

Ministers reflect on the civil service



About the series

Over 10 years, the Institute for Government has interviewed nearly 200 ministers from the UK and devolved governments as part of the Ministers Reflect project.

Being a minister is a job like no other and the interviews provide unique perspectives about what it is like to govern and what those who have done the job wish they knew before entering office. This series builds on the insights and experiences recorded in the archive to provide broader reflections on the key themes that have an impact on government.

This paper draws on these interviews as well as the Institute's extensive body of existing research to examine the relationship between ministers and the civil service. This partnership is fundamental for understanding how government does (and does not) work in the UK. It will be useful to ministers, special advisers and civil servants across government as well as those on the outside who are interested in what this key relationship looks like in practice.

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CABINET OFFICE

70 WHITEHALL



Introduction

"I always found the civil servants, again really, incredibly helpful. They want you to succeed, because if you fail, they fail." – [Hazel Blears](#), *secretary of state for communities and local government (2007–09)*

Ministers need the civil service machine to turn the commitments that they campaigned on into reality, and the civil service needs ministers to provide direction and democratic accountability. This relationship is the foundation of modern government. But the traditional settlement of a joint enterprise between ministers and civil servants has been under strain in recent years. Some tension is healthy, but civil service–ministerial relations have been rocky since 2010,¹ something that successive shocks in the form of Brexit and the Covid pandemic have made worse. While Conservative ministers (not unfairly) have complained about the difficulty of reforming the civil service, other ministers have gone further and attacked the quality of civil servants, who they view as obstructing the work of government as part of the 'blob'. The Labour government, which came to power in July 2024, promised an improved relationship with the civil service but the reset soon turned sour, as reflected in Keir Starmer's comment that "too many people in Whitehall are comfortable in the tepid bath of managed decline".² More recent controversies surrounding the vetting of Peter Mandelson and the sacking of the Foreign Office permanent secretary Sir Olly Robbins have inflicted further damage on ministerial–civil service relations.³

For their part, civil servants have long complained that ministers do not provide clear direction and that they are being scape-goated for ministerial failures. It is clear that both sides are frustrated by the system as it is.

Upcoming work from the Institute for Government will explore the ways in which ministerial trust in the civil service is collapsing, and how we can start to rebuild it. This paper accompanies that work, drawing on reflections from the Institute's [Ministers Reflect](#) series – a public archive of interviews with former ministers in the UK government who served under every prime minister from Margaret Thatcher to Rishi Sunak – and our extensive [back catalogue](#) of research. But these interviews are both public and wide-ranging and, as such, some of the insights diverge from our upcoming work on how political trust in the civil service has been lost, which draws on private interviews with individuals who have a broader range of experience across government. Nonetheless, this present paper discusses views expressly from the viewpoint of ministers and many of the themes and insights in the pieces of work complement one another.

This paper builds on the Ministers Reflect archive to explore the following:

- **What ministers think the civil service does well.** Ministers recognise that the civil service's impartiality, combined with its expertise, empowers it to give advice to ministers and that it has deeper knowledge on how the system works.
- **What frustrates ministers about the civil service.** Ministers are also frustrated with what they view as a civil service that is slow-paced, too risk-averse and not well geared towards delivery.
- **Ministers acknowledge the importance of private office, but do not always think it is effective.** The value of a high-performing private office is clear to ministers, but some ministers suspect that the office does not always have their back and does not understand their commitments beyond the department.
- **How ministers can get the best from the civil service.** There are things that ministers can do to get the most out of the civil service – for example, by communicating their preferences and priorities, and setting the conditions around how ministers and civil servants interact.

The appendix sets out what we have drawn on to inform this research – our interviews with ministers, research reports, guides, commentaries and the IfG Ministers Database.

What ministers think the civil service does well

“One of the genuine privileges of ministerial life is working with the civil service. I honestly loved working with civil servants and really missed it when we left government.” – [Douglas Alexander](#), *Scotland secretary (2006–07, 2025–) and international development secretary (2007–10)**

Many of the ministers we interviewed have had positive experiences of working with the civil service. They told us that they valued the civil service’s ability to provide informed advice and institutional expertise, and found officials well-intentioned in wanting to adapt to individual ministerial preferences and priorities. This shows that ministers and civil servants can build productive working relationships.

Ministers feel that civil servants’ impartiality lends credibility to their advice

Former ministers consistently valued civil servants’ ability to remain impartial and objective, as the Civil Service Code requires of them. Overall, ministers found civil servants to be adaptable to successive administrations and willing to serve the government of the day, no matter which party was in power. For instance, [Hazel Blears](#), secretary of state for communities and local government (2007–09), emphasised her sense that “the civil servants want you to do well, irrespective of your politics”.

This impartiality is crucial because it enables ministers to feel that they can trust the advice they receive from their civil servants. Ministers know that their officials are recommending policy choices based on objective assessments of value for money, feasibility and public benefit. [Philip Hammond](#), chancellor (2016–19), recalled that he “always found civil servants admirably neutral, well informed and willing to do whatever work you direct them to”.

This impartiality is particularly important when civil servants need to deliver bad news to ministers, flag where a policy idea has not worked before or raise problems with implementation. Civil servants are free to give honest and truthful advice because their career is not dependent on ministerial or political patronage.

But some ministers felt that officials mistook impartiality requirements as a licence to avoid taking a stance or, as [Baroness Stowell](#), leader of the House of Lords (2014–16), put it, “some civil servants confuse impartiality with not giving a view on something”. Impartiality requirements can also be misused to ignore the politics at play. One area where this comes through is speech writing, as [Simon Hughes](#), who was a junior minister at the Ministry of Justice (2013–15), found out: “Generally people would give me very solid briefs for speeches in the House or speeches outside the House, but they often weren’t politically clever. And I pretty well always had to rewrite the material I was given.”

* We give further details on the interviewees in the appendix, including some of their other ministerial roles.

As noted above, the Civil Service Code requires officials to be politically impartial. This means that they should not be writing political speeches for ministers. But as the Institute for Government will argue in forthcoming work, this should not be an excuse for failing to build an understanding of politics and the constraints that this can impose on their work. Most ministers interviewed understood that civil servants had boundaries they could not cross and they relied on their special advisers to support them in a political capacity. [Sajid Javid](#), chancellor (2019–20), found that, among civil servants across several departments, there was “a clear understanding that they didn’t want to get involved in anything political”, but having skilled special advisers meant that he “didn’t generally find that an issue”. He went on to say:

“Sometimes, you’d want to make a speech that might have some political content in it. Your civil servants would say ‘We can’t write that bit.’ So they’d leave a spot blank and your spads [special advisers] would write it.”

The Institute for Government has previously argued that an impartial civil service remains the right model for the UK.⁴ The impartiality of those who advise on and draft legislation, and the professional standing of those who administer and operate public services, are valuable and need to be maintained.

The civil service should actively pursue ministerial objectives, but its honest advice about the legal and practical pitfalls to policies is essential for effective governance. Rather than view advice from officials as an attempt to obstruct or thwart their plans, ministers can welcome this honesty as part of the civil service’s responsibility to provide impartial advice. Of course, part of giving honest advice is providing constructive challenge, and this is something that civil servants can struggle with, as another former chancellor, [Jeremy Hunt](#), recalls:

“I did have a problem with civil servants not having the confidence to speak out when they thought that one of my ideas was barmy. So that’s why I always try really hard to encourage people to speak out.”

Hunt was not alone in recognising the important role that officials have to play when it comes to providing constructive challenge:

“I think you want a system where civil servants are confident enough to bring you ideas, to challenge ministers, to be very honest with them and then ultimately defer to the minister’s decision.” – [David Laws](#), *minister of state for schools and in the Cabinet Office (2012–15)*

While ministers can set expectations around challenge and encourage officials to speak up, more can be done to provide cover for officials and to shift incentives towards more open feedback. The Institute for Government has argued that the civil service should embrace the new duty of candour as a way to promote clear and honest advice to ministers.⁵

Civil servants are responsive to ministerial preferences and priorities

While it is important for civil servants to provide constructive challenge to ministers, once the minister decides on a course of action, the civil service will respond and execute the minister's instruction. [Michael Fallon](#), defence secretary (2014–17), shared his positive experience:

"They were wonderful about it. They give you the advice. The minute you take a decision and say: 'I know you recommend A and I know you would second recommend B, but I'm doing C,' they would go off and do it."

Ministers will have particular policy areas from within their wider portfolio that they want to prioritise. The ministers we interviewed found that civil servants are sensitive to this and have a strong antenna for ministerial priorities. But this relies on ministers communicating their priorities clearly to civil servants in the first instance. [Matt Hancock](#), health secretary (2018–21), shed light on how responsive the civil service can be and how important it is for ministers to harness that by setting out a clear direction:

"Going into government is like getting into a Mercedes and going into cabinet is like you're in a Ferrari – not that I've actually ever driven a Ferrari. You touch the accelerator and it shoots off. As in, the civil service becomes ultra responsive. And you've actually got to also be slightly careful of that because you can say things that will then get interpreted and four weeks later, something comes up to you."

Ministers told us that officials were responsive when they expressed their preferred style of working. The civil service appreciates that different ministers will want to receive advice from officials in different ways, in different formats and at different times. For instance, [Philip Hammond](#) recalled asking Treasury officials for short 'paragraphs' of written advice on minor updates twice a day. His officials adapted to this request and 'paragraphs' became routine practice in the department.

Ministers draw on their civil servants for institutional knowledge and expertise

While ministerial careers are subject to changing political fortunes, civil servants offer continuity and stability within government. Officials who have remained in the same department over several years build a rich reserve of institutional knowledge and they can advise ministers on what has been tried successfully or unsuccessfully in the past.

"Those civil servants have got to the jobs they're in through decades of hard work, and going through this continual process of evaluation... Politicians, to a certain extent, bypass all of that." – [Mark Garnier](#), *parliamentary under-secretary of state for international trade* (2016–18)

Civil servants have expert knowledge about the processes and systems that ministers need to navigate to get things done in a certain policy area. They will have developed relationships with, and an understanding of, the wider ecosystem of stakeholders in the public and private sectors and in civil society. [Patrick McLoughlin](#), transport secretary (2012–16), advised ministers to remember that:

“You are not there as an expert in the department. You’ve got experts there – that’s the civil service. They’re there to advise and to tell and to help assist you.”

However, other ministers said that high turnover in the civil service has damaged its institutional memory. This can create scenarios where, as [David Lidington](#), justice secretary (2017–18), experienced, a longer serving minister is providing the institutional memory function that should be the job of the civil service. [Whitehall Monitor 2026](#), the Institute for Government’s annual data-led assessment of the size, shape and performance of the civil service, found that high turnover in the civil service is a long-standing and persistent problem. We have called on the government to reform pay structures that incentivise churn and to set and implement departmental targets for reducing staff turnover and minimum service terms, among other measures.⁶

Despite this, ministers still value hard-working officials’ commitment to, and enthusiasm for, public service even where civil servants have less experience in a department. [Gregory Baker](#), minister for energy and climate change (2010–14), found that “most of the officials that I dealt with had a very good in-depth knowledge of their particular area, even if they hadn’t been working on it very long”.

What frustrates ministers about the civil service

"I became aware of the dreadful slowness of getting change, you are turning around a tanker." – [Alistair Burt](#), minister of state in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2010–13) and the Department of Health (2015–16)

While ministers have much praise for the civil service, they have their fair share of frustrations when it comes to how it operates. Ministers want to get a lot done in what is increasingly a short amount of time, but they see civil service inertia, risk aversion and failures when it comes to delivery as standing in the way of implementing their agenda.

Ministerial careers can be short and they can be frustrated by what they see as a slow-paced civil service

A common refrain from ministers is that the civil service simply takes too long to get things done or, as [Jonathan Djanogly](#), junior minister for justice (2010–12), colourfully put it: "Whitehall is coated in treacle. It is very, very difficult to get the machine to be inventive." [Stephen Hammond](#), junior minister for transport (2012–14), points to "the natural caution of the civil service" and onerous processes as a barrier for creative thinking and getting things done quickly: "What you found was every process went consecutively... 'We've never done that before, minister, we don't do it that way.'"

As our [IfG Ministers Database](#), which holds information about all government ministers since 1979, makes clear, ministerial careers have become shorter over time and new ministers are understandably keen to deliver on their priorities with what time they have. But they also need to weigh up whether the trade-offs that come with ever-faster policy making are worth it. Our research on rapid policy making has highlighted how a focus on speed can lead to a closed process that sidelines data and evidence, with less thought given to how a policy might work in practice.⁷

But ministers can help provide clarity and drive action in the civil service when they are clear about what their key priorities are, as [Jeremy Wright](#), attorney general (2014–18) and culture secretary (2018–19), reflected:

"If you do keep pushing, you will find that civil service will do their darndest to make it happen, but you may need to keep pushing."

But this creates a frustration in and of itself – ministers can only devote their attention to so many things and will rightly become irate if civil servants do not make progress when ministerial eyes are occupied elsewhere:

"I was talking about procurement and how badly run procurement was. It was a shocking waste of money – and another former civil servant, a retired permanent secretary, there said: 'Well, of course, we have known about this for ages. You are

not saying anything new.' Well, why on earth didn't anyone do anything? If you all knew about it, why on earth did no one do anything about it?" – [Francis Maude](#), *Cabinet Office minister (2010–15)*

There is a sense among some ministers that the civil service is set in its ways and too risk averse

There are also complaints that the civil service struggles to provide challenge to ministers or take innovative approaches to problems. [Lord Frost](#), Cabinet Office minister (2021), complained:

"I think officials have got frightened of getting things wrong. It's an organisation where you get relatively little credit for success and if you mess it up people know..."

Similarly, [Baroness Fairhead](#), minister for trade and export promotion (2017–19), pointed to a culture of officials being too deferential on the surface, but without following through. Fairhead reminisced about civil servants who "would just say 'Yes, yes, we'll do that' and then it didn't get done". This was also something that [Baroness Warsi](#), senior minister of state at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2012–14), also experienced:

"I lay out my priorities and whilst the answer often was, 'Yes, minister, no, minister, three bags full, minister', they didn't necessarily change their priorities! It makes you think, 'What's the point of having ministers?'"

Risk aversion is not something that is inherent to civil servants, but reflects a skewed system for accountability, coupled with a lack of positive incentives, which discourages new approaches. Ministers set the framework within which civil servants operate and they can back civil servants who want to take more innovative approaches – but this means that ministers need to take on some of the risk.

The Institute for Government has long argued that there needs to be stronger accountability for decisions and outcomes from civil servants *and* ministers.⁸ This means that ministers need to be held accountable over a longer period as the outcomes of their decisions become apparent. This could include ministers being recalled by parliamentary committees or other bodies. But ministers and senior civil servants are also responsible for creating an environment that supports effective policy making.

As part of its research on rapid policy making, the Institute for Government has called for the government to equip officials to navigate the demands of policy making under pressure.⁹ To do this the government needs to normalise a culture that empowers the civil service to take risks and to embrace a 'test and learn' mindset. But this will not happen overnight, and the Institute has laid out quick wins, deeper reforms and radical changes that will help embed a test and learn approach.¹⁰

Ministers are sceptical of the civil service when it comes to delivery

“Well, the lack of delivery capability in the civil service. I mean, it was appalling. I had a reputation for being a tough bastard and often I was overly aggressive and demanding, but it really was born [out] of a frustration.” – [Liam Byrne](#), *chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (2008–09) and chief secretary to the Treasury (2009–10)*

One area where ministers have not had confidence in officials is implementation. [Lord Freud](#), a long-serving junior minister for welfare reform (2010–16), was blunt in his assessment: “I do not agree with the idea you can separate policy from implementation – which is almost the fundamental theory behind the civil service.” Not all ministers share this opinion and it is the case that the civil service has put more emphasis on joining up policy and delivery. But [Nick Gibb](#), another long-serving minister, in the Department for Education (2010–12, 2014–23), believed that the strength of the civil service was in delivery rather than policy making because “they’re not in the political world, they’re in the civil service world, and so they haven’t done the thinking, the philosophy, the reading of what we believe in”.

However, the overall sense from former ministers is that without constant ministerial focus and pressure, the attention of the civil service simply drifts away from sustained delivery. Liam Byrne’s complaint that there was little project management capability in the civil service is borne out by the experience of [Michael Heseltine](#), deputy prime minister (1995–97), who stressed the role that ministers need to play in outlining expectations and timescales. Ministers certainly have a key role to play and the [IfG Academy](#) has produced an accessible guide on how ministers can set up systems to monitor implementation to make sure policies are delivered on time and as planned.¹¹ And our recent paper on ministerial leadership of public service reform looked at how ministers can build a team around them, and set up the right delivery and accountability mechanisms, to ensure their vision is implemented.¹²

But it cannot all be down to ministers and there is more that the civil service can do around performance management, building expertise and addressing systemic issues that stymie delivery capability, such as high staff turnover. The Institute for Government has compiled a list of 20 recommendations for how the civil service can improve its day-to-day effectiveness, which includes recommendations for improving the way the civil service workforce is managed as well as improving performance management for civil servants.¹³

The quality of civil servants’ work does not always meet ministers’ expectations

“What I found was commitment and enthusiasm and very variable levels of quality in the civil service. Where there were problems of quality – I’m thinking of one specific area of really important policy making where it was quite clear the civil servants weren’t up to it.” – [Nick Hurd](#), *minister for climate change and industry (2016–17) and minister for policing and the fire service (2017–19)*

Ministers who have spoken to the Institute for Government are often effusive about the quality and dedication of their civil servants, but this is not unanimous and as [Amber Rudd](#), home secretary (2016–18), put it, as with any large organisation there is bad and good.

Where ministers most often complain about the civil service is in the quality of its day-to-day work – the handling of correspondence is one area where former ministers voice frustrations. [Andrea Leadsom](#), as a junior minister at the Treasury (economic secretary, 2014–15), was not impressed about the quality of departmental correspondence: “Having again had a lot of experience of customer service in banking, this is the world’s window on the Treasury. This is what taxpayers are paying for.”

Ministerial perceptions about the quality of civil servants have a huge bearing on how ministers interact with their officials and help set the tone for the relationship – as [Iain Duncan Smith](#), work and pensions secretary (2010–16), recalled:

“It takes time to get to know which of your civil servants have the kind of analytical and questioning approach. That’s why one has to put the pressure on early to see who reacts by forcing everybody to focus.”

Ministers feel that the stakes are higher for them than civil servants because they have to go before parliament and take the political heat for failures, as [Tracey Crouch](#), parliamentary under-secretary of state in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (2015–18), recalled:

“That was the thing that I was most tough with my civil servants on: reminding them that it’s me that goes into the chamber to speak to make policy announcements or to answer questions, and therefore, if they get it wrong, I get it wrong. I’m the one that gets punished, not them. I’m the one who gets sort of blazoned all over the papers or criticised or called back to parliament or whatever, not them.”

As [Damian Green](#), Home Office minister (2012–14), pointed out, it is not always clear to civil servants that “[parliament] is almost the only medium in which you can lose your job in about half an hour, and a lot of officials don’t get that at all”. While ministers are right to set high expectations for their civil servants, as noted above, they need to be willing to create space for them to innovate and to fail, otherwise they may encourage the same kind of risk aversion that many have complained to the Institute for Government about.

Sometimes poor-quality work is an issue, but it is not always easily addressed. There are barriers to bringing in the key skills and capabilities that can help improve the performance of the civil service, as [Lord Freud](#) recalled:

“Pay restraint means you are cutting yourself off from the key parts of [the] labour market. People can be as good as you like and as well-meaning as you like, but if you don’t have the key skills in your organisation, you can’t perform.”

Institute for Government research on strengthening the civil service through external recruitment has highlighted pay as an ongoing issue and has recommended reforms to civil service contracts to better reward success, alongside other interventions such as:

- the creation of more senior specialist roles
- overhauling the application process, which at present can discourage external candidates
- improving the onboarding process.¹⁴

Former ministers also complained that there was little accountability for poor performance because, rather than addressing the problem, underperforming officials are simply moved around the system:

“They never, ever like to sack anybody or move them or admit they are no good. That is the main weakness of the civil service. It is total weakness that they defend their own against ministerial disapproval of performance.” – Alan Duncan, minister of state for international development (2010–14)

While the civil service has introduced new performance management rules for senior civil servants, the Institute for Government has argued that it is still too easy for civil servants to ignore poor performance and that the civil service needs better processes for managing (and removing) underperformers.¹⁵ A more effective suite of tools could include:

- mandatory performance management training
- giving managers access to internal candidates’ performance reviews
- introducing pay rises based on performance.

One approach to moving people out of the civil service, as discussed in [Whitehall Monitor 2026](#), has been exit schemes. Whether the government decides to continue down this path or to take another route, such as instigating rounds of compulsory redundancies, the civil service needs to be able to remove staff who consistently underperform.¹⁶



CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER.

Ministers acknowledge the importance of private office, but do not always think it is effective

“Your working relationship with private office is fundamental to everything that you do and your success. They act as the bridge between the minister and the department.” – [Hilary Benn](#), *international development secretary (2003–07)*, *environment secretary (2007–10)* and *Northern Ireland secretary (2024–)*

A newly appointed minister’s first real contact with the civil service will be with the departmental private office. From scheduling diaries to compiling the box, private office manages the infrastructure that connects ministers to their department. While ministers credit private office for inducting them into government and explaining how things work, they are not always convinced that it is working solely in their interests nor that it understands their commitments beyond their ministerial role. Nonetheless, they understand that private office is key to success.

Ministers turn to private office to help them understand their role within government

The ministerial private office holds the keys to the kingdom. It is the first port of call for ministers when appointed to a new role and, because they stay in place even when a minister moves on, they provide an important reservoir of institutional knowledge.

Even experienced ministers will have to learn the lay of the land when they arrive at a new department, and private office can point them to the key experts and stakeholders within and beyond the department. [Mark Francois](#), minister of state in the Ministry of Defence (2012–15) and then in the Department for Communities and Local Government (2015–16), describes a minister’s relationship with their private office as like “the relationship between a sergeant and a young officer taking over a platoon: you have got someone that has been there for a while and understands how things work”.

As IfG Academy guidance for private office on preparing for a new minister highlights, the onboarding role that private office plays is even more important when parliamentarians become a minister for the first time.¹⁷ [Jacqui Smith](#), home secretary (2007–09), described being bewildered at the outset of her career by the structures of how government worked. Other ministers shared this sentiment. Without proper guidance, things like submissions or ministerial correspondence are opaque and hard to navigate, but here private office can step in.

Some ministers feel like private office does not have their back

While many ministers spoke highly of their private offices, some also had trouble accepting them as working primarily for the benefit of ministers. According to [George Freeman](#), minister for science, research and innovation (2021–23), private office saw itself as “gatekeeper to the ministerial sign-off” and he felt that it was more concerned with achieving the civil service’s priorities than those of the minister:

“It felt to me when I got up in the morning like my private office was not ‘my’ private office. It was the civil service’s private office for setting my priorities, rather than for transmitting those priorities out across the system.”

This is not an uncommon view among former ministers. [Ken Clarke](#), chancellor (1993–97), was able to use private office’s ‘double agent’ relationship with the department to his advantage:

“If you have got a really good private secretary... they tell you what the department is really up to.... And of course, at the same time, I have not the slightest doubt, they tell the department what the secretary of state is really up to.”

Ministers wish that private office understood their commitments beyond the department

A common complaint from ministers is that civil servants too often do not understand that they have responsibilities – and a life – beyond being a minister. Because of the close contact between private office and ministers, and the role that the former plays in managing a minister’s time, the onus is on private office to help ministers manage the different and often conflicting parts of their lives, but this does not always happen.

[Sajid Javid](#), chancellor (2019–20), recalled how “they just think you’re a machine”. He said that back-to-back meetings, with no thought given to travel time to parliament or to toilet breaks, were common and that:

“You are also a member of parliament, and you have parliamentary responsibilities, but also you have constituency responsibilities. You might also be a father or a mother or something... I learned quickly that private offices don’t tend to understand this.”

While some ministers complain about quality, they understand that a well-functioning private office is key to success

Ministers across the board acknowledge that a good private office is a key ingredient for success, but as Institute for Government research on strengthening private office has found, this part of Whitehall’s infrastructure does not always work as well as it should.¹⁸ While the traditional view of private office as a career accelerator has cooled in recent years, there are high levels of churn and private office functions are not always treated as a specialism worth cultivating in and of itself.

However, when private office can develop the right set of skills, it can be marshalled to drive forward a minister's agenda and hold the department to account:

"I went out and selected people, brought them into my private office and gave them brief responsibilities. They would make sure they continued pushing and making things happen whilst I wasn't there." – [Baroness Warsi](#), *minister without portfolio (2010–12) and minister of state for faith and communities (2012–14)*

Ministers should not be passive when it comes to their private office and where relationships are not working they can ask for change. [Ben Bradshaw](#), culture secretary (2009–10), recalled having "a principal private secretary who felt his job was to defend the department against me, rather than to help me deliver the government's policy" and he took steps to change his private office set-up. More than this, there is an onus on private office to work with their ministers to agree on effective ways of working. The Institute for Government has produced a guide for private office to structure conversations about effective ways of working.¹⁹

"Your private office is the thing that you rely on every minute of the day. They're running your life, and so you need to be very clear about what you do want in your life and what you don't want." – [Patricia Hewitt](#), *trade and industry secretary (2001–05) and health secretary (2005–07)*

How ministers can get the best out of the civil service

While ministers can feel frustrated when the civil service falls short of expectations, they need to recognise that they have the power to do something about it. Civil service performance depends on the quality of ministerial leadership it receives. There are several constructive steps that ministers can take to ensure that they are receiving tailored support from their officials and maximising their civil servants' capacity to deliver departmental priorities.

Ministers should communicate their preferences and priorities clearly to officials

"See the civil service as your allies... if you give them a clear sense of direction... the civil service will help you deliver." – [David Gauke](#), *secretary of state for justice (2018–19)*

As leaders of hundreds of thousands of civil servants, ministers are responsible for setting the direction of travel for their department. To do so, they need to be clear and consistent about their priorities and willing to make the difficult trade-offs required to create the impact they want to see.

Then, they need to articulate that vision effectively to their civil servants. In response, private office and the wider department need to be responsive so that they are working on what the minister wants them to.

"You have to set out your goals and explain the context and the trade-offs and you've got to have a narrative, an argument that drives all the way through." – [Patricia Hewitt](#), *secretary of state for trade and industry (2001–05) and health secretary (2005–07)*

[Robert Buckland](#), solicitor general (2014–19), cautioned ministers:

"If you don't know your own mind, don't blame the civil service, because they will try and interpret what you're saying and no doubt they'll get it wrong because you haven't thought it through."

The civil service has a vast capacity to deliver, but to make the most of it, ministers need to focus officials' minds on key priorities. For [Philip Hammond](#), chancellor (2016–19), this meant taking "immediate control of the diary, otherwise civil servants will fill it with rubbish". Ministers can signal their priorities to officials through active diary management, ensuring that their time is spent on the issues most important to them and rejecting work that does not fit their objectives.

Institute for Government research on getting things done in government has shown that successful ministers are those who communicate and maintain focus on achieving a clear objective.²⁰ Whether the goal is a piece of legislation, delivery of a major project or raising awareness about an issue and putting it on the political agenda, having that clarity of focus enables ministers and their officials to feel motivated by a shared mission.

Ministers set the conditions for successful relationships with civil servants

"I always had great store in treating officials courteously and in a personal way. I think you get far more out of them than [by being] demanding... They are people!" – Lord Wallace, deputy first minister of Scotland (1999–2005) and advocate general for Scotland (2010–15)

Ministers rely on their officials to implement policies and so they are likely to be much more effective in their role if they treat their civil servants with respect and decency. Baroness Kramer, minister of state for transport (2013–15), observed some departments where "ministers really couldn't get anything done because they just didn't treat people well". As Johnny Mercer, veterans' minister (2022–24), confirmed, not all ministers treat their officials with due respect:

"If you had talked to officials the way I've seen some ministers talk to officials, if you'd have talked to people like that in the army, you would have got punched in the mouth."

Mercer's approach to building better relations was to have an open door policy for his officials and to get out into the department to build relationships. It is essential for effective governance for civil servants to feel confident enough to offer constructive challenge to ministers in the policy making process. But it is on ministers to create the conditions for openness and honest dialogue and to build a trusting relationship, rather than assuming that the civil service is there to obstruct ministerial priorities. When officials who deliver the bad news are attacked for obstructing ministerial priorities, trust cannot grow and they are incentivised to avoid sharing hard truths with ministers. As Alan Duncan reflected from his time in the Foreign Office (2016–19):

"If you are known to be tough but tantrum ridden, then they will go, 'Oh god, give it to another minister or let's hide it for another few months.' So tough but fair is fine and they don't mind having to sort something out but they don't like being, and nor should they stand for being, badly treated."

If ministers fail to treat officials with respect or lash out when they deliver bad news, then they will not get the best out of their officials. Civil servants who fear their minister will not provide open advice and assessment, or push back when it counts, which can leave a minister far more vulnerable. With this in mind, Lynne Featherstone, minister for international development (2012–14) and for crime prevention (2014–15), made sure she "never shouted at a civil servant" when she was disappointed by their work. Instead, she would explain clearly to her officials what support she needed from them and they would rethink the content and presentation of their advice accordingly.

[David Mundell](#), who served in the Scotland Office for nine years (2010–19), would even ask for “360-degree feedback” and appraisals from his civil servants to discover what they found unhelpful or ineffective about his own style of working. By showing that they value civil servants’ opinions in this way, ministers can foster productive and successful relationships with officials.

“There were lots of very good and very bright people who were around and available at your service and that actually if you showed an interest and were willing to lead and engage with them, they really liked that...” – [Simon Hughes](#), minister of state for justice and civil liberties (2013–15)

Ministers should instil confidence in their civil servants and lead by example

Ministers need to gain the confidence of their civil servants by showing their eagerness to deliver and achieve their objectives in the role. [Andrew Mitchell](#), international development secretary (2010–12), confirmed this and advised fellow ministers that: “In order to command the support of civil servants in your department, they need to know that you can get things done.” While civil servants can help induct, support and advise, ministers ultimately need to show their ability to follow through – it is up to ministers to push their agenda forward within their ministerial team or at the cabinet table and to make the case for change in public. The civil service is no substitute for a disempowered minister.

In her interview, [Baroness Kramer](#) recalled how, in some departments, she found civil servants to have “a sort of jaded ‘we’ve seen this all before’” attitude. Ministers can help cut through that disillusion by showing to civil servants that they get things done in the role. Kramer wished she had realised sooner that she needed to “press and kick” to create momentum and motivate officials in those departments.

One factor that has contributed to this attitude among civil servants is the high rates of ministerial churn – it is hard to lead by example if officials expect their ministers to be here today and gone tomorrow. The Institute for Government has pointed out the negative impacts of ministerial churn and has long argued that ministers should be kept in place for longer.²¹

Beyond these changes, the IfG Academy has compiled a guide for ministers on how they can get things done in government.²² One crucial lesson from this research is that ministers can bring drive and urgency to a department by making effective, timely decisions. This is echoed in the advice of [Alan Johnson](#), home secretary (2009–10), to ministers that “the civil service want you to be decisive. They want to give you the arguments for and against, but once you’ve decided, they will follow.” Civil servants need to know that their minister is prepared to make those tough decisions, lead by example and take action.



Conclusion: ministers and civil servants need to continuously (re)build the relationship between them

"That relationship that you form with your permanent secretary, with your private office, with your DGs [directors general] and the whole team... you get their respect and you respect them too. And that culture... is absolutely critical if you are to thrive, and at times survive, so that you all work together with that same objective." – [James Brokenshire](#), *Northern Ireland secretary (2016–18) and housing, communities and local government secretary (2018–19)*

Ministers have a lot of reflections on the civil service. Those we have interviewed for the Ministers Reflect project have emphasised the value of impartiality, how responsive civil servants are to ministerial priorities and the value of civil service expertise. The importance of private office is also a common theme in the interviews, but ministers are also frustrated by what they perceive as a slow-paced civil service, which can fall below their expectations.

Forthcoming Institute for Government work on how political trust in the civil service has been lost explores the deteriorating relations between ministers and the civil service. Trust, or lack thereof, is at the heart of this problem. We believe that the civil service needs to take the initiative to re-legitimise itself to ministers, but ministers also have a role to play. They need to be clear about their priorities and instil confidence in their officials. But trust will continue to deteriorate if ministers are inherently suspicious of the civil service and its motives. Where ministers approach civil servants and their advice with an open mind, they can create more space for trust and dialogue to develop. As [Ben Bradshaw](#), who was a minister in several government departments between 2001 and 2010, puts it:

"Good civil servants are there to help you deliver for the government and if you can make that work it becomes a really fantastic resource and relationship."

A moment of opportunity has opened up for a new relationship between ministers and a reformed civil service

The Labour government, as with those before it, has recognised the importance of 'rewiring the state' to implement reforms that will improve the civil service and finally address some of the growing tensions between ministers and officials.

In *Power with Purpose*, the final report of the Commission on the Centre of Government, the Institute for Government argued that No.10 and the Cabinet Office should be restructured into:

- a Department for the Prime Minister and Cabinet, which would set the direction of the government
- a Department of the Civil Service, which would take on the leadership, management and capability of the civil service.

The latter department would be led by a new senior first secretary of state, who would assume ministerial responsibility, and by a new head of the civil service, who would be able to carry out a reform agenda.

The cabinet secretary, Antonia Romeo, has already started to provide more visible leadership by publishing her performance objectives and in doing so has signalled that civil service reform is on the agenda.²³ Significantly, the government has also committed to “bring forward proposals that strengthen the delivery, accountability, innovation and productivity of the civil service” by endorsing the Institute for Government’s plans for the civil service reform in the King’s Speech 2026.²⁴ We have repeatedly made the case for a new Civil Service Act to clarify the purpose of the institution and to enhance its accountability²⁵ and to this end the Institute for Government has drafted a *Civil Service Bill*, ready to be introduced to parliament.

The relationship between ministers and the civil service is at the heart of good government and both parties need to do more to guarantee this relationship into the future. This is the moment to act on civil service reform and to start rebuilding the relationship that forms the bedrock of government.

Appendix: What we have drawn on to inform this research

The Institute's [Ministers Reflect](#) archive features nearly 200 interviews with former ministers from the UK and devolved governments. For this paper we drew quotes from interviews with 50 former ministers. The table below sets out brief details of the interviewees cited in the paper, in order of appearance.

Details of ministerial interviewees who are cited in this paper

Name	Party	Years when a minister	Some of their ministerial roles
Hazel Blears	Labour	2001–09	Policing, security and community safety minister (2003–06), communities and local government secretary (2007–09)
Douglas Alexander	Labour	2001–10 2024–	Scotland secretary (2006–07, 2025–), transport secretary (2006–07), international development secretary (2007–10)
Philip Hammond	Conservative	2010–19	Defence secretary (2011–14), foreign secretary (2014–16), chancellor (2016–19)
Baroness Stowell	Conservative	2011–16	Leader of the House of Lords (2014–16)
Simon Hughes	Liberal Democrat	2013–15	Justice and civil liberties minister (2013–15)
Sajid Javid	Conservative	2012–20 2021–22	Home secretary (2018–19), chancellor (2019–20), health and social care secretary (2021–22)
Jeremy Hunt	Conservative	2010–19 2022–24	Health secretary (2012–18), foreign secretary (2018–19), chancellor (2022–24)
David Laws	Liberal Democrat	2010 2012–15	Schools minister (2012–15)
Michael Fallon	Conservative	1988–92 2012–17	Business and enterprise minister (2012–14), defence secretary (2014–17)
Matt Hancock	Conservative	2012–21	Health secretary (2018–21)
Mark Garnier	Conservative	2016–18	Parliamentary under-secretary of state for international trade (2016–18)

Patrick McLoughlin	Conservative	1989–94 1995–97 2010–18	Transport secretary (2012–16), chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (2016–18)
David Lidington	Conservative	2010–19	Justice secretary (2017–18), chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (2018–19)
Gregory Barker	Conservative	2010–14	Minister for energy and climate change (2010–14)
Alistair Burt	Conservative	1992–97 2010–13 2015–16 2017–19	Minister of state in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2010–13), minister of state in the Department of Health (2015–16), minister of state for international development (2017–19)
Jonathan Djanogly	Conservative	2010–12	Minister for the courts and legal aid (2010–12)
Stephen Hammond	Conservative	2012–14 2018–19	Minister for transport (2012–14), minister for health (2018–19)
Jeremy Wright	Conservative	2010–19	Attorney general (2014–18), culture secretary (2018–19)
Francis Maude	Conservative	1985–92 2010–16	Minister for the Cabinet Office (2010–15), minister for trade and investment (2015–16)
Lord Frost	Conservative	2021	Minister of state in the Cabinet Office (2021)
Baroness Fairhead	Conservative	2017–19	Minister for trade and export promotion (2017–19)
Baroness Warsi	Conservative	2010–14	Minister without portfolio (2010–12), senior minister of state at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2012–14), minister of state for faith and communities (2012–14)
Liam Byrne	Labour	2005–10	Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (2008–09), chief secretary to the Treasury (2009–10)
Lord Freud	Conservative	2010–16	Minister for welfare reform (2010–16)
Nick Gibb	Conservative	2010–12 2014–21 2022–23	Minister for schools (2010–12, 2015–16, 2022–23), minister for school standards (2016–21)

Michael Heseltine	Conservative	1979–86 1990–97	Defence secretary (1983–86), environment secretary (1990–92), trade and industry secretary (1992–95), deputy prime minister (1995–97)
Nick Hurd	Conservative	2010–14 2015–19	Minister for climate change and industry (2016–17), minister for policing and the fire service (2017–19)
Amber Rudd	Conservative	2013–19	Home secretary (2016–18), work and pensions secretary (2018–19)
Andrea Leadsom	Conservative	2014–20 2023–24	Economic secretary (2014–15), leader of the House of Commons (2017–19), business, energy and industrial strategy secretary (2019–20)
Iain Duncan Smith	Conservative	2010–16	Work and pensions secretary (2010–16)
Tracey Crouch	Conservative	2015–18	Sports minister (2015–18)
Damian Green	Conservative	2010–14 2016–17	Minister for policing and criminal justice (2012–14), work and pensions secretary (2016–17)
Alan Duncan	Conservative	2010–14 2016–19	Minister of state for international development (2010–14), minister for Europe and the Americas (2016–19)
Hilary Benn	Labour	2001–10 2024–	International development secretary (2003–07), environment secretary (2007–10), Northern Ireland secretary (2024–)
Mark Francois	Conservative	2012–16	Minister of state in the Ministry of Defence (2012–15), minister of state in the Department for Communities and Local Government (2015–16)
Jacqui Smith	Labour	1999–2009 2024–	Chief whip (2006–07), home secretary (2007–09), minister for skills (2024–)
George Freeman	Conservative	2014–16 2019–20 2021–23	Life sciences minister (2014–16), minister for science, research and innovation (2021–23)
Kenneth Clarke	Conservative	1974 1979–97 2010–14	Home secretary (1992–93), chancellor (1993–97), justice secretary (2010–12)

Ben Bradshaw	Labour	2001–10	Minister of state in the Department of Health (2007–09), culture secretary (2009–10)
Patricia Hewitt	Labour	1998–2007	Trade and industry secretary (2001–05), health secretary (2005–07)
David Gauke	Conservative	2010–19	Chief secretary to the Treasury (2016–17), justice secretary (2018–19)
Robert Buckland	Conservative	2014–22	Solicitor general (2014–19), justice secretary (2019–21)
Lord Wallace	Liberal Democrat	1999–2005 2010–15	Deputy first minister of Scotland (1999–2005), advocate general for Scotland (2010–15), deputy leader of the House of Lords (2013–15)
Baroness Kramer	Liberal Democrat	2013–15	Minister for transport (2013–15)
Johnny Mercer	Conservative	2019–21 2022–24	Minister for veterans' affairs (2022–24)
Lynne Featherstone	Liberal Democrat	2010–15	Minister for international development (2012–14), minister for crime prevention (2014–15)
David Mundell	Conservative	2010–19	Scotland secretary (2015–19)
Andrew Mitchell	Conservative	1992–97 2010–12 2022–24	International development secretary (2010–12), minister for development and Africa (2022–24)
Alan Johnson	Labour	1999–2010	Education secretary (2006–07), health secretary (2007–09), home secretary (2009–10)
James Brokenshire	Conservative	2010–19 2020–21	Northern Ireland secretary (2016–18), housing, communities and local government secretary (2018–19)

The Institute for Government has an extensive [back catalogue](#) covering civil service analysis and reform and ministerial effectiveness. The research reports that informed this paper are:

- [20 ways to improve the civil service \(2024\)](#)
- [A new Civil Service Act \(2025\)](#)
- [A new statutory role for the civil service \(2022\)](#)
- [Appointed on merit: the value of an impartial civil service \(2023\)](#)
- [Better policy making \(2022\)](#)
- [Civil service–ministerial relations: time for a reset \(2022\)](#)
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- [Ministerial leadership of public service reform \(2026\)](#)
- [Opening up: how to strengthen the civil service through external recruitment \(2022\)](#)
- [Power with purpose: final report of the Commission on the Centre of Government \(2024\)](#)
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- [Strengthening private office: how the civil service should improve support for ministers \(2023\)](#)
- [Whitehall Monitor \(2026\)](#)

The Institute for Government provides regular [commentary](#) on government. The commentaries cited in this paper include:

- [Antonia Romeo’s performance objectives are a welcome sign of leadership \(2026\)](#)
- [New civil service performance management rules are about more than saving money \(2025\)](#)
- [Pat McFadden is right: the civil service needs to lose poor performers \(2025\)](#)
- [The government adopts IfG plans for civil service reform \(2026\)](#)

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- [The Mandelson vetting blame-game is causing serious damage to ministerial-civil service relations \(2026\)](#)
 - [The next cabinet secretary: five tasks for Sir Chris Wormald \(2024\)](#)

The IfG Academy provides [guides](#) for those working in and around government. The guides cited in this paper include:

- [Driving delivery](#)
- [Ministers' ways of working: a guide for private office](#)
- [Preparing for a new minister](#)

For this research we also used the [IfG Ministers Database](#), which holds up-to-date information on all government ministers since 1979 – who served as a minister, in what roles and between which dates.

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