



House of Commons
Public Accounts Committee

EU Exit: Get ready for Brexit Campaign

Fourth Report of Session 2019–21

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

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The Committee of Public Accounts

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Publication

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Bradley Albrow (Second Clerk), Hajera Begum (Committee Assistant), Jessica Bridges-Palmer (Media Officer), Ameet Chudasama (Senior Committee Assistant), Richard Cooke (Clerk) and Shai Jacobs (Chair Liaison).

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Summary

Last year's Get ready for Brexit campaign (the campaign) had a budget of £100 million and was launched on 1 September 2019. Despite spending £46 million of taxpayers' money, the Cabinet Office was unable to demonstrate that the campaign led to people being better prepared for the UK leaving the EU on 31 October. Planning started too late with insufficient attention paid at the outset to understanding what businesses needed, or how to monitor and evaluate the campaign's success; thereby undermining the Cabinet Office's ability to steer the campaign effectively. Too much was spent on the mass advertising elements of the campaign designed to raise awareness and not enough on targeted activity which would get people to take action.

When the transition period for the UK's exit from the EU ends, it will result in significant changes for many people and businesses. When that happens, it will be vital that citizens are well prepared. Whether it be a member of the public planning to drive abroad, or a company trading across borders, all will need to understand, in good time, what action they should take and by when. In its next campaign preparing citizens and businesses for the end of the transition period, the Cabinet Office must learn from the mistakes of the Get ready for Brexit campaign.

As well as preparing the campaign for the end of the transition period, the Cabinet Office is also at the forefront of delivering the government's public health information campaign on Covid-19. We are concerned that the Cabinet Office may lack the capacity to successfully deliver two such important campaigns and may also overload the public's ability to receive and act on the messages.

Introduction

The Get ready for Brexit campaign had a budget of £100 million and was launched on 1 September 2019. It was led by the Cabinet Office with support from civil servants from across government departments. The campaign aimed to ensure that everyone was prepared for the UK leaving the EU on 31 October. The campaign comprised two main parts: an air campaign designed to raise awareness; and a ground campaign which aimed to provide tailored information to encourage specific groups, such as hauliers, to take action. Having cost £46 million, the campaign was stopped on 28 October when an extension to the UK's membership of the EU to 31 January 2020 was agreed. The UK and EU are now in a transition period while a new relationship, including a trade agreement, is negotiated. This transition period is due to end on 31 December 2020.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. **It will be essential to give businesses sufficient information in good time to enable them to be prepared for the end of the transition period.** When the transition period for the UK's exit from the EU ends, businesses will need to be ready to respond to new trade arrangements. Businesses have frequently stressed the importance of having information far enough in advance to allow them to prepare, and this Committee has previously commented on the late delivery of information as a weakness of the government's EU exit planning. By July 2019, some government departments were reporting an urgent need to communicate with target audiences, including businesses, about action they might need to take. Yet the Cabinet Office did not start detailed planning for the campaign until the end of July 2019 and launched it on 1 September 2019 – just two months before the UK was expected to leave the EU on 31 October 2019. This left citizens and businesses with very little time to prepare.

Recommendation: *The Cabinet Office should set out, as part of its Treasury Minute response, what specific actions it has taken to prepare an effective and timely communication campaign in for the end of the transition period.*

2. **The Cabinet Office may lack the capacity to successfully deliver campaign messages on preparations for the end of the transition period at the same time as delivering the major public health campaign on Covid-19.** The Cabinet Office tells us that it is building its transition campaign team and learning lessons from the previous campaigns. However, some of the communications team have been transferred to work on the significant coronavirus public health information campaign, which is likely to continue for some time. We are concerned about whether the Cabinet Office will have sufficient capacity to work effectively on both campaigns simultaneously. It is likely that the Covid-19 campaign will crowd out the transition campaign. Businesses and the public may not have the capacity to act on both sets of messages. Currently the focus is on Covid-19. The Cabinet Office acknowledges the challenge but told us it would be possible to run both campaigns.

Recommendation: *The Cabinet Office should be actively reviewing its ability to deliver simultaneously two major public information campaigns and the ability of citizens to absorb the vital messages on each. As part of its Treasury Minute response, the Cabinet Office should set out what it has done, and is doing, to ensure it has capacity to deliver both campaigns simultaneously.*

3. **The Cabinet Office did not focus enough on what behaviour change it needed to deliver or how to measure it.** The campaign was designed to not only increase awareness but also to lead people to actually change their behaviour and take specific action. However, the Cabinet Office did not follow its own good practice and establish how it would monitor and evaluate the success of the campaign at the outset. We are concerned that the Cabinet Office could not demonstrate that the ground campaign resulted in action being taken by all the specific groups it sought to target. Just two of the 26 priority actions identified for citizens and businesses had a measurable target at the start of the campaign to suggest what success might look like. The Cabinet Office was able to demonstrate some impact such as increases in the number of passport renewal applications and applications for international

driving permits. Yet, without targets for the level of activity expected or needing to be taken by the target audience from the outset, the Cabinet Office could not measure or monitor whether the campaign was successful in delivering the impact required and steer the campaign effectively.

Recommendation: *Well in advance of the end of the transition period the Cabinet Office should ensure it is clear about the actions that it is seeking from businesses and members of the public, the degree of impact required, and how it will measure that impact across all activity.*

4. **The Cabinet Office did not focus sufficiently on what value it would derive from spending £100 million.** In its business case the Cabinet Office examined four options for the campaign, ranging in budget up to £100 million. The £100 million option was designed to reach 99.9% of the population on average 65 times and was the only option to include extensive on-the-ground activity such as business readiness roadshows. Even then the Cabinet Office decided to allocate more than half of the £100m budget to the air campaign, despite believing that on-the-ground activity would have more impact. The business case did not attempt to quantify the different impacts the options would deliver in terms of preparatory action. The Accounting Officer accepted that there were value for money questions over the scale of the budget, but not enough to seek a ministerial direction and instead decided to rely on the creation of an assurance panel.

Recommendation: *The Cabinet Office should write to the Committee within three months of this report to provide clear and specific assurance that in future it will use the analysis of options in business cases to drive decision making and deliver better value for the taxpayer.*

5. **The lessons learnt from running a large and complex integrated cross-government campaign at pace will be essential for future campaigns.** Learning the lessons from its earlier campaign in advance of the previous March 2019 leaving date, the Cabinet Office decided to incorporate all EU exit communications by departments within the Get ready for Brexit Campaign. This close-working and coordination by the communications team across multiple departments meant target audiences received integrated messages. The ground campaign, involving teams in 15 different departments, used different approaches aimed at targeting more specific audiences, such as businesses trading at the border and hauliers. The Cabinet Office has drawn on the NAO's findings to inform its own evaluation of the campaign and there is broad agreement on the lessons to be learned from it.

Recommendation: *The Cabinet Office should write to the Committee within one month of this report setting out how it plans to act upon the lessons learned.*

1 Delivering the campaign

1. On the basis of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, we took evidence from the Cabinet Office about its ‘Get ready for Brexit’ public information campaign, carried out in preparation for the UK’s planned exit from the European Union on 31 October 2019.¹

2. On 1 September 2019, the government launched the ‘Get ready for Brexit’ public information campaign. The campaign objective was to ensure that everyone was prepared for leaving the EU on 31 October—regardless of the negotiation outcome. The campaign was stopped on 28 October when the government and EU agreed an extension to the UK’s membership of the EU to 31 January 2020, the date the UK left the EU. The overall campaign was led by the Cabinet Office. The executive director of government communications was the senior responsible owner, supported by other civil servants from the Cabinet Office, the Department for Exiting the European Union and other departments.²

3. The campaign comprised two main components: termed the ‘air’ and ‘ground’ campaigns.

- The air campaign was targeted at all UK residents and other relevant groups, and was intended to raise awareness of the UK’s commitment to leaving the EU on 31 October 2019, and to encourage people to use the information on the GOV.UK website to identify the steps they might need to take to prepare. It included advertising through TV, radio, digital and other outlets.
- The objective of the ground campaign was to build on the air campaign by providing information to targeted groups to encourage them to take action in 26 priority areas, for example hauliers moving goods between the EU and UK. It included non-digital activity such as roadshows and stakeholder events.³

4. The overall campaign budget was £100 million, including £56.7 million for the air campaign and £26.2 million for the ground campaign. The remaining £17.1 million was for activity to support both campaigns and included £3 million for central staffing and £11 million for developing GOV.UK. By the end of October, at the point at which the campaign was stopped, £46 million had been spent against an expected spend at that point of £53 million.⁴ The campaign followed a previous communications campaign run by the government in advance of 29 March 2019, the initial expected date of departure from the EU. This earlier campaign started in December 2018 and, by the end of April 2019, had cost the centre of government £15.2 million.⁵

Giving people sufficient time to prepare

5. At the end of the current transition period, new trade arrangements will come into force. There are likely to be significant changes presenting further challenges for businesses. It is essential that businesses, in particular smaller businesses, have time to

1 C&AG’s Report, *EU Exit: the Get ready for Brexit campaign*, Session 2019–20, HC 22, 28 January 2020

2 C&AG’s Report, paras 3, 5

3 C&AG’s Report, para 4

4 C&AG’s Report, paras 6, 1.13

5 C&AG’s Report, para 1.4

prepare and that they receive clear information as far as possible in advance of changes taking effect. This Committee has heard before that lateness of preparation has been a common weakness in government planning.⁶

6. By July 2019 a number of departments were reporting an urgent need to communicate with target audiences about the action they might need to take ahead of 31 October 2019. Officials prepared options for a campaign during the last week of July, including the option for a campaign on a significantly larger and more intensive scale than that run ahead of 29 March. On 31 July 2019 the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced new funding for no-deal preparations, which included £100 million for a communications campaign. Usually government information campaigns are planned over many months, for example, the Cabinet Office's own guidance expects government TV campaigns to be worked-up five months before launch. The air campaign was launched within six weeks of the start of the planning stage.⁷

7. When asked why detailed planning of the campaign had not started earlier, the Cabinet Office pointed to having learned lessons from the campaign prior to March 2019, and was aware that the campaign for the October deadline would have to be a "much more impressive campaign at scale". It also referenced the change in Prime Minister and said that it had not been able to start the work of designing a campaign until it was clear on what Government and new Ministers in the Cabinet Office wanted and when.⁸

8. On the matter of lead-in time required before the end of the current transition period, the Cabinet Office said that the situation would be different to the position the UK faced at the end of October last year. It stressed that government communications with traders could now speak to there being a border to deal with, whatever kind of agreement is reached.⁹

9. The Cabinet Office said that there was 'a fair amount' of communication with business going on about what to do, led by HM Revenue & Customs and the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. But the big public information campaign had not yet started.¹⁰ The messages to be delivered by a campaign would depend on the outcome of negotiations and the precise relationship with the EU post-transition. Ministers would decide when to start a campaign. When asked how much notice it would need to run an effective campaign, the Cabinet Office said it would be good to know "as early as possible".¹¹

10. In oral evidence Cabinet Office officials were asked whether they had any concerns about running a publicly funded campaign on an issue of significant public controversy. They replied that they were satisfied that the campaign met the essential criteria of propriety, regularity and feasibility, and that the question of Value For Money had been "the closest to discuss".¹²

6 Q 53

7 C&AG's Report, para 10

8 Q 55

9 Qq 53, 81

10 Q 23

11 Qq 83, 84

12 Q 32

Measurement of behavioural change

11. The campaign objective was to ensure that everyone was prepared for leaving the EU on 31 October 2019—raising awareness of the commitment to leave on that date (air campaign) and getting those that needed to, to take action (ground campaign). The Cabinet Office identified 26 priority actions for citizens and businesses to take, which it sought to address through the ground campaign; four for UK residents, three for UK residents in the EU, four for EU citizens, 12 for businesses, and three for recipients of EU funds. For example, for businesses exporting to the EU the actions include the need to register for an economic operators registration and identification (EORI) number, and for UK nationals who want to drive in the EU to register for an International Driving Permit.¹³

12. The Cabinet Office used its own cross-government campaign planning guide, known as OASIS, to help develop the campaign. The Cabinet Office developed ‘OASIS’ bids for ground campaign funding but these bids did not consistently apply the OASIS principles. Of the 26 priority actions, 11 were not mentioned in the bids and, of the remaining 15, only two set out objectives (OASIS principle 1) and a plan for scoring and evaluating whether they were achieved (OASIS principle 5).¹⁴

13. The Cabinet Office acknowledged that “because this was done at pace, there was not much up-front articulation of exactly the metrics that we were trying to get to.” As well as the pace at which it was working, the Cabinet Office drew attention to the complexity of the campaign as having made things difficult.¹⁵ While accepting that it had not done the normal baselining and targeting for each metric, the Cabinet Office said it would be doing so next time. It also claimed that, by the end of the campaign, all 26 priority actions had been measured, albeit that it had not provided the evidence of that to us in advance of our evidence session or before that to the National Audit Office during its audit.¹⁶

14. We questioned whether the percentage of people who had looked or started to look for information to prepare—broadly unchanged at 34% despite the campaign—indicated success. The Cabinet Office noted that political uncertainty and strong opinions about the UK exiting the EU on 31 October 2019 had acted as a ‘drag-weight’ on the campaign’s impact.¹⁷ The Cabinet Office pointed to other indicators that showed the campaign was successful. For example: 42 million page views of GOV.UK; 73% campaign awareness; 65% of UK nationals in the EU checking the validity of their passport by the end of the campaign; 105,000 EORI applications; and applications to the EU settlement scheme increasing by 1 million over the course of the campaign.¹⁸ Passport renewal applications during the campaign were around a quarter higher than business-as-usual forecasts, and the number of international driving permits issued each week peaked at 15,658 in mid-October, compared to 8,451 five weeks earlier. However, the Cabinet Office had not set out what increases were likely to be needed.¹⁹ While reiterating the challenges of working

13 C&AG’s Report, paras 3, 4, Figure 3

14 C&AG’s Report, paras 2.14, 2.15, Figure 7 - “Objectives should be achievable, measurable – expressed numerically where possible, focused on outcomes not outputs and related to changing attitudes and/or behaviour. ... You should monitor inputs, outputs, outtakes and outcomes throughout your campaign and evaluate once it is complete.”

15 Q 21

16 Qq 22, 45

17 Qq 40, 41; C&AG’s Report, para 3.9

18 Qq 21, 46

19 C&AG’s Report, para 3.12

at such pace on this campaign, the Cabinet Office accepted that it had been lighter on targets than it would have liked because it lacked baseline data, and that it could have done better.²⁰

Maximising value from investment in the campaign

15. HM Treasury requires departments to prepare a full business case and to seek its approval for all programmes and projects above £5 million. The Cabinet Office's business case was approved by its Investment and Portfolio Committee on 13 August, given ministerial approval on 23 August, and by HM Treasury on 27 August. The business case noted that the £100 million budget had already been agreed by the Cabinet.²¹

16. The business case prepared by the Cabinet Office had presented four options: a 'do nothing' option, judged not to be feasible given the lack of preparedness; a £15 million campaign similar to the pre-March 2019 campaign; an up to £60 million campaign with more extensive actions to raise mass awareness; and an up to £100 million campaign which was the preferred and chosen option. The £100 million option was judged to have the potential to reach 99.9% of the population, on average 65 times via the air campaign. It was the only one to propose extensive targeted on-the-ground activity, such as business preparedness roadshows and other stakeholder events.²² The majority of the preferred £100 million option would still be for the air campaign to promote awareness, although the Cabinet Office had identified in the business case that it was the ground campaign that would get people to act. The business case did not attempt to quantify the potential impact of increased spending on the air campaign in prompting public action and therefore did not assess the additional value to be derived.²³

17. The Cabinet Office told us that it knew it had to increase awareness compared to the March campaign, which had hit 99% of the population 15, 16 or 17 times each but which had not been enough. The £60 million option was to get the increased awareness by getting to people more times in more of their circumstances. The £100 million option was the one that included the 'ground campaign'—the targeted audience activity that the Cabinet Office thought would change behaviour.²⁴ It also commented that it had 'down-weighted' the campaign significantly, with agreement from Ministers, after 7 October—carrying on because it was still possible that the UK would leave on 31 October without a deal, but recognising that this was less likely.²⁵ The Cabinet Office added that it had stopped on 28 October—a little earlier than expected but not a lot. It suggested that, had the UK left the EU on 31 October, there would have been massive activity at the last minute, and that this would have resulted in the behavioural change that the campaign had been intended to drive.²⁶

18. Given the increased scale of the campaign compared to the one run ahead of March 2019, and the choice of the most expensive business case option, and the extra money in that option to be spent on driving behavioural change, we asked whether the Permanent Secretary had at any stage thought about doing an Accounting Officer assessment or

20 Qq 43, 73

21 C&AG's Report, para 2.16

22 C&AG's Report, paras 2.17, Figure 9

23 C&AG's Report, para 9

24 Q 56

25 Q 37

26 Q 61

seeking a Ministerial Direction. He said that he had not because the first three components of an accounting officer assessment—regularity, propriety, and feasibility—were clear. “It was a legal thing to do. It was aligned with the Cabinet Office’s purpose and we were following the instructions of a Government. I believed that it was a feasible thing to do, I thought it was quite stretching, but I believed that it was feasible, and indeed that is what transpired.” He added that his area of concern was the value for money and that, given the amount of money, he had wanted more assurance on that. To which end he had asked for, among other things an assurance panel to be set up.²⁷ The EU Exit Campaign Assurance Panel was convened in August 2019 to provide professional oversight and challenge to the campaign.²⁸

27 Q 63

28 C&AG’s Report para 1.19, Figure 5

2 Considerations for the next campaign

Lessons learnt

19. The NAO's report recognised that the campaign spanned the work of many departments, and that the Cabinet Office team had coordinated and worked closely with them to integrate messages to their respective target audiences. For example, the ground campaign involved teams in 15 different departments. The public was made more aware of some of the things they might need to take action on. However, the Cabinet Office could not demonstrate that the air campaign resulted in significantly better preparedness and it was unclear whether the audiences targeted by the ground campaign went on to take the required action. We were similarly sceptical that targeting specific groups had led to action being taken and were concerned that, without outcome targets, the Cabinet Office did not know if the money spent had an impact. For example, we asked how many of the 700,000 copies of a haulier's handbook had been given out. The Cabinet Office confirmed that it did not know how or where these materials had been distributed. The NAO recommended that in future the Cabinet Office should, from the start, focus much more on what impact is needed and how the behaviour change required by government will be delivered. Its scrutiny of plans should place more emphasis on targeting resources on the combination of activities likely to add the greatest value, and there should be a more consistent focus on key performance metrics from an early stage.²⁹

20. The Cabinet Office said that the NAO's recommendations were lessons which were good and which it broadly accepted. It accepted that the relative lack of evaluation in the campaign was a fair challenge, said that evaluation of impact was something that it was keen to champion, and that it was fair criticism that there was not much up-front articulation of performance metrics.³⁰ The Cabinet Office said that it had done its own evaluation of the campaign with its own separate report. It said that that was broadly aligned with the NAO. It also commented on the lack of disagreement about the lessons to be learned among other groups such as its Strategy and Evaluation Council and Ministerial Board.³¹ The Cabinet Office confirmed that it had not assessed the return on investment for the campaign. It argued that specifying a return on investment would not be practical, given the 26 actions the campaign was driving at, and the fact that the UK did not leave the EU on 31 October, but said it had its own evaluation report, the NAO report, and would be happy to do further evaluation.³²

21. The Cabinet Office also said it would specifically: look at understanding more about the relationship between the air campaign for awareness and the ground campaign for activity and probably look to adjust the balance between the two; look to more targeted activity to drive behavioural change; and probably be more prioritised in the target audiences it chose to address. All of these points would improve the value for money of what it did next.³³ It also highlighted having learned from the previous March campaign about the need to bring together messages from different parts of government targeted at the same group.³⁴

29 Qq 57–60; Note dated 30 March 2020 from Cabinet Office; C&AG's Report, paras 15–17

30 Qq 20, 21

31 Qq 51, 67

32 Qq 67–69

33 Q 24

34 Q 55; C&AG's Report, para 2.13

22. The Cabinet Office stressed the importance of the lesson to ‘spend longer up front’.³⁵ It also acknowledged that “We must learn, we must do it better next time and we must use the time that we have got now to see if we can get better metrics, so that we can measure it.”³⁶ The Cabinet Office also said it would engage with industry earlier to find out what industry needed. It pointed to the potential for a more video-based and visual campaign, and more real-time data for the Cabinet Office to judge how well things were going and adjust if needs be.³⁷

23. The Cabinet Office accepted the need to learn lessons and improve. But it was also keen to stress, given the context that the campaign ran in and the pace of delivery, that it was proud of the campaign and considered it to have been successful overall.³⁸

Capacity to deliver a Brexit campaign alongside dealing with Covid-19

24. We took evidence from the Cabinet Office on 18 March 2020, five days before the Prime Minister’s televised address announcing social distancing measures and with the Cabinet Office already heavily involved in the expanding coronavirus public information campaign. With the transition period due to end on 31 December 2019, we were concerned about the capacity to deliver both campaigns simultaneously.

25. The Cabinet Office told us that it had an EU transition team, a Covid team, and behavioural science and evaluation teams which served both. Some people from the transition team were now working on Covid. It said that, while it would be a challenge, it could deal with both policies.³⁹ The Cabinet Office said that, in respect of communications, there was no question that Covid had become the Government’s main effort. But, while some resources had shifted to Covid, there were still some devoted to EU transition, and activity was still going on in other departments for managing the end of the transition period in December 2020.⁴⁰

26. We also asked whether the Cabinet Office considered it realistic to expect the public to receive two sets of important messages at the same time, and whether the Cabinet Office was advising Ministers on whether it was possible or sensible to deal with both simultaneously. The Cabinet Office said it was content to do both things, while recognising that there were very serious issues ahead. It would see how things develop and do what is asked of it by Ministers.⁴¹

35 Q 64

36 Q 73

37 Qq 74–77

38 Qq 41, 43, 51, 55

39 Q 25

40 Q 26

41 Qq 27–29

Formal minutes

Wednesday 20 May 2020

Virtual meeting

Members present:

Meg Hillier, in the Chair

Gareth Bacon

Mr Richard Holden

Olivia Blake

Gagan Mohindra

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown

Nick Smith

Dame Cheryl Gillan

James Wild

Peter Grant

Draft Report (*EU Exit: Get Ready for Brexit campaign*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 26 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Introduction agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Fourth of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Friday 22 May at 1:45pm]

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Wednesday 18 March 2020

Sir John Manzoni, Chief Executive of the Civil Service and Permanent Secretary, Cabinet Office, and **Alex Aiken**, Executive Director, Government Communications.

[Q1–86](#)

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

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Session 2019–21

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Second Report	Defence Nuclear Infrastructure	HC 86
Third Report	High Speed 2: Spring 2020 Update	HC 84