



Becoming a junior minister

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“Junior ministers tend to be the workhorses of the department.”
– Stephen Hammond¹

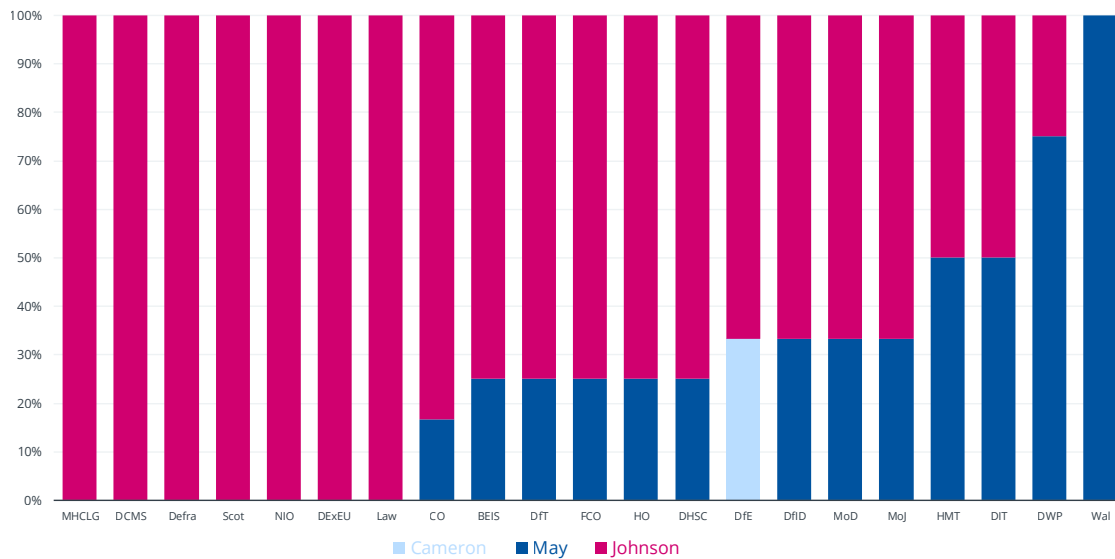
“There’s absolutely no preparation in the case of becoming a minister. One minute you’re not a minister, the next minute you’ve got people saying ‘Minister, sign this, sign that.’” – Hugo Swire²

There are more than 60 junior ministerial roles across government, responsible for overseeing large parts of the public sector and making policy decisions. But taking up one of these posts can be bewildering, and new ministers are expected to get up to speed with the role very quickly. This paper outlines the process of becoming a junior minister and how new ministers can make the most of their time in office.

Whether they are appointed after an election victory or a government reshuffle, ministers at any level are expected to take on a wide range of responsibilities immediately. For many, they will not have long to make their mark: the average tenure of all ministers between 1997 and 2015 was just 21 months.³

As Figure 1 (overleaf) shows, the majority of current junior ministers have been in their role for only a few months. Boris Johnson replaced or moved most junior ministers when he took office. Even if his government returns to office after the election, further ministerial changes can be expected.

Figure 1: Proportion of current junior ministers appointed to post by each prime minister, as of 3 December 2019



Source: Institute for Government ministerial database, drawing on [gov.uk/government/ministers](https://www.gov.uk/government/ministers) and news coverage.

Many first-time ministers report a feeling of confusion about what precisely their new role entails. It is a job like no other, and there is little training available beforehand to those likely to be appointed. Stephen Hammond, who worked as a junior transport minister during the coalition, reflected that “there is no gradualism in this. You can’t halfway jump into the swimming pool”.⁴ Ministers have to get stuck into the job immediately.

Junior ministerial roles – those outside the Cabinet – generally deal with a specific policy area that falls within the wider remit of a secretary of state.* Some may be appointed to work in two (or in some cases, three) departments, to bring together policy areas that are related but separated by departmental siloes.

There are two ranks of junior minister. The more junior of these is the parliamentary under-secretary of state. The next rung up is the minister of state, who will generally have a higher profile or larger portfolio than their under-secretary colleagues. Stephen Hammond reported that junior ministers will often find their time is taken up with the nitty-gritty of heading a government department, including dealing with parliamentary scrutiny, implementing policies and managing the response to crises.

* The Cabinet is made up of around 20 secretaries of state, to whom junior ministers will report in their respective department(s). For more information about the role of secretary of state, see Haddon C, Durrant T, Devine D and Kidney Bishop T, *Becoming Secretary of State*, Institute for Government, 2019.

This paper discusses the reality of ministerial life. Drawing on our collection of interviews with former ministers in the [Ministers Reflect](#) archive and previous Institute for Government research, it sets out:

1. **The transition** – what happens when, the first week in office and the key things new ministers should ask of themselves and the people around them.
2. **The organisation** – how to understand the department, who does what, and who to talk to about what.
3. **The day-to-day** – how to make decisions and prioritise tasks, make time for Parliament, manage the diary and 'ministerial' or 'red box' (the red despatch case in which ministers carry official documents), manage implementation and maintain a work/life balance.
4. **Conclusion: how to do the job well** – our summary of recommendations for new ministers.

While every ministerial role is unique, there are common issues that arise again and again.* Learning from previous ministers about how they have managed the job will help future ministers perform their role effectively.

Becoming a junior minister – the transition

Prime ministers and, less often, secretaries of state will have some idea that they are going to assume their new role before they do. But for junior ministers, appointment can be wholly unexpected. Tracey Crouch, parliamentary under-secretary of state for sport, civil society and loneliness under Theresa May, "didn't expect to be made a minister, so it came as a bit of a surprise. In fact, when I got the call from Downing Street, I thought it was a prank".⁵

At the 2010 general election, Jeremy Browne's "ambition for the week was to try and get re-elected as an MP".⁶ Taking a phone call from the new deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg, while "standing in a car park in Tesco's in Taunton", asking him to be a minister of state in the Foreign Office after the coalition discussions accordingly came as something of a surprise. He spoke to the prime minister the following morning "in a First Great Western loo" on the train to London.

Whether it is a surprise or not, the phone call – or potentially the face-to-face meeting – with the prime minister is a key part of the appointment routine. Some prime ministers will use this conversation to explain the new minister's role, but in many cases this will not have been decided in any detail.

* In this paper we only consider the role of a junior minister drawn from the House of Commons. While there are many similarities, Lords ministers have a very different relationship with Parliament. A forthcoming Institute for Government publication will consider the particular role of a Lords minister.

That first conversation will typically be followed by a phone call from the new minister's private office. Steve Brine, who was a junior health minister between 2017 and 2019, was "phoned the night before by [my] private secretary, who calls you 'minister' for the first and only time, and then it was 'Steve'";⁷ this was followed by a meeting with the permanent secretary of the Department of Health. From there, he went straight into his new office and the day-to-day of the job began.

Getting to know the department

Former ministers describe the first day as a whirlwind of introductory meetings and piles of briefing papers. Stephen Hammond said that in his first conversation with his departmental private office, he was told that "we've got a box of work for you and the secretary of state wants a meeting in an hour and a half's time".⁸

Whenever there is an election, or if civil servants know a new minister is likely, they will develop briefing documents covering the key issues and decisions that face the department, its approximate organisation and budget, and the policy landscape in the short and long term. These may also include details of the department's key policies, plans for meetings with key figures (such as leaders of public bodies or community groups), or a proposed timetable for the parliamentary sequencing of key legislation.

If it is a new government following an election, they will also include manifesto commitments and how the civil service thinks these can be delivered.

The precise nature of the induction offered to new ministers depends on the circumstances. If the new minister's brief was not decided by the prime minister during the appointment call, that might happen on this first day in a conversation with the secretary of state. Alan Duncan, minister of state at the Department for International Development (DfID), said that "the most important thing I did was to be successful in my negotiations with the secretary of state on day one in carving up the globe" – in other words, agreeing which regions of the world would be included in his portfolio.⁹

Briefing documents might then be more targeted at the policy area(s) the junior minister has been assigned to. In other cases, ministers' briefs may not be decided for several days, so the initial induction will offer a more general overview of the work of the department.

Mark Hoban, junior minister at the Treasury, 2010–12, "was struck by how much care the civil service had taken to prepare for the incoming government".¹⁰ If appointment happens outside the context of an election or expected reshuffle, however, induction of the new minister is typically more ad hoc. Jacqui Smith, who held a number of junior and Cabinet ministerial roles under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, said that "much more difficult, I think, is when you become a minister and then it's because somebody has resigned or it is a very sudden change and then perhaps the structures aren't there".¹¹

In this scenario, civil servants may not have had time to prepare for the change and the introduction to the department may be more rushed.

Even when there are briefing documents prepared, ministers rarely have time to read them in any depth. John Healey, who held a number of junior ministerial roles in the last Labour government, described the briefing as a “big, fat lever-arched file... which I never got to read”.¹²

Ministers can be swept up into meetings with officials and external groups almost immediately, often (if they are replacing a minister of the same party) inheriting diary appointments from the predecessor. There is rarely much time to get to grips with the issues before the demands of the job hit.

Getting to know the role

While the briefings offered to new ministers might offer a good overview of the work of the department, former ministers have complained that they give no guidance on how to be a minister. Jacqui Smith, who began her ministerial career in the Department for Education (DfE) in 1999, said that “what I think would have been helpful is a bit of a discussion almost about the nature of the role and the extent to which you can influence, question and think about the organisation of the department”, rather than simply receiving briefings on the policy areas she was now responsible for.¹³

Unsurprisingly, this means that new ministers consistently feel out of their depth. Nick Harvey, a junior defence minister during the coalition, said that “in those first months I had felt rather as though I had been parachuted behind enemy lines, with absolutely no instructions, no communication link back to headquarters, was simply foraging off the local countryside and doing what I hoped central command would have wanted me to do”.¹⁴

But even when a new minister has some relevant experience, these first few days are hard to prepare for. Hugo Swire had spent years in the Shadow Cabinet, but still felt there was:

“absolutely nothing to prepare you for any of this at all... I mean, you think when you’re suddenly told you’re going to be chairman of the board of a company, chances are you either worked for the company or in the industry, but there’s absolutely no preparation in the case of becoming a minister. One minute you’re not a minister, the next minute you’ve got people saying ‘Minister, sign this, sign that.’”¹⁵

Tessa Jowell told a similar story. She had held “senior management roles in local government and the voluntary sector”, had been through a series of inductions before the 1997 election and “knew a lot about health policy” before being appointed minister for public health after Labour’s victory. Nonetheless, she still observed that “nothing quite prepares you for being a minister”.¹⁶

Indeed, her main recollection of the first few days at the Department of Health was “the sense of incompetence”, starting on her first night with a 70-page submission:

“I didn’t understand most of it – and I was asked at the end if I was prepared to approve the recommendations. It’s some time since I’ve been asked a question and thought ‘I have no idea what the answer is and I don’t know how to busk it!’”

Ben Bradshaw, who held a number of junior ministerial roles under Blair and Brown, observed that there was actually a grace period of sorts in which he was able to say “look I’m terribly sorry, I’ve only been in the job 48 hours... forgive me”.¹⁷ But Jacqui Smith said that “you have a pretty short period of grace in terms of people’s expectations of whether or not you’re going to be up to speed with the whole policy area”.¹⁸

With decisions expected and meetings filling the diary, ministers are expected to get to grips with their new role very quickly.

Getting to know the departmental team and private office

The most important figures involved in inducting any new minister into the department are those that make up their private office. This is the civil service team dedicated to supporting the minister: managing their time, arranging meetings, selecting which papers they see and when, and advising them on the day-to-day responsibilities of the role. The private office provides continuity through changes of minister, and is appointed by the civil service, though ministers can request changes to the team.

Many former ministers stressed just how important the private office is to ministerial effectiveness. Stephen Timms, who held various ministerial roles over his 12 years in government, observed that “if you’ve got a good private secretary, you can achieve a great deal more”.¹⁹ John Hutton and Leigh Lewis, in their book *How to be a Minister*, put it even more bluntly: “To be a successful minister you need to have a good private office. It is as basic as that.”²⁰

Jacqui Smith felt lucky to have “a private secretary who was pretty experienced in having worked with other ministers beginning the role” when she first became a minister. Her private secretary “provided me with the sort of guidance on [the] process and what a submission was and how the correspondence was dealt with and how you might go about agreeing or not agreeing to do a particular event. All things which, if you didn’t have somebody to explain to you, it would be pretty opaque actually in terms of the way that government works.”²¹

One of the key roles of the private office team, working with the departmental permanent secretary and the Cabinet Office, is to advise ministers on the application of the *Ministerial Code*, which sets out what is, and is not, appropriate for a minister.²²

This document, circulated in the name of the prime minister, is one of the few official guides that exist on what the role involves, how ministers work and what the rules are. For new ministers not used to government, it is essential reading, not least because breaking any of the rules can easily lead to an early departure.

Jo Swinson, when first appointed as a junior minister, said that “[reading] the *Ministerial Code* was one of the first things I did”.²³

To get the most out of their private office, a new minister needs to communicate clearly how they would like to work and what their priorities are. Patricia Hewitt, who was a junior minister from 1997 until moving into the Cabinet in 2001, said that the private office “[runs] your life, and so you need to be very clear about what you do want in your life and what you don’t want”.²⁴

In particular, ministerial boxes – which contain a range of papers, from urgent decisions to briefings on future meetings and responses to parliamentary questions – can be arranged to meet the minister’s working style. Stephen Hammond arranged a top sheet listing all that was in the box, the date a decision was needed, and so on.²⁵

Sometimes, ministers will need to work with, or on, their private office to achieve their desired working culture. Tessa Jowell “trained [her private office] very carefully and for about 18 months I had the best administrative machine that was possible to imagine”.²⁶

A new junior minister who does not think they are getting what they need can always turn to their permanent secretary (or their office), for help. Similarly, the secretary of state’s principal private secretary (PPS), who oversees the junior ministers’ private offices, is a sensible first port of call for trying to improve the situation.

Getting to know the other ministers

Building relationships with other ministers, both inside the department and outside of it, can prove crucial to getting things done as a junior minister. Beyond their own department’s civil servants, relationships with the rest of the ministerial team can also prove crucial. Ministers need to work together; as Ben Bradshaw said, “you can’t do these things without working as a team and without a collective effort and without someone having done some of the groundwork”.²⁷

The relationships within a department will be determined to an extent by the approach of the secretary of state. Alan Duncan told us that “a lot depends on the secretary of state, whether they work with their team and a lot of them do not”.²⁸ Some secretaries of state prefer to meet each of their junior ministers on a one-to-one basis, while others like to have regular meetings with their whole team. Richard Harrington, a junior minister in several departments under Cameron and May, contrasted the approach that Theresa May took at the Home Office, which he described as “a silo system”, with the “very collegiate and different system” that Greg Clark ran at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS).²⁹

Former ministers are typically positive about experiences where they met regularly with their departmental colleagues. Simon Hughes, a justice minister during the coalition, said that the ministers in his department:

“met weekly, privately – ministers and special advisers or just ministers in term time, and we met weekly with our PPSs [parliamentary private secretaries] and private offices regularly as well, as well as individual meetings.”³⁰

Steve Brine, at the Department of Health, said that it was important to know what his colleagues were working on as “in health, everything is everything... a very foolish minister plays turf war and says: ‘Don’t interfere in my area’, because you all live and die by each other’s areas.”³¹

According to Kitty Ussher, a junior minister between 2007 and 2009, it was the secretary of state’s job to help the other ministers in their department see the bigger picture: “As a junior minister you’ve only got partial sight, you’ve only got partial influence and actually sometimes, you just really need to understand what your role is in the team.”³²

When a new government takes office, working out the roles of each junior minister may take time. Liam Byrne, who held several ministerial roles in the last Labour government, commented: “You forget, actually, that when you come in with a new secretary of state, it actually takes them a bit of time to work out who is doing what job and it takes four or five days to pin down the allocation of responsibilities – and obviously as a junior minister that is the most important thing in the world! For the secretary of state, that’s about tenth on your list of things to be worried about.”³³

Deciding on priorities

All former ministers talk about the importance of choosing a limited number of priorities to focus on in office, not least as ministerial tenure is often limited. Junior ministers are not always able to set their own priorities: some will come from the prime minister or secretary of state, others from their predecessor or a party manifesto. Others still may be dictated or constrained by broader political priorities, or the policies of other departments. Ed Vaizey, minister for culture, communications and creative industries from 2010 to 2016, observed that his were “dictated by George Osborne’s austerity budget”.³⁴

External events will also play a role. At the Foreign Office, Alistair Burt found they “worked out the priorities based on what was going on around the world”.³⁵ Many of these priorities may not even be policy changes: delivering the policies of predecessors, managing relationships with business and other stakeholders, or changing aspects of how the department works might all require a minister’s attention first.

Usually, though, there is space for a new junior minister to decide on some priorities for themselves. John Penrose, taking up the tourism and heritage brief at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in 2010, said that while some priorities were dictated to him, there were “a couple which I was able to choose myself”. One was the decision “to come up with a new tourism policy and to get buy-in from the industry”, which was “deliberate and early” – and proved successful.³⁶

Junior ministers highlighted the need to identify priorities that did not overlap with those of their colleagues. Jacqui Smith said that “there is the ability even at a relatively junior level in government to carve out some areas that you want to focus on and make your own priorities”.³⁷ John Healey actively sought to “carve out areas for which I was directly responsible, able to make decisions and therefore minimise the need to refer to the secretary of state”.³⁸

Former ministers also emphasised the need to make the most of this freedom early. Jacqui Smith felt her most successful experiences as a minister came when she “took advantage of that period of time [at the start of a new role] to say, ‘The priorities I’m really interested in are x and y’, before those things get imposed on you”.³⁹

This will be easier for ministers who come into government with a clear sense of what it is they want to achieve, for instance if they have been shadowing the brief.

Stephen Crabb, who first joined government as a parliamentary under-secretary of state for Wales in 2012, felt that this was particularly helpful: “Coming in with an idea of what it is you want to do is just so important.”⁴⁰ One of Jonathan Djanogly’s proudest achievements as a junior minister at the Ministry of Justice – reforms to ‘no win, no fee’ legal schemes – was made much easier by the fact that he had already worked on it in opposition, so he “knew where to go on it quickly”.⁴¹

Even for ministers new to the policy area it is possible to move quickly. Liam Byrne, who worked in multiple departments, typically tried to “speak to about 20 to 30 people in order to establish what’s going on and what you might think about something and what your priorities need to be” in the first month of each new role.⁴² Jacqui Smith, too, felt that you needed to set up “a series of meetings... with the key teams to talk to you about... where you want to focus... reasonably quickly” – although reading most of the policy briefs, “probably on the first night”, also gives you a head start.⁴³

Speed should not mean rushing, though. Nicky Morgan, who held several junior ministerial roles before becoming a secretary of state in 2014, stressed the importance of “taking time to understand the brief”,⁴⁴ with veteran minister Ken Clarke warning against “doing anything straight away, until you have had a meeting or two about it and decided you have really got your head around and you want to do it”.⁴⁵

These briefings will be helpful to guide, but need not dictate, priorities. Kitty Ussher emphasised that “you have a right to initiate your own priorities. It’s quite hard to do in a short space of time, but you can.”⁴⁶ Tracey Crouch’s three years as a junior minister at DCMS serve as a good example of this: she “wanted to review stakes and prizes on gambling” from her first day, and experienced some pushback. Although it took some time to start and, “once it began, [the work] did actually take three and a half years to finish... we got there in the end”.⁴⁷

A number of interviewees made the point that these personal priorities need to be balanced with the department’s existing ones. Kitty Ussher felt that “you sometimes see ministers that are trying very hard to be effective and actually shooting themselves in the foot, by wanting to have their own little thing [when] contributing to the wider priorities of the department” would be more productive.⁴⁸ Tessa Jowell argued similarly that part of the ministerial skillset is the ability to “focus on what are the real priorities of the department rather than things that you may be particularly interested in”.⁴⁹

Whatever types of priorities are decided on, former ministers agreed it is important not to have too many and to make sure they are clearly stated.

Nicky Morgan felt that, “particularly if you’re a junior minister, two or three priorities is more than enough”.⁵⁰ Liam Byrne typically went for “four or five big strategic priorities”, which he would set out in a speech at the end of his first month of conversations.⁵¹ This speech would help give clarity to civil servants about what he aimed to achieve, making their jobs easier – as Hugh Robertson, a junior minister under Cameron, told us, “it’s hopeless for civil servants if they don’t know where the minister’s coming from”.⁵²

Moreover, Justine Greening, who served several roles under Cameron and May, found that “when civil servants are clear on what the overall ambition is... [they] can then come back and say: ‘We think this is how you might bundle it up a bit more effectively.’”⁵³

A minister communicating clearly what they want to achieve will make it easier for the civil service to help them to do so.

Becoming a junior minister – the organisation

For any new minister, turning policy objectives or manifesto commitments into reality means understanding the organisation that will support them.

The key people

The people who support any minister include civil servants, who provide continuity in the department, and political staff, who will be appointed by the secretary of state and/or the prime minister, depending on their relationship. Some of the most important people to be aware of include:

- **Permanent secretary:** the department’s civil service head, and a key figure within the department, as Ken Clarke remembers: “The atmosphere in the department rather depended on who you got as permanent secretary.”⁵⁴
- **Directors general:** senior civil servants responsible for key policy portfolios or departmental management functions.
- **Private office staff:** a team of civil servants supporting the minister. They act as “gatekeepers”⁵⁵ to the minister, and organise their ministerial box and diary. Ministers may want to call on the secretary of state’s private office, as well as their own, to resolve issues they face within the department.
- **Special advisers (SpAds):** special advisers are appointed by, and primarily accountable to, the secretary of state, with the prior approval of No.10. Their specific roles depend on what the secretary of state deems most important. SpAds may be mainly press-focused, tasked with working across departments or managing relationships within the political party, for example. They can be important colleagues for junior ministers in resolving disputes between government departments and helping manage relationships with the party in Parliament.

Support structures

There is a lot of consistency in the type of things that ministers say they find useful in terms of support structures. It is unlikely that new ministers will need, or indeed be able, to change structures beyond their private office (this tends to be reserved for new prime ministers). Nonetheless, they can use existing structures, including their private office, the wider department, and mechanisms that bring together different departments, to support them in their decision making. The civil service day-one briefing will provide an in-depth overview of each department.

At a minimum, new ministers should be aware of the following structures:

- **The civil service:** the set-up of the civil service varies depending on the department but will consist of multiple grades or levels of seniority and 28 professions. Civil servants work in a range of teams, units and other structures grouped around policy areas and tasks. The professions broadly fall into the categories of operational delivery, cross-departmental specialisms and departmental specialisms. The largest grouping is operational delivery – the frontline staff in delivery departments – while the civil servants that ministers are most likely to interact with are those working in policy analysis and communications. Departmental specialisms are unique to individual departments, for example tax specialists working at HMRC and the Treasury.
- **Departmental boards:** each department has a board that consists of the secretary of state as chair, the junior ministers, the permanent secretary and other senior civil servants, as well as non-executive members brought in from outside government (often from business or the charitable sector) to advise the board. This structure is there to support ministerial decision making and manage departmental business.
- **Cabinet committees and ministerial taskforces:** these bring together ministers from different departments to make decisions that affect the work of multiple parts of the government. Depending on the issue, a department may be represented by its secretary of state or by one of its junior ministers.
- **Arm’s-length bodies (ALBs):** public bodies that have varying degrees of independence from the government. In some departments ALBs spend the majority of the departmental budget and provide oversight for particular policy areas, services or functions. If something goes wrong in an ALB, however, the ministerial team will still find themselves accountable to Parliament for the failure – something that former ministers have expressed frustration about.
- **Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA):**⁵⁶ departments deliver a range of major projects relating to infrastructure, defence capabilities, government IT systems and transforming public services. Supporting this activity from the centre of government is the IPA, a joint unit of the Cabinet Office and the Treasury. Described as a “centre of expertise”, it oversees government projects throughout their life cycle and develops the skills and capabilities of project leaders.

Becoming a junior minister – the day-to-day

Once a minister has met their department and their private office, they will be quickly swept up into the day-to-day of the role. Each ministerial role will be different depending on the department, the minister's relationship with the secretary of state and the rest of the party, and the parliamentary arithmetic. But there are some things that all junior ministers will deal with, to a greater or lesser extent. We consider them below.

Managing the relationship with Parliament

Representing the government in Parliament is one of the main tasks of a junior minister. This can happen almost immediately, particularly if a minister has been appointed to deal with a controversial issue.

Alan Johnson, who served as a junior minister from 1999 to 2004, before serving in both Blair's and Brown's Cabinets, said that "usually you are appointed on a Friday and on your feet in the Commons on Monday".⁵⁷ Jacqui Smith said she had colleagues "who have become a minister in the morning and in the afternoon have been in Parliament responding on behalf of the department".⁵⁸

Regardless of how quickly the first parliamentary appearance comes round, all departments will have regular question sessions in the Commons, and ministers will appear at select committees to discuss their department's work in more detail. Some will also be responsible for taking legislation through the House. Liam Byrne, reflecting on his various ministerial roles, said that "good politicians take Parliament very seriously, not least because they learn a lot there by listening".⁵⁹

Ministers will find it difficult to make things happen if they do not have the support of, and show respect for, Parliament.

Junior ministers must invest time to ensure they can manage all of these different parliamentary responsibilities. Previous ministers have spoken about the importance of preparation for parliamentary appearances, whether departmental questions, select committee appearances or debates on legislation (some of which could be scheduled with short notice).

Steve Brine explained that:

"I would never take [Parliament] flippantly and think I can now do it without notes or doing the prep, because the minute you do, that is the minute it bites you somewhere really unpleasant."⁶⁰

At some point junior ministers may find themselves steering legislation through Parliament. The amount of legislation will depend on which department they are working in – some departments have multiple bills each year, while others have not had any at all in recent years. Some will face relatively little scrutiny, while others will be contentious and require many hours of discussion.*

* For more on the government's business in the most recent Parliament, see Lilly A and Marshal J, *Parliamentary Monitor 2019: Snapshot*, Institute for Government, 2019.

In any legislative process, junior ministers are “the workhorses of the department”,⁶¹ as Stephen Hammond put it; and working with officials to develop the policy ahead of introducing any legislation to Parliament will take time. Simon Hughes said that “if there was legislation going through, talking through the strategy for the legislation... making sure we were in the chamber to support each other” was a key topic of discussion at the Ministry of Justice ministers’ Monday meetings.⁶²

The process of shepherding the bill through the various stages in Parliament will take time and will often fall to junior ministers – Alan Johnson, as secretary of state, said that “if it was legislation then of course it was junior ministers doing it, third reading and the report stage was generally junior ministers”.⁶³

Those ministers who have previously served as whips note that the experience is particularly useful when it comes to managing legislation through the Commons. Margaret Beckett, who was a whip in the 1970s before joining Tony Blair’s government in 1997, said that “a year in the whips’ office is worth 10 years on the backbenches in terms of learning... how the handling of a bill works”.⁶⁴

As well as taking legislation through its formal stages, there is also a need to build support informally for the government’s proposals. Gregory Barker, minister for climate change, 2010–14, said that:

“that sort of informal networking, which can sound like sloping off, actually was extremely valuable because if you lose the confidence of your colleagues, even simply fail to explain what you are doing, even if you are doing a great job, you can just become politically impotent and you’re dead in the water.”⁶⁵

Jacqui Smith warned that it is possible to “slightly forget the politics of Parliament if you are not careful as a more junior minister”.⁶⁶ Maintaining relationships with MPs will help ministers get their legislation and other business through Parliament.

One of the most intimidating parts of parliamentary scrutiny for many ministers will be their appearances in front of their departmental select committee. Alan Johnson said that “going into the committee corridor is a completely different world to being on the floor of the House of Commons – it’s much more scary”.⁶⁷ Similarly, Steve Brine described select committee appearances as “terrifying”.⁶⁸

Preparation and a full understanding of the brief is essential before a select committee appearance, as unconvincing performances can damage the government’s reputation and, in extreme cases, cause ministers to lose their jobs.⁶⁹

But if managed well, select committees can be a useful way of building support for a minister’s priorities. Andrew Mitchell, a former international development secretary explained that “I was very keen to try and engage with Parliament, particularly the select committee – which of course was full of experts on it – as part of getting support for the case for development”.⁷⁰

Harriet Harman, who served in several ministerial roles between 1997 and 2010, said that government, and particularly civil servants, “should have embraced more the notion that you are putting [legislation] into the public domain in Parliament and actually, Parliament can improve it, and select committees can improve it”, rather than shying away from scrutiny.⁷¹ Jo Swinson agreed, saying that parliamentary processes allow ministers to “make sure the finished product is the best possible”.⁷²

While Parliament is important to ministers, many who have experience of the role also note that the civil service does not always fully understand its importance. Damian Green, a minister across several departments between 2010 and 2017, said that, “this 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”.⁷³

Many new ministers find they need to educate officials about the need to prioritise appearances in Parliament and relationships with parliamentarians. Tracey Crouch said this “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... So damn well get it right.”⁷⁴

An underestimation of the importance of Parliament will not be true of all officials, of course, but is a recurring theme in ministers’ reflections on their time in office.

Managing implementation

As well as making policy decisions and legislating for them, ministers need to think about how the decisions they are making are actually implemented. Justine Greening highlighted the relationship between policy development and implementation:

“Policy on its own is not enough. If it doesn’t have a strategy, doesn’t have an implementation plan, if you don’t know how you’re going to transition from where you’ve been to where you’re going to... then don’t be surprised when it doesn’t go well”.⁷⁵

Different departments will have different mechanisms for tracking the implementation of their policies, and the role of a junior minister can be crucial in keeping things on track. Some secretaries of state expect each of their ministerial team to know exactly where each of the policies in their portfolios are at, as Nick Boles explained about Eric Pickles, his secretary of state when he was a minister at the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG):

“There was a very strict agenda. There were these huge Gantt charts: mine was the planning update and then there was a housing update and a local government update. And literally, specific tasks, timetables, what’s happened here, what’s going on here... it meant that everybody knew that actually, his fingers were on every single set of reins. With a little twitch of the reins in that meeting, you knew that by the next week you needed to have a much better answer than you had that week as to why you were slipping on that milestone.”⁷⁶

Stephen Timms said that junior ministers spent a lot of time on “spadework... not the sort of thing that attracts a great deal of public attention, but very important spadework”.⁷⁷ Those ministers who have worked in business before joining government may be able to draw on their past experience to ensure progress is made, as Liam Byrne described:

“The discipline of setting a roadmap, setting strategic goals, communicating those goals and then building a delivery system around the delivery of those goals, those are the most important things that you learn, I suppose, in business.”⁷⁸

Byrne, who described himself as “a very delivery-orientated person”, had other reflections on how ministers can ensure that once policy decisions have been made, they are actually carried out. He “tended to have an assistant private secretary [APS] actually devoted to delivery management... making sure people were doing what they were supposed to be doing”.⁷⁹

Another former minister, who spoke to us anonymously, said that it was important to communicate with those involved in policy implementation outside government, as “you need to keep links to where the policy is being implemented and talk to people who are the recipients of the policy to get feedback from them rather than accept that it’s all intermediated through the civil service”.⁸⁰

Previous [Institute for Government research](#) has found that junior ministers’ networks within and beyond government – whether in their constituencies, from their previous careers or other connections – play an important role. These all bring information into government departments and provide an additional connection between departments to allow more “joined-up” activity.⁸¹

It is important to remember that for areas that are outsourced, some policies will ultimately be implemented by a public body, local authority or private company. Even where implementation is not the responsibility of departmental officials, the prestige and authority of a minister can be an effective way to keep others focused on delivering commitments they have made. Meetings with, or letters from, a minister to remind those implementing a policy of its political importance can help speed up the process.

Managing crises

Despite best-laid plans, things do go wrong in government. These may be less of an issue for junior ministers than their bosses; Ed Vaizey said that “the advantage of being a junior minister was that when crises blew up, the secretary of state had to deal with it!”⁸² But any minister is going to have to deal with a problem at some point in their career.

Some departments are more at risk than others – Alan Johnson observed that while he was at the Home Office it felt like “there was one [crisis] a week”.⁸³ Hugo Swire existed “in a heightened state of alert” as a Foreign Office minister, saying that “there was always bound to be a crisis somewhere and I lived in perpetual fear of dropping a ball”.⁸⁴

Ed Balls reflected, at the end of a long ministerial career, that there is no replacement for learning on the job: “The reality is you learn to handle external crises by handling external crises.”⁸⁵ Nonetheless, former ministers agree on a number of things that can help.

The first issue can be identifying the scale and the nature of the problem. John Penrose said that when dealing with a crisis, “the most difficult piece of judgement in my experience, is naming it in the first place and saying ‘OK, this is actually quite serious’... It is important enough to merit tearing up the next four meetings because we’ve got to fix this now.”⁸⁶

That ability to respond flexibly is a key part of a minister’s role. As Hugh Robertson put it: “You just have to deal with it.”⁸⁷

Having identified an issue, it is important to move quickly. Nicky Morgan stressed that when a crisis hits, “speed is of the essence, and you just drop everything else”.⁸⁸ This can mean that other work backs up, but as Mark Prisk, who held junior ministerial roles in business and housing between 2010 and 2013, said, “there’s no point well saying, ‘Oh well, sorry, I can’t possibly do that today. I’m too busy’. You just have to fit it in, that’s just the nature of it.”⁸⁹

Liam Byrne emphasised that it is important to “try and get the facts on the table as fast as possible”⁹⁰ – though, as Nicky Morgan pointed out, “at that moment when something hits, you’re never going to have all the facts”.⁹¹ And of course the facts may change, as Ben Bradshaw explained: “These crises can move on and change from one minute to the next.”⁹² But the better the information, the better any decisions will be, and the more effectively ministers will be able to communicate with the outside world.

Former ministers referred to this communication as a particularly crucial part of crisis management. Hugh Robertson said that “what most often happens is when one of these crises occurs, the problem is not solving the crisis but explaining the crisis to the outside world”.⁹³ When dealing with the media, specifically, Alan Johnson stressed that is vital that “press lines are not spin, [and that you] are as factual as you can be and as honest as you can be”.⁹⁴ This helps communicate to the public that government ‘has a grip’ on the situation.

Ed Balls regretted not dealing openly with the media in his first experience of a crisis, saying: “I should have gone out, on the very first day, and said ‘We are gripping the situation and we are discovering what’s happening and we are asking these difficult questions.’”⁹⁵ Asking questions allows ministers to “find out what’s really going on and establish the accountability” but “you can only do that if you are seen to grip”⁹⁶ – a key part of a minister’s role in dealing with a crisis is being *seen* to be dealing with it.

The civil service “works well in response to crisis”, according to John Healey.⁹⁷ George Eustice, a long-serving junior minister at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), said that during the floods that affected southern England in 2014, “my experience of Defra... was actually quite positive... and the Environment Agency were doing their bit”.⁹⁸ The problems arose because “local authorities were off on holiday over Christmas and weren’t doing things that they would be expected to do”.

After David Cameron was publicly criticised about his government's response to the floods, there were regular meetings in Cabinet Office Briefing Room A, more commonly known as COBRA, some of which Eustice chaired (unusually – junior ministers will attend COBRA meetings, but rarely chair them):

“COBRA is designed to try and you know, give everybody a kind of proverbial kick up the backside and get things moving... you soon found that some of the DCLG weren't just saying: 'Oh, it's just the local authorities' [problem]', they were actually getting involved and really pushing things forward.”

Knowing what lever to pull to deal with a crisis can make all the difference to how quickly it is resolved, and ministers will need to take the lead. Ken Clarke said that the key thing to do is to “work with the officials to get the reality going the right way... and also to feel confident that what you are doing about it is actually going to work”.⁹⁹

Lynne Featherstone, a Home Office minister at the time of the 2011 riots, said that when she saw the news she rang one of (then home secretary) Theresa May's advisers to say: “We need to get a minister out there and I think it needs to be me because I think I am duty minister.”^{*100} Ministers may need to push the department to ensure that it is considering properly how its response is being seen externally if they do not think its approach is sufficient.

On the other hand, as John Whittingdale found when dealing with a cyber-attack on an internet company while secretary of state at DCMS, it may be better to allow officials to manage things when they are the experts: “That was an area of policy I wasn't that familiar [with]... so I was quite reliant on the officials in sort of talking me through it”.¹⁰¹ Letting officials get on with tackling the detail of the issue, while asking the right questions, focusing on external communication and showing 'grip', can be the most effective approach for a minister facing a crisis.

Crises can present opportunities as well as risks. Jim Knight, reflecting on his ministerial career under Blair and Brown, said that he “really liked crises, because that's when you get things done”.¹⁰² during a crisis “we've just got to get things done and not worry so much about the politics, not worry so much about anything but get it done, do the right thing. And actually, that's great.” For Gregory Barker, crises “brought out the best in people”.¹⁰³

Getting on the front foot, showing that the government is taking the issue seriously and making the most of the opportunities, will mean that a crisis does not have to become a permanent problem.

Managing the diary

For any minister, diary management is an essential skill. Hugo Swire said that “the biggest bugbear and the biggest challenge was the diary, which was planned way ahead”.¹⁰⁴ There are numerous demands on a minister's time, including meeting organisations interested in their policy portfolio, reading advice from officials,

* The duty minister is the member of the ministerial team on call outside of usual office hours, during holidays or when other ministers are abroad.

travelling around the country or internationally, fulfilling their responsibilities as a constituency MP and, hopefully, carving out some time for their personal life.

Ed Vaizey said that “I did not manage my diary very well [while at DCMS]. I tended to meet a lot of people.”¹⁰⁵ The pressure to hold lots of meetings can come from outside groups, the department or ministers themselves: Gregory Barker told us that “we’d always aim for thinking time or time to be political... but in practice, invariably things are crowded into my diary not least because I was my own worst enemy in wanting to see people, wanting to discuss things face-to-face”.¹⁰⁶

Ministers can easily find that their diary fills up, particularly because their private offices tend to work on the assumption that they should be busy all the time.

For some ministers, travel will take up a large part of their diary. Those with domestic responsibilities will often travel around the country to visit the public service(s) they oversee, or to visit businesses and other organisations affected by their policy decisions. Former ministers have stressed how beneficial these visits are. Ben Bradshaw said: “I always thought it was very important to try to get out of the Westminster bubble on visits.”¹⁰⁷

Likewise, Simon Hughes remembered that he “tried to go out from London once every week as much as possible and [I] felt good about that. So, for example, as somebody looking after women offenders, I went to every single women’s prison at least once.”¹⁰⁸

Ministers in departments with an international remit – such as the Foreign Office, Ministry of Defence, DfID and the Department for International Trade – can expect to be abroad regularly, which means they will need to be even more careful in managing their diary when at home.

Hugh Robertson explained his schedule as a Foreign Office minister: “One had to be out of the country visiting, out visiting and doing things, three weeks in every four. And then on the fourth week you were duty minister, and so everything landed on your desk.”¹⁰⁹ Alan Duncan, a long-serving DfID and then Foreign Office minister, reflected that “there is quite a lot of variety in the DfID job. On the one hand you are dealing with primitive toilets in Bangladesh, the next thing you are at a meeting of a development bank in New York.”¹¹⁰

And of course, some ministers will need to travel far to return to their constituencies each week. Jo Swinson, who represents East Dunbartonshire, said that:

“I was used to, during the parliamentary week, physically not being able to be in my constituency. I did it once and resolved never to do it again. You know, you do the 1,600 miles in a week rather than the 800 and it didn’t leave me in a very good state to be working.”¹¹¹

Ministers will need to decide how often they can get back to their constituency and how they manage their ministerial work when outside London.

With all these demands on their time, ministers' diaries can easily get overwhelming. Stephen Crabb advised ministers: "Don't be afraid to say no to things in the diary... be clear about what the meetings are there for and what is expected at the end of them."¹¹² He discussed his priorities for the diary with his departmental diary secretary and "after a bit of trial and error we got a structure that worked well".

Hugo Swire found it helpful to discuss all the aspects of his diary together: "I used to have my wife come in sometimes, Sue [from his House of Commons office] would come over, my diary secretary would be there and they'd literally be bidding for bits of me!"¹¹³ Actively managing the diary is an essential task for any minister.

Managing the relationship with No.10 and the Treasury

While the secretary of state will represent the department at Cabinet and be ultimately responsible for negotiations with the Treasury on spending, any minister will have to deal with No.10 and the Treasury at some point.

Along with the Cabinet Office, these two departments form the 'centre of government', and take an interest in everything else going on across other departments. Steve Brine explained how this worked, saying:

"I hadn't appreciated how the whole policy and SpAd network is repeated in No.10 as it is in each department. They have a mini health department at No.10. I didn't know that, and it takes a while to get to grips with that."¹¹⁴

Liberal Democrat Nick Harvey, who served as a junior minister at the Ministry of Defence, explained how he was "astonished by the extent to which No.10 and the Treasury and the Cabinet Office stuck their nose into departmental affairs".¹¹⁵

The relationship between officials in the central government departments and a policy department can affect how much a minister can actually get done. Tracey Crouch said that "most departments are quite frightened of the Treasury, which I'm not sure is necessarily very healthy"¹¹⁶ as it meant that the Treasury could overrule the priorities of other departments.

Officials may be more nervous when they know that No.10 and/or the Treasury are interested in a particular departmental policy area. With No.10 in particular there will be a greater focus on the presentation of policies, while if the Treasury is involved in discussions officials will want to ensure that departmental budgets are protected.

While junior ministers may not get much time to discuss issues with the prime minister or chancellor, they can use personal relationships with those in the central departments to advance their own policy priorities. As pensions minister, Steve Webb "would ring Danny [Alexander, then chief secretary to the Treasury]"¹¹⁷ if he needed an issue unblocking at the Treasury. Similarly, David Willetts would try to look at things from the Treasury's point of view, taking "items that were in the BIS [Department for Business, Innovation and Skills] ask list, but re-presented and re-prioritised in accordance with what I knew [the Treasury's] priorities were".¹¹⁸

Patricia Hewitt had similar advice:

“Really understand what your prime minister wants and expects, and then stay very close to [the] prime minister or No.10 and [the] chancellor and his or her special advisers, because you’re going to need that to make things happen.”¹¹⁹

Managing two ministerial jobs

Some prime ministers appoint junior ministers to two (and occasionally more) departments, to oversee policy areas that are the responsibility of more than one department. These joint ministers are often appointed to deal with high-profile issues.

In 2015, for example, David Cameron appointed Richard Harrington as minister for Syrian refugees, working across the Home Office and the Departments for Local Government and International Development to settle Syrian refugees in communities across the UK. And in summer 2019, Boris Johnson appointed Johnny Mercer as minister for veterans’ affairs at the Ministry of Defence and the Cabinet Office.

These jobs can allow ministers to break down any divides that exist between different parts of government. As a minister Jo Swinson was responsible for equalities policy, an area shared between BEIS and DCMS. She said that double-hatting helped “in preventing the silo mentality”.¹²⁰

Ministers in joint roles may also be able to drive work forward more easily than if they were only working in one department. Nick Boles, who was minister for skills 2014–16, working in BEIS and DfE, said that “neither secretary of state was my boss, completely”, which meant that “neither of my immediate bosses were in complete control of apprenticeships policy, and I knew that I could sell the idea to the chancellor and the PM”.¹²¹

However, other ministers working across two departments have found that it adds to the difficulty of the job. Damian Green, who worked as a junior minister in both the Home Office and Ministry of Justice during the coalition, said that “most of all you are trying to work to two bosses who may well have two different agendas, and indeed there is an inherent tension between the home secretary and the justice secretary whoever it is”.¹²²

Even where there is agreement between the two secretaries of state about the policy agenda, working in multiple departments can mean more bureaucracy. Harrington said that when he became minister for Syrian refugees, he told prime minister Cameron that “no one can have three private offices, it’s all got to be under one roof”¹²³ – something echoed by Nick Boles, who said that “this idea of having two offices... I just thought all that was nonsense”.¹²⁴

Damian Green even noted that on one occasion, “I was required to write to myself as one minister in a department to another, demanding that something happen”.¹²⁵

An appointment as a joint minister can be a fulfilling opportunity to make things happen; Harrington described his time wearing three departmental hats to settle Syrian refugees as “the most fundamentally worthwhile thing I’ve done in government”.¹²⁶ But ministers must be careful that these jobs do not just create more bureaucracy.

Managing the personal adjustment

Ministers of all ranks have discussed the pressure of the job; the “colossal” hours¹²⁷ and “relentless pressure”, with many ministers averaging a 15-hour working day.¹²⁸ Personal life, such as family and sleep, gets “squeezed out” as ministers balance the role with constituency and media work.¹²⁹

For Nicky Morgan, the key was to “try and not to exhaust yourself, because actually that’s the time when you become ill and then you lose perspective” – although this can obviously be difficult.¹³⁰

Andrew Mitchell, who was a junior minister in the Department of Social Security between 1995 and 1997, “used to try not to take work home during the week”.¹³¹ Since civil servants had to stay late with him, he felt that doing so made them “prioritise work instead of just lobbing it all into a red box”. But he would still have “six boxes most weekends”, which he used to “slightly resent” because it encroached on his home life.

The demands of the ministerial role also have to be balanced with constituency work, especially in more contested seats. As Mark Francois, a minister in more than one department under Cameron, put it:

“The constituents want you in the constituency. The civil servants want you in the department. Your political colleagues want you in Parliament. Trying to keep everybody happy can be quite a challenge.”¹³²

John Healey found that it helped to remind his private office, on arriving, that he was “an MP as well and for me first and foremost I’m elected to do that job”.¹³³ He would organise “an away-day for the private ministerial office in the constituency, where they met the constituency team and saw for themselves what we did in Rotherham and what life was like”. He then set boundaries: “They could have me Monday to Thursday, but on Friday and Saturday I was full time an MP and dad, and Sunday I was a dad.”

Liberal Democrat minister Chris Huhne made it clear, too, that “the department didn’t get me on Friday.”¹³⁴

Whether constituency or family commitments, Alan Johnson and others found that a minister’s private office will “facilitate... if at all possible... because they’ll want to help you do this job and it is 24/7 – a way of life more than a job.”¹³⁵ At the same time, Jacqui Smith said that it is important to “be realistic about the fact that being a minister is damn hard work and frankly if you say, ‘I don’t want to do any work at the weekend’, you are probably being wholly unrealistic about what being a minister is about”.¹³⁶

The different ranks of junior minister can also make a difference to workload. George Young, who held a number of ministerial positions under Margaret Thatcher, John Major and David Cameron, said that “the big jump for me was going from PUSS [parliamentary under-secretary of state] to minister of state under [Michael] Heseltine, partly because there was a lot of delegation to ministers of state”.¹³⁷

When junior ministers are promoted to minister of state level, they may find the demands on their time increase even further.

Former ministers have suggested several mechanisms for coping with these day-to-day pressures. Jack Straw, who served in the last Labour government, said one of the most important pieces of advice he had for new ministers was “go to the gym”, because “if I’d not taken exercise throughout the period I wouldn’t have coped as well as I did in government”, both as it enabled him to keep fit and spend time with others.¹³⁸ For Huhne, it was crucial to keep fit in order to be able to operate at the “actually quite abnormal” pace of ministerial life.¹³⁹

Nick Clegg, although in a more senior role as deputy prime minister, “switched basic habits” a year into government:

“I smoked less, did more exercise, bought a rowing machine, which was put in a cubby hole down the corridor in the Cabinet Office. I would not read the box late at night and instead I would go to bed a bit earlier... one of my top recommendations would be work out how you can remain physically strong and resilient and not be silly about how little one sleeps.”¹⁴⁰

Establishing a routine will help manage the pressures of ministerial office. Regardless, Desmond Swayne, who served as minister of state for international development from 2014 to 2016, found that “being a minister... never finishes; you could spend every hour of every day doing the job”.¹⁴¹

Although this sentiment is echoed across our interviews with former junior ministers, many also make a point of how much they enjoyed the role. While Patrick McLoughlin said that sometimes “you just wanted to climb under your desk and try to lock the doors”, he nevertheless found his time as a minister “incredibly rewarding and great fun” overall.¹⁴²

If a new minister takes care of themselves, with the help of their private office, it should be possible to heed Hugo Swire’s advice: “It’s a tremendous privilege and it comes to an end – so enjoy it!”¹⁴³

Conclusion – how to do the job well

All new ministers will want to hit the ground running, whether they are appointed after an election or a reshuffle. Ministers' tenure is rarely long, and there is no guarantee of how long they will be in position, so it is important to make the most of the time available.

Those who come in with no government experience at all, as opposed to moving from another ministerial role, may well find the transition bewildering. Knowing how to approach the role – even if the policy content is unknown – will help any aspiring minister make the most of their time in office. The following are our four key takeaways for new ministers.

1. Have clear priorities

Throughout all of the Institute for Government's [work with former ministers](#), those we spoke to have stressed the need to have clear policy priorities and a plan for how they will be implemented. The civil service will respond if given direction. This does not mean reinventing the wheel, and the extent of policy change depends largely on the political climate and department; it may simply mean continuing the work of the predecessor or carrying out the wishes of the secretary of state. In any case, giving a clear steer to the civil service and paying attention to implementation will go a long way to ensuring the best outcomes.

2. Decide how to run your private office

The private office is there to work for the minister. Private office staff prepare the minister's boxes and diary, and act as 'gatekeepers' of their time and attention. Incoming ministers must communicate how they want this to be done; a conversation with the diary manager early on will make the role easier. Factoring in time for Parliament, constituency visits, home life and deciding how the ministerial box should be prepared are all important things to consider.

3. Build strong relationships across government and Parliament

Working collaboratively with other ministers and SpAds across government – as well as with the civil service – will help you avoid blockages and make progress on priorities. Recognising the importance of Parliament and maintaining relationships with fellow MPs will also help get things done.

4. Make time for your constituency and personal life

The ministerial role is only one of the many responsibilities held by junior ministers. It is a demanding role, and it is important to not neglect relationships in constituencies, as well as to make time for family – and rest. Ministerial roles are hard work, and those holding them will need to find their own way to juggle the various competing tasks that they face.

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