



Being an effective minister

Why this issue is important

The skills needed to win elections are very different from those required to be an effective minister. Whatever the result in May, we will see the appointment of new secretaries of state and junior ministers. Some will be taking on a government post for the first time. Others, with previous ministerial experience, will be taking on new briefs and responsibilities. The effectiveness of these individual ministers is likely to have a significant impact on the standing of the next government.

It is difficult to prepare for the realities of office – the sheer weight of responsibility, the round-the-clock media scrutiny, and the competing demands on a minister's time. And there is remarkably little support in place. Induction and professional development are rare in our political system and the support structures around ministers owe more to historic precedent than conscious planning.

The first few months in office are critical for any new minister – setting the tone, forging relationships, and establishing their credibility. They can be supported in the challenges ahead.

Early challenges and how they can be addressed

- **Communicate priorities:** There is common agreement among civil servants and politicians that effective ministers need [clarity on their priorities](#) and an ability to communicate these to their department. Where there is a change in government, and access talks have been used to good effect, this can be achieved very quickly – as [George Osborne managed in 2010](#). In many respects, ministers in a returning government may have even less opportunity to signal their priorities to the Civil Service, given the lack of formal access talks and the likelihood that No. 10 will closely guard the manifesto-writing process.
- **Get to know the department and the brief:** Any new minister has to get to grips with how their department works. There will be lots of departmental support from the permanent secretary and private office, but there is no substitute for getting out and about. The first few months are a good time to get a [different take](#) on the department by meeting frontline staff, non-executive directors, and external stakeholders. As James Purnell, a former minister at the Department for Work and Pensions, once [observed](#): any politician “spending a day listening to calls coming into one of [the department's] call centres, or sitting in on interviews in a jobcentre, will get a far better idea of the problems the department and its staff face than they will through any number of briefings from the human resources director, however good he or she may be.”
- **Build strong relationships at the top of the department:** Internal discord quickly becomes common knowledge and can derail policy agendas. The most effective secretaries of state find ways of building well-functioning ministerial teams, despite having had little or no say in who was appointed. Delegation and communication is key. Junior ministers should have clear areas of responsibility on which to report back. Routines are also useful. David Blunkett was [known](#) for calling his junior ministers on a Sunday evening to hear their views. Others use weekly meetings to keep everyone engaged. While relationships between secretaries of state and permanent secretaries have come under [increased strain](#) in some departments in recent years, they should

also be prioritised. Some former post holders [recommend](#) agreeing working protocols early on to help get off on the right foot, such as ‘disagree in private, never in public’.

- **Tailor the private office to the minister:** Every minister is supported by a private office that will have to adapt to their management style and preferred way of working. Ministers should be entitled to appoint more expert advisers, including from outside Whitehall, into an expanded private office. This would give them greater capacity to ensure that the department is pursuing their priorities and to monitor the implementation of key policies. But it is vital that ministers are committed to [transparency](#) about these new arrangements. The job descriptions and expertise of the appointed candidates for all extended-office roles should therefore be [publicly available](#). Ministers should also be wary of being ‘captured’ by their departments. Many end up feeling that their offices do not give their other responsibilities – parliamentary, governmental, constituency, and personal – [sufficient weight](#). They should not be afraid to [say](#), for instance, that they want their briefings for the next day by 7pm rather than 11pm or ask that their diary be cleared of unwanted departmental meetings.
- **Enable the department to work effectively:** High-performing ministers will signal their support for good quality work early on – welcoming constructive challenge from advisers and civil servants; testing ideas; and opening up the process to early input from delivery specialists, service users, and the stakeholders who will determine whether a policy priority sinks or swims. Secretaries of state should also make use of their ministerial team. Our [research](#) shows that junior ministers are often better placed to oversee the translation of high-level objectives into workable policies.
- **Get induction right:** Many new ministers have no experience of working in, let alone leading, a major Whitehall department. Nor are they provided with the type of training or induction that is the norm for executive positions in large businesses and charities. As Jacqui Smith [recalls](#): “When I became Home Secretary, I’d never run a major organisation. I hope I did a good job, but if I did it was more by luck than by any kind of development of those skills.” There was equally [little induction](#) for ministers after the 2010 election (or for their special advisers for that matter), beyond what their private offices arranged and a small number of sessions at the Institute for Government. Ministers and special advisers should make time early on to go through inductions that cover getting to grips with their departments, how Whitehall works, and practical considerations such as ethical codes. But more importantly they should use inductions to reflect on how to be an effective minister, learning from those who have previously held that post. Inductions should provide the space to focus on how they want to lead their department and how they can develop the skills necessary to do so.

Longer-term reform priorities

- **Continual professional development:** There is a need for far more systematic support for ministers. Mentoring, coaching, training, and appraisal of ministers go against the political grain but can be [hugely valuable](#). While the support provided to those entering office is haphazard, professional development once in post is almost non-existent. This is both a supply and demand issue. There needs to be some organisational support from the Civil Service and outsiders, but above all else, improved provision and take-up will have the most chance of success if given the drive and backing of Number 10. Ministers themselves also need to [set an example](#) by taking leadership development seriously, inviting feedback, and seeking out development opportunities.