

How ministers can lead during a crisis





“ Crises happen in life; the test is whether you make a drama out of it or whether you maintain your aim. ”

Ben Wallace
Secretary of state for defence (2019–23)

Ministerial leadership during crises

Crises are among the greatest challenges a minister will face while in office. This guide brings together lessons from previous ministers, senior officials, heads of public bodies and others so ministers can think about how they can be most effective during a crisis.

The guide is divided into three main sections – preparing for a crisis, during a crisis and after the immediate crisis has passed. Each section sets out questions you can ask yourself and your team to ensure that you have the right support in place and know what to prioritise when dealing with a crisis.

This is just part of the support that the IfG provides to ministers and their teams. We have developed an in-depth workshop on crisis response, allowing you and your colleagues to think about how you would work together to deal with these situations when they occur. And our in-depth paper, available on our website, looks in more detail at how ministers have successfully responded to crises in the past.

If you would like more details, contact us at ifgacademy@instituteforgovernment.org.uk



CABINET OFFICE

“ **The pre-crisis stage is crucial for effective crisis management. The early identification of emerging risks can enable timely responses to prevent a crisis from materialising, or facilitate the necessary contingency planning to reduce impacts of a crisis if manifested.** ”

Cabinet Office Amber Book

Preparing for a crisis

Ministers face many demands on their time – their focus is often on delivering their priorities or responding to day-to-day issues. But all governments face crises and it is crucial that ministers think about longer-term risks: the agenda that they seek to achieve could be thrown off course by a crisis.

Understand your key risks and how government manages crises

- What does your department’s risk register say?
- What are the things you are most worried about in your portfolio?
- Have you consulted the National Risk Register and the Cabinet Office’s Amber Book on crisis management?

Identify the key people you will rely on in a crisis

- Do you understand who is responsible for what, both within the department and across the wider system and sector?
- Do you have relationships with them and their agencies/ organisations already? How can you build them if not? Do you have a shared view of what could go wrong and how you would respond to it?
- Do you have good relationships with your immediate team? How can you build these relationships ahead of any potential crisis?

Cultivate an open culture so people can raise problems

- Have you encouraged officials to raise problems with you before they become full-blown crises?
- Are you clear that you want to hear disagreement and challenge from officials?
- Do you have a good understanding of how frontline staff, as well as those in the department, view potential risks?

Consider using drills or exercises to rehearse crisis response

- Would you find drills or 'war-games' useful to find out how you and the department can respond to crises?
- Do you know where to access these kind of opportunities? If not, can you ask your private office to help arrange them?
- How can you ensure that you and the department learn lessons from any drills, so that if a real crisis hits you are better prepared?

Consider how you will personally approach a crisis

- What do you want to learn about before a crisis hits?
- Who can support you to build necessary knowledge or skills?
- How are you likely to react to high-pressure situations?

During a crisis

Once a crisis hits, there are various roles ministers need to play. Different types of crises require different types of response, and your ability to influence the response will also vary depending on the situation.

As a minister, you are only one actor among many involved in the response, but there are certain things that only ministers can do. You will probably play different roles at different times, depending on the situation, your personal preferences, and the reaction of the rest of government, parliament and the public.

The key roles that ministers play during a crisis are:



Decision maker



Problem solver



Convenor




Team leader



Cross-government leader



Communicator

A photograph of two men in suits. The man in the foreground is Alistair Darling, looking to the right. The man in the background is wearing glasses and looking forward. A dark blue rectangular box with white text is overlaid on the bottom half of the image. The text is a quote by Alistair Darling. The quote is enclosed in quotation marks, with a double quote on the left and a single quote on the right. The quote reads: "Within any crisis – whether it's a banking crash, or the trains not running on time – there's big things you need to sort... you learn to focus on the things that matter and then let the other things look after themselves." Below the quote, the name "Alistair Darling" and his title "Chancellor of the exchequer (2007–10)" are written in white text.

“ Within any crisis – whether it’s a banking crash, or the trains not running on time – there’s big things you need to sort... you learn to focus on the things that matter and then let the other things look after themselves. ”

Alistair Darling
Chancellor of the exchequer (2007–10)



Decision maker

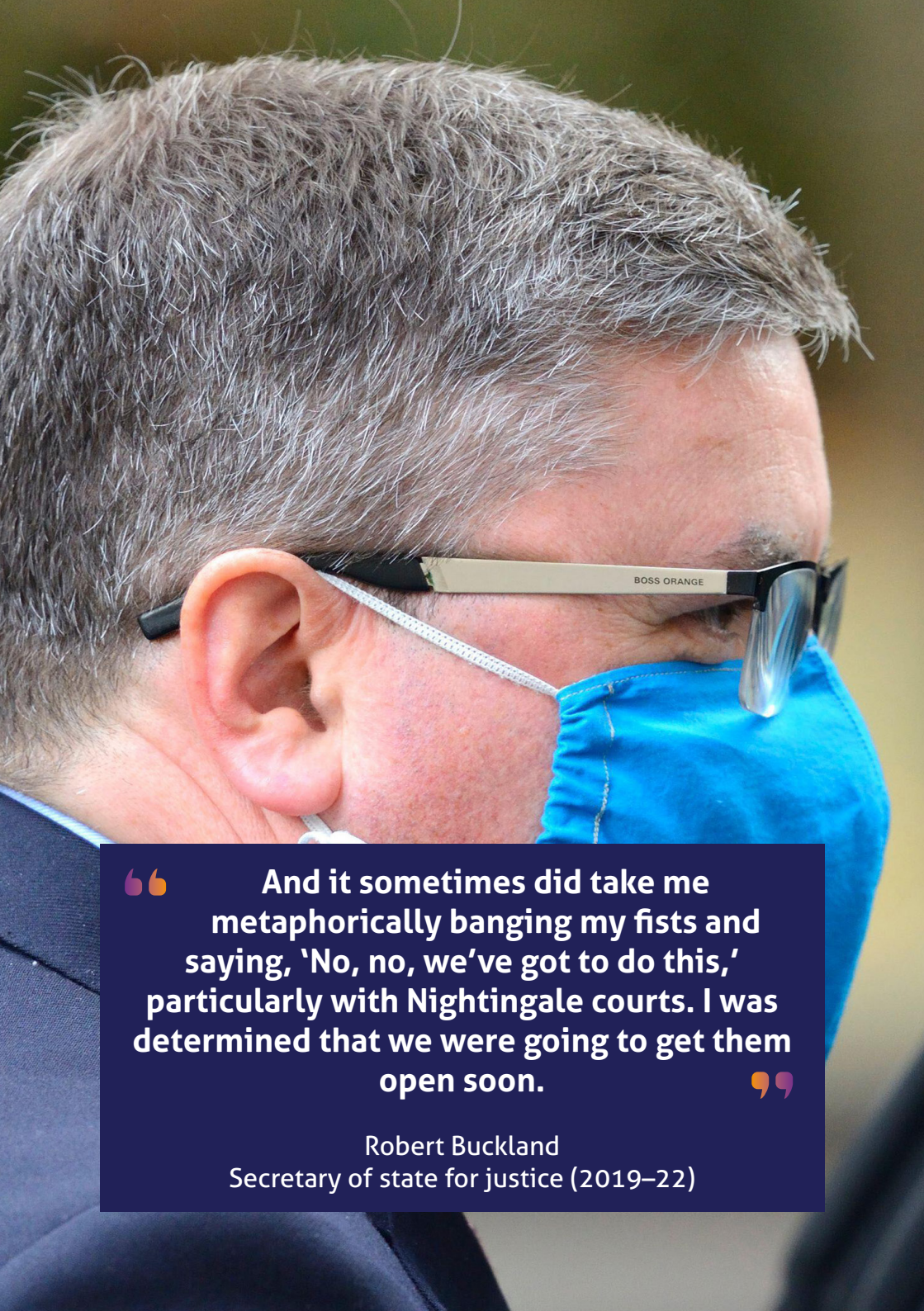
Crises require quick decisions about what to do, often in the face of incomplete information. Ministers' roles in decision-making will differ depending on the specific situation – they are unlikely to be taking operational decisions about on-the-ground responses – but they will play an active role in decisions about what different actors should do, how resources should be allocated or how to grapple with trade-offs.

Make sure you have the information and advice you need to make decisions

- Can you bring in other sources of information – from your constituency and party colleagues, for example?
- Does your department have the expertise it needs? If not, how can you bring it in?
- Are you prepared to make decisions even when the evidence is uncertain? How will you refine and iterate your decisions when new information emerges?

Set the priorities and parameters for what you want to happen

- Have you clarified to the department what is politically acceptable as an outcome?
- Are you ready to hold people to account for their work responding to the crisis?
- Have you identified the key issues you will prioritise, as well as those you will deprioritise?



And it sometimes did take me metaphorically banging my fists and saying, 'No, no, we've got to do this,' particularly with Nightingale courts. I was determined that we were going to get them open soon.



Robert Buckland
Secretary of state for justice (2019–22)



Problem solver

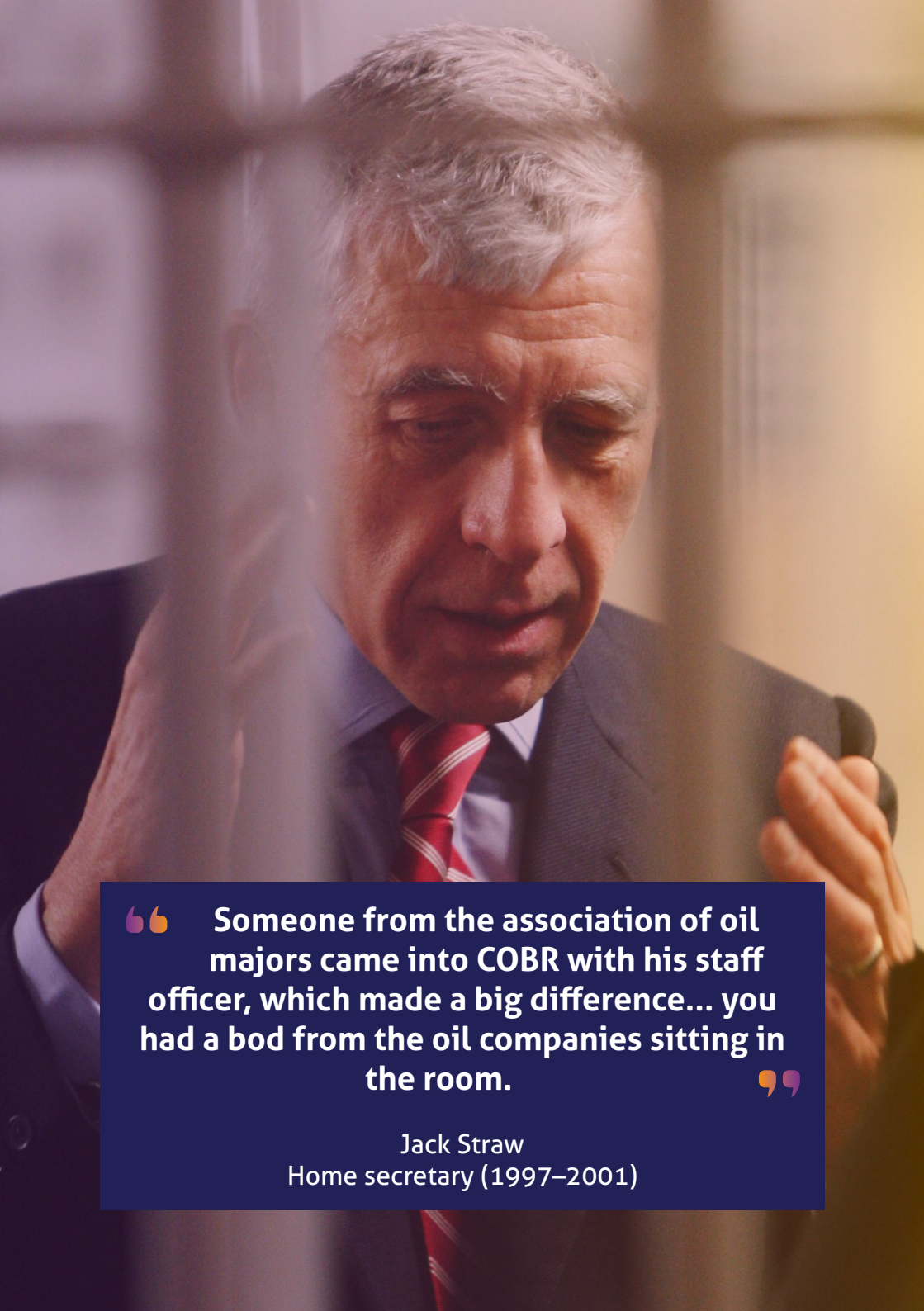
Crises are complex situations, where different organisations have different priorities and responsibilities. Ministers play an essential role in driving different actors to work together, and ensure that officials are implementing their decisions. Sometimes this means creating space for responding agencies to get on with their jobs, and sometimes it means confronting, challenging and pushing the system to do more.

Identify how you can support responding agencies to do their job

- Have you been clear on which agency or agencies are in charge of the response?
- Where necessary, will you provide cover for the key responders, by dealing with the media attention and political criticisms?

Make sure to constructively challenge what officials are doing

- Have you asked officials what they don't know?
- Can you provide cover for officials to be more ambitious/react quicker/think outside the box?
- How can you use your position or your relationships to unblock or short-circuit bureaucracy?



“ Someone from the association of oil majors came into COBR with his staff officer, which made a big difference... you had a bod from the oil companies sitting in the room. ”

Jack Straw
Home secretary (1997–2001)



Convenor

Assembling the right people – and getting them to work together – is key in a crisis. Part of this is having established relationships before a crisis breaks out, but ministers will not always have this luxury and will need to be able to build new relationships at speed – they need to know who to bring into the room and when.

Think about how you will build relationships quickly

- Who are the other people you need to hear from, whether inside or outside government?
- Where you do not already have a relationship with key individuals, how will you get up to speed quickly?
- How can you draw on others' relationships (other ministers, senior officials, other politicians) to connect you with the people you need to work with?

Use your position to convene the right people at the right time

- When do you want to bring in different groups?
- Who do you not want to hear from?



“ I had to reassure the National Cyber Security Centre that they were doing the right thing and make sure that they had the confidence to deliver the right message, a reassuring message. ”

Amber Rudd
Home secretary (2016–18)



Team leader

Ministers can be pulled in different directions by competing demands in a crisis – they need to delegate effectively. To do this, ministers need trust in the immediate team around them. Where ministers build a unified team, all pulling in the same direction, they can quickly get the information they need and make decisions effectively with the confidence that they will be delivered.

Support the resilience of your team

- Are you leading by example in taking care of your wellbeing?
- Can you encourage others to maintain their own and the department's effectiveness by taking breaks and sharing tasks?

Make sure the wider ministerial team are working well together

- How can you get the most out of your colleagues?
- Is there further experience you need in your immediate team?
How can you bring it in?



“ COBR is designed to try and you know, give everybody a kind of proverbial kick up the backside and get things moving. So, when you had DCLG ministers who were being harangued by the prime minister to sort this out, 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. ”

George Eustice
Secretary of state for the environment, food and rural
affairs (2020–22)



Cross-government leader

Crises will often have knock-on consequences for a range of government departments, especially beyond the initial phase. It is therefore essential for one minister to act as a clear point-person for the government. With a constantly evolving situation, there needs to be a strong mandate and clear lines of accountability for those responding to the crisis.

Decide whether you want to convene COBR

- If not COBR, who will you want to attend cross-government meetings?
- How can you get the rest of government to work together to help deal with the crisis?

Keep the prime minister up to date on the situation

- Do you know what the prime minister's priorities are?
- Do you know the best way to keep the PM and their team up to date?
- Can you make use of your personal relationship with the prime minister, or other senior ministers, to bring in their expertise or political capital to support the government's response?



“ [Visits] brought benefits in purely, we underline and continue to underline the fact that national government wasn't walking away from these areas or moving on and turning our attention to other things, because they were still struggling. ”

John Healey
Minister for floods recovery (2007–08)



Communicator

Ministers play a central role in communicating about crises – explaining both what is happening and what the government is doing about it. Different audiences, including individuals and organisations directly impacted, the public at large and political audiences – will require different types of communication so that confidence in the response is maintained.

Identify the key audiences you need to communicate with

- What are the messages you need to get across?
- Who is the best messenger?

Make a plan for how you will communicate with those most affected

- Will you visit the site(s) of the crisis? What will your objectives for the visit be?
- How will you get information from the operational agencies responding to the crisis?
- How will you bring back what you learn into the decision-making process?

Make a plan for communicating with the general public

- What are the key points you want people to understand?
- How will you divide up communication with expert advisers?
- What do you not know? And how will you explain that?
- How will you ensure your policy response can be clearly explained?

Make a plan for communicating with parliament and other politicians

- What are your messages for MPs whose constituencies are affected?
- How will you keep parliament up to date on what has happened, and what the government is doing?
- Are there politicians from other parties – whether MPs, devolved governments, mayors or local authorities – who you'll need to work with?

After the immediate crisis has passed

With the demands upon a minister's time, it is easy for a crisis to slip from view once the immediate risks have been dealt with. But the end of the initial response to a crisis does not mean that the impacts or underlying causes go away. Ensuring that recovery efforts continue and that there is time for reflection is also part of a minister's role.

Maintain a longer-term focus on recovery

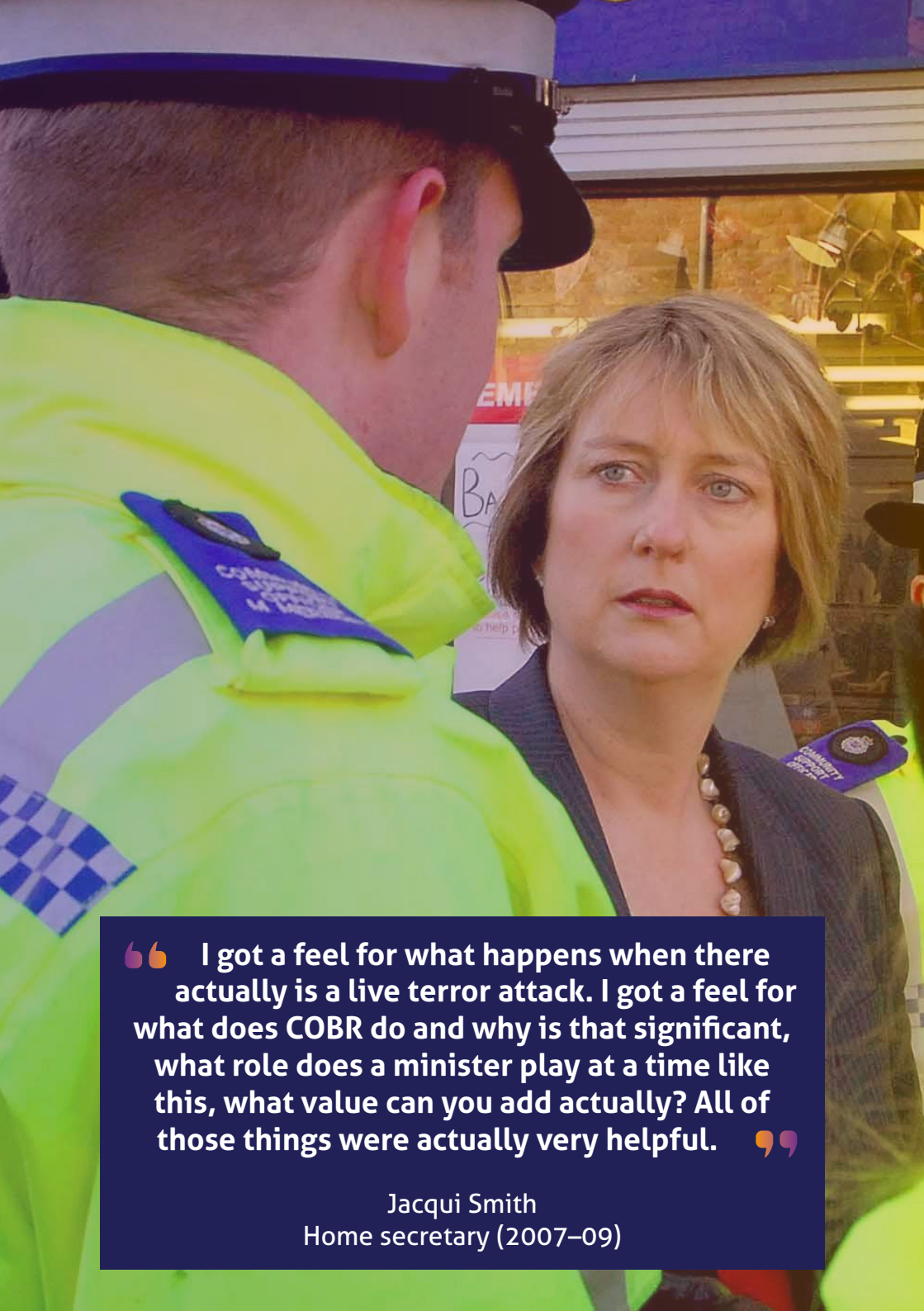
- What processes are in place to support affected communities and address the causes of the crisis?
- Do relevant agencies – public bodies, local authorities and others – have the support they need to focus on recovery?

Ensure the government learns lessons after the crisis

- Does the department need to review what happened?
- Are there clear things to do differently in future?
- Are there useful exercises you, the department and wider organisations can use to prepare for future potential crises?

Reflect on your own performance during the crisis

- What would you do differently in the future?
- What advice would you give to someone in a similar situation?

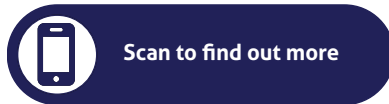


“ I got a feel for what happens when there actually is a live terror attack. I got a feel for what does COBR do and why is that significant, what role does a minister play at a time like this, what value can you add actually? All of those things were actually very helpful. ”

Jacqui Smith
Home secretary (2007–09)

Find out more

Read our in-depth report into how ministers can effectively lead crisis responses and find out more about how the IfG Academy can support you and your team.



All ministerial quotes taken from the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect interviews, except: Ben Wallace, p2, taken from *Crisis What Crisis?* by Andy Coulson; and Jack Straw, p12, taken from author interview with Jack Straw.

The Institute for Government is the UK's leading think tank promoting government effectiveness.

Founded in 2008, we work with all the main political parties and with public servants in Westminster, Whitehall and across the UK, providing fresh thinking through research, events and leadership development.

Find out more about the IfG Academy:



www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ifg-academy



[@ifgacademy.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/@ifgacademy)



ifgacademy@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

