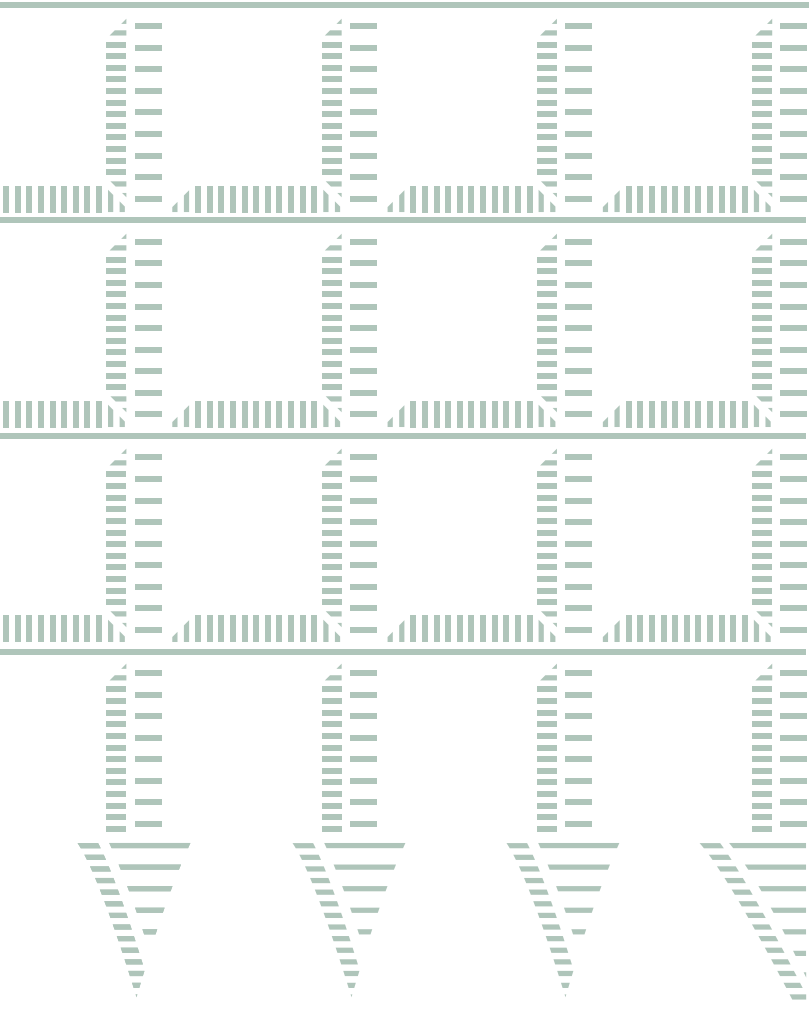


Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Trusted voices: Government response

Second Special Report of Session 2024–25

HC 292



Culture, Media and Sport Committee

The Culture, Media and Sport Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and its associated public bodies.

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The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No. 152. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

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Second Special Report

1. Our predecessor Culture Media and Sport Committee published its Sixth Report of Session 2023–24, [Trusted voices](#) (HC 175), on 12 April 2024. A letter from the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, and the Government response, was received on 2 October 2024 and is appended below.

Appendix 1: Letter from the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, dated 2 October 2024

Dear Dame Caroline,

I welcome the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee’s contribution to this important debate, and thank the previous Committee for the report on “Trusted Voices” of 26 March 2024. With the new Committee in the process of being re-formed, I note its conclusions and recommendations and enclose the government’s response to these issues.

The government broadly agrees with the previous Committee’s report, recognising that access to authoritative information is vital in protecting the public against misinformation and disinformation, and acknowledging that

trusted voices play a key role in effectively communicating information in an accessible way to the general public. Our response looks at the specifics of each of the recommendations.

As the previous Committee's report recommends a variety of measures across government, the response incorporates input from various government teams and departments to ensure a comprehensive and thorough reply.

Congratulations on your new role as the Chair of this Committee and I look forward to working with you.

Yours sincerely,

Baroness Maggie Jones

Minister for the Future Digital Economy and Online Safety

Appendix 2: Government Response

Introduction

The government is grateful to the House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee for their report on “Trusted Voices”. The report examines the contributing factors to establishing reliable, accurate sources of information, the role of trusted voices in today’s information landscape, and the role of media, the government and National Academies in acting as, and supporting, such voices.

The Committee’s report details how the internet has transformed the information landscape. Individuals’ new ability to widely disseminate information, both accurate and false, has created an abundance of information sources and facilitated the spread of misinformation and disinformation. The government agrees with the Committee that having access to authoritative information is vital in protecting the public against misinformation and disinformation, and acknowledges that having trusted voices to provide evidenced, accurate information in an accessible way is a pivotal part of this.

We take seriously the Committee’s recommendations and acknowledge the need to address the challenges posed by misinformation and disinformation. From Covid-19 to civil unrest following the attacks in Southport, misinformation and disinformation now represents a pervasive threat. The government believes that the spread of misinformation and disinformation requires a multi-faceted, whole of society approach, of which promoting authoritative information is just one key element. This issue cannot be addressed by a single strategy or sector alone.

That is why this response details a range of legislative and non-legislative actions from across government that address the environment in which misinformation and disinformation spreads. From the regulatory framework of the new Online Safety Act 2023 to our work on media literacy, there are many routes that we are exploring to tackle misinformation and disinformation.

This document sets out the government's response to the Committee's report which has highlighted several important matters for our attention. The structure of this paper corresponds to the conclusions and recommendations of the Committee and sets out our response to the points raised in the report. The responses to the Committee's recommendations are below:

1 What is a Trusted Voice?

Conclusion of the report: There is no one single trusted voice: different communities or demographics may turn to different ones. That is as it should be, but the more the media seeks to understand and reflect the diversity of the country, the more it can provide the trusted voices that are vital in providing accurate information and tackling misinformation where it arises. (Paragraph 25).

The government acknowledges the critical role that the media plays in the provision of trustworthy information. Public interest journalism plays an invaluable role in the fabric of our society, providing reliable, high-quality information, and the government is committed to supporting a free, sustainable and plural media landscape.

Journalism, particularly at a local level, plays a vital role in providing a sense of community connection - contributing to local economies, holding local public services to account, aiding social cohesion and offering a voice for all parts of local communities. Local newspapers have traditionally been a part of a community's identity and sense of place, enabling citizens to see their contributions and perspectives represented and talked about, which can help to foster a self-confident nation in which everyone feels that their contribution is valued as part of an inclusive national story. The importance of that role, and the wider media's provision of trustworthy information as a bulwark against mis and disinformation, was clearly illustrated during the August riots.

Society's shift online presents new challenges and opportunities to news media as well as to the provision of trustworthy information. We are committed to taking action to support broadcasters and news publishers in adapting to this shift, including in work on the next BBC Charter Review, and helping to support the sustainability of local journalism and the further development of community-based media.

This work will build on our implementation of legislation passed in the previous Parliament:

- The Media Act which will future-proof our broadcasting sector, enabling viewers and listeners across the UK to continue to access public service media content as technology changes, and repeals Section 40 of Crime and Courts Act 2013, which will help ensure our press remains free and independent.
- The Digital Markets, Competition and Consumer Act - which will, among many other things, help rebalance the relationship between news publishers and dominant online platforms, making a significant contribution to the sustainability of the press. Separately the legislation will make clear that it is not acceptable for foreign governments to gain ownership, control or influence of British newspapers, in particular for reasons of trust.
- The Online Safety Act – which has been designed to protect press and media freedom and includes robust provisions to ensure people can continue to access diverse news sources online.

2 Communicating with young people

Conclusion of the report: The recent growth of TikTok and decisions to disengage from or potentially ban the platform demonstrates how swiftly sources of information can change. New apps and platforms rapidly become major players, shifting audience habits but also fragmenting the sources the public use for information. The Government must have a clear strategy for communicating with young people and adapting to the development of new apps and platforms which appeal to this audience. (Paragraph 34).

Recommendation of the Committee: We recommend that the Government publishes advice for Government departments and their public bodies on communication for young people, including guidance on the use of new apps and platforms, including TikTok. (Paragraph 35).

Government communications use a range of channels to reach people directly on the platforms they spend the most time on. This includes through paid-for media, marketing and direct communications on digital and social media platforms, including those which attract younger audiences.

Broadly speaking, in deciding whether to undertake activity on any digital platform, the Government Communication Service (GCS) asks three questions:

- Does the activity represent value for money for taxpayers and is it justifiable as a use of public funds?
- Does the digital environment meet the ethical standards for digital safety set out in the GCS SAFE framework?

- Are there risks to data protection, information security or national security, for example as advised by the ICO, or other government functions?

Our final approach is always based upon weighing each of these principles against the potential value of a particular platform.

3 Media Literacy

Conclusion of the report: We welcome the Government's recognition of the importance of media literacy skills and the creation of its Online Media Literacy Strategy and Taskforce to deliver on this. However, it is crucial that the impact of the Strategy is assessed as it progresses, both to ensure that it is on the right track and to inform future delivery. (Paragraph 40).

Recommendation of the Committee: We recommend that, at the conclusion of the 2021–24 Online Media Literacy Strategy, the Government publishes a detailed assessment of what the impact of this work has been, alongside a refreshed strategy for the forthcoming years. (Paragraph 41).

The UK has a diverse media literacy sector, with over 170 initiatives being delivered across the country. The primary aim of the 2021-24 Online Media Literacy Strategy has been to support the sector to deliver its work in a more effective, wide-reaching and coordinated way. Under the Strategy, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) has provided almost £2.5 million in grant scheme funding to a range of educational projects, many of which have supported the development of new evidence-led resources and interventions.

The government recognises that there is currently limited evidence on effective approaches to media literacy. We understand the importance of increasing the evidence base to help ensure the effectiveness of future media literacy interventions. Robust evaluation was a key requirement embedded into the grant schemes and recipients of DSIT funding were required to evaluate the impact of their projects.

In addition, the Online Safety Act updated Ofcom's statutory duty to promote media literacy and placed targeted duties on the regulator to raise the public's awareness of the nature and impact of misinformation and disinformation. The updated duties are intended to ensure the public can 'establish the reliability, accuracy and authenticity' of content found on regulated services.

The new duty on Ofcom also requires the regulator to build the evidence base and publish a statement recommending ways in which regulated services, among others, can deliver activities to promote media literacy to users. Ofcom will be required to publish a media literacy strategy at least once every three years, setting out their objectives and priorities for that period. It will then need to publish an annual statement outlining progress against its strategy. These duties are already in force.

The consultation on Ofcom's first three-year strategy was published on 29 April 2024 and the strategy itself, 'A Positive Vision for Media Literacy', is due to be published in autumn 2024. We look forward to working with them as they implement the strategies laid out in this approach.

4 Counter Disinformation Unit (CDU)

Conclusion of the report: We are concerned about the lack of transparency and accountability of the CDU and the appropriateness of its reach. (Paragraph 46).

Recommendation of the Committee: We recommend that the Government commission and lay before Parliament an independent review of the activities and strategy of Counter Disinformation Unit within the next 12 months. (Paragraph 46).

On 21 March 2023, the Committee heard oral evidence on the work carried out by the Counter Disinformation Unit, which at that time had been predominantly focused on misinformation and disinformation concerning Covid-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

In October 2023, the Counter Disinformation Unit became the National Security and Online Information Team (NSOIT). This name more accurately reflects the team's revised remit and function, which is to tackle the greatest national security risks facing the UK from misinformation and disinformation, specifically looking at threats posed by foreign states and risks to elections including the use of AI and deepfakes.

This revised remit is kept under regular review by ministers, who already regularly engage with parliamentarians on this important work by attending Committee hearings and answering written and oral questions. In view of the change of remit and the ongoing parliamentary scrutiny of the team, we are not considering a review at this juncture.

5 GOV.UK

Conclusion of the report: The Government Digital Service has acknowledged that some users of GOV.UK have been lost and overwhelmed by the architecture of the website and the amount of information that it contains. While it has committed itself to making improvements, three years later the site is still not meeting user needs. (Paragraph 52).

Recommendation of the Committee: We recommend that the Government Digital Service undertake further work better to understand user needs for accessing information on GOV.UK, and that it provides us with its plans for this work, including a timescale for improvements, as part of the response to this report (Paragraph 52).

The Government Digital Service (GDS) acknowledges the findings of the report, including the importance of responding to changing user needs and the perceived limitations of the existing GOV.UK infrastructure. The report findings and recommendation have helped to shape GDS' future strategy for GOV.UK.

GOV.UK is the trusted, reliable and authoritative digital home for UK government information and services. Now a core part of the UK's national infrastructure, GOV.UK supports an average of 12 million unique users per week, who use the site to access essential government services, find critical information, and monitor government activity.

According to YouGov, GOV.UK is recognised by 98% of the UK population. It has a satisfaction rating of 76% and 75% consider information on GOV.UK to be accurate and reliable. In an era of disinformation, the GOV.UK brand is a kitemark for accuracy and authenticity, assures users, and helps to protect people from scams and misinformation.

GOV.UK's core purpose is to make it easy for everyone to interact with government, so that they can access the information and services they need. Users' expectations and needs of GOV.UK are not static; these constantly evolve in line with new demands, trends, and access to technology. User centred-design, underpinned by continuous user research and data analysis, is a foundation of the GDS approach and we regularly review user insights, industry trends and international comparators to ensure that GOV.UK is responding to and anticipating these changes.

In recognition of the need for GOV.UK to evolve, in June 2023 GDS launched GOV.UK's Strategy for Growth, intended to better support more people, in more places, to access more of the things they need and want from government. GDS has already delivered significant improvements under this plan, which have been implemented prior to the publication of the report. Examples of these changes are noted below.

Search

GOV.UK's site search function is used over 4 million times per month, and GDS has improved it to make it easier for users to find relevant content. GDS introduced a new search tool in February 2024. A/B testing showed a 23% increase in users clicking the top result, and a 14% increase in users clicking on a result. These improvements help people find information from across GOV.UK, including on government policy and guidance.

The majority of visits to GOV.UK are from external search engines. In July 2024, nearly three-quarters of such sessions originated from the likes of Google, Yahoo, and Bing. GDS has an active policy of Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), identifying trends via analytics, and using simple, clear language in line with user searches to ensure the most relevant results are surfaced. GDS also works directly with search engine providers. As an example of this, during the general election, we worked with Google to present trusted GOV.UK content about voting from within search results pages - such as the new rules regarding voter ID.

Homepage and navigation

In late 2023, GDS unveiled the biggest redesign of the GOV.UK homepage since 2014. Used more than a million times each week, GDS redesigned this to prioritise the mobile experience, improve accessibility and make information easier to find. GDS took a data-led approach which has seen increased engagement with the homepage. In addition, GDS has improved how users browse GOV.UK by clicking through menus or topic pages, introducing a new menu bar across the site, and working with over 50 departments to retire specialist topic pages. The most used service on GOV.UK, Apply for Universal Credit, now has a click-through rate of over 97%.

The next phase of implementing GOV.UK's strategy will focus on new and expanded channels, content and interactions, which will offer users a more convenient and simpler way to access what they need, and make government more proactive in helping people.

GOV.UK App

GDS is developing a GOV.UK app, building on the success of the One Login identity checking app, which has been downloaded over 7 million times. This will provide relevant information and tools, tailored to the user's individual circumstances, removing more of the burden on citizens to navigate and find the things they need.

GOV.UK Social

GDS is expanding GOV.UK into social media channels to build a more visible and consistent presence in more of the places users expect to find it, including via video, which some users prefer to consume rather than long form written text. This will allow GDS to extend its reach amongst new and existing users who are currently underserved by the website.

GOV.UK Chat

GDS is developing a prototype LLM-powered chatbot: GOV.UK Chat, due for beta launch in September 2024. This allows users to ask questions of GOV.UK and receive a response in natural language. This experiment aims to explore whether new technology can make it easier for users to navigate the many pages of guidance on GOV.UK. Early testing found that nearly 70% of users found the responses were useful, and just under 65% of users were satisfied with the experience (2023).

6 Government Communications

Conclusion of the Report: The pandemic highlighted the importance of the public being well-informed; yet there were gaps and inconsistencies in the information offered to the public by the Government, with limitations in respect of both the information transmitted and the methods by which it was communicated. We welcome the fact that the Government says it has learned lessons and is using these to inform its subsequent communication campaigns. We are however concerned that there is no evidence that the Government has conducted a full evaluation of its communications or formally sought feedback from its intended audiences following the pandemic. (Paragraph 58).

Recommendation of the Committee: The Government Communication Service should conduct and publish an evaluation of the effectiveness of Government communications during the pandemic by the end of 2024, ensuring that this takes into account the views of the public and frontline organisations, such as those working with patients and carers. (Paragraph 59).

The government would note that the UK Covid-19 Inquiry is underway and the government will consider and respond to any findings and recommendations by that Inquiry in due course.

The GCS recognises the important role of evaluating and learning from our CV19 pandemic communications response. We understand the significance of incorporating opinions from the public and frontline organisations into this activity.

Within GCS, we have well established processes to capture, analyse and disseminate lessons learned from each campaign we undertake. These lessons are shared across the whole of the communication profession across Government to ensure all campaigns benefit from these learnings.

Some of the key lessons learned from the pandemic and recognised for the future of communicating with the public through cross-channel campaigns include:

- The evolving scientific understanding of the virus and how it spread required an agile approach to the public information campaign.
- All communications were created through research and feedback sessions with the general public and key stakeholders such as local authorities, Directors of Public Health, local MPs and the transport sector.
- Simple language rhyming mnemonics ('Hands, Face, Space') were used to group behaviours into core ideas to achieve greater impact.
- Communications are significantly more effective in changing behaviours when mutually supported by policy advice and regulation.
- A strategic communications and centralised insight programme can deliver regular reporting which avoids duplication, provides a single source of the truth, and valuable insight for policy-making.
- Volume, clarity and timeliness of communications are essential considerations. Clear, simple and actionable messaging backed with evidence can boost public understanding and should be communicated across channels, including accessible formats.
- Paid-for media can give an issue prominence and prime audiences en-mass or in a more targeted way. Local newspapers and local radio stations including community radio and other media serving ethnic communities play a vital role in the provision of reliable, high-quality information at local level, and were used as a key channel for delivering government messages during the pandemic. These media can also be used to communicate to harder to reach audiences at a local level, and benefit from a comparatively high level of trust. Creativity in messaging and media planning is crucial in achieving cut-through, particularly when there is audience fatigue.

- Communicating through local, regional and national partners, including the private sector (e.g. transport operators), provides credibility, authenticity and relevance to audiences.

Through the steps and processes implemented, and outlined above, we embed lessons learned into our practices to allow us to adapt and refine our approaches. This will ensure we adapt and refine our strategies to deliver the maximum impact and effectiveness through our communication activities.

7 Transparency of Evidence

Conclusion of the report: While we recognise the need for free and frank discussions within Government, and the political, security and commercial sensitivities of some Government business, increased transparency for the evidence underpinning policy decisions has the potential to increase the level of trust in Government. (Paragraph 63).

Recommendation of the Committee: We recommend that the Government increase its proactive publication of evidence used in policy making, especially in policy areas that are frequently subject to misinformation. (Paragraph 63).

The Analysis Function is a cross-government network for all civil servants working in government analysis. The mission of the function is to support everyone in government to make informed decisions so that policy and operations can be evidenced and deliver value for money and improve the lives of the people of the UK.

Noting this recommendation and others from the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC), the Analysis Function has committed to working with the Communications Function and other bodies, such as the Policy Profession, to consider options regarding routinely publishing the evidence and data underpinning their major policy announcements.

The Analysis Function currently provides guidance for analysts on the importance of transparency, which is included in the Analysis Function Standard, the Code of Practice for Statistics, the government Social Research Publication protocol, and the Aqua, Green and Magenta books. We also recognise the important role that other organisations play in achieving the goal of greater transparency in analysis and decision making across government, including the Office for Statistics Regulation and its work on Intelligent Transparency.

8 Role of Government Scientists

Conclusion of the report: Some of the country's best scientists work in government departments and agencies. It is a wasted opportunity not to allow them to play a larger public role. The Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Officer played a critical role in public communications during the pandemic and proved the value of scientific experts engaging in issues of national concern and demonstrated their ability to navigate the boundaries of what Government scientists can and cannot comment upon. (Paragraph 67).

Recommendation of the Committee: The Government should allow and encourage its scientists to respond directly to the media to counter misinformation. (Paragraph 67).

The government agrees on the importance of scientists responding directly to counter misinformation. The Government Communication Service (GCS) encourages the use of expert voices to counter mis and disinformation, communicate during emergencies and to amplify key messages.

Utilising experts is a valuable resource for raising the awareness of government campaigns as it enables HMG to harness the reach, authenticity and personality of individuals who have already built trust and profile with a particular target audience. Trust in their voices is often higher than government-only voices and we know from experience that their messages gain the cut through we require to persuade audiences to take action.

We also echo the importance of government policies and decisions being informed by the best scientific evidence and strategic long-term thinking. There are over 10,000 members of the science and engineering profession, and scientists play different roles across central government departments and their Arms-Length Bodies. Most government departments have a Chief Scientific Adviser to lead their science system and to provide advice and challenge to Ministers. As the Committee notes, science - and scientists such as the Government Chief Scientific Adviser (GCSA), Chief Medical Officer and experts participating in the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) - played a critical role during the pandemic, in supporting effective, clear public communications informed by the best scientific advice.

At the centre of Government Scientific Structures, the GCSA - and Government Office for Science (GOS) - are tasked with advising the Prime Minister and Cabinet to ensure science advice mechanisms are efficient, effective, speak truth to power and are embedded irreversibly in government systems. They are also tasked with driving visible impact through both proactive and demand-led science advice that is relevant, excellent, and delivered fit for purpose.

The GCSA and network of departmental Chief Scientific Advisers (CSAs) work with government to support robust evidence-led communications as appropriate. For example, the GCSA has an extensive calendar of speaking engagements covering the whole country where, in dedicated Q&A sessions, attendees can put questions to the GCSA directly. The GCSA also engages with the media on a range of topics and maintains an active presence on social media channels. The GCSA, departmental CSAs, and members of advisory groups such as the Council for Science and Technology and departmental Science Advisory Councils are free to engage with the media – if they wish to do so. The code of practice for Science Advisory Councils states that members can choose whether to accept or reject offers from the media but should state clearly if they are speaking in a personal capacity and should not comment on confidential discussions.

GOS makes a wide range of its products available on GOV.UK, including minutes and papers from the Covid-19 SAGE. GOS champions, across government, the transparency commitments of the Concordat to Support Research Integrity and the importance of making scientific evidence as transparent as possible.

GOS has published guidance to implement the concordat in government and departments now publish an annual statement setting out how they have implemented this.

Alongside direct media engagement, GOS ensures government has access to proactive and demand-led science advice and helps policy makers think through complex cross-cutting issues. There is an extensive list of projects published online, including many of GOS's flagship Foresight projects as well as on other areas such as examining misinformation and disinformation, where a roundtable on the evidence for impacts of climate misinformation was recently published.

We are committed to continuing to do what we can to support and encourage government scientists in engaging effectively with the media and, through them, the general public on science-related topics.

9 National Academies

Conclusion of the report: All National Academies have provided us with some excellent examples of public engagement but we remain unclear about their strategic aims for public engagement. Without clear aims, it is not possible to judge the efficacy of their public engagement and, consequently, whether they are spending public money appropriately. (Paragraph 84).

Recommendation of the Committee: As part of its renewed focus on assessing the National Academies, the Government should review what role the National Academies should play in the public information landscape and work with them to publish objectives and benchmarks to deliver that role. (Paragraph 84).

Government welcomes the Committee's recognition of the excellent public engagement which the UK National Academies conduct and agrees with much of the recommendation. However, the Department for Science Innovation and Technology (DSIT) cannot fully accept the Committee's recommendation as the action described would hinder the independence of the National Academies, which is fundamental to their role and operation, and the public's perception of them, as trusted Research and Development (R&D) organisations.

The National Academies are a longstanding, independent and integral part of the UK's R&D system. Their presence as recognised, trusted and prestigious R&D organisations, both domestically and internationally, stems from their independence of government, their world-leading science and research expertise and their connections and influence with the science and research communities they serve and represent.

Through public engagement, the National Academies proactively seek to inspire, educate and inform wider society on their important role, as well as on the value, impact and benefit of R&D. While the National Academies are supported by DSIT funding, the majority of which supports research programmes and talent development, they also generate and use their own private income to support their activities, including on public engagement and outreach. It would therefore be inappropriate for DSIT to seek to develop objectives and delivery benchmarks for the whole of the National Academies' public engagement and outreach work.

Each National Academy has flexibility to tailor and set their public engagement and outreach activities to suit their own strategic organisational aims and objectives. This allows the National Academies to embrace a broad approach; to align activity with intended purposes and undertake meaningful public engagement with a range of communities and individuals; and to respond to areas of public interest, providing information, insight and evidence from their science and research disciplines. This flexibility underpins the National Academies' credibility as trustworthy sources of information and knowledge.

The strategic organisational aims and objectives of each National Academy are clearly published on their websites, and they include details of their approach to and activities around public engagement and outreach. However, recognising the importance of clear aims and objectives, DSIT

will continue working closely with the National Academies to encourage stronger communication of their public engagement and outreach aims, objectives and activities, including for example via their websites.

Each National Academy has its own monitoring and evaluation framework in place to support their wide range of public engagement and outreach activities, such as events, exhibitions, meetings, digital channels, newsletters and social media. As part of this they regularly capture delivery metrics, such as data on attendance, participant feedback, perceptions of impact, digital reach, subscribers and where relevant also commission external evaluation.

DSIT already undertakes regular, robust and proportionate monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of its public funding to the National Academies and has a number of ongoing and regular oversight engagements and review points with each National Academy throughout the year.

DSIT fully recognises the importance of having clear aims and objectives for and measurement of the effectiveness of its public funding to the National Academies. Following the Commission's recommendation, DSIT will therefore look to strengthen its M&E in relation to the DSIT funded elements of the National Academies' public engagement and outreach activities, and will work with the National Academies to ensure that their aims and objectives are more clearly communicated in a publicly accessible way. DSIT will also hold conversations with the National Academies about how they see their role in the public information landscape relating to science and research, and how public funding can positively contribute to this.

DSIT believes this approach best supports the reputation and independence of the National Academies, as self-governing organisations led by world-leading scientists, researchers and experts in their scientific fields, so that they can continue to command and leverage public confidence and trust in their research, insight and evidence, whilst balancing this against having the right robust and proportionate oversight of use of public funding.