in a box and you’re whisked off in a car to somewhere else. And that’s quite traumatic; it’s a bit like a breakup that you don’t see coming [*laughs*]. And so, although DCMS was always my dream job – it was always the department I wanted to go to – it did take a little bit of time to adjust. Just before I left DHSC, I used to get daily sitreps of what was happening with Covid. I think we had around three cases in the UK on the week that I got reshuffled, and so it wasn’t clear at that time that it was going to be a global pandemic. But very quickly, within a couple of weeks, it became clear that this was accelerating at a rapid rate. So, we started having regular calls with stakeholders to find out what the scale of the challenges was and what the issues were. And it became clear that we needed to work at pace and at scale to bring in some kind of support package, with the overarching theme of making sure that we could preserve as much of our culture and arts through the challenges of the pandemic, so that it would be there on the other side, for people to come back to.

**CH: Did you have a sense of what other departments were doing? The Treasury put the furlough scheme in place within a two-week period. In a sense, you were dealing with similar issues but in specific sectors, so were there opportunities for those kinds of conversations, or was it all too chaotic?**

**CD:** Yeah, it was very chaotic. I think there were quite of a lot of those conversations happening at SpAd [special adviser] level but very much what the Treasury was trying to achieve, I think, was a fairly broad-brush approach. And we had issues within our department for those who were freelancers. So we were then advocating to finesse the Treasury offer in order that more of our sector would be scooped up, who were sort of slipping through the net.

**PT: And what difference did the pandemic make to being a minister and being in government, in terms of how you worked and that kind of thing?**

**CD:** Yeah, it was fairly hellish because there were a very large number of my officials that I was working really closely with, meeting in some cases every day, or every other day, or once or twice a week, who I'd never actually met in real life. Some of them I never met until a year or eighteen months later. And to meet someone who ... you've seen the inside of their house, you've met their children and their cats as they walked across the computer screen but you don't know how tall they are *[laughs]*, it's difficult, isn't it?

And then it was literally back-to-back meetings. And, at the same time, I was also responsible for online safety, so the Online Safety Bill was coming together. Obviously digital was my portfolio, and so as well as thinking about how we preserved the culture and arts and the creative industries, how we could keep films shooting and what have you, I also had the issue of how everybody was reliant on digital to be able to continue working and learning and being entertained. And we initially had the issue of misinformation going around on the internet that 5G was responsible for Covid, so the Government Disinformation Unit sprung into action, which I was ministerially responsible for. And so, I met with them literally weekly to go through what was happening. And then, of course, we had to look ahead to when there was going to be a vaccine and to make sure that we were kind of pre-empting the inevitable vaccine dis- and misinformation that was going to be going wild on social media, to try and make sure that we were getting ahead of that. So, it was a really crazy role.

And, added into the equation, we then officially left the EU, after the two years of transition period, when suddenly it became apparent that there had been nothing negotiated for touring musicians *[laughs]*. And so, I suddenly had the issue that loads of my performing arts sector, once we'd got through the challenges of coronavirus, wouldn't then be able to tour in the EU. And there were all these issues around cabotage [the right to operate transport services within a particular territory], which I won't trouble you with, and moving instruments, and visas, and all that sort of thing. So, it was quite a manic job *[laughs]*.

**PT: And you mentioned that you had responsibility for the Online Safety Bill when you were in DCMS. Now, out of government, what's it like witnessing that progressing and coming into effect?**

**CD:** Yeah, it's really cool. There were a lot of changes that I'd pushed forward within government that I couldn't deliver because of blockages in other parts of the system which have now been adopted and are now in the bill, so it's really nice to see something that I feel like I meaningfully shaped come into fruition. But there is a little part of me that is quite pleased it's not me having to do the passage of the bill, because it's hellishly complicated and very, very large *[laughs]*.

**CH: And were you in charge of some of the planning for the Jubilee as well?**

**CD:** Yeah, that was mine as well. That was sad, feeling that I'd done a lot to bring it forward and yet wasn't invited to any of the Jubilee celebrations, or Festival 2022. All of these came under my portfolio, and you play a meaningful role in taking them forward on their

journey, but then you don't get involved in actually seeing any of it come to fruition, other than tuning in on the telly, which was lovely.

**PT: Now, to move to some general reflections on your time in government, what did you notice about governing with a majority, so 2015 – 2017 and 2019 – 2021, compared to a minority governments, so 2017 – 2019?**

**CD:** So, the big thing I noticed is that there is often a lag in civil service thinking as to how you deliver business. I don't know if anyone has mentioned this to you before. So, when I moved into the Department for Work and Pensions, which was after we suddenly didn't have a majority anymore, officials would say, "Oh, we'll use a statutory instrument to deliver this". And I would say, "You can't do that now because we haven't got the majority *[laughs]*." And it was like, "Oh, this does not compute, we don't understand how this works." And so, I'd have to encourage people to come up with new and imaginative ways to actually do things without needing legislation, and to think whether legislation was actually necessary. Because I think we've kind of got a little bit lazy: we weren't looking for a work around, we'd just whack through a bit of legislation.

And then, bizarrely, once we had a majority again, we were then stuck in the mindset of not having one. So, when we were looking at bills, officials would say to me, "Oh, we need a concession strategy in order to get this bill through". And I'd say, "No, we've got a majority of 80, we don't need a concession strategy, we just need to make the bill as good as it can possibly be, so that people don't have any reasons to table amendments *[laughs]*." Do you know what I mean? So, it was like we had a satellite delay in the civil service as to what the political environment was like, in order for them to deliver stuff.

**PT: And you talked about the secretaries of state that you worked under but, as a minister, you also worked under three prime ministers: Cameron, May and Johnson. How much did you, as a junior minister, notice the different ways in which they led their governments, and their styles of leadership etc.?**

**CD:** Okay. So, when I first became an education minister, we had to deliver the 30 hours' free childcare, and it was delayed because of the EU referendum and then the change of prime minister. There was a three-month delay on this piece of legislation. The legislation had gone through with 30 hours' free childcare on the face of the bill, but nothing had actually started in terms of delivery. And so, I got brought in as the minister responsible for this, and the very first thing I had to do was to try and get a decision from Number 10 as to whether they wanted to go ahead and deliver this to the timeline or whether they wanted to delay it by a year. So, I'd literally been in the job a week, two weeks, and I got dispatched off to Number 10 to go and meet Theresa May, as prime minister. And I was surprised, because the prime minister's office had changed from when David Cameron was prime minister. It was a sofa, and you'd sit there, and you'd have a little chat, and his civil servants and special advisers and what have you would be around, and he'd ask questions, and they'd ask questions, and then three or four days later you'd get a response once they'd considered their thoughts on what you were pitching.

With Theresa May, when I walked into the office, it had changed. The sofas had gone, there was a board table, and Theresa May sat at the end. She had a few advisers and what have you sitting around it. I'd made my pitch with the various options. They asked their questions. She then came in and she asked her questions, and they were exactly the

sorts of questions you would want a prime minister to ask. She got to the root of the problem and expressed them really articulately and I thought, “Oh, this is really impressive”. And then, without any other consultation with the other people at the table, she went, “Okay, I’ve made up my mind. You can go ahead with this. We will get this rolled out straight away.” So, I went back to my office, and my office went, “Oh, when are we going to hear?” And I said, “No, we’ve heard, we can go ahead”, and they were flabbergasted. They couldn’t understand how I’d managed to get the go-ahead straight away from the mouth of the prime minister.

So, we cracked on and we delivered the policy. And I went out and about and I consulted with a load of stakeholders, because initially there was a real fear that we weren’t going to be able to deliver this policy because it was unworkable in the format that it was. But fast forward about three or four months, and I’d come up with a list of five things that we needed to change in order to get the policy rolled out and in order to get the sector to buy into it. Because, in order to deliver 30 hours’ free childcare, you need to get childcare providers who are willing to do it. And there were five things that needed to be changed in order to do that.

And we wrote to Number 10 setting out what those five things were, and that was sometime in January, and in very early March, I was due to be speaking at a big event at Olympia to stakeholders from across the sector; hundreds and hundreds and people. And by that stage I had still not had sign-off for these five things that needed to change. So, something changed between the early part of the May administration, where I got immediate sign-off for something that I wanted to do, and six or seven months later, when suddenly it was taking five weeks to get anything out of Number 10. The blob of bureaucracy had somehow built around the prime minister, and you couldn’t get an urgent decision, to the extent that I was on my way up in an elevator with a bodyguard – this huge bodyguard who’d been appointed because there were these people who were ready to riot at Olympia – into this room full of hundreds of stakeholders, who were all sitting there with their arms folded, looking furious about to scream and shout at me, with five versions of the same speech in my handbag because I still hadn’t had the final sign-off. And then suddenly, just as I was about to get onto the lectern, we got the call from Number 10 to say, “Yes, you can go ahead and announce all five things.” So, by the time I’d finished the speech, I got a standing ovation, but it did nothing for my blood pressure *[laughs]*. And you thought to yourself, “What changed within government that we went from being able to make fast, rapid, sensible decisions to this ... blancmange.”

And I noticed a similar thing come up in the most recent administration, around Boris Johnson, in that I just literally couldn’t get anything signed off. I was responsible for so many arm’s length bodies and national galleries and museums and what have you. And we would have people that had gone through the interview process, and we wanted to be signed off as the new chair or the new chief executive, and I just couldn’t get it through Number 10. And in some cases, we had brilliant people who had applied to do the job but, by the time we’d eventually got them signed off by Number 10, they’d given up the will to live and had taken a different job. So, we ended up losing out on some really good people.

**PT:** Something we're looking at, at the moment, is the support provided to ministers by their private office etc. What was your general impression of what you received as a minister, over the different departments?

**CH:** Also, are there any changes that you felt frustrated about at the time?

**CD:** Yeah, so, I have thoughts on this. You will be surprised to know I have thoughts on this *[laughs]*! So, my first private office was excellent, and I didn't understand that you don't miraculously, suddenly have a perfect private office, until I moved into a government department where the department wasn't expecting me. So I was suddenly an additional minister that they weren't expecting, and they had to pull together a private secretary and a private office. Only one of them had ever had experience of private office before. And it was an absolute disaster *[laughs]*, to the extent that, about two or three weeks in, I was dispatched off to go to a roundtable event, where I was told it would be about twelve people in a room, and I had half an A4 sheet of paper with a few speaking notes on. And I was told that it would be a private meeting, about twelve people, on a roundtable, informal.

I got there and it was about 400 - 500 people in a room, with a lectern, people with their iPhones filming it because it was quite a political event. And I was two to three weeks into the portfolio, so I didn't know the portfolio, but I ended up having to make up a speech using my little half a page of speaking notes *[laughs]*. And god knows what happened but apparently it went alright. So, I just think some magic happened on that one occasion. I was blessed, but that was stressful. And then I got home that night – it was a Thursday – and I'd picked up my kid from school and I fed him and I got him to bed and I was in the bath and it was maybe nine thirty at night and I had my full constituency day planned as an MP the following day and I got a message to say, "Oh, we've bugged up your diary: you're duty minister tomorrow. You have to be in parliament by half past nine." And I had a kid that I had to get to school, and I had a full constituency day, and I literally just sat there in the bath and I sobbed. Because I just thought, "I've got this job which is really high pressure, I don't understand it, I've got to get my head around it, and today I've been thrown into this situation where I had to sort of fight to stop myself being nationally ridiculed, and then suddenly I've now got to somehow figure out how I'm going to be in central London by nine thirty tomorrow morning, bearing in mind that it's a good two-and-a-half hour commute from my constituency." It was things like that.

And so, Monday morning, I went in there and I said, "Right, this isn't working, you're not supporting me properly. We need to change how we do things." And I did three things that materially changed the experience, which I think would be helpful for any minister in my position. The first thing is, you kind of really have to get the people you work with to understand that your role is not just as a minister. A minister is not your full-time job. You also have a job as a member of parliament, and in some cases you have a job as a parent. So I invited my entire ministerial team to my constituency for an awayday, and we had a policy day where we would sort of go through all the things that we wanted to achieve – the low hanging fruit – and all the things that we thought we could tackle together. We did that from my house in Gosport.

But the point of doing it was that they got to commute, and they got to see how long it took to travel on the train from Waterloo to Portsmouth Harbour, then on a ferry from Portsmouth Harbour to Gosport, and then on foot from there to my house, so they could

get their head around the fact that my role was not just as a minister, that I actually had other responsibilities as well. That was really important. We also produced a document which we used for any kind of engagement that I was doing, which set out: what you expect Caroline to do, how long you expect her to speak for, who is going, how many people are going to be in the audience, whether it will be a stage, whether there will be a lectern, what side of the stage you would like her to enter from. All these sorts of details that actually mean that, before you walk into a room, you've got a visual idea of what's expected of you ... will there be questions at the end? Do you know what I mean? So you're able to do your job a lot more professionally. Yeah, so, that was a real eye opener for me, about how you build your private office and how you construct it in a way that's going to support you to do the job properly.

**CH: Just moving to the end of your time as a minister then, you left government in the September 2021 reshuffle. Had you been expecting that? What was the experience like?**

**CD:** Yeah, I was expecting it, because I was invited into Number 10 last summer [2021] and I was asked what I wanted to do next, and, to be honest with you, I was done. I'd done six-and-a-half years, six government departments, seven different bosses. I knew that my job, as it was, was going to be changing because we were one minister over in the department, and I just didn't have the energy to start again. Because as I said, it takes six months to learn a new portfolio, and I just didn't have the heart for it again. And I was knackered. I would have stayed on doing the same portfolio in the same role, but I told them I didn't want another sideways move, so I effectively opted myself out of another reshuffle. So, I was probably the one person who was expecting that phone call *[laughs]*.

**CH: Would you go back, though, if you got another opportunity? Is it just a question of taking a breather, or is it more now that you've been there, done that?**

**CD:** It would very much depend on the offer and on the role, I think, yeah.

**CH: Now outside of government, you are chair of the APPG [All-Party Parliamentary Group] for carers and a member of the Women and Equalities Select Committee, so carrying on some of your ministerial briefs in parliament, as it were. What's that like? How does having been a minister help? What is your experience of what you can achieve in parliament?**

**CD:** Yeah, it's so much better being a backbencher MP once you've been a minister, because it really gives you so much more insight into how you get things done, and where the pressure points are. There has not been a single day – so far, touch wood – not one second where I've regretted the decision to go back to the backbenches for a bit. And yeah, it really, really helps having been a minister, to understand how the whole system works, because it's just such an unfathomable system.

**CH: Is there any particular achievement from your time in office that you're most proud of?**

**CD:** I suppose the thing that I am most proud of was [introducing] the mandatory training for all health and care staff on learning disabilities and autism. And it's now finally got royal assent. It's actually happening. It's already changing people's experiences and it's potentially saving lives. And it was something that I had to push from day one. It was



literally just a recommendation in the LeDeR report [an annual report into the lives and deaths of people with a learning disability]. I got massive pushback from both the medical profession and civil servants doing it, and not only did I do it but I extended it to autism, because it was originally just for learning disabilities. I am so pleased I did, because it took an enormous amount of political energy, but it potentially could save lives. And that's what you have to hold onto when you do these roles, which can be so thankless *[laughs]*, that literally sometimes you can change lives.

I got the ball rolling on the adult social care white paper, I did a lot of the work on the Online Safety Bill, put through the gender pay gap legislation, started the ball rolling on no fault divorce as a justice minister, and delivered 30 hours' free childcare. And equally the Carers Action Plan, which was when I discovered that government departments work utterly in silos, which was another eye opener for me.

**CH: Could you tell us a bit more about that?**

**CD:** So, I inherited the Carers Action Plan. I came into Health in January 2018, and, with the benefit of experience, you say, "Right, what is it that's coming up?", so that you don't get any nasty surprises. They said, "Oh, the Carers Action Plan". And I said, "Can I have a look at it?" They said it was only in draft form at the moment, and I said, "Just let me take it home over the weekend and feed in". So, I came back after the weekend and they said, "What did you think?". And I said, "Well, I understand that it's not finished, but there is nothing in it about young carers". And they said, "No, no, that's not us, that's not the Department of Health, that's the Department for Education". And I said, "Okay, well, there is nothing in it about carers' leave, carers taking time out of work for caring". And they said "That wouldn't be us, that would be BEIS". "Okay, well there is nothing in here about carers' benefits and carers' allowance." "That wouldn't be us, that would be the Department for Work and Pensions."

And we went on in this vein, and I said, "You can't possibly expect me to publish a Carers Action Plan that literally only talks about the bit that the Department of Health and Social Care is responsible for. This is madness." And they said, "Well, we haven't been able to get any buy-in from any of the other government departments". And so, I literally sat there and I WhatsApped my corresponding minister in every government department, and within a week I'd set up a meeting of us all, and I got them all to sign up to this Carers Action Plan. So, it was published, I think, three or four weeks later than scheduled, but it was co-signed by seven different government departments. And it was a piece of work that we could all put our name to. Can you imagine me standing up in parliament and trying to deliver a Carers Action Plan that had nothing about any of the things I've just mentioned? I mean, it was just madness. And that, for me, demonstrates how government departments work in silos and sometimes don't make any effort at all to break down those barriers.

**CH: Okay, final question: do you have any advice for new or future ministers, anything that you would have done differently, or anything you did that you think new ministers should know about?**

**CD:** Yeah. So, speaking to the person that's done the job before you, is a no brainer for me. I can't understand why more people don't do it.



It would be really, really useful, I think, if there was more training for new ministers on how to do the job properly. I think so many people just take what they're told at face value and don't challenge it, don't question it, and you wouldn't run a business that way. I actually re-wrote every speech I was ever given, because you need to kind of re-interpret them so that you're speaking human. And so many of the things you are given to say are not written by anybody who has ever had to stand up and actually say something of that kind in front of a room full of humans. And had I delivered some of the speeches that I was given as they were, sometimes I don't think I'd have left the room alive *[laughs]*. So, being cantankerous and questioning, and looking for alternative ways to deliver something that you're told you can't do, I think, are all really important. While they make you a very difficult human being, they actually make you quite a decent minister.

One other thing: the people I worked with in my private office and within the different government departments ... I worked with some incredibly talented people, who know so much and who care so deeply about their work. And I think building those relationships, making sure everybody feels valued, making sure you bring the best out of everyone, that is so important as well. You're building your team and so making sure that the team feels that you appreciate them, I think, is fundamental to being a good minister.

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