



Cabinet Office
70 Whitehall London SW1A 2AS

Dame Meg Hillier
Chair, Public Accounts Committee
House of Commons
SW1A 0AA

29 October 2021

Dear Chair,

I am writing to you in relation to recommendation 4 of the Thirteenth Report of the 2021-22 Session of the Public Accounts Committee, on 'Initial Lessons from the Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic'.

The recommendation included an action for the Cabinet Office to set out what lessons it has learnt regarding communicating with the public and stakeholders and what guidelines or procedures it has implemented to minimise issues concerning the volume, clarity and timeliness of communications.

Communications has been a critical lever for the Government to deploy during this crisis. Government Communications Service professionals have brought best practice from across the industry and drawn on years of experience from the public, private and third sector in delivering COVID-19 communications.

This pandemic differs from other issues facing the Government - in its severity, scale and urgency. Over the course of the pandemic, unfolding scientific understanding, the often unpredictable nature of the spread and its impact has required agile policy delivery (fast, flexible and proportionate to risk level).

Throughout the pandemic, the Cabinet Office has focused on providing the general public with advice on what actions they need to take to protect themselves from COVID-19 through messaging that is proportional to the challenge. Wherever possible, the Cabinet Office has sought to advise businesses and private sector organisations of the plans to modify, change or increase restrictions in advance, however the need for immediate action has made this challenging.

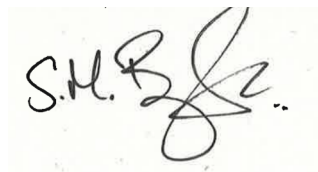
All communications are created as a result of research and feedback sessions with the

general public and key stakeholders such as industry leaders, Local Authorities, Directors of Public Health, local MPs etc. From regular feedback with stakeholders and the general public, the key lessons learned include:

- Communications have been significantly more effective on behaviour compliance when mutually supported by policy advice and regulation. Collaboration across policy and communications is essential, with communications leading a strong strategic communications function and centralised insight programme delivering regular reporting using a range of qualitative and quantitative data. This enables a single source of the truth, avoids duplication and provides valuable insight to inform policy making and stakeholder engagement.
- Volume, clarity and timeliness of communications are essential considerations in any communication programme in or outside of a pandemic. Standard procedures to assure effectiveness around these aspects from pre pandemic times are equally applicable as are the majority of lessons learnt. Clear, simple and actionable messaging needs to be backed with evidence to aid public understanding and communicated through accessible formats including translations and large print.
- Communications delivered through engagement via partnership working provides credibility, authenticity and relevance to audiences. This includes working with local, regional and national partners as well as charities. They also provide insightful two-way dialogue with key stakeholders around the country.
- The versatility of paid-for media enables it to give an issue prominence and reach, and prime audiences en-masse or in a more targeted way. Continuous creativity across all channels is crucial in achieving cut-through, particularly when engaging over time with a fatigued audience. This includes using appropriate messengers in new or across different platforms on and off-line, as well as media planning to reach the general public as well as target high risk or hard-to-influence audiences.

The Cabinet Office continues to make every effort to communicate changes as clearly and simply as possible. All updated guidance is published on gov.uk. The key elements are then shared with the public via the Government's various communication channels.

Simon Baugh

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S.M. Baugh', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Chief Executive, Government Communication