



Driving delivery

Making a policy announcement is just the beginning – it is important that ministers also monitor implementation to make sure policies are delivered on time and achieve their intended outcomes.

Ministers can drive delivery by being effective leaders, energising civil servants and delivery officials to get 'buy in' for their vision and providing political cover for policy change to MPs and the media. The attention of a minister on a specific area is a powerful tool for driving action. But there are also some concrete mechanisms ministers have at their disposal to ensure progress towards their objectives:

1. Check in regularly on the progress made towards your priorities

Ministers have wide-ranging portfolios, so it is essential that you choose a few priority areas that you want to make progress towards. Some of these might be manifesto commitments. And some secretaries of state, who cannot be across the whole departmental brief, might use delegation letters to make clear which member of the ministerial team should track the delivery of certain policies.

Once you have an idea of your priorities, check in regularly on progress – by routinely monitoring delivery you can shape the rhythm of the department's work. Some check-ins should be relatively frequent: weekly or fortnightly, depending on the policy area and the frequency with which data is updated or decisions need to be made. Think about how the different priorities interact with each other, with other policy areas and with the work of other departments and ministers across government. You may also want to hold monthly or quarterly 'stocktakes' to take a more strategic view of delivery.

2. Decide which format for tracking delivery works for you

Ministers tend to carry out their regular check-ins through some combination of written briefings, meetings, or other tools. These check-ins help to understand progress towards individual projects, or across the department, and make routine decisions.

Here are some examples of previous ministers' approaches:

- A six-page weekly delivery note summarising the ongoing and upcoming work of the department, with regularly updated statistics and an option to get a follow-up note on certain areas
- A 10-page tracker covering updates on 50 policies, to provide a briefing ahead of the weekly departmental meeting
- A Gantt chart tracking the top 40 items in the department, including specific tasks and timetables, and updates from each junior minister, to structure the weekly departmental meeting
- Weekly meetings on each priority area with relevant officials from the department and arm's-length bodies
- 'Show and tell' sessions with project teams to help ministers understand the trade-offs of decisions and to allow honest discussion

There are many different ways to check in on progress – you should reflect on which methods work for you and speak to your officials if you would like to iterate your approach.

3. Establish regular stocktakes to take a strategic approach to delivery

Delivery units in the UK and other countries have used 'stocktakes' – often on a quarterly basis – to monitor implementation of overarching priorities. These are a useful forum to oversee delivery at a strategic level, beyond the day-to-day decisions that need to be taken on a specific project, as they can help to identify wider barriers to delivery and solve problems. They can also be used to inform reporting to No10 or to prepare for questions and scrutiny from the centre. These stocktakes are often used to track progress towards targets, where these have been set.

Stocktakes can also be a tool to hold ministers and senior officials to account for progress towards their policy areas. Some former secretaries of state have held monthly or two-monthly meetings with each of their junior ministers to go through their portfolios and assess a RAG rating of progress in each area.

4. Work out what information you want to monitor

As well as the format of your progress meetings, you also need to choose which indicators of progress are most important. Tell your private office what information you need, and how – and how often – you want to receive it. If you aren't sure, ask for advice from delivery experts within the department or elsewhere.

You might work with policy and delivery teams to establish measurable metrics or key performance indicators (KPIs) – while being aware of [the risks involved in setting targets](#). If data is particularly important, then decide who should help you to review it – as minister for health, [John Denham](#) used to include statistics experts and hospital managers in fortnightly meetings, rather than asking just policy officials to report back.

Getting the right castlist for these meetings is very important – work out who you trust and whose insights you value. Some ministers also use regular visits to frontline services to see first-hand how policies are being implemented.

5. Set out clear actions and deadlines

Using the information you regularly receive, you should set out specific tasks and the timetable for delivering them. As a minister [John Penrose](#) held short, weekly meetings with project teams where they would report on what they were supposed to have achieved in the previous week and what they aimed to achieve in the coming week. You should explicitly agree actions at the end of each meeting, so everyone knows what they need to focus on ahead of the next meeting.

These check-in meetings can be useful to quickly make decisions to help overcome problems and iterate effectively. Make clear to officials that you would like to hear about problems delaying delivery, particularly if there are persistent challenges – you may need to revise the timetable, or work with senior officials to ensure the department has the capacity to deliver your objectives.



“When you have a meeting, you outline what your views are, what you want, the timescale in which you want it, and that you expect an interim report from the private secretary by a certain date. Then it will happen. But if you don’t do those things it won’t.”

Michael Heseltine
Deputy prime minister (1995-97)

6. Use your private office to follow up

Ministers can't be everywhere at once, so you can use your private office to act on your behalf to chase up on the actions you have agreed. Make clear to them what you want to achieve, and why, so they can communicate this with the department. They will need strong working relationships with those responsible for implementation.

You should also think about how the structure of your private office can support the delivery of your objectives – talk to your private secretary about the pros and cons of different options. Each private secretary may be responsible for monitoring progress towards the policies they oversee, or there may be benefits to assigning one private secretary to oversee implementation across the entire portfolio. Some ministers have set up a delivery unit in their private office – though [IfG research](#) has shown that to make this a success ministers need to be clear about what they want to achieve from such a unit and make sure it is focused on a small number of priorities.



“If you have a good private office, they should day to day be kicking the tyres on all of those plans and chasing down your to-do list when you’ve not heard back from officials and things are taking longer than you expect.”

Justine Greening

Secretary of state for international development (2012–16)

Questions to ask yourself

- How often do you want to be updated about how your priorities are being delivered?
- Which are the key sources of information you need to understand the level of progress made towards your priorities?
- Which implementation decisions do you want to oversee yourself and which do you want to delegate to others?
- How will you ensure the department has the capacity to deliver your priorities on time and to a high quality?

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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