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Ministerial leadership of public service reform

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About this report

Public services shape people's everyday experiences of the state. While successive governments have promised reform across public services, delivering sustained improvement has often proved difficult. For ministers today, charged with leading ambitious reform agendas, the task can feel daunting – particularly as much of the delivery of these reforms takes place on the front line, at arm's length from ministers themselves.

But ministers play a critical role. Even in a fragmented delivery landscape, there are specific things that only ministers can do and choices only they can make.

Drawing on studies of successful public service reform, and interviews with former ministers and officials, this report explores what effective leadership looks like in public service reform, and the lessons this holds for current and future ministers.

This paper is part of a package of IfG Academy resources designed to support ministers and their teams.

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Introduction

When Labour took office in 2024, most public services were performing worse than at the start of the 2019 parliament, and substantially worse than in 2010.[1] Each public service faces its own challenges, but many had reached crisis point. The prime minister, Sir Keir Starmer, has said that his government is highly focused on delivering for the public by implementing reforms across a range of public services.

For individual ministers charged with delivering reform of public services, the task can feel daunting, particularly when they are under pressure to both deliver better services for the public and make efficiency savings. This is especially so when, as in most areas of public services, the problems and attempts to fix them are not new. Today's ministers face contemporary fiscal and political challenges, but there is also much crossover in the type of work they are trying to do, and the goals they are trying to achieve, with ministers who have come before.

Successive governments have promised reform in different sectors, but not all have achieved meaningful change. Adult social care is an obvious example.[2] Nearly 30 years since Tony Blair established the Sutherland Commission into adult social care, and after more than 20 subsequent reviews,[3] Starmer has established another independent commission into adult social care, which is not expected to report until 2028, meaning that substantial change is unlikely to come in this parliament.

But there are plenty of examples of successful reforms in public services from which today's ministers can learn lessons as they tackle new challenges. These include the Sure Start programme, which the last Labour government introduced in 1999. This brought together a range of services – including child care, health and social services – to improve the outcomes of pre-school children and support families in the most deprived areas of England.[4] Another example is the creation of Universal Credit, which brought together multiple benefits into one payment, thereby streamlining the welfare system and improving support for millions of people.

Current ministers can learn from past examples to better understand their role

This report explores five case studies of former ministers who have each attempted to drive through reform in public services. Desk-based research, alongside interviews and discussions with the ministers and those who worked closely with them at the time, either in government or in delivery bodies, have informed this research. Using the five case studies, we have pulled out key insights in the form of four lessons that have relevance for ministers today.

Nick Gibb served as minister for schools in the Department for Education from 2010 to 2012 and then returned to the department in 2014. While he spearheaded a range of reforms to improve standards in schools in England, he is perhaps best known for his focus on the 'synthetic phonics' method of teaching reading. Responding to

evidence that England's reading performance had declined relative to international peers during the 2000s, Gibb believed that phonics should be the central method for teaching children to read. To test how well this was working in schools, he introduced the **phonics screening test**, which assesses pupils' ability to decode words using phonics. This was backed by statutory requirements for schools to teach a programme of systematic synthetic phonics and supported by targeted government resources. Drawing on extensive preparation in opposition, close engagement with evidence and experts, and strong political backing from senior ministers, Gibb moved quickly to implement the policy after the 2010 general election. The phonic screening test was piloted in 2011 and rolled out fully in 2012. Over time, the proportion of pupils meeting the expected standard increased substantially – although it has dropped slightly for disadvantaged students in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic[5] – and performance in phonics was positively associated with later international literacy outcomes.[6] This marks the reform as a durable and measurable shift in early reading instruction in England.

As work and pensions secretary, **Iain Duncan Smith** sought to address what he saw as fundamental flaws in the working-age benefits system, which by the 2000s had become highly fragmented and difficult for both claimants and administrators to navigate. His central reform objective was to create a single working-age benefit to incentivise work and consolidate existing support, and as secretary of state he announced **Universal Credit** in 2010.* While the policy framework was established early in the parliament (2010–15), the programme encountered significant delivery problems in its initial years, including critical external reviews and instability in programme leadership.

The reform was turned around through a shift in approach from 2013, when ministers adopted a 'test and learn' model and worked with a multidisciplinary team in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Government Digital Service to build a new digital system. Alongside this, the department pursued a 'twin-track' strategy, continuing to operate and expand the original live service while iteratively developing a digital platform. Duncan Smith focused on providing sustained political cover, securing funding across Whitehall and overseeing the project roll-out. In 2015, research showed that after nine months, Universal Credit claimants were more likely to have been in work than people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance.[7] After a roll-out of the full digital service to a small number of job centres, it began to roll out nationally from May 2016. Since Duncan Smith left the government, all 10 of his successors – including Liz Kendall and Pat McFadden under the current Labour government – have supported the roll-out of Universal Credit and the roll-out is due to complete this year. The robustness of the system was shown during the Covid pandemic when DWP successfully processed millions of new claims, including a peak of 135,900 claims in a single day on 27 March 2020.[8] This cemented it as a lasting reform of the welfare system.

* A fuller account of the story of Universal Credit can be found in a recent IfG report, see Timmins N, *From Disaster to Completion: the 15-year story of Universal Credit*, Institute for Government, 2026 [URL PENDING]

In June 2007, the prime minister, Gordon Brown, appointed **Jacqui Smith** as home secretary. One of the reasons Brown brought her into the Home Office was to drive forward delivery on the **Neighbourhood Policing programme**. Launched in 2004, the programme aimed to deliver a neighbourhood policing team in every neighbourhood in England and Wales by 2008, to address the public's low levels of confidence in the policing system. Even though rates of serious crime had been falling steadily since the mid-1990s, the signs of local crime, disorder and antisocial behaviour led many to believe that crime was rising in their local areas. While chief constables implemented the programme on the ground, the Home Office supported the roll-out through the provision of financial support and by monitoring performance. The programme was already well under way when Smith entered the department in 2007 but there was still a challenge ahead to oversee its completion and meet the 2008 roll-out target. Smith worked collaboratively with police chiefs to keep momentum on implementation and concentrated focus on one, single target, which measured public confidence in policing.

Smith successfully met the national roll-out target – of 3,600 neighbourhood policing teams across the 43 police forces in England and Wales by 2008. Although the coalition government scrapped Smith's single target when it came to power in 2010, the programme has had a lasting influence on the present Labour government, which announced a Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee to restore confidence in policing by ensuring named and contactable officers for every neighbourhood and guaranteed police patrols.

As the sole Liberal Democrat minister in the Department of Health (now the Department of Health and Social Care), having been appointed minister of state for care and support in 2012, **Norman Lamb** worked to raise awareness of mental health within the health system and challenged the imbalance between mental health care and physical care. The coalition government had started to make some progress on this and published a cross-government mental health outcomes strategy called 'No Health Without Mental Health' in 2011.[9] This included explicit reference to mental health in the Health and Social Care Act 2012.[10] The government wanted to ensure 'parity of esteem' between mental and physical health, ensuring equal access to care and resources and equal outcomes. Lamb, coming into the role, knew from first-hand experience, from listening to the experiences of his constituents and from shadowing the health portfolio for four years, that health services often overlooked mental health care. Mental health care lacked investment and resources compared with physical health care, which meant that people faced barriers to accessing it and, in some cases, experienced poor-quality treatment.

There are multiple reasons why it is difficult to achieve 'parity of esteem' between mental health and physical health services, some of which are specific to the NHS, including funding and incentives.[11] To address one of these, Lamb introduced the first **waiting-time and access standards for mental health services**. Before this, non-medical consultant-led mental health services were exempt from the NHS target that people should have treatment within 18 weeks of referral. Lamb wanted to use the standards to improve the quality of mental health waiting-time data (which was not collected at the time), make the problem more politically visible and thereby

incentivise commissioners to allocate funding towards mental health. Lamb knew that waiting-time standards already existed in the NHS for physical health, such as waiting-time standards for accident and emergency (A&E), elective care and cancer treatment. He saw that waiting-time standards were a language that the NHS could understand and use to allocate and prioritise funding. He designed the mental health waiting-time standards to mirror these – for example, the standard that people who receive a diagnosis of psychosis for the first time should be treated within two weeks mirrored the timeframe for some cancer waiting-time standards.

The standards were announced at the 2014 Liberal Democrats party conference and introduced fully in April 2016. Since their introduction, the waiting-time standards for talking therapies and early intervention in psychosis services have been met consistently.[12] And more broadly, spending on mental health trusts has grown more quickly than spending on other parts of the NHS.[13] The principle of waiting-time standards, and the creation of an accompanying data infrastructure, helped ensure a legacy that would last beyond Lamb's individual policy approach. The waiting-time standards were also an important foundation for the Mental Health Investment Standard, which protects mental health funding and which Wes Streeting, the secretary of state for health and social care, recently recommitted the government to.[14]

The **Sure Start programme** is an example of public service reform that many Labour MPs and ministers today view as a key success from the last time the party was in power. In 1998, the Labour government's review of early childhood found that investment in health and social development and integrated provision of services could improve a child's life chances.[15] In response, the government designed the Sure Start programme to create family centres in the most deprived areas of England, to provide integrated child care, health and social services to new parents and their children. A ministerial steering group at the centre of government, chaired by **Tessa Jowell** as minister for public health, oversaw the programme. As minister for children from 2005 to 2009, **Beverley Hughes** was also responsible for overseeing the expansion of the Sure Start children's centres across England.

By April 2010, more than 3,500 Sure Start children's centres had opened across England and studies found that the programme notably improved children's education and health outcomes.[16] But in 2011, the coalition government removed the programme's ring-fenced funding, which led to the closure of hundreds of centres as spending on statutory, acute services crowded out more universal preventative spending.[17] The current Labour government's Best Start programme takes inspiration from Sure Start and aims to rebuild family services to create 'best start family hubs', which will bring together professionals from health and education, nurseries, schools, libraries and community groups.[18]

Each of these case studies involves different ministers with their own approaches and leadership styles. Our interviewees credited Jacqui Smith and Iain Duncan Smith as showing leadership by not trying to run everything themselves and understanding, although not necessarily immediately, how to be effective in "steering" rather than "riding" the whole agenda. Nick Gibb had what one interviewee described as a

"disrupter" style – on entering government he was clear about what he wanted to achieve and was aware that he could not assume things would happen without him pushing things along. Tessa Jowell was one of several ministers involved in Sure Start but was noted for her passion and the considerable amount of time she dedicated to the programme, which helped drive action across government.[19] Meanwhile, our interviewees knew Norman Lamb as someone who was a "master" of getting the best out of people, and was able to make people feel safe, secure and valued to get the most out of them.

This report recognises the different contexts in which reform can be tackled, as well as alternative styles that ministers will bring to their roles. But it also identifies common approaches that previous ministers have found to be effective in successfully managing reform projects in public services.

By understanding the specific challenges in reforming public services, ministers are better prepared

Ministers across government departments are tasked with delivering different policy reform agendas: this government has launched reform programmes across a wide array of services, including prisons, local government, the NHS, the police, schools and courts.[20] There are some similarities in how they can best approach this. But ministers should recognise the particular challenges involved in reform of public services.

Many public services – such as the NHS, schools and welfare – are highly visible and central to daily public life. The public cares a lot about how these services are run[21] and, when asked, will say that they are under-performing and in need of both funding and reform.[22] But ministers tasked with reform do not necessarily have access to substantial new resources to invest in public services, and reform in large and complex public services is challenging. The Labour backbench rebellion in summer 2025 over proposed cuts to personal independence payments illustrates both the practical and political risks of reform in a policy area that is central to the lives of the public – MPs' constituents.

Public service reforms can be harder for ministers to sell both publicly and across government, because their benefits are unlikely to be seen within a parliamentary or spending review cycle. While some changes, such as restricting who can claim certain benefits, can be felt quickly, improvements in health or education outcomes may take a decade or more. The incentives built into the political system, however, favour quick wins that are visible and measurable, making it harder to pursue deeper, preventative reforms that improve productivity and reduce acute demand over time.[23]

Structural barriers often compound these challenges for ministers. Departments' siloed working can make cross-government working difficult. Poor co-ordination between services creates inefficiencies and frustration for the public, and makes it difficult for those in government, designing policy, to see the interconnected effects of different policies.[24] Ministers must work collaboratively to deliver integrated reform. The current government has sought to address structural barriers to reform through new initiatives, including its five 'missions' for national renewal, continuing Places

for Growth (an initiative of the previous government that will see more civil service jobs moved out of London), bringing together civil servants from across some of the missions and continuing various place-based reform pilots.[25] But the current system and ways of working in Whitehall can still make reform hard to achieve.

The way public services are delivered at the front line adds another layer of complexity for ministers pursuing public service reform. Most services are implemented at arm's length from central government. The police and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) are operationally independent, NHS England (currently) oversees health care, which is run by regional integrated care boards, much of DWP delivery happens in job centres, teachers teach the curriculum in schools, and local authorities oversee and often run Sure Start children's centres.

This government has been explicit about wanting to devolve powers to local areas as a principle of public service reform, but ministers often instinctively pull control to the centre – exemplified by recent announcements that there will be greater central control of the NHS and the police.[26] To deliver reform effectively, ministers need to have a good understanding of the delivery and stakeholder landscape, and ensure they are set up to navigate relationships with key people in these organisations well.

Ministers play an important leadership role in a fragmented delivery landscape

The fragmented landscape of public services means that reform is the work of many people, at all levels of government. While there are calls, including from within government, for further decentralisation of public services, ministers still play an outsized role in deciding and defining what happens in public services, and how those services function. So while ministers are only one part of the picture, there are some things that only ministers can do to help push forward reform. Recognising the unique role that ministers play and the perspective they can bring into their role is an important first step.

As constituency representatives, ministers have a direct link to the front line of public services – and the experiences of service users – that officials in central government do not necessarily share. Ministers can bring this on-the-ground knowledge into government, providing important colour and depth to understanding of the issues for which they are responsible.

As well as their connections with the outside world, many ministers who have been effective at driving change in public services have been those who have a personal commitment to and passion for the issue on which they are working. This can come from many places, such as personal experience with a service, working on a policy area in opposition or previous professional experience – for example, in the NHS or local government. Ministers can build on their own experience to become recognised as leaders of and powerful advocates for change, personally associated with certain reforms.

Any government reform will depend on the work of thousands of people in many organisations. Engagement with different stakeholder groups and delivery organisations so that central government can learn from and be guided by those on the front line is therefore essential. Engaging with front-line staff, backbench MPs, other ministers and the general public also provides opportunities for ministers to keep making the case for the reforms they are working on.

Ministers, therefore, have a unique position within government to drive change. There is no specific formula that can be applied to all contexts, and policy success is about more than what ministers can achieve alone. But there are useful lessons that ministers can learn about how they approach their role to drive forward the change they want to see. By combining their on-the-ground understanding, their personal commitment and their public advocacy, ministers can create the conditions for reforms to happen.

The rest of this report sets out four lessons, supported by the insights from the case studies, for how ministers can make the most of their position to approach public service reform:

1. A clear and consistent vision for reform guides action throughout the system.

2. Strong relationships inside and outside government help ministers achieve their goals.

3. Using the right tools helps to embed change.

4. Continuously championing reforms builds support among MPs, the public and the wider sector.

3^2+3 / 1^2 / $4^2+1+500\times4$
What's On?
Child
Day

Lesson 1: A clear and consistent vision for reform guides action throughout the system

Effective reform of public services requires multiple aspects of government and delivery organisations to align, so that everything is moving in the same direction. This requires having the right policies and the right resources in place, but also, crucially, the ability of ministers to clearly articulate their priorities for reform to their departmental officials and to the wider sector. The unique role that ministers can play is to translate political ambition into a unifying purpose – explaining 'the why', not just 'the what' – which can guide decisions through every level of the system.

Consistency matters too. Public service reform typically takes place over several years, and across multiple spending review cycles. In the process of delivering a programme, ministers may find they have to change some of the detail of delivery, and plans will develop over time. When goals are unclear or frequently change, ministers risk losing control and credibility. When this happens, momentum on delivery can easily dissipate across the system. Having a consistent goal front of mind – to improve the standards of teaching in schools – helped Nick Gibb to effectively communicate his vision of reform to his officials and advisers. Interviewees described him as a minister who had real courage of his convictions and who "stuck to his guns". Gibb's relentless focus on his vision to improve school standards and his predictability were effective in getting the civil service to understand and internalise his mission. Gibb's team could anticipate what his perspective on something would be, right down to the precise language and terminology their minister wanted them to use. For instance, officials knew that Gibb wanted to avoid using terminology such as 'learner', preferring instead 'pupil'.

Time in opposition can be used to develop serious policy ideas

Potential ministers have the opportunity in opposition to spend time developing knowledge and expertise of their brief, which will help them later in government. Forming and refining policy ideas in opposition means that, on entering government, ministers already have a clear idea of what they want to achieve and a plan for how they will do so.

Gibb was clear on his priority and vision for reform as minister for schools from the outset. Having shadowed his government post in opposition, as shadow minister for schools for five years, Gibb built a deep understanding of the schools system and an excellent knowledge of his brief. He had also served for several years on the education select committee, during which time he had contributed to a report that set out the case for the use of phonics in primary education.[1] This meant that, on entering ministerial office, he was able to hit the ground running with already formed strong views. Gibb knew that he wanted to focus on school standards, with a particular focus on how children learn to read. He was so focused on this aim that he told officials that

he wanted to continue working specifically on schools rather than ever move post or be promoted to secretary of state in the department. While an interviewee told us that some trade union leaders thought that Gibb's behaviour was "obsessive" at first, they grew to respect his focus as a sign of a passionate minister. Having this clear goal front of mind from the outset meant that Gibb was effective at ensuring all those around him knew what reform he wanted to achieve.

Like Gibb, Iain Duncan Smith spent years developing his vision for reform of the benefits system in opposition before he became secretary of state for work and pensions in 2010. As director of the Centre for Social Justice in 2007, Duncan Smith commissioned the *Dynamic Benefits* report, which advocated for a simplification of the benefits system to better support people into work.[2] This report formed the basis of what ultimately became Universal Credit, the new benefits system that consolidated six means-tested benefits for working-age people spread across different parts of the system into a single working-age benefit. Duncan Smith's detailed knowledge of the welfare system and his clear vision for how it should be reformed meant that, on entering government, he could – like Gibb – hit the ground running and operate effectively to drive reform.

The examples of Gibb and Duncan Smith show the value of ministers being clear in their own minds about the priorities they want to achieve in post. Spending time in opposition developing ideas will ensure that ministers can be effective at delivering reform early on in their ministerial career. Having a clear vision will, in turn, help ministers to articulate their goals to the civil servants in their department.

Alternatively, ministers can use their first few months in office to develop their proposals

Other ministers will be less clear about what they want to achieve when they enter office, or be placed into a ministerial role they have not shadowed. This means they will need to spend their first few months developing their priorities. Direction may come directly from the prime minister, or from the relevant secretary of state if they are a junior minister, or the minister may need to spend some time developing their own goals.

Like Nick Gibb and Iain Duncan Smith, Norman Lamb had a strong understanding of his brief as minister for care and support, having served as the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for health before entering government. Interviewees told us that he also had good, pre-existing relationships with stakeholders and charities from the sector, many of whom welcomed his appointment to the post and regarded him as a "known quantity". In fact, Lamb had already been identified within the sector as an MP who had shown an interest in mental health and spoken about it in parliament. But Lamb had not articulated a specific project to focus on when he started. Civil servants who worked with him closely recalled how it took time for them to work out what Lamb's main priority was.

As Lamb settled into the role, it became clear to civil servants that he was most exercised about the issue of mental health, in particular access to and the quality of mental health care. He developed some of his ideas for reform after attending Jeremy Hunt's Monday morning meetings, when the secretary of state for health ran through his priorities, including asking for updates on the waiting times for A&E and elective care treatment. In addition to Lamb and Hunt's other ministers in attendance, these meetings included special advisers and NHS England representatives. The meetings made Lamb question why there was not an equivalent meeting and equivalent standards for mental health and this brought home to him the imbalance between mental health and physical health – particularly as these meetings drove decisions about where funding went to.

Alongside these meetings, discussions with his special adviser helped Lamb identify what he wanted to focus on. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 had legislated for "parity of esteem" between physical and mental health, but this was a long way from becoming a reality. Through discussions with his adviser, Lamb identified achieving parity of esteem as his overarching objective, and identified waiting-time standards for mental health services as a way of getting there.

Lamb drew on his constituency experience to make the case for these reforms. His local mental health trust was under strain, and he would talk about stories from his constituents in government meetings. Lamb's passion also derived from his personal experience of poor mental health in his family. Our interviewees observed that Lamb never leaned too heavily on his personal story and always approached mental health from a civic and political lens first – he saw better treatment for people with mental health problems as something that chimed with Liberal Democrat values, and he shared this view with the then deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg. Nonetheless, his first-hand experience lent him credibility and gave him a "leg up" with stakeholders. Lamb's passion, combined with his strategic focus on the clear goal of mental health care standards that he eventually developed, meant that he was effective at inspiring and motivating civil servants to support him in delivering his priorities. Interviewees told us that because of this, his team understood that he was "a man on a mission" with "a real sense of burning injustice". This shows how a clear sense of purpose can be useful to ensure a minister's private office, and wider team, are aligned on their priorities and are better able to work collectively towards achieving them.

These cases show the importance of ministers setting out their priorities clearly early on. They also show that ministers who have developed their priorities from existing knowledge, expertise or personal passion are often better able to make powerful cases for reform and build credibility with the sector from the start.

Other ministers have their goals set for them, but still need to be clear about what this means for how they approach the role

Both Norman Lamb and Nick Gibb had the freedom to choose their own priorities for their role. But other ministers will step into post where the policy agenda has largely been defined for them. Where reforms are already in motion, an incoming minister's role might be to shepherd the reforms and oversee projects to completion. In such cases, ministers will have less control over the overall vision for reform, but they still need to be clear about what the objectives are and communicate them to others.

When Jacqui Smith became home secretary in 2007, she was given a letter from the then prime minister, Gordon Brown, which outlined his priorities for Smith in the role. The vision for reform had been determined for her, and she was brought into the department to deliver it. Before this, Smith had been the government's chief whip and therefore did not have existing relationships with, or expert knowledge of, the policing system, whereas Gibb and Lamb had existing relationships in and knowledge of their respective fields. Reflecting on her ministerial career, she told the Institute for Government: "I never thought I would become home secretary. I asked for a different job actually."[3]

The Neighbourhood Policing programme was already well under way in the Home Office when Smith began her role. It had launched nationally in 2004 and was due to be fully implemented by 2008. By the time Smith was appointed home secretary, the programme was in the later stages of development – our interviewees described it as "about 60% implemented, but the other 40% was critical". Smith's task was to sustain the roll-out of the programme and carry it over the line. She reaffirmed her commitment to the programme and to the target of having a neighbourhood policing team in every area in England and Wales – a total of 3,600 teams – by March 2008. Smith introduced accountability mechanisms, such as weekly meetings with police chiefs, to ensure they were implementing the programme. As minister she was able to keep up momentum on the programme, and the target was met successfully.

But setting up the neighbourhood policing teams was only the first step of the programme. After meeting the implementation target, Smith made it clear that she was committed to delivering the full ambition behind the policy and embedding neighbourhood policing in practice. Those we interviewed said that the 2008 policing green paper[4] was a key moment when Smith signalled that the government was serious about making a success of the programme and understood the barriers that police forces were facing. In it, Smith confirmed that the ring-fenced funding for neighbourhood policing teams would be maintained for the following three years to provide greater security and stability to the policy. To reduce bureaucracy, she stripped back an array of inherited top-down targets for the police, instead focusing on retaining one top-down numerical target, which measured public confidence in policing. Using data from the British Crime Survey, which asked people whether they thought the police were dealing with crime and antisocial behaviour issues that mattered locally, Smith worked with police forces to negotiate tailored local targets for

public confidence levels. The government expected to see a "significant improvement" on each local area's baseline confidence level over the following three years.[5] Smith homed in on this single target as her focus, which enabled her to manage her priorities effectively and drive change.

These cases show that, regardless of whether ministers are starting from scratch, like Lamb and Gibb, or picking up an agenda that is already in train, like Smith, they need to work out their priorities, clearly communicate them to others and set out how they will approach their role, as we set out below. This will help them focus their efforts.

A clear, and consistent, articulation of priorities helps ministers drive action through the system

Ministers have a lot of responsibilities to juggle when they begin a new post. They will be faced with submissions and correspondence that require their response, while also needing to get to grips with how their new department functions. The team around them, including their private office, special advisers and some staff from across the wider department will be trying to work out what the minister's priorities are, and where they can put their effort to be most effective. In this context, it is important for ministers to be clear in their own minds of the priorities they want to achieve. This will be drawn from their higher-level vision but should have a narrower focus. Ministers setting out clearly defined priorities, including how they will measure success, and communicating these effectively to the wider department, helps ensure that there is a consistent message and that everyone is pulling in the same direction. It also allows the department to focus its efforts on implementing the minister's objectives, and to feel motivated by a shared mission.

Having a well-defined focus on streamlining and improving digital access to the welfare system enabled Iain Duncan Smith to express his priorities to the civil service effectively and bring staff on board. Those we spoke to said that Duncan Smith had a real ability to take complicated ideas and distil them down to short, simple summaries that captured the more technical point of view. They observed, as one interviewee put it, that Duncan Smith's commitment to "seeing everything through the lens of Universal Credit" showed his "unwavering commitment" to the goal.

Not only does having a set of clear priorities enable ministers to communicate effectively with departmental officials, it also helps them to communicate their plans to the wider sector and the general public. Jacqui Smith successfully articulated her focus on the single target measuring public confidence in policing to the sector. The police chiefs at the time wanted their home secretary to, as one interviewee put it, be able to "convert their wish list and communicate it effectively" without encroaching on police operational independence. Smith successfully struck this balance as she developed strong, positive relationships with police chiefs while also managing to complete the roll-out of the Neighbourhood Policing programme. To signal to the wider public that neighbourhood policing was a priority for the department, the Home Office used poster advertising campaigns, which summarised the department's core policies, including neighbourhood policing.

Prioritisation is particularly important when funding is tight, which is the case for current ministers, and will continue to be so for as long as the UK's fiscal position remains constrained. Front-line providers such as councils, schools and NHS trusts are experiencing a lot of competing pressures, including requirements that central government has placed on them. Front-line providers facing funding constraints are having to make their own trade-offs and are, understandably, likely to focus on the most urgent, acute problems if they do not have a clear sense that their department or ministers want them to focus elsewhere.

Once ministers have set this foundation and are clear in their own minds of their role and priorities, they can think about the wider context of relationships around them. They need to ensure that their relationships across government, with their immediate team and with stakeholders in the sector, are set up to support them.

Notice board
As quick as a flash.
in the blink of an eye.

Lesson 2: Strong relationships inside and outside government help ministers achieve their goals

Having established clear objectives and a sense of direction, the next crucial step for ministers is to ensure they have a team around them that can help to nurture the relationships that will enable them to deliver on their goals. Effective delivery of public service reform relies heavily on a minister's ability to cultivate and manage key relationships across a web of different actors, including their private office and special advisers, the prime minister and the Treasury, other ministers and their departments, arm's length bodies and front-line delivery partners. The strength and quality of these relationships, and a minister's ability to secure buy-in through them, can determine whether reform is successful or not.

Ministers cannot deliver without the right relationships in place

Securing reform in public services is particularly tricky for ministers sitting in central government, due to delivery often sitting at arm's length. Whether this is in the NHS, schools, policing or local authorities, change is easier to drive forward if front-line leaders trust that those making decisions in central government understand the challenges of delivery, and value their role in the system. Having good relationships does not mean avoiding difficult conversations or scrutiny; ministers will ultimately have to take some hard decisions. But good relationships help to ensure that the whole system has a shared understanding of aims and can more easily work together to pursue them. Jacqui Smith highlighted the importance of this in her Ministers Reflect interview with the Institute for Government:

> **"The strength of relationships and the messages sent by leaders about their priorities is more important than I first realised. I almost wish that someone had said to me right at the start that relationships are fundamental to effective leadership."**[1]

As parliamentary secretary in the Cabinet Office in 2024–25, Georgia Gould was leading work on a "new era" of partnership between central and local government. Gould came to Westminster from her role as leader of Camden Council, where she championed a mission-driven approach to the council's work. This approach focused on building partnerships with residents to develop plans to tackle some deep-rooted and complex problems, such as the lack of affordable housing and the cost of living. On entering government, Gould was keen to bring in this partnership style of working, having seen first-hand how it worked in local government and recognising the benefits of working with "passionate committed innovators" in public services.[2] Gould was also able to bring in her own experience, and frustrations, of working in local government and highlighted the need for central government to foster a new approach in its engagement with local government as a partner.

Alongside Gould, in the Cabinet Office, Pat McFadden was leading the work on implementing a 'test, learn and grow' culture across Whitehall, part of which was intended to bring in stakeholders to work alongside civil servants and develop new ways of working. This work, led by the Cabinet Office at the start of the new Labour government, showed a real understanding that in order for the government to successfully reform public services, it needs to be able to reach out, and partner with those in the public services and local government involved in delivery. This work also showed an understanding from within government that public services are delivered on the front line, so while ministers have an important role in stewarding reforms, it is ultimately front-line staff who deliver reform, and so need to be part of the process.

But since then, both Gould and McFadden have moved on to other departments. Josh Simons, who temporarily covered the brief in the Cabinet Office, launched the government's 'test, learn and grow network' in December 2025,[3] but has since left government. Building a culture of partnership working across government will take sustained effort from leaders. But despite the current government's strong move in this direction, some of the key advocates for this approach are now in other roles. There is a risk that this weakens the signal across government that this is an approach that ministers should be pursuing.

Some ministers of course will bring in their own, pre-existing relationships with the sector into government. This can shortcut some of the initial work, and might enable these ministers to leverage credibility with the sector. Both Norman Lamb and Beverley Hughes had expertise and pre-existing relationships within the relevant policy networks – Lamb from his work with mental health charities and time in opposition as health spokesperson, and Hughes as a former lecturer on social work. This was reflected in Lamb's approach as minister, as he identified and worked closely with key senior figures in professional organisations including the Royal College of Psychiatrists and with other organisations within the sector to progress reform. Lamb was able to use, as one interviewee called it, his "personal cache" and skill at building networks so that he could ring people up and ask: "If we had the money, what should we be doing?" The support of his special adviser, Emily Frith, was also fundamental in building and maintaining Lamb's relationships with the sector. The open engagement and trust he was able to build meant he and his team were able to more freely test policy ideas and support for their plans with the sector. This engagement helped to lock in backing for Lamb's agenda. It also helped him to ensure change would last beyond his time in office: he was instrumental in setting up the Mental Health Taskforce,[4] which brought together public bodies such as NHS England and a range of mental health sector organisations to set out the NHS's five-year plan for mental health in England.[5]

But it was also Lamb's authenticity that helped him engage with the sector during his time as minister of state for care and support. He continued, in government, to be a campaigner for mental health and said in his Ministers Reflect interview with the Institute for Government: "I saw myself as an advocate for mental health in government rather than the government advocate dealing with mental health."[6] In practice, this meant he was both working in government to achieve change and championing that change, but also willing to say to the sector when he thought things

needed to change, not to just defend the status quo. The result was the sector felt that Lamb was someone they could work with, rather than against. This open relationship helped to stave off potential issues, including in one instance that an interviewee told us about when the charity Mind had produced research showing the link between face-down restraint in inpatient units and patient deaths. This was a highly sensitive issue and Mind had coverage lined up to go public with the findings. It took this to Lamb first, and he agreed to publicly commit a government response to the findings. The report was then launched on the *Today* programme on BBC Radio 4, which airs in the morning and, by lunchtime, Lamb was on the *World at One* programme (also on BBC Radio 4) committing the government to ending face-down restraint and ordering a specific investigation into its use.[7] The open relationship meant he could get on the front foot and avoid a destabilising scandal.

With or without pre-existing relationships, ministers will have to maintain existing relationships or build new ones when in office. Ministers should keep up regular dialogue with key high-level stakeholders. This was one of the strengths of Jacqui Smith's approach, particularly in recognising that her role was to keep the roll-out of the Neighbourhood Policing programme on track. Policing in the UK is operationally independent from the government, so while the home secretary has responsibility for policing, the roll-out of policy such as the Neighbourhood Policing policy is ultimately in the hands of the 43 individual police chiefs across England and Wales. Smith worked with the police chiefs to negotiate the streamlining of multiple targets into a single target, in response to their feedback that there were too many targets. The single target was to improve public confidence that local crime and community safety priorities were being identified and addressed based on the government's public service agreement for the Home Office. Interviewees commended Smith for her collaborative approach to the negotiations, which one interviewee described as akin to a brainstorming session, which signalled that Smith was open to ideas and working with police chiefs on getting the roll-out right.

Keeping the centre of government on side is essential

The people and institutions at the centre of government are another key set of stakeholders that ministers need to secure buy-in from for large-scale reform – especially if it is controversial, cross-cutting or comes with a hefty price tag.

If the prime minister articulates that a particular area of reform is a priority, this provides political cover, and importantly can ensure individual ministers have the authority to reach across other areas of government. Jacqui Smith benefited from both an established relationship with Gordon Brown, having been chief whip before becoming home secretary, and knowing that neighbourhood policing was a priority for both Tony Blair and Brown – successive prime ministers at the time.

However, not all ministers will have such a clear steer, in which case it is important for them to show how their plans align with the government's priorities. Norman Lamb, who benefited from a close relationship with the then deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg, as his former parliamentary private secretary, still had to convince Clegg's office that mental health was a worthwhile priority. He was able to do this in part by

linking reform in this area to the Liberal Democrat value of fairness and highlighting the cost of mental ill health to the economy. That Emily Frith, Lamb's special adviser, also worked in Clegg's office, helped him make the case to Clegg. He also tried to align his agenda with the priority of Jeremy Hunt, the health department's secretary of state, relating to patient safety. Clegg's support ultimately helped Lamb to get investment from the Treasury and Hunt's support was useful for keeping a focus on implementation. Meanwhile, Lamb's relationship with Simon Stevens, then chief executive of NHS England, was essential for getting the NHS behind his plans.

Ministers will also need to build relationships with the Treasury – as the decision maker on spending, the Treasury is a key player in all areas of government policy.[8] Sure Start had a cross-departmental budget, the Children's Fund, which was allocated £425 million between 1999 and 2002.[9] Early support from the Treasury was crucial to the success of Sure Start and its ability to innovate and effect change across Whitehall. Sure Start also benefited heavily from the support of Gordon Brown as chancellor and then prime minister: his support ensured the programme was renewed when he became prime minister, despite evaluations showing mixed effects in the short term.[10] As part of the 1998 comprehensive spending review, Tessa Jowell chaired the ministerial steering group for the cross-departmental review of early years provision, supported by Treasury officials.[11] She was a strong advocate for Sure Start in the group and worked well with Norman Glass, who was the Treasury lead of the officials' steering group. As Philip Hammond commented during his Ministers Reflect interview with the Institute for Government:

> **"Ministers in all spending departments will have marks on their furniture where they've kicked something because they got a message saying the Treasury doesn't like this, and they will have said: 'What the **** has it got to do with the Treasury?' And the answer is 'everything'."**[12]

Former ministers have talked about the importance of being able to speak the Treasury's language, to show you are serious and credible.[13] Iain Duncan Smith's support for Universal Credit in cross-government forums was crucial to ensure the cabinet first approved the programme. There were challenges from the Treasury, where the then chancellor, George Osborne, wanted DWP to make cuts and senior officials were sceptical about the affordability of implementing Universal Credit. Duncan Smith had worked with his special adviser, Philippa Stroud, for a number of years and she was able to negotiate with the chancellor's chief economic adviser and the minister for government policy to secure investment. Duncan Smith also actively engaged with the rest of the 'quad', which was the decision making body for the coalition government, comprised of the prime minister, the deputy prime minister, the chancellor and the chief secretary to the Treasury, to ensure their support. Duncan Smith's active engagement with the Liberal Democrat members of the quad – Nick Clegg, deputy prime minister, and Danny Alexander, chief secretary to the Treasury – was important. Liberal Democrat support for Universal Credit proved crucial. In particular, Alexander's support as a Treasury minister was vital when Universal Credit hit issues with its roll-out later on.

Not every minister will have close relationships with the Treasury officials shadowing their department, but understanding how the department works, when to push back against demands and when to leverage their analysis will be important decisions for any minister.

A minister's team must be set up to support their objectives

Delivering reform is a team effort and ministers need to think about how they can best organise and use those around them to achieve their goals. Ministers are supported by a private office, the department's policy teams and, in some cases, delivery-orientated civil servants. Special advisers also support secretaries of state. Private office staff usually stay in place from one minister to the next, while a minister's special advisers are part of the team that usually they have selected and the advisers can follow them as they move around. Special advisers play a distinct but complementary role, acting as political translators and helping secretaries of state to align departmental activity with wider government strategy and political priorities. The most effective departments ensure that private offices, senior civil servants and special advisers each know their distinctive roles, but are able to work together as a coherent team, rather than competing, to support ministers.

Ministers often come into government without having thought much about how they can set up effective ways of working with the team around them and they can have mixed experiences. Interviewees noted that Norman Lamb had a good relationship with his private office; he created a team spirit that an interviewee described as one such that "people would walk over hot coals for him". Crucially, they also understood him well, which meant they could serve him well as minister. Nick Gibb initially saw his team as playing more of an administrative function. But over time he built up more trust with the civil servants in his team and they were able to take on a more strategic role. The civil service team around Gibb also got better at learning how he worked as time went on.

As ministers come into government, they know they have to deliver, but they do not know the civil servants, and they may not know how long things take or how systems work. Trust is crucial in ensuring ministers and the civil service work together effectively but it can sometimes be hard won and may need to build over time.

While ministers inherit and have little choice over some of the civil servants they work with, they are able to tailor the support they receive and some ministers have brought in new roles to support them on specific issues. Norman Lamb brought in a delivery adviser to his private office, tasked specifically with focusing on delivery and fixing issues that got in the way of that without being tied up in the day-to-day running of the private office. This role worked in part because Lamb gave the adviser a degree of authority, who conveyed to officials the minister's priorities and helped to steer them in the right direction.

EQUALITY FOR MENTAL HEALTH

We, the undersigned, have joined together to mount a cross-party, cross-society campaign aimed at persuading the Government to help reduce the suffering of those with mental ill health by increasing investment into the provision of mental health services.

As ministers make final decisions on the Spending Review, we urge them to treat mental health equally with physical health. We ask for the same right to timely access to evidence-based treatment as those with physical health problems.

We accept, and urge ministers to accept, that this will require additional investment in mental health services. But we are strongly persuaded that sustained investment in mental health services will lead to significant returns for the Exchequer, by reducing the burden on the NHS through the improved wellbeing of our citizens, by helping people to stay in, or get back into work and by helping young people succeed in education.

We note the many comments from ministers and opinion-formers acknowledging the huge cost of mental ill health, not just to individuals and their families, including veterans of our Armed Forces, but to the economy as a whole. Some estimates put this cost as high as £100bn a year, spent on visits to A&E, lost jobs, unemployment benefits, homelessness support, police time and even prison places.

So the economic argument for a new approach is clear. And so is the human and moral argument. Because ministers have also accepted that whatever improvements in attitude may have been made in British society, with a greater understanding and awareness of mental ill health, those who experience it still do not get a fair deal from our health services. In effect, they suffer discrimination in our publicly funded NHS. This must be addressed.

To highlight just 10 of the many concerns we have in this area:

1 People with mental health problems do not enjoy the same access to services and to treatment as those with physical health problems: 75 per cent of children and young people experiencing a mental health problem are thought to not access any treatment. And only 15 per cent of people who might benefit from talking therapies are actually getting such treatment.

2 Until this April there were no maximum waiting times for treatment for mental ill health, and we urge the Government to use the Spending Review to show how these will be implemented and extended to cover all ages and all mental health services.

3 The financial incentives in the NHS discriminate against mental health. As a result, whenever resources are under pressure, mental health is the first to lose out.

4 Too many mentally ill people are being shunted around the country in search of a bed – and with no accommodation for parents or carers – and in some cases children are being admitted to adult wards due to shortages – a practice that would never be tolerated in physical health.

5 Too few people who lose their jobs are having the mental health impact of unemployment taken into account, and so lack treatment that might help get them back into work.

6 Too many children and adults are still ending up in police cells rather than hospital when going through a mental health crisis.

7 Too many people are inappropriately in prison, essentially because they suffer mental ill health or have a learning disability or autism.

8 We remain deeply concerned that people with long-term mental health conditions live on average 20 years less than the general population.

9 It is very troubling that certain ethnic groups, particularly African-Caribbean and African, are under-represented in children's services and over-represented in adult acute mental health services and locked and secure services. People from these backgrounds face more frequent use of coercion, suffer more use of physical restraint, end up in contact with the police more often than others and have less access to talking therapies.

10 Vital research to gain a better understanding of mental illness and to establish the most effective treatments is compromised by inadequate funding. While mental ill health accounts for around 23 per cent of the overall disease burden, it only receives about 5 per cent of research funding.

We acknowledge that progress in awareness and understanding has been made. But this is not being matched by the levels of investment in an area that affects virtually every family in the country. We urge the Government to seize the opportunity to end this historic injustice and commit the investment that will lead to an economically, and socially, stronger Britain.

The signatories

Emma Freud, *broadcaster*

Ian Knott, *rugby player*

Frances O'Grady, *General*

Gordon Strachan, *Manager of*

Lesson 3: Using the right tools helps to embed change

Ministers often reflect that managing vast portfolios presents significant challenges in maintaining oversight and focusing their efforts. Announcing policy or changing legislation is not enough on its own to deliver reform in public services – delivering reform also means creating tangible change in real-world outcomes. Once ministers know what they want to do, they need to turn their focus to facilitating implementation. While ministers may not control many of the operational aspects of public services, they can still drive progress from within government, by ensuring progress is being monitored effectively and accountabilities are clear. Effective monitoring of implementation should also mean ministers are aware of any particular issues for those delivering the policy and doing the work on the ground. Ministers and their team should then be able to look out for where delivery needs extra support. So, once priorities are in place, ministers must maintain momentum with officials in the department and the wider delivery system and ensure they are set up to identify and resolve potential blockages or issues within the system. As Norman Lamb commented in a Ministers Reflect interview with the Institute for Government:

> **"[W]e just monitored it really closely and managed to actually, without being oppressive, to get things happening across the whole country. This focus on implementation, this idea that passing a law or announcing a position achieves nothing unless you actually change behaviour on the ground."**[1]

This can be where support for ministers from officials is important. When Nick Gibb returned to government in 2014 as minister for schools, he made more significant progress in embedding reforms than he did first time round. One reason for this is that he brought in two 'teachers in residence': Robert Peal and Rory Gribbell. They acted essentially as policy advisers and several people who we interviewed who worked with Gibb at the time credited him with providing crucial support on how to embed and systematise the reforms.

Other ministers have taken different strategic approaches to monitoring and implementing their reforms, and we can draw some lessons from these examples.

Ministers need to prioritise and protect the most important work

Governments face pressure from many sources, but successful reform of public services requires ongoing effort, and it is crucial for ministers to provide sustained leadership to keep the system focused.

Part of the challenge is for ministers to be able to communicate their key priorities – as discussed above – and then ensure civil servants remain focused on these priorities rather than getting pulled elsewhere. There are different ways in which ministers can be kept up to date on delivery, but most crucially the format should match the nature

of the priority. A steady drumbeat of monthly meetings can be useful to provide updates as well as the space to consider wider strategy. For example, Jeremy Hunt set out four priorities for his time as secretary of state for health: the NHS, general practice and primary care, patient safety and mental health. He held weekly meetings with officials every Monday on one of the topics, so each team would meet him once a month. This steady schedule helped keep the focus on the priorities while allowing officials time to consider emerging issues that were coming down the track and how they could prepare for them.

Other options for maintaining a focus on delivery include more detailed, weekly updates. For example, Lamb appointed "a brilliant bloke from the Cabinet Office" as his delivery adviser, focused on implementation. The adviser provided Lamb with a weekly update on 12 priority areas. This was clear, concise – just 30–60 words on each one – and accompanied by a red/amber/green (RAG) rating, charting progress from the previous week. Lamb explained that having this dedicated role and his adviser's "ruthless focus on following everything through"[2] freed up time for broader strategic work, rather than another team member getting tied up with the day-to-day running of the private office.

Good relationships between ministers are also essential in maintaining priorities. Nick Gibb benefited from a strong working relationship with Michael Gove as education secretary, developed during their time in opposition. This relationship was particularly important in ensuring Gibb could introduce accountability mechanisms for the delivery of his phonics agenda, since these arguably did not align with the broader agenda of the Department for Education (including academisation), which aimed to give more autonomy to schools. But as Gibb says in his book on lesson reform, which he co-authored with Robert Peal, he and Gove agreed on a vision of "high autonomy, high accountability": they were aligned in their belief that the way to achieve change was "through giving schools the freedom to innovate and devise alternative approaches".[3] A good working relationship with the relevant secretary of state was also important for Norman Lamb's reforms. Jeremy Hunt's support was particularly useful for holding NHS England accountable for delivering the standards and he used his regular Monday meetings to monitor progress.

Sometimes ministers will need to be able to grip the attention of ministers in other departments as well, for which they may need to use more formal mechanisms. Sure Start is an example of a programme where cross-government attention and support were crucial to its success. This meant that those responsible for it in government had to find a way to ensure it was protected and prioritised across government, not just within one department. The scheme had ambitious targets and operated in a complicated policy space looking at "the whole child and whole family". An initial challenge was aligning the different perspectives across government about what Sure Start was for – whether it was primarily about getting the parent and child to bond, or about getting women into work.[4]

While the scheme benefited from Treasury support – having been built up from some initial work by officials there – and had cross-government support from Tessa Jowell, minister for public health and David Blunkett, secretary of state for education, the government still had to align on the key priorities.[5] Without cross-government alignment on the priorities it is much harder to ensure that each part of government is doing what it needs to do to meet the objectives. As well as chairing the early years review for the 1998 comprehensive spending review, Tessa Jowell – who had day-to-day responsibility for the policy – set up and oversaw a ministerial steering group that had oversight of the Sure Start Unit, a new interdepartmental unit based in the Department for Education and Employment. The group brought together several relevant departments every two months, including the Treasury and ministers responsible for health, education and social security, to agree cross-government action on the programme.[6] The group also set the terms of reference and targets for the Sure Start Unit, which itself benefited from the support of both the prime minister and the chancellor.[7] While the group was only one part of Jowell's ministerial role, she dedicated considerable amounts of her time to it and her passion – and the popularity of Sure Start – helped to drive action across government. Unlike other inter-ministerial groups, the steering group had a unique informality and energy, which meant ministers and civil servants were willing to contribute.

To further support cross-departmental working, while Jowell was in the Department of Health, she reported to David Blunkett as secretary of state for education and employment, who represented the policy at cabinet level.[8] In the House of Commons, an innovative arrangement was established whereby questions about Sure Start were tabled for the Department for Education and Employment but the minister for public health answered them.

Effective ministers have strategic oversight of reform, but do not try to solve every problem themselves

Ministers need to strike a careful balance: maintaining oversight of delivery without becoming entangled in the day-to-day detail. This is challenging, but while ministers are accountable for both successes and failures, they cannot perform their role effectively if they are involved in every decision. Ministers can struggle at first with 'what altitude' to operate at. It can be tempting to take over and micro-manage, especially if ministers think that things are not going well. But ministers cannot be over every bit of detail – the system works better when they adopt a higher-level, strategic role.

After the policy and legislative framework for Universal Credit had been established, some of the focus of DWP turned to delivery of the roll-out of the digital service. Iain Duncan Smith still had to retain some focus on building political support for Universal Credit across Whitehall while overseeing the roll-out. He received a weekly note from the Universal Credit programme team but also relied on his minister of state for welfare reform, Lord Freud, to work closely with operational teams. Freud had detailed technical knowledge of the welfare system from his 2007 review and his time as shadow minister and Duncan Smith trusted Freud to oversee some of the detail of the programme, ensuring that the roles complemented each other.

But in order for Duncan Smith to build support across Whitehall, he needed to have a level of understanding of the roll-out of Universal Credit and as secretary of state needed to be involved to some level in resolving some of the issues, in particular in developing the digital service. One way the department managed this was to develop 'show and tell' sessions, which civil servants working on Universal Credit, including operational officials, delivered. These were seen as an effective way for Duncan Smith to better understand progress and the trade-offs of decisions that were being made at the operational level, without needing to be involved in every decision.[9]

Ministers can use accountability mechanisms to ensure the system prioritises reform

Accountability mechanisms – whether formal, such as statutory duties, performance measures and reporting cycles, or informal, such as ministerial attention and pressure – are one of the few levers that ministers can use to keep the entire system pointed in the same direction.

Formal accountability mechanisms can create a shared clarity throughout the system as to how delivery agencies should interpret political priorities. In establishing accountability mechanisms to ensure the improvement of mental health care standards, Norman Lamb took care to strike a delicate balance between driving his vision as a minister from central government while encouraging local services to take up the reforms and implement them from the bottom up. The Mental Health Crisis Care Concordat that Lamb announced in 2014 illustrates this.[10] This concordat was a written agreement that outlined the standards of care that people should expect if they had a mental health crisis. It challenged local services to ensure that beds were always available for people who needed them urgently and that police custody was never used to accommodate people experiencing crisis just because mental health services were unavailable. It was up to organisations such as the police, mental health trusts and paramedics to sign this agreement, but the Department of Health stated the expectation for each locality to agree to the declaration by the end of 2014. In this way, Lamb successfully set the vision of reform from the top but encouraged and entrusted local services to take it up and implement it. Those we interviewed recalled how Lamb would write letters to organisations that had not yet signed the agreement, to apply some pressure, and the organisations that did sign up would receive a letter of thanks from him.

Another example of a formal accountability mechanism is the use of targets, which different governments have used to increase accountability between the government, delivery staff and the public. Governments have used targets extensively over recent decades. For example, the current Labour government has just recently announced a set of targets for policing in England and Wales in a new white paper, which sets out large-scale reform of the policing system.[11]

Lamb used targets to drive reform in NHS mental health services. He introduced the first waiting-time and access standards for mental health services,[12] stating that:

- 75% of people referred for NHS talking therapies (formerly known as 'Improving Access to Psychological Therapies' or IAPT) should be treated within six weeks, with 95% starting treatment within 18 weeks

- more than 50% of people going through their first episode of psychosis should be treated within two weeks.

Lamb and his team were aware that targets can determine where money goes when money is tight. In the NHS, the prioritisation of physical health targets meant that mental health was not receiving the same attention as other areas that had their own targets.

When setting targets, there are many considerations that ministers should take into account, one of which is that ministers need to strike a balance between being ambitious and ensuring they are not setting the system up to fail.[13] The Department of Health seconded a director of mental health at NHS England to work on creating the mental health targets. This helped ensure that learning continued to feed back into how the targets were pursued. For example, one of Lamb's targets was originally about access but evolved into getting treatment, not just getting someone in through the door. The waiting-time standards for talking therapies and early intervention in psychosis services have been met consistently since their introduction.[14] Standards have also improved: the psychosis treatment standard was increased from 50% to 60% by 2020/21. The principle of waiting-time standards for mental health, and the creation of an accompanying data infrastructure, helped ensure a legacy that would last beyond Lamb's individual policy approach.

Targets can be a useful tool, and have been used successfully, but they need to be used strategically. Poorly designed targets can incentivise the pursuit of easy wins over meaningful improvements, or discourage staff from using their professional judgment.[15,16] One of the principles of Sure Start – and followed through in the related targets in the relevant public service agreement – was for the centre of government to define the outcomes, but for local places to have the freedom to use their judgment, and innovate to determine the inputs that would achieve the centrally set outcomes. This was known as a 'tight–loose' design. It was used because it was recognised that although there was a need to have consistent outcomes across programmes, there was variation at the local level that needed to be considered in programme design. In different places taking different approaches, there were also opportunities for places to learn from each other. Those that were doing particularly well on the public service agreement targets were then able to share their methods with others. This approach has been taken since, particularly in local government policy where local variation matters and where natural experimentation means central government can see what works in different places. But the approach requires robust and well-monitored evaluation.

As minister for schools, Nick Gibb benefited from there already being a well-developed accountability system in place in the education system, which he was then able to build on. Gibb created the phonics screening test to assess how well schools were teaching children to read using the phonics approach. This became the phonics check for six-year-olds, which the education department piloted in 300 schools in 2011 and introduced across England from 2012. The test required children to read 40 words (some real and some made up) to their teacher to check their ability to read. As Gibb has noted on his book on lesson reform, the test helped "ensure children were making progress with their phonics and that their schools were teaching phonics correctly".[17]

Gibb pushed for the test and worked with two panels of teachers to design it and set the pass mark. While much of the government's focus in this period was about maximising the autonomy of schools to experiment and find ways to deliver for their communities, freeing them from local authority control, Gibb and Michael Gove were clear that they were directing primary schools on phonics. Gibb explained this seeming contradiction by arguing that "early reading is, quite simply, too important to be left to chance".[18] Gibb was also able to use some more informal mechanisms to build accountability, ensuring that teachers and schools knew that phonics reform was a key priority for him personally. These informal mechanisms are primarily about building relationships and showing that reform is a personal priority. As minister he did a school visit every Thursday, which he had started doing while in opposition. These visits provided a feedback loop between policy and practice; he would observe classrooms and speak with teachers about what was or was not working. These visits were also a way for Gibb to show his own personal commitment, signalling that phonics instruction was a valued priority. When policy announcements in Whitehall and the media can feel far removed from the work of those on the front line, this signalling can be valuable. Over time, the ongoing scrutiny and visibility of Gibb internalised into the education system that phonics mattered and helped to embed it.

However, visits can take up a considerable amount of time, and there is a risk that they become more of a photo opportunity than a tool for learning and accountability. Ministers should be clear about what they want to achieve from visits, whether it is checking on progress, getting a better understanding of delivery challenges or boosting staff morale.

Marva

Lesson 4: Continuously championing reforms builds support among MPs, the public and the wider sector

Once ministers have set out their vision for change, established their team and worked out their accountability mechanisms that will help to implement their priorities, they need to be prepared to champion and defend their reforms to others in the political system and outside of it. Delivering public service reform is rarely a smooth process, and ministers are likely to encounter obstacles and challenges along the way that will cause others to doubt the viability of their plans. As outlined in the introduction, it can also take a long time to see tangible evidence of improvement in public services, which can cause politicians and the public to question whether any progress is being made. In such situations, ministers should stand their ground and continue to make the case for their vision. But they will also need to reassure and convince others that they can make the reforms work and that they are confident in their ability to succeed.

Ministers' unique position can provide political cover for reforms as they develop

Delivering public service reform is a process that requires ongoing ministerial attention and engagement. To ensure that changes are embedded, ministers need to continuously defend their plans and not abandon them when obstacles emerge.

Iain Duncan Smith successfully defended the Universal Credit programme when it came under fire in parliament and from other departments in government. In 2010, DWP set out to transfer eight million households to Universal Credit by 2017. It aimed for Universal Credit to take on all new out-of-work claims from October 2013 and all new in-work claims from April 2014. But the programme faced multiple problems in its early years, including the lack of both IT security and a "coherent and realistic" blueprint for how Universal Credit was to be delivered.[1]

In February 2013, the government's Major Projects Authority took the view that given DWP's lack of progress and capability, the timeline was "clearly unachievable".[2] The programme was paused and the head of the Major Projects Authority was asked to conduct a 13-week 'reset' between February and May 2013. The multidisciplinary reset team included senior officials from DWP, the Cabinet Office, the Treasury and the Government Digital Services (GDS). During this period, staff from GDS began to develop a three-month 'proof of concept' of what a properly digital and much more secure version of Universal Credit would look like.

In November 2013, the decision was finally taken to go with a 'twin-track' approach, which saw the original version of Universal Credit rolled out slowly to the most limited of claimant types, while the new digital service, which used a 'test and learn' approach to creating the new software, was developed. As a result, DWP learnt how claimants reacted to the original version of Universal Credit, and this provided its own 'test and learn' lessons for the full digital service. During this turnaround of Universal Credit, there was strong opposition to the twin-track approach from the Cabinet Office and, for a time, DWP struggled to get its approval for any form of spending. At this point, Duncan Smith's relationship with Danny Alexander as chief secretary to the Treasury was important, as Alexander decided to use his own authority to keep the money flowing.[3]

In the face of these internal government battles and fierce parliamentary criticism as the huge scale of delay became public, Duncan Smith did not waver and he consistently used his political capital to defend the programme and, as one interviewee put it, be its "cheerleader". He justified the delay to the implementation timetable in parliament by arguing that his officials needed time to test the system properly before proceeding. He also actively engaged with, and sought to gain the support of, the 'quad' at the centre of the coalition government. The civil servants in DWP were impressed by Duncan Smith's leadership and appreciated his efforts to "keep the wolves from the door" while they continued with the detailed and operational work of implementation. This shows the particular importance of ministers providing political cover when they wish to apply a test-and-learn approach to public service reform.

In his speech on reform of the state in December 2024, the former chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Pat McFadden, said that the government wants to establish a 'test and learn culture' in government to free up teams to be more honest about delivery, to make mistakes, but ultimately to roll out services that work. There is much the government can learn from Duncan Smith's case about the importance of providing ministerial political cover when applying a test-and-learn approach. Ministers need to be prepared to defend and protect their vision when their plans are being tested, face setbacks and are being adapted accordingly.

Engagement with the wider sector provides useful feedback and can help build support for reform

Providing political cover for a reform does not mean taking a bulldozer approach to the wider sector. One of the reasons for this is that many of the people across the sector will be the government's delivery partners, so it is important to have them on side, but they are also a useful feedback loop and can provide intelligence about how the policy is being felt at the delivery end. Even with good levels of engagement, and taking on feedback, it is not always possible for ministers to have buy-in from across the sector: governments will sometimes have to make difficult decisions in specific contexts that are hard to sell. But successful ministers have found ways to move past difficult relationships and find some common ground.

When Nick Gibb returned to office in the education department in 2014, one of the tasks he had was to "turn down the heat" and rebuild relationships between the department and the teaching sector. While out of office, Gibb had used his time to continue to engage with the sector through visits to schools as part of his role as a board member of a multi-academy trust in the Midlands. During this time, Gibb realised that teachers were feeling frustrated and personally attacked by ministers for the public criticisms of their delivery of the department's policies. He came back in with a new understanding of the "futility of reforming a sector without also trying to win its support".[4]

To build back this support, Gibb set himself new rules to apply to his approach as minister: "always assume good intentions, praise good practice more than criticise bad, find common ground and never talk about 'the blob'".[5] Finding common ground was particularly useful in his interactions with the trade unions, who often have a combative relationship with ministers – from any party. Indeed, those combative relationships played out earlier in Gibb's own career when the deputy general secretary of NASUWT, the teachers' union, described the Education Act 2011 as a "crime against humanity".[6] Gibb instead found, on his return to government, that he could find common ground with trade unions by having a better understanding of their underlying interests – pay and conditions for their members. One union leader later reflected to Gibb that he had become more constructive, and that although they disagreed with his policies, they never doubted his sincerity. Backed by this new approach, Gibb committed to offer a one-year lead-in time to further changes to the curriculum, qualifications or accountability methods. It served his interests to keep momentum on reform while recognising that the underlying interests of teachers and unions were to reduce teacher workload and address concerns over mental health.

Conclusion

Today's ministers are operating in a demanding context. The current government has prioritised delivering for the public, and has put reform of public services in the centre of these plans. The case studies in this report show that ministers have an important role to play – even in a fragmented delivery context – and there are specific things that only they can do. But successful public service reform, as these case studies reveal, is also often contingent and situational. Today's ministers face contemporary challenges, both fiscal and political, but all ministers face challenges, and no minister has full control of the things they may feel they need – such as funding, buy-in or the wider stakeholder landscape – to drive reform. Nor is that desirable for effective government. The government's wider agenda is guiding current ministers. This includes the five 'missions' for national renewal, and the three principles of public service reform – devolution of power from Whitehall, better integration of services at a local level, and a shifting focus towards prevention.

The principles in particular push up against some of the incentives in the system (focusing on short-term wins) and the instincts of ministers, to pull power closer to the centre of government. Ministers should see these constraints as shaping their role, rather than removing their agency.

The skill or effort of individual ministers is not the only thing that drives success. Despite Norman Lamb's personal passion for improving mental health outcomes, his success also depended on the buy-in from Nick Clegg, then the deputy prime minister, support from Jeremy Hunt, as secretary of state for health, and alignment with the leadership of NHS England. Jacqui Smith also benefited from clear direction and buy-in from the then prime minister, Gordon Brown, in the letter he sent outlining his priorities for her role. External factors can open or close the windows of opportunity for ministers: Sure Start benefited from Treasury buy-in and cross-government alignment, while pushback both within government and externally among MPs and the public almost derailed Iain Duncan Smith's reforms. While ministers cannot choose all the conditions they are operating within, they can ensure they understand them and are well set up to navigate them.

This is where ministerial leadership is key, and why the lessons in this report are useful for ministers. While this report does not set out a specific formula for the successful reform of public services, it does outline the approaches that ministers can take to ensure they can navigate the challenges of public service reform and have the best chance of success. These include setting out a clear vision for reform – having a clear set of priorities that can galvanise action within the relevant team and department and, as is often necessary, across government.

Ministers should also ensure that their team is set up to support them – ministers cannot be involved in every action, so their supporting staff and wider team need to be able to communicate and drive forward their minister's priorities even when they are not physically there.

Ministers should ensure they are using effective and appropriate tools for accountability to keep the momentum on reforms up. And they should be ready to defend and champion their plans, while also listening to feedback. The lessons from past cases tell us that effective ministers do not just shape policy, they also shape the conditions that allow reform to be enacted and embedded for the long term. The four lessons in this report show how ministers can leverage their unique position as leaders to ensure all parts of the system are aligned, and pulling in the same direction.

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