OECD Public Governance Reviews

Public Communication Scan of the United Kingdom

USING PUBLIC COMMUNICATION TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC TRUST



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Foreword

The OECD's Reinforcing Democracy Initiative (RDI), endorsed by Ministers at the OECD Ministerial Meeting on Building Trust and Reinforcing Democracy in November 2022, emphasises the importance of strengthening the integrity of the "information ecosystem" as public discourse, the media, and political rhetoric have grown increasingly fragmented and polarised in many democracies. "Fringe" views are amplified over moderate ones by social media algorithms. Along with mis- and disinformation, these views pollute the public sphere in which democratic societies form opinions and debate policy questions.

Public communication can help mitigate these threats. It can also expand opportunities for constructive dialogue with citizens and facilitate citizens' participation in public life. The OECD is looking at how public communication can be reformed and used more strategically to support good governance, open government objectives, sound policy making, and effective service design and delivery. Communication professionals are key in helping governments better engage and interact in increasingly connected societies.

This *Public Communication Scan of the United Kingdom* is the first of its kind for an OECD Member country. It outlines how public communication can contribute to better policies and services, greater citizen trust and, ultimately, stronger democracies. This *Scan* builds on the 2021 OECD report, *Public Communication: The Global Context and the Way Forward.* It provides an international overview of this function across 46 countries and 63 institutions.

The UK's Government Communication Service (GCS) has invested considerably in building a modern and capable public communication function that has earned international recognition. It has now embarked on an ambitious reform strategy to develop a communication function that can withstand the challenges of a rapidly evolving information ecosystem while harnessing technological change to support its objectives. In doing so, the GCS is working to make communication "one of the four main levers government has to effect change, alongside legislation, regulation and taxation".

The analysis and recommendations in this *Scan* highlight opportunities for GCS and the UK Government to align reform priorities with a more inclusive and people-centred communication that contributes to stronger democratic governance. At a time when parts of the population are feeling left behind, these reforms will help build better dialogue between government and citizens. Giving more policy prominence to citizen-centred public communication is an important step in promoting greater openness and engagement, and building trust.

With many countries facing similar challenges, the *Scan's* findings are relevant for all governments reflecting on public communication as a core instrument for democracy.

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The process was co-ordinated by Carlotta Alfonsi and Karine Badr of the Open Government, Public Communication, and Civic Space Unit. Carlotta Alfonsi drafted the report with support from Laura Chapman. The *Scan* benefited from expert input by Distinguished Professor Jim Macnamara of the University of Technology, Sydney.

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Executive summary

In recent years, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, policy makers have gained new awareness of public communication's potential in achieving better policy outcomes. With weak public confidence in government institutions and the deteriorating health of information ecosystems, governments are rethinking how communication can support democratic resilience. In many democracies, the space for open public debate that fosters this democratic resilience suffers from polarising narratives and disinformation. This can undermine policy and result in public disengagement from political and civic participation.

Public communication can address these challenges and contribute to stronger, more effective democracies. It provides citizens with reliable information that helps them make choices that improve their lives, and form opinions and preferences on matters of public interest. Public communication is also a powerful instrument for listening to citizens' voices in the virtual public square made up of digital and traditional communication channels.

When institutions listen to their citizens, it can inform responsive policy, enable dialogue, and support participative decision making. It can thereby alleviate citizens' frustrations that they do not have a say in what governments do and that their feedback goes unheeded. The 2021 *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions* identified these as primary factors of low trust in institutions.

This *Public Communication Scan of the United Kingdom* analyses how UK institutions conduct purposeful communication in support of policy, dialogue and citizen participation. It also looks at how they gain trust in a challenging context of polarisation and misinformation.

The *Scan* focuses on the Government Communication Service (GCS) whose leadership at the centre of government helps it communicate with one voice and improve standards of practice across institutions. Following a period of internal restructuring, GCS published an ambitious three-year strategy in 2022, entitled "Performance with Purpose", to help it overcome existing challenges and harness technological change. The Strategy places strong emphasis on the purpose of communication as being in the service of government objectives.

This report begins with an overview of the GCS and its core structures and policies (Chapter 1). It highlights the important progress the GCS has made in recognising and empowering communicators in UK institutions, which is a precondition for making effective use of the function.

This progress is partly visible in the integration of public communication with policy to improve its development and implementation (Chapter 2). Analysis focuses on the use of communication campaigns to support policy implementation. Campaigns are used to reach diverse groups in society with tailored information encouraging compliance or positive behaviour change. The chapter also finds that public insights gathered from diverse communication channels can improve the design of policy. It recommends UK communicators to work more closely with policy teams, and innovate and expand methods for organisational listening to make their institutions more responsive, reliable, and trustworthy.

Finally, building trust in institutions as information sources is a prerequisite for the effectiveness of public communication (Chapter 3). This trust is threatened when there is risk of this function being politicised. It undermines public perceptions of institutional communication as impartial and unbiased. Trust in official information is equally crucial against mis- and disinformation in the age of artificial intelligence. To this end, the chapter recommends independent oversight and better separation of political and public communication.

Key findings and recommendations

- Across the 12 government departments analysed, many communication teams showed leading innovation and excellence in the field. There is an opportunity to elevate all departments to the same high standards and to consolidate those promising practices and methods that make for more responsive, inclusive communication. GCS' plans for greater knowledge-sharing, upskilling and innovation in its reform strategy, position it well to drive this change.
- A core area to strengthen is gathering insights about citizens' preferences and concerns, particularly by building capacity to conduct organisational listening at scale. Combined with other means of citizen and stakeholder participation, this could enable a feedback loop between government and citizens that builds trust. GCS could be among the first entities internationally to introduce a dedicated framework and promote this practice across UK institutions.
- UK communicators reported improvements in how their work is valued and understood by leaders and policy teams in their institutions. They attribute this to measurement and evaluation, which can demonstrate the value of communication in achieving tangible policy objectives. Nonetheless, communication seldom contributes to the early stages of developing policy where it can channel citizens' voices to inform decisions. GCS can address barriers to effective collaboration between communication and policy disciplines to unlock these benefits.
- The public communication function in the UK is not immune to the trend towards politicisation observed in several countries. A complicated past legacy and the UK's polarising media discourse risk making communication appear biased or untrustworthy to the public. Evidence points to an enduring emphasis on the press office function to secure favourable headlines in politically influential outlets at the expense of more strategic activities. This illustrates the sometimes-tenuous separation between public and political communication that needs reinforcement to ensure integrity.
- The trustworthiness of the public communication function is essential. It is crucial in countering disinformation and underpins GCS' social license to use technologies and tools such as ad targeting and behavioural insights responsibly and in the public interest. GCS could benefit from introducing a transparent, independent oversight mechanism to ensure propriety and trustworthiness. It should also consider co-developing with citizens a charter to meet public expectations for communication and engagement.

1 The Government Communication Service: Building a communication function fit for the future

This Chapter analyses the governance and structures for public communication in the UK central government. It provides recommendations on how they can be strengthened to empower the function and adapt to transformations in the profession. Using the OECD analytical framework for public communication as the basis for this study, Chapter 1 begins by reviewing the official mandate and expectations for the function in the UK. It proposes ways to enhance the mandate for communication, chiefly by more explicitly acknowledging its policy role and two-way dialogue with citizens. In a similar vein, Chapter 1 looks at how the function is empowered within government. This is through the representation of senior communicators in key decision-making forums and the use of evaluations to demonstrate public communication's value-added. Chapter 1 concludes with a discussion of the ongoing transformations in the profession and its landscape as well as the implications for capability, skills and ways of working. It summarises key challenges and considerations to future-proof the Government Communication Service (GCS), starting with the implementation of its ambitious reform strategy.

Making public communication a main lever of government

"Communication is one of the four main levers government has to affect change, alongside legislation, regulation and taxation" (GCS, 2022[1]). The UK has come a long way towards matching this statement with the actions to prove it. As the central government body in charge of public communication, GCS has been building a mature and professional function to deliver on this vision and is undertaking further reforms to meet even more ambitious objectives.

As outlined in the OECD's international report, *Public Communication: The Global Context and the Way Forward* (2021[2]), *public* communication (referred throughout as the communication function) is the government function of delivering information, and listening and responding to citizens in the service of the common good. It is distinct from *political* communication, which is linked to political parties or election campaigns. The OECD's report reiterates that public communication can support improved policy outcomes, and better and more democratic governance but it requires transitioning away from a traditional understanding of communication as a press office function and leveraging it strategically for the public good.

This goal aligns with the mandate for the function in the UK and what GCS leadership has been pursuing for over a decade. It is also the backdrop to a comprehensive strategy to enhance the profession's governance and capability.

Public communication has to navigate a media and information landscape in the UK and internationally that is fractured by and vulnerable to polarising and false narratives (see Chapter 3). Rapid digital transformation is testing communicators' ability to adapt their skills and ways of working. The hardship resulting from years of health, geopolitical and economic crises combined with policy adjustments following the UK's departure from the EU have sapped public confidence. This has increased the urgency and difficulty of reconnecting with citizens. These are core challenges that require a greater focus on strengthening public communication within the UK's policy agenda.

Taking stock of the progress made so far, the future ambitions for public communication, and momentous changes to the information ecosystem, this *Public Communication Scan of the UK* seeks to analyse the function in the UK and opportunities to strengthen its contributions to better policy, governance and, ultimately, democracy.

This section introduces the analytical framework upon which this report is based. It then gives an overview of GCS and presents the governance and structures for public communication across the UK government. Finally, it discusses where communication sits as a government function and how it can become more empowered throughout the public sector as a lever of positive change.

Understanding how public communication contributes to better policies and governance

Public communication is a core function that fulfils three primary roles in government and in service to democracy. These are:[1]

- Inform the public, who can participate and provide input on matters of public interest.
- Support the design, implementation and evaluation of policies and services.
- Build trust in public institutions and help further social cohesion by:
  - Enabling government-citizen/stakeholder dialogue.
  - Countering mis- and disinformation.

These three primary roles help break down the contribution of communication to democratic governance into more concrete terms and provide a useful basis for understanding how this plays out in the UK.

To analyse the function and how it performs these roles, the OECD has developed an analytical framework, which is illustrated in Figure 1.1 below. The framework (based on a programme logic model) illustrates how a set of inputs and a set of processes or activities carried out by public institutions produces communication outputs that generate desired outcomes in the audiences (i.e. the individuals and groups that receive and interact with the information, in this case the UK public). In turn, these outcomes contribute to positive impacts linked to policy goals, improved trust, and democratic resilience.

This *Scan* focuses on analysing structural inputs, communication processes and activities within UK public institutions at the level of the central government. It assesses how the function is set up and governed, and how communication directorates work towards fulfilling their mandate across government. The resulting analysis and recommendations focus on how communicators and policy makers in the UK government can enhance their capabilities, approaches, and practices to ensure the public communication function maximises its potential to create better outcomes for citizens.

Methodology

This *Scan* was developed based on an OECD survey of 12 government departments, 30 qualitative interviews with governmental and civil society stakeholders and a review of government documents.

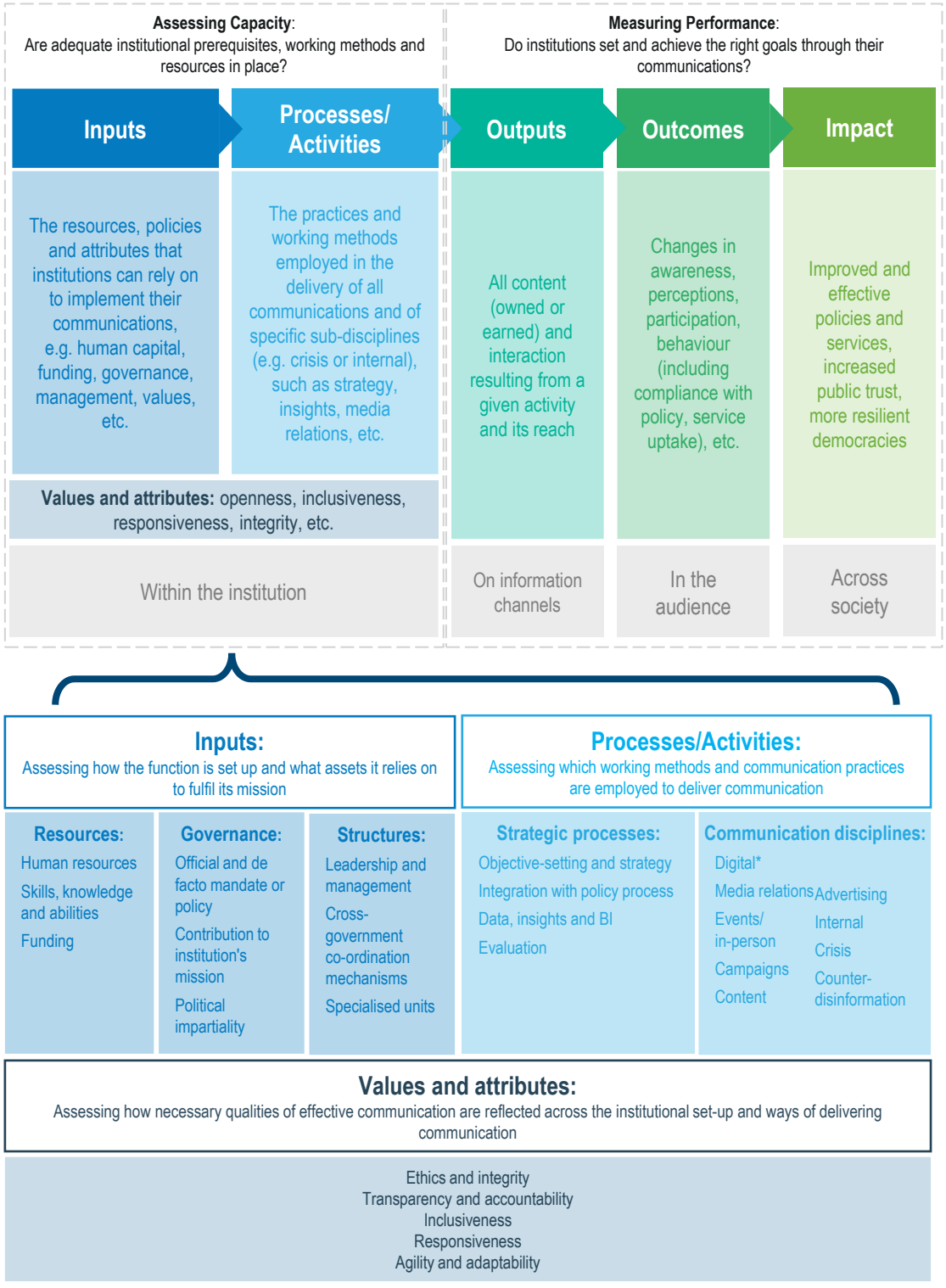
A first round of interviews was conducted by the OECD Secretariat and public officials from Canada and Finland acting as peers during a fact-finding mission in London in December 2022. Additional interviews were conducted between January and April 2023.

Table 1.1. Participating organisations and stakeholders

Survey respondents	Interviews with central government departments	Interviews with devolved and local authorities and non-governmental stakeholders
Cabinet Office	Cabinet Office (7 individual interviews)	Government of Wales
Home Office	Home Office	Westminster Council
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) (2 distinct interviews)	Essex County Council
Department for Education	Department for Education	Full Fact
Ministry of Defence	Ministry of Defence	BBC
Ministry of Justice	Ministry of Justice	Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR)
Department for Work and Pensions	Department for Work and Pensions	Tim Hughes, open government expert and advocate
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)	Prof. Ruth Garland (Goldsmiths University)
Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS)	Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) (2 distinct interviews)	Prof. Lee Edwards (London School of Economics)
Department for Transport	Department for Transport	
His Majesty's Revenues and Customs (HMRC)	His Majesty's Revenues and Customs (HMRC)	
Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ)	Department for Health and Social Care	
	Department for International Trade	

Note: Reforms to government departments underway during the course of this research mean that some of the departments who participated in the survey and/or interviews have since changed name or been merged with other departments. The above list reflects the names of each department at the time they participated in the interview and/or survey. All departmental interviews involved between one and five senior communicators covering the highest communication roles in their respective departments.

Figure 1.1. Framework logic model: How public communication fulfils primary roles in government



Note: * Digital can refer to digital content and channels, but should be cross-cutting to most practice areas affected by technological change.

The governance and structures of public communication in the United Kingdom

Over the past century, since the initial creation of the Department of Information during the first world war, the public information function in the UK government has gone through multiple iterations, evolving its organisational structure and expanding its competencies. Today, GCS is the structure in charge of the civil service function for public information, support for policy delivery, and the enhancement of the practice of communication.

The creation of GCS in 2013 was motivated by improved efficiency of government communication with a "strengthened centre", greater collaboration across government departments, and improved professional standards (McKenna, 2018[3]). This is consistent with the international trend for centres of government to be more active in steering and leading governance and cross-government policy such as communication (OECD, 2018[4]). Prior to GCS, the Government Communication Network was the first body to convene press officers from the then Government Information and Communication Service, which was staffed with professionals from other disciplines such as marketing (Sanders, 2013[5]).

Repeated changes to the government communication apparatus and its role over the years reflect a parallel evolution in the information ecosystem. This spurs innovation in the practices and diverse skillsets required for sophisticated communication. The proliferation of communication-related disciplines and increase in the number of government communicators – growing from a postwar staff of around 2 000 in the late 1940s (McKenna, 2018[3]) to a force of 7 000 civil servants today (GCS, 2022[1]) – has strengthened the case for more centralised co-ordination of the function to ensure activities remain streamlined. Estimates of this expansion do not account for the role of politically appointed Special Advisors (SpAds), who are commonly brought in by ministers to support their own communication and work alongside civil servants.

The GCS's central structure and leadership sit at the centre of government within the Cabinet Office[2] and are staffed by civil servants. Beyond the Cabinet Office, GCS has a membership-style structure that encompasses the profession across governmental bodies. As of 2022, it comprised teams across 46 government departments (24 ministerial and 20 non-ministerial) on top of over 300 public entities commonly referred to as arm's-length bodies (ALBs)[3] (GCS, 2022[1]). The membership model refers to an organisational system where GCS leadership sets cross-government communication priorities and provides resources to units within departments and ALBs, whose communicators are members of GCS and the profession alongside their departmental affiliation (GCS, 2020).

GCS benefits from a solid management structure. It has been enhanced by recent reforms such as the appointment of a Chief Executive Officer to lead the organisation, reporting to the Cabinet Office Permanent Secretary (GCS, 2021[6]). The CEO of GCS works with departmental Directors of Communication to raise professional standards for communication within government, oversee central funding, and lead on recruitment panels (GCS, 2022[7]). The CEO also works alongside a Senior Leadership Team of Executive Directors who together manage high-level work streams on the transformation of the function and delivery of strategic priorities. Central to these is the multi-annual strategy "Performance with Purpose" (hereafter the "GCS Strategy"), which outlines a comprehensive agenda of internal reforms and planning for the future of GCS that stretches from 2022 to 2025 (discussed further below and in Box 1.4).

The leadership team works with internal teams of senior managers that make up a GCS Strategy Programme Board to ensure the timely and effective delivery of its 2022-25 reform Strategy. A new External Advisory Board of key stakeholders was formed in 2022 to make recommendations on reforms and strategic directions. A GCS People Board has been established to focus on professional development and staff management, in line with the relevant pillar of the Strategy.

These dedicated bodies highlight a commitment to accountability within the GCS hierarchy. This is also visible in the emphasis interviewees placed on continuously proving the value of communication, which has earned growing recognition, as discussed in the following section.

Ultimate responsibility and accountability for GCS rests with a Minister within Cabinet Office. A separate GCS Board that groups the Service's leadership and representatives from Departments and experts reports instead to the UK's Civil Service Board, although it has an advisory role. A GCS Ministerial Board chaired by the responsible Cabinet Office Minister endorses amendments to the Government Functional Standards on Communication (hereafter "the Standards"), which define the mandate for this function. It also approves annual communication plans and oversees implementation of reforms to GCS (UK Government, 2021[8]; GCS, 2022[9]).

The official mandate for public communication: The Functional Standards on Communication

The Functional Standards document sets out the purpose for public communication and expectations for its consistent management in any given public institution, as described in Box 1.1. It is the core instrument for the function's governance. This type of document is common to a range of horizontal governmental functions, including project delivery, analysis, or use of digital, data and technology.[4]

While the Functional Standards have a primarily organisational focus, defining procedures for internal administration, they also provide some grounding on the overarching objectives of the function. The Standards emphasise that public communication is a means to effectively deliver and implement government policy objectives. The document refers to the importance of providing audiences with information to help change behaviours and make choices, and of building the public's trust in the government and its services. In this respect, it aligns with the role of public communication as outlined in the OECD Analytical Framework described in Figure 1.1.

Box 1.1. The Government Functional Standard: Communication

The 2.0 version of the Communication Functional Standards was released in 2021 and has been frequently updated. It provides guidance and direction to those involved in developing, managing, and delivering communication; those commissioning communication activities; senior leadership and board members within organisations; permanent secretaries; directors-general; and third parties engaged in public communication.

It defines its purpose as "to set expectations for the management and practice of government communication in order to deliver responsive and informative public service communication that supports the effective delivery of HM Government policy and priorities, and assists with the effective operation of public services".

The document has a detailed focus on the governance and management framework for GCS, and the roles, oversight and reporting within organisations' hierarchies. It states that an annual government-wide communication plan should define communication priorities. The 2019-2020 plan highlighted how the GREAT Britain and Northern Ireland campaign maximised economic returns from trade, tourism, inward investment, exports and education (GCS, 2019[10]) while the 2021-22 plan focused on how communication could help deliver the government's aim to "Build Back Better" in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (GCS, 2022[11]). The 2023-4 plan focuses on the five priorities of the Government and includes additional objectives such as public sector recruitment and support for public services (GCS, 2023[12]).

This cross-government plan sits alongside organisational communication plans developed by each department or agency that outline how communication supports the effective delivery of both the wider government, and the organisation's own policies, priorities, and public services. There is a focus on providing "outcome-based metrics" to define objectives to be achieved through communication.

The Functional Standards determine the range of communication disciplines that all entities ought to cover within their teams: strategy, marketing, media relations, external affairs, internal communication, behaviour change, crisis communication, partnership marketing, capability and capacity, brand, and writing.

The Standards set out a blueprint for key stages in the life cycle of a campaign, from the definition of objectives to audience insight, strategy, implementation, and evaluation. In defining these key steps, the document reiterates that the purpose of campaigns is to "be linked to a clear objective so that their impact can be evaluated". It further states that campaign objectives should be measurable and achievable, focused on "outcomes not outputs, and related to changing attitudes and/or behaviour". The practice of gathering insights about the audience (referred to as "audience insights") are required to set out strategic approaches. The document determines that five to ten percent of total campaign expenditure should be allocated to evaluation.

Source: UK Government (2021[8]), *Government Communication, Functional Standard*, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/government-communication-functional-standard/; GCS (2023[12]), *UK Government Communication Plan 2023/24*, https://communication-plan.gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/; GCS, *Government Communications Plan 2019/20*, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/government-communications-plan-2019-20/; GCS, *UK Government Communication Plan 2021/2022*, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/uk-government-communication-plan-2021-2022/.

The Functional Standards could benefit from a more explicit framing of public communication's contribution to democratic principles and, especially, dialogue with citizens. Such framing is increasingly found in the communication policies and official mandates of other OECD Members, such as those noted in Box 1.2. References range from an emphasis on the importance of taking citizens' views into consideration when developing policies (Government of Canada, 2016[13]) to safeguarding the public's right to information (Government of the Netherlands, n.d.[14]) and establishing a dialogue between citizens and governments (Government of Norway, 2009[15]).

Defining the role of communication in fostering an informed public, facilitating constructive democratic debate, and supporting greater government accountability and public trust could help consolidate an elevated understanding of the function and its value to democracy. In parallel, embedding public communication in the UK's Open Government[5] agenda could reinforce its role as a vehicle for openness and engagement (for more details see Chapter 2).

For instance, the lens of the citizen as the interlocutor and beneficiary of communication is often implicit in the Standards and could be further emphasised. The document includes only limited references to understanding citizens' needs to achieve government objectives. For example, marketing is defined as "a range of techniques that help fulfil operational and policy objectives, by effectively understanding and meeting the needs of citizens" (UK Government, 2021[8]). Similarly, "stakeholder engagement" is noted as serving to "gather intelligence to inform internal thinking and provide early warning of issues which might need to be addressed" (UK Government, 2021[8]).

A larger focus on listening and dialogue with citizens is important for enabling better policy outcomes and greater public trust. One way to ensure this focus is shared and translated into practice is to clearly define it as a goal in the Standards. It should serve as a mandate to which communicators and public managers are held to account. In this respect, there is scope for the document to be more prescriptive and elaborate further how communication can facilitate these goals and do so beyond the specific setting of a campaign.

Box 1.2. Public communication policies and mandates in Canada, Sweden, Norway, and the Netherlands

The Government of Canada's communication activities are governed by the Policy on Communication and Federal Identity. Among its key objectives, it explicitly refers to citizen engagement, noting that it aims to ensure that "The Government of Canada considers the views and interests of the public when developing policies, services, and initiatives". The policy also underlines the link between communication and public trust, stating that the government, "has a responsibility to communicate with Canadians to help protect their interests and well-being". Its other objectives include ensuring that communication is non-partisan, that they cater to the diverse communication needs of the Canadian public, that they are standardised and cost-effective, and that the country's official languages (English and French) are equally projected. Accountability for compliance with the policy and its implementation rests with deputy heads, who are the most senior official in each department.

Alongside this policy, there is also a Directive on the Management of Communication, which contains regulations for communication activities across multiple disciplines, including advertising, social media and web, media relations, public opinion research, consultations and events. This is implemented and assured by Heads of Communication within each department, and the Directive explicitly sets out the roles and responsibilities of the Heads of Communication within each department.

In the Netherlands, the Government Communication Policy explicitly refers to the public's right to government information, which is set out in the Constitution and the Government Information Act. The policy also underlines citizens' right to communicate with their government, and notes that the government must involve the public in different stages of policy making.

In Sweden, there is a Communication Policy for the Government Offices, which serves as guidance for day-to-day work. It explicitly underlines the link between public communication and governance, stating: "how well a democracy functions is determined to a great extent by citizens' knowledge and access to facts, assessment of consequences, positions and arguments". It further emphasises the links between the legitimacy of government and citizens' understanding of its work, which is facilitated through dialogue and transparency.

In Norway, the constitution contains provisions relating to public communication within its Article 100 on freedom of expression, noting that "the authorities of the State shall create conditions that facilitate open and enlightened public discourse". There is also a Government Communication Policy that establishes two purposes for government communication: "getting the message out to those who need it" and "establishing a dialogue between the citizens and the government". It emphasises that government communication should be characterised by openness, with the communication policy laying the foundations for democratic participation and public debate. The Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development (and from 1 January 2024 the Ministry of Digitalisation and Public Governance) has responsibility for the policy, with individual government agencies responsible for its implementation.

Source: Government of Canada (2021[16]), *Directive on the Management of Communication*, https://www.tbs-sct.canada.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=30682; Government of Canada (2016[13]), *Policy on Communication and Federal Identity*, https://www.tbs-sct.canada.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=30683; Government of the Netherlands (n.d.[14]), *Government Communication Policy*, https://www.government.nl/topics/government-communications/government-communications-policy; Lovdata (2023[17]), *The Constitution of the Kingdom of Norway*, https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/1814-05-17; Government of Sweden (2022[18]), *Communication Policy for the Government Offices*, https://www.government.se/contentassets/733006124df143acbc8ae762aa61a42f/communication-policy-for-the-government-offices.pdf; Government of Norway (2009[15]), *Central Government Communication Policy*, https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/fad/vedlegg/informasjonspolitikk/statkompol_eng.pdf.

There is a similar opportunity to emphasise the role of communication in enhancing government transparency.[6] Although the Standards state that communication should be "open, transparent and informative", these terms are not qualified any further. Yet they are important elements for building and maintaining public trust in the function and institutions, as Chapter 3 discusses.

Finally, it would be helpful to acknowledge in the Standards document the function's role in countering mis--and disinformation, and the attributes of communication (such as transparency) that enable it to do so (for instance, see the *OECD Principles of Good Practice for Public Communication Responses to Mis- and Disinformation*, included in Chapter 3). While guidance on this issue is available through dedicated frameworks and strategies such as the RESIST 2 Counter-Disinformation Toolkit (GCS, 2021[19]) and the Wall of Beliefs (GCS, 2022[20]), its recognition within the Functional Standards would help formalise the function's responsibilities within a co-ordinated multi-disciplinary response to mis- and disinformation in defence of democracy.

The Functional Standards are edited and revised by the GCS leadership and approved by a ministerial board. As such, they provide an agile instrument to update and improve the governance of the function in light of reform efforts underway. The document similarly sets out oversight structures to ensure its provisions are monitored and complied with, such as the reference to impact assurance, requiring that organisations have a "defined and established approach" (UK Government, 2021[8]).

Interviews conducted by the OECD specified that the CEO of GCS is also responsible for monitoring compliance with the Functional Standards, alongside a Civil Service Board composed of senior civil servants. These mechanisms could be codified further to favour standardisation of this monitoring process for each institution and help reinforce the function's value across government.

Furthermore, parliamentary or stakeholder involvement in the periodical revision and monitoring of the documents could be a valuable addition to the Standards. External validation could offer an additional layer of democratic accountability for a function that can sometimes still be perceived as politicised or manipulative from the outside (Garland, 2021[21]; Sanders, 2013[5]). Particularly in a context of declining trust in media and information, such open and consultative ways of reviewing the mandate for public communication can help reinforce its credibility and legitimacy. These aspects are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

GCS standards of practice and key frameworks

Alongside the Functional Standards, which provide the overarching framing for the governance of communication, GCS has invested significantly in codifying and articulating standards of practice across most disciplines of the profession. Specific aspects of the function's governance are elaborated in a range of "models", frameworks and guiding documents (see Box 1.3). These range from the Modern Communication Operating Model 3.0 (MCOM), to the OASIS Guide to Campaign Planning, (GCS, 2020[22]) the Emergency Planning Framework, (GCS, 2018[23]) and the RESIST 2 Disinformation Toolkit and more.

Box 1.3. Selected key GCS frameworks and guidance on public communication and related disciplines

GCS has published and continues to update a wide range of frameworks and guidance to set standards for various communication disciplines. Among these, some of the main documents include:

- The **Modern Communication Operating Model (MCOM 3.0)**, which sets out the specific skills, capabilities, and practices needed for effective public service communication. It includes the disciplines of Data & Insight, Digital, External Affairs, Internal Communication, Media, Marketing, and Strategic Communication.

- The **OASIS** guide to campaign planning sets out a series of steps to ensure government communication campaigns are "effective, efficient, and evaluated." The steps include objectives, audience insight, strategy/ ideas, implementation, and scoring/evaluation.
- The **Crisis Communication Operating Model** provides a template for preparedness and response to a crisis, with a focus on ensuring continued public trust in government and guidance on the recovery phase.
- The **RESIST 2 Counter-Disinformation Toolkit** aims to reduce the impact of mis- and disinformation through strategic communication. The key steps outlined within the toolkit are recognising mis- and disinformation, early warning (identifying vulnerabilities), situational insight, impact analysis and strategic communication.

Source: GCS (2023[24]), *Modern Communication Operating Model (MCOM 3.0)*, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/modern-communications-operating-model-3-0/; GCS (2020[22]), *Guide to Campaign Planning: OASIS*, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/guidance/marketing/delivering-government-campaigns/guide-to-campaign-planning-oasis/; GCS (2023[25]), *Crisis Communication Operating Model*, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Crisis-Communications-Operating-Model.pdf; GCS (2021[19]), *RESIST 2 Counter Disinformation Toolkit*, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/resist-2-counter-disinformation-toolkit/.

Among them, MCOM 3.0 represents the most comprehensive guidance for communication units and is an essential blueprint for carrying out the function to a high standard. As the Functional Standards on Communication, MCOM (in its 2.0 version) defines the purpose of communication in operational terms as "Changing behaviours for the benefit of society; Operational effectiveness of public services; Reputation of the UK and responding in times of a crisis; Explanation of government policies and programmes" under the acronym "CORE" (GCS, 2019[26]). The Model carries a strong customer or citizen focus. Linking these purposes and citizen-centric language more explicitly with democratic principles can help to reinforce this lens in the day-to-day work of communicators across government.

Collectively, these documents are a pillar of public communication's governance in the UK and represent significant efforts to institutionalise and consolidate disciplines and practices. They raise the bar for public communication's efficiency and impact with regard to policy objectives. GCS guidance and frameworks stand out internationally as an example of sector-leading practice, reflecting its leadership's ambition for excellence. Interviews with communicators at all levels of government indicated that these frameworks, toolkits and guidance are highly valued resources. They appear to be routinely applied to inform day-to-day communication activities.

The Cabinet Office role in guiding whole-of-government communication and reform

The GCS team within the Cabinet Office performs a core co-ordination role in carrying out whole-of-government communication. Co-ordinating with the communication unit in the Prime Minister's office (commonly known as 10 Downing Street or "Number 10"), GCS ensures that the UK government is speaking with one voice (GCS, 2022[9]). In doing so, they combine the development and updating of the aforementioned frameworks and guidance with support on specialist capacity, collaboration and training.

This centralised co-ordination style is characteristic of the British system of government, but it has also been heralded as a potential model for other countries looking to centralise communication and resources. A strong steering function in the centre of government can support better policy cohesion and alignment with the executive agenda, which is recognised by the OECD's research (OECD, 2018[4]). Not only does this enable greater coherence in the messages audiences receive, it can also facilitate cross-government support for priority activities within specific ministries or teams, and fosters an environment conducive to the sharing of good practices among peers (OECD, 2021[2]).

The relative uniformity of co-ordination tactics mentioned by the various departments surveyed indicate that the process is consistent and harmonised across government. Findings from the survey indicate that departments co-ordinate their communication activities across government through frequent meetings between department representatives and the Cabinet Office, and co-creation and delivery of priority activities with the Cabinet Office. This contributes to whole-of-government strategy developments and the sharing of monitoring and analysis reports on audience insights and public discourse (see Figure 1.2).

Despite additional steps and processes involved, co-ordination methods in place are deemed effective in facilitating whole-of-government communication and creating efficiencies. Eight surveyed departments characterised co-ordination of communication between departments and the Centre of Government as "effective but demanding": the degree of co-ordination can create some additional tasks and delays, but respondents insisted this is mostly compensated by better outcomes and efficiencies overall.

Interviews indicated that vertical siloes between departments are often a barrier to carrying out citizen-centric, integrated communication on cross-cutting issues. Senior departmental communicators interviewed appeared acutely aware that the public perceives the government as unitary and that a positive customer journey and experience is essential to achieving policy outcomes. Yet they recognise that examples of successful cross-government collaboration are fewer than desired due to budgets and internal obstacles. There is further complexity in the case of devolved nations and subnational administrations, where it can be hard to draw lines between policy domains that fall under devolved versus national authorities, and which differ across Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, according to interviews.

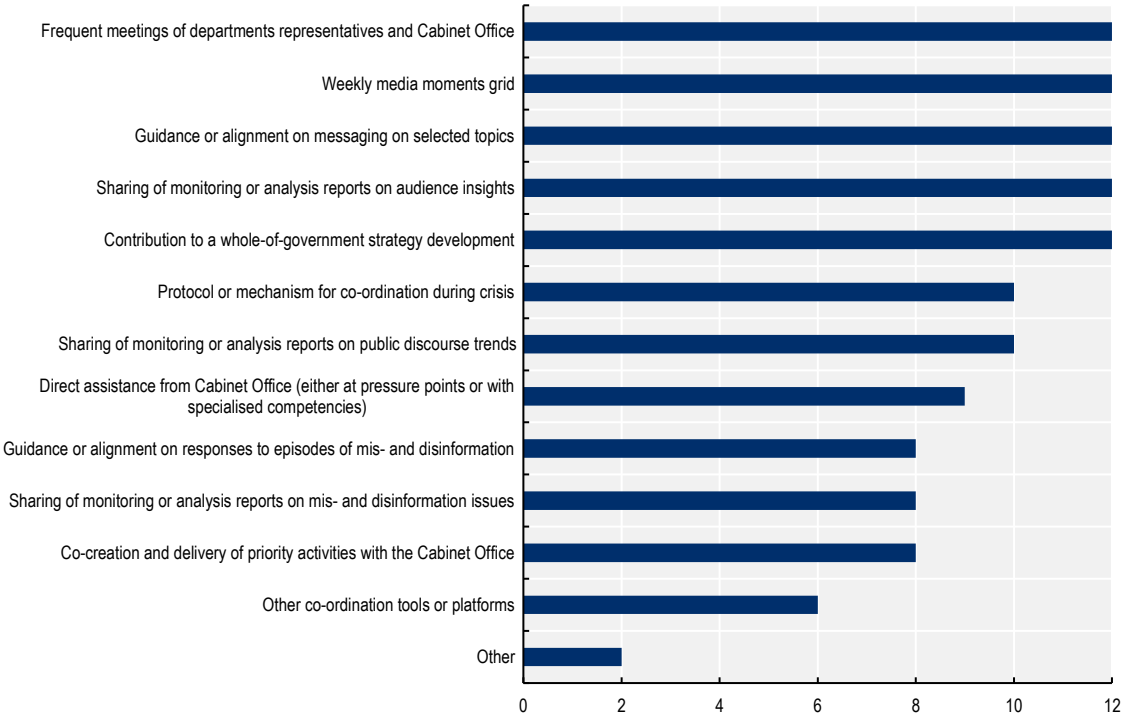
Despite this, several communicators have mentioned positive examples of inter-departmental co-ordination and collaboration in recent years – notably around the pandemic response and cost-of-living crisis. Breaking down these siloes was a welcome target of the GCS 2022-25 Strategy, with a pillar on collaboration (see Box 1.4). This has been demonstrated in numerous joint campaigns carried out by GCS, examples of which are discussed in Chapter 2.

Greater co-ordination and efficiency are the focus of significant reforms to GCS in recent years. These are being complemented with actions envisioned in the 2022-25 Strategy. Reforms have ushered in new leadership and contributed to a 55% reduction in the central Cabinet Office team, ending years of consecutive staff growth (CSW, 2023[27]). The restructuring was noted in the 2022-2025 strategy as a way to create a "smaller, more joined-up Government Communication Service" (GCS, 2022[9]), which was welcomed by some observers (Cain, 2021[28]; Urban, 2023[29]). Conversely, most surveyed departments stated that existing resources and available staff capacity made implementing the official mandate for communication a challenge, particularly when combined with the expanding range of issues and specialised disciplines teams are expected to cover.

Restructuring has not amounted to reductions across the board as departments and ALBs retain responsibility on personnel decisions (GCS, 2022[9]). Survey responses indicate that trends in departments' team sizes differ, but a majority have increased specialised communication roles (Figure 1.3). Interviews broadly confirmed the move towards more specialised profiles, particularly in the disciplines of digital, insight and analysis. This is not surprising given the accelerated transformation of the profession, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alfonsi et al., 2022[30]). Ensuring the right capacity and skills is vital to the function and remains a priority for GCS leadership. Despite the central downsizing of GCS, plans to meet the challenge of a transforming profession deserve praise and ought to be accomplished, as discussed in the last section of this chapter.

Figure 1.2. Areas of inter-departmental co-ordination

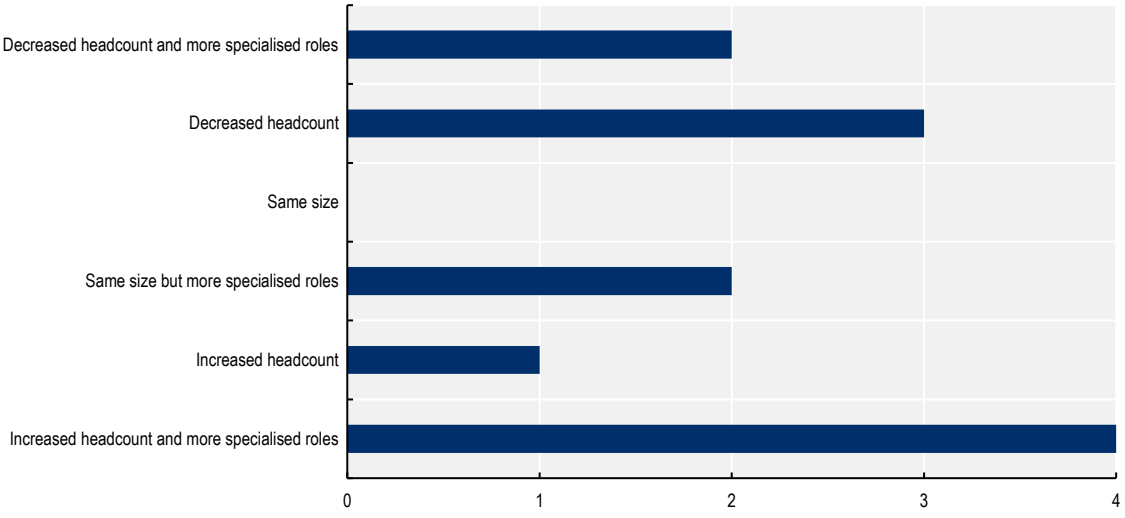
How does the department co-ordinate its communication activities across government to support a whole-of-government communication?



Note: N=12, multiple responses possible.
Source: OECD survey of UK government communication offices at departmental level, 2022.

Figure 1.3. Size and composition of departments' communication offices

Overall, has the size and composition of the communication team in the institution changed over the last 5 years?



Note: Note: N=12, single choice answer.
Source: OECD survey of UK government communication offices at departmental level, 2022.

Box 1.4. The 2022-2025 Government Communication Service (GCS) Strategy

The GCS Strategy multi-annual reform strategy has five overarching goals:

- Improve the ability of communicators to work together to address top challenges.
- Grow capabilities to leverage technological transformation for the public good.
- Improve efficiency and effectiveness of GCS.
- Build public trust.
- Grow and develop the function's talent pool.

The strategy is broken down into three pillars, each matched by a set of commitments that aim to solve challenges within each pillar.

The first pillar is 'Collaboration', with key points of action including the creation of a strong cross-Government communication strategy, grounded in shared audience insights, data analysis, and effective evaluation. Aiming to break down siloes and institutional barriers to deliver joined-up campaigns, the pillar includes the design of a new central GCS operating model and creating more opportunities for GCS members to connect with one another.

The second pillar is 'Innovation and improvement', which aims to respond to the changing nature of the communication landscape by encouraging every member of GCS to drive innovation and improvement within their own day-to-day practices. Priority areas for action include improving digital, data and content; harnessing technology to improve impact, including through the publication of a GCS Innovation Strategy and GCS Data Strategy; improving efficiency throughout GCS, and maintaining public trust through the highest standards of propriety and ethics.

The third pillar is 'Great People'. This pillar highlights the need for a re-evaluation of approaches to learning and development, career progression, and professional accreditation, driven by ongoing changes to the world of work and employees' expectations of their employers. The strategy indicates this would be achieved through raising professional standards, attracting, recruiting and retaining talented communicators, building brilliant functional leaders, creating a diverse and inclusive GCS, and creating careers across all four corners of the UK.

Table 1.2. Commitments under the three pillars of GCS 2022-2023 strategy (extract)

Collaboration	Innovation and Improvement	Great People
• Clearly articulate the remit and responsibility of the campaign SRO role • Raise the bar on spending controls to be more assertive in using spending controls to improve the quality of campaigns and join up with other departments • Consider professional assurance approval for campaigns that run across more than one financial year • Develop a monthly research and insight report for the key planks of the annual Government Communication Strategy • Reform, simplify and digitise the PASS process • Establish a central Strategy and Planning function within GCS	• Create an enhanced No.10 digital communication hub to provide strategic direction and set best practice for GCS digital communication • Update the GCS evaluation framework to include stronger standards for evaluating digital content • Update the Modern Communication Operating Model and Government Communication Service Functional Model so that it includes design principles for digital content teams. • Establish a virtual 'GCS Innovation Lab' • Publish a GCS Innovation Strategy • Develop a sprint-based approach to launching new products and services • Publish a GCS Data Strategy	• Review and consolidate core professional frameworks and guidance, including: o all leadership and capability frameworks for GCS SCS Leaders o the Modern Comms Operating Model, Competency Framework and Functional Standard • Enhance the GCS curriculum in line with outputs from the Future Communicator project, wider skills data, create an accreditation model, establish the feasibility of delivering an online learning management system • Develop a new GCS people brand and articulate the GCS people offer to include a new outreach programme

• Develop a planning cycle that gives all stakeholders clarity on what to expect over the year and allows time for collaboration, strategic input and approvals • Develop one systematic process for monitoring and reporting on campaigns, including standardised approaches to data collection and consistent measurement, which gives Ministers clear visibility and confidence in delivery and impact • Restructure and reduce the size of the central GCS team at the Cabinet Office with a focus on strategy and co-ordination, standards and capability, and expert and shared services • Introduce a new funding model based on the principle that core No.10 and Cabinet Office activity should come from core funding, mandatory professional development activity should be funded by the marketing levy or a per FTE charge, and GCS should charge for discretionary expert or shared services • Re-establish the GCS Board • Establish a new GCS External Advisory Board • Draft a Crisis Communication improvement plan including the development of a toolkit to include consideration of crisis contracts and playbook	• As part of wider business planning rounds, we will conduct an annual data collection across GCS community to include: • FTE/role data • Location • Use our data to support departments and ALBs to drive efficiencies through functional standards • Review and refresh propriety guidance, to include: ○ Clarification on how to raise a concern ○ Annual mandatory training • Updating of guidance to incorporate ethical use of new technology	• Review existing talent programmes (including diversity programmes) and develop a new talent and succession planning strategy • Develop a new GCS induction approach • Develop a secondments action plan • Develop a model leadership objective for GCS leaders aligned with their role in delivering this strategy • Develop a bi-annual SCS leadership event – with the first event focussing on the delivery of this strategy • Create a new SCS induction programme • Review and consolidate core professional frameworks and guidance including all leadership and capability frameworks for GCS SCS Leaders to align with L&D expectations • Review and publish a new D&I action plan • Create and publish a GCS location strategy with a target for the number of GCS roles to be based outside of London

Note: The above table of commitments is an extract of the GCS Strategy document.
Source: GCS (2022[1]), Government Communication Service: Our Strategy for 2022-2025, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/about-us/government-communication-service-our-strategy-for-2022-to-2025/.

Empowering the public communication function to deliver impact for citizens

The OECD *Report on Public Communication* (2021[2]) highlighted empowering the function as one of five key principles for rendering it more effective as a lever of government. In many of the 46 countries studied in the Report, there was a gap between the understanding of public communication's role, its actual implementation, and the resources allocated to it. This section looks at how GCS and communication offices across government are becoming more empowered to contribute meaningfully to government objectives and fulfil their potential to bring value for citizens.

As highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, GCS is working towards breaking legacy misperceptions of communication's role, which are common to many OECD countries (OECD, 2021[2]). As a result, it is increasingly valued across government thanks to its effort to demonstrate impact. This process has been underway for a number of years owing to the aforementioned efforts to raise quality and demonstrate impact. Previous external reviews of government communication have noted "something approaching disdain for media and communication matters" among some observers (UK Parliament, 1998[31]) and "inconsistencies between departments on the significance attached to the communication function" (Phillis, 2008[32]).

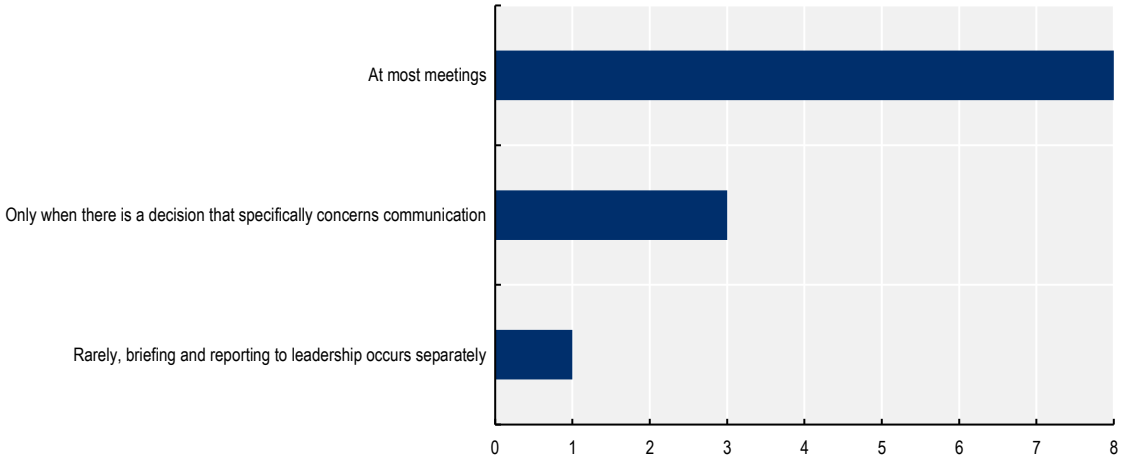
While significant progress has been made to improve the recognition of communication within government, evidence collected through this *Scan* indicates there is still some way to go to ensure communication's value is maximised. One important way is its positioning within administrative hierarchies. Since

October 2021, the function has benefitted from a revamped structure with the new role of CEO on par with the grade of Director-General in the UK civil service policy function.

Similarly, interviews conducted as part of this *Scan* showed an upward trend in the involvement of senior communicators in key decision-making forums across government departments. For instance, eight of the twelve departments in the OECD survey indicated their Director of Communication (DoC) participates in their institutions' Executive Committee (ExCo) meetings, along with Director-Generals, other top civil servants and ministerial advisors. Three respondents noted participating only in situations where communication decisions are concerned, and another noted that reporting to leadership happened in separate settings (Figure 1.4). These findings broadly align with accounts from the interviews, which show some discrepancy in which levels of the departmental hierarchy DoCs typically report to, and their representation among senior leadership.

Figure 1.4. Access to top-level decision makers

How frequently is the Director of Communication represented in meetings of the departments' executive board (or equivalent)?



Note: Note: N=12, single choice answer.
Source: OECD survey of UK government communication offices at departmental level, 2022.

Several senior communicators remarked high-level visibility and influence was a recent development. Interviewees have repeatedly cited the COVID-19 pandemic as a watershed moment where the strategic importance of communication, and the complexity of leveraging it effectively, were truly understood by policy makers, politicians and stakeholders. Some noted benefitting from an elevated role as a result, and said they were consistently included at the highest level of decision making in cross-governmental initiatives, such as in the implementation of lockdown measures and COVID-19 vaccine delivery.

Whereas the overall picture points to a trend for greater empowerment of the communication function and the recognition of its strategic and practical importance for government, this development is not to be taken for granted. Efforts to ensure this trend is not reversed are equally valuable. It is notable that when listing top challenges and strengths in the survey, departments mentioned high-level recognition of communication under both categories.

Rather than being a protocol requirement, DoC's participation in ExCo meetings remains at the discretion of senior officials, often the Permanent Secretary (the most senior civil servant) in each department. Lines of reporting can similarly affect this access to the organisations' leadership, for instance, some DoCs report to Director-Generals instead of directly to the Permanent Secretary.

The inclusion of communicators in ExCo meetings often results from ministerial or political-level attention to communication and media, seemingly out of consideration for reputational concerns. This was noted by a number of departmental communicators interviewed, who indicated that ministers are often among those most interested in hearing DoCs' views of how a given policy would be received by the public. However, interest at the political level of departments can reinforce a focus on the reputation management aspects of the function, at the relative expense of more operational types of communication.

In particular, interviews with communicators stressed that the onus lies on each DoC to "fight for a seat at the table". In this sense, there was unanimity in placing emphasis on the need to continuously demonstrate value and challenge misperceptions. Such a system can be overly vulnerable to changes in personnel, in the event that a department's hierarchy is not receptive to DoC's arguments for involvement in the ExCo or similar, or the latter is unsuccessful in advancing the case.

Formalising the role of communication in the departmental hierarchy could help consolidate gains in its empowerment. This could be achieved by defining reporting lines in the Functional Standards. This would match the document's existing formal requirement on evaluation of communication activities, which interviews highlighted is a proven means for continuing to challenge legacy assumptions that have long worked to discredit communication.

Evaluating communication impact to demonstrate value

The strong focus on evaluation and placing evidence at the centre of communication strategies has been recognised by the GCS leadership for some time. By producing sound evidence of the impact of communication activities, GCS has been able to gradually change how it is seen by the rest of government. As a result, it has become empowered to continuously adjust, improve, and innovate to pursue more ambitious objectives. GCS's leadership has repeatedly stressed that if communicators are not able to prove their added value they stand to lose budget and resources, and hence their ability to support the government's work.[7]

Thanks to sustained investment in developing and expanding its methodology, UK government communicators have become acknowledged as leaders in evaluation. Data from the OECD's international report (2021[2]) supported this favourable comparison with the international status quo. GCS has developed several frameworks and guidance documents on evaluation, with a focus on strategic communication and campaigns. The updated Evaluation Framework 2.0 (GCS, 2018[33]) includes metrics for measurement tailored to different campaign types, along with guidance on calculating return on investment (see Box 1.5). It emphasises the importance of setting 'C-SMART' objectives: ones that are challenging, specific, measurable, attainable, and relevant – also included within the OASIS campaign planning guide (GCS, 2020[22]). Both documents notably recognise the importance of setting metrics relating to desirable outcomes such as changes in behaviour, attitudes and awareness levels.

Box 1.5. GCS Evaluation Framework 2.0

The GCS Evaluation Framework 2.0 is primarily aimed at paid campaign activity, which is characterised by typically having one of three objectives: behaviour change, recruitment, and awareness. Each of these has a set of recommended evaluation metrics, divided into four categories: inputs, outputs, outtakes, outcomes.

The Framework focuses on empirical measurement by ensuring that objectives contain three elements: a baseline, which should include a numerical prediction of what will be observed if no communication activity takes place; a numerical forecast of the difference that the campaign activity will make (over a

defined period of time); and an explanation, with existing evidence base, used to justify the level of change that is being targeted.

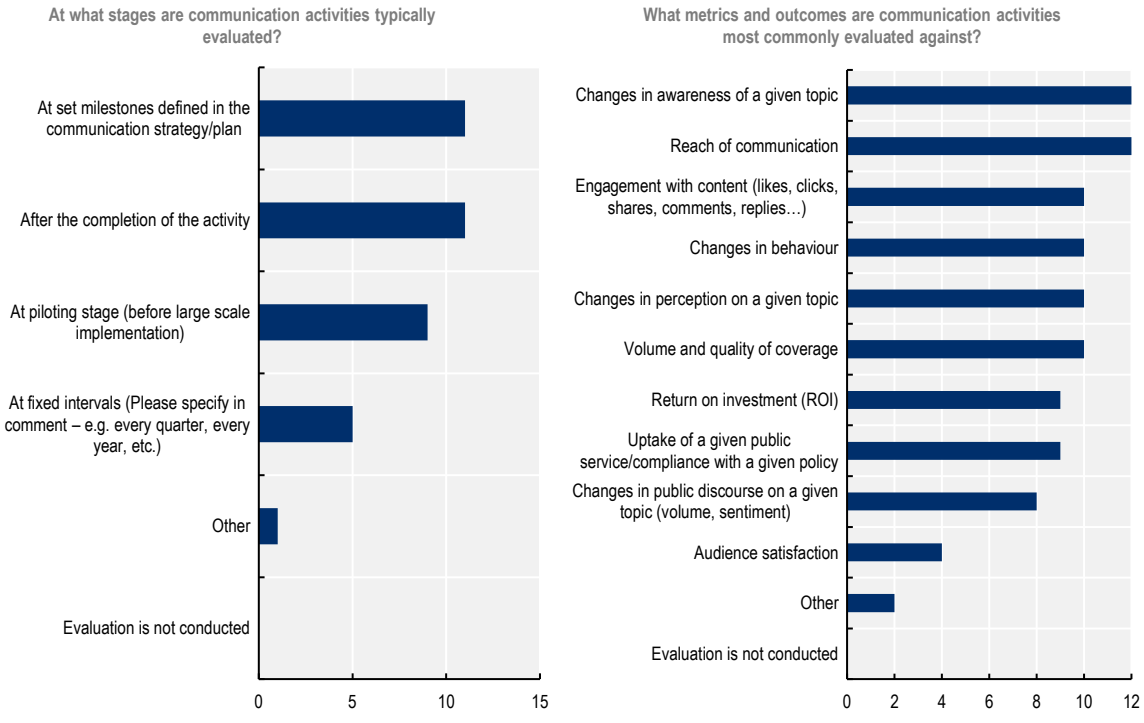
It states that during the evaluation process, which should be ongoing throughout the campaign to ensure continuous optimisation, actual outcome data should be compared with targets set in objectives. Outtakes will also be compared with these objectives, and the causal link between the outtakes and the outcomes should also be considered.

Source: GCS (2018[33]), *Evaluation Framework 2.0*, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/evaluation-framework/.

This guidance seems well-consolidated in practice. Eleven departments that answered the survey indicated that communication activities are typically evaluated at set milestones, as defined in communication strategies, and after completion of the activity. All but three also noted evaluating at the piloting stage. All departments additionally claimed to carry out evaluation across a wide range of metrics: from reach and volume of coverage, to changes in awareness of a given topic, in behaviour, in public discourse, and in uptake of a given public service (see Figure 1.5).

This approach is valuable as it represents a departure from the still-prevalent practice in most OECD countries of measuring communication success only in terms of communication outputs (such as volume of media coverage, reach of digital content and interaction rates) rather than communication outcomes (such as behaviour change or perceptions change), which correlate more closely to overall impact (OECD, 2021[2]). This emphasis has been dubbed by Macnamara (2023[34]) as a "media-centric, rather than an audience-centric, approach" that leaves unanswered what the consequences of the communication are.

Figure 1.5. Evaluation stages and metrics across departments



Note: Note: N=12, multiple choices possible.
Source: OECD survey of UK government communication offices at departmental level, 2022.

However, while evaluation of communication activities may be effective in measuring how far public communication is creating an informed public and supporting policy delivery from service uptake and behaviour change, the extent to which audiences feel satisfied[8] with information they receive is not commonly measured. This may have implications for public trust. This will be explored in further depth in Chapter 2.

Box 1.6. Evaluating public communication in New South Wales, Australia

The Government of New South Wales, Australia has developed an evaluation framework for advertising and communication that links communication inputs (such as baseline data collection, focus groups, literature reviews) to activities (such as creative design, media buying, journalist relations), outputs (such as social media posts, paid advertising, events), outcomes (such as recall, awareness, interest, attitude change) and finally impact (such as inquiries or registrations, revenue, quality of life). It lists methods by which outputs can be measured, such as media metrics, content analysis, website data, in addition to highlighting ways of measuring outcomes, such as through surveys, interviews, and social media qualitative analysis.

Through this comprehensive matrix, a process of evaluating communication and advertising at every stage of its development and delivery is outlined, which directly links activities to policy outcomes, thus demonstrating the impact of communication.

Source: NSW Government (n.d.[35]), *NSW Government Evaluation Framework for Advertising and Communication*, https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-03/Evaluation%20Framework%20Implementation%20Matrix.pdf

As the next Chapter of this *Scan* will discuss, enabling dialogue and a feedback loop with citizens is an important objective that communication can facilitate. There is an opportunity to build relevant metrics of interaction and responsiveness to evaluation designs. In the survey, only four departments indicated that audience satisfaction is commonly evaluated. This can ensure opportunities for interaction are built into communication plans and that they are used to improve the communication itself and feed into policy.

Future-proofing and professionalising GCS

The communication profession and information ecosystem have undergone significant transformations in the last decade, which many governments are still grappling with (OECD, 2021[2]; Alfonsi et al., 2022[30]). Rapid digitalisation has revolutionised information consumption habits and enabled each individual to reach many more with their content – which was previously exclusive to the news and entertainment media (Alfonsi et al., 2022[30]). The opportunity for governments to reach and engage with citizens at scale is greater than ever before. These aspects are elaborated in Chapter 2.

Succeeding in such a complex and changing environment comes with challenges: traditional communication methods and tactics are losing efficacy, and governments are under growing pressure to match and outdo innovations in other sectors.

Recent leaps in generative artificial intelligence (AI) such as ChatGPT have made automated content creation a reality. And, big data analytics allow audience insights to be gathered and audience segments to be targeted with high precision (Alfonsi et al., 2022[30]).

The rise of platforms giving users personalised experiences has made it “easier (and cheaper) for the government to reach specific segments of the population, but harder (and more expensive) to reach everybody at once” (Urban, 2023[29]). Citizens are accessing information from a more diverse range of

platforms than ever before that cater to their specific preferences. This provides opportunities for highly precise targeting. Simultaneously, fewer channels have an audience that is genuinely widespread and diverse. This is a challenge for reaching multiple groups at once. COVID-19 has been a further catalyst for change. It has accelerated governments' uptake of innovative practices for more citizen-centred communication against a backdrop of worsening mis- and disinformation (Alfonsi et al., 2022[30]).

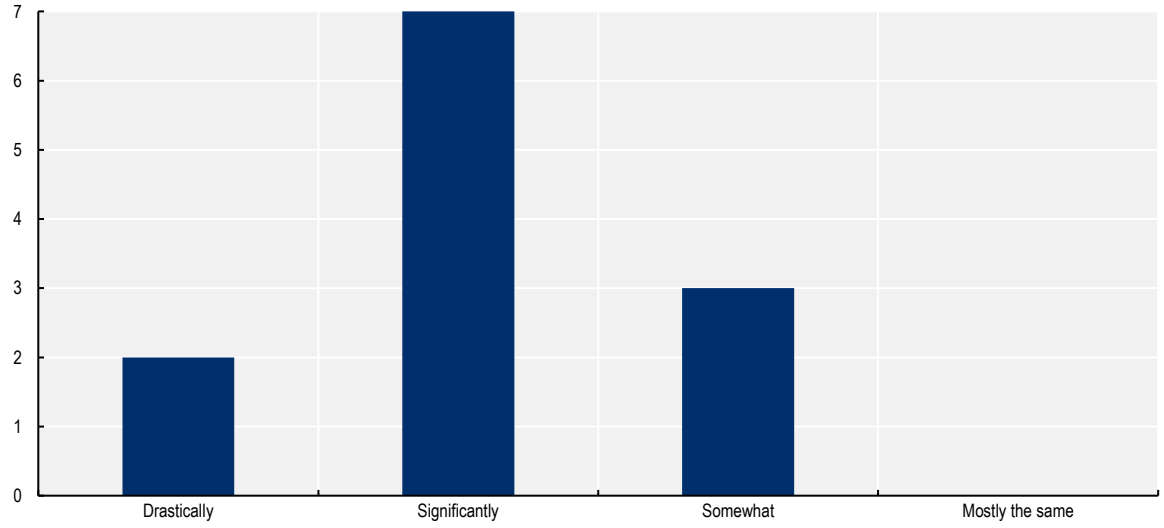
Novel technologies come with new and urgent ethical questions. Institutions need to address them if they are to maintain their social license to employ these technologies responsibly without public fears of manipulation or surveillance. These questions, discussed in Chapter 3, require updated guidance, which recent surveys have found communication professionals unprepared for (Zerfass et al., 2020[36]; Macnamara et al., 2021[37]).

Likewise, information technologies and innovation in communication call for advanced and diverse skills sets across communication teams so that they are able to seize innovation opportunities at scale (Alfonsi et al., 2022[30]; Zerfass et al., 2020[36]). The potential these innovations have for communicating directly and effectively with citizens warrants investment in professionalising and future-proofing the function.

Changes to the communication profession and its wider ecosystem have been front of mind for GCS leadership and communicators across government. Seven of the twelve surveyed departments recognised that the nature of the communication function, expectations of it and challenges they deal with have changed "significantly" (see Figure 1.6) over the last five years. This is not surprising since this is the period in which communicators experienced the COVID-19 pandemic, exponential growth of mis- and disinformation, and a rapid shift to image, video and audio as primary content formats across communication channels.

Figure 1.6. Perceived recent transformation of the function

Has the nature of the public communication function (as performed by the institution), the expectations for it, and the challenges it deals with changed over the last 5 years?



Note: Note: N=12, single choice answer.
Source: OECD survey of UK government communication offices at departmental level, 2022.

While they recognise and emphasise the challenges in adjusting to this new environment, communication directorates in UK government departments maintain a positive outlook for their teams. Six out of 12 surveyed departments considered their communication unit to be "highly agile" in adapting to

transformations in the field and seizing innovation. The other half answered that they can sometimes struggle to update approaches but have managed to navigate challenges.

Interviews broadly corroborated this finding: communicators often recognised their achievements in growing their departments' insights and digital capabilities, for example, but were similarly candid about the progress still to be made. Across the board, communicators recognised some "pockets of excellence" and innovative examples in the use of digital tools, data, and behavioural insights, but they were cautious not to claim these were representative of the modus operandi of their departments or wider government communication.

This relatively encouraging picture is due in part to the emphasis the GCS leadership places on professionalisation and skills. Models, frameworks and toolkits have proliferated, covering all communication disciplines. The broad acknowledgement of the Modern Communication Operating Model (MCOM), for instance, suggests it helped shift expectations for the performance of a professional communication unit. As noted in the GCS 2022-25 strategy, MCOM has been updated to include a dedicated focus on digital. This reflects the growing centrality of this specialist discipline and the need to integrate it accordingly.

GCS has introduced a career framework centred around the skills of different disciplines (GCS, 2021[38]). MCOM disciplines encompass Strategic Communication, Digital, Data & Insight, Marketing, External Affairs, Media and Internal Communication.

Underpinning these models and structures is a drive to build a skilled and capable workforce. To this end, GCS is developing talent and upskilling communicators at all levels of seniority through training programmes. The Government Communication Academy is one such established endeavour, similar to training centres established by other OECD Members (see Box 1.7). The Academy has been expanding its offer of different formats of learning and development activities for the GCS membership.

In line with commitments in the GCS 2022-25 strategy, the GCS Advance capacity-building initiative will combine different streams of training from the apprentice level up to the leader (GCS, 2023[39]). As of September 2023, the Advance initiative launched a pilot programme aimed at the "practitioner" level. It offers comprehensive online training courses across all the core communication disciplines, improving and expanding on the existing Academy offer. Once scaled in 2024, the programme will address some priority competency areas identified in this section as needing further development. These include AI in communication, data and insights, and digital communication. Beyond the "practitioner" level, a diversified offer to be rolled out between 2024 and 2025 will complement this training to develop cohorts of experts and prepare experienced technical experts for leadership positions. This aspect will respond to the pre-existing gap in tailored learning identified in the survey of departments conducted for this *Scan* (see below).

Box 1.7. Government communication academies in the UK, Canada and the Netherlands

In the **UK**, the Government Communication Academy includes the GCS curriculum and standards of professional practice, courses and events, information about relevant professional bodies and mentoring opportunities. Members of GCS are required to complete a specific portion of learning and development every year based on these materials. The new GCS Advance "Practitioner" programme is likewise offered online and will reach 1 200 learners per year from 2024.

Conversely, in **Canada**, the Communication Community Office (CCO) is the body that supports federal government communicators with training and guidance across a range of communication disciplines. The CCO's programmes sit alongside resources offered through Canada's School of Public Service, which offers government-wide cross-discipline training, including a dedicated Digital Academy designed to help public servants develop the skills needed to thrive in the digital age.

In the **Netherlands**, the Academy for Government Communication supports government communicators with professional development opportunities and provides a network for knowledge-sharing. It also carries out training for policy professionals, in collaboration with the Dutch Institute for Public Administration training centre.

Source: GCS (2021[40]), *About the Academy*, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/academy/about-the-academy/; Government of Canada (2022[41]), *Learning Opportunities for Communicators*, https://www.canada.ca/en/privy-council/services/communications-community-office/learning-opportunities-communicators.html; Government of the Netherlands (n.d.[42]), *Organisation*, https://www.government.nl/ministries/ministry-of-general-affairs/organisation.

Survey responses validated that training is in place for all the main competencies, including newer disciplines such as data analytics, behavioural science and counter-disinformation. According to one interview, over 2 000 staff have received digital communication training to date. However, responses also indicated that the training offer has historically been the same regardless of seniority and experience although diversified levels are supposed to have been put in place in the implementation of the GCS Strategy. This training gap may be a barrier to developing the highly specialised profiles that interviews highlighted are in high demand, as noted below. Generic training may also be less fit for ensuring that senior leaders, who may have built their career prior to the recent transformations in the field, are up to speed with the cutting-edge of the profession and able to lead it forward. This is particularly important for their role in setting their teams' culture and openness to innovation (Alfonsi et al., 2022[30]).

The other pillars of GCS's effort for professionalisation are its apprenticeships, mentoring schemes and talent programmes for government communicators across different grades of seniority. Six such programmes are listed on the GCS website.[9] One external interviewee noted that such programmes are regarded as highly effective for attracting young talent and building foundational skills whereas schemes for leadership and more experienced staff could be improved, an area GCS has recently addressed. On top of these initiatives, interviews revealed that it is commonplace for communicators to have worked in different departments and agencies over the course of their careers. This exposure to different teams and issues can be an asset to facilitate collaboration and the transfer of good practices across institutions.

GCS has also introduced the informal roles of "head of discipline" for all areas of communication. Heads of discipline are top experts in a particular specialisation of the profession (such as Data and Insights, Marketing or Strategic Communication) working in Cabinet Office or other departments. They assume a cross-government responsibility to cultivate this expertise and put it at the service of the rest of GCS by driving improvements and mainstreaming good practices across its membership. According to interviews, heads of discipline similarly lead the design and delivery of training sessions on their specific areas of focus.

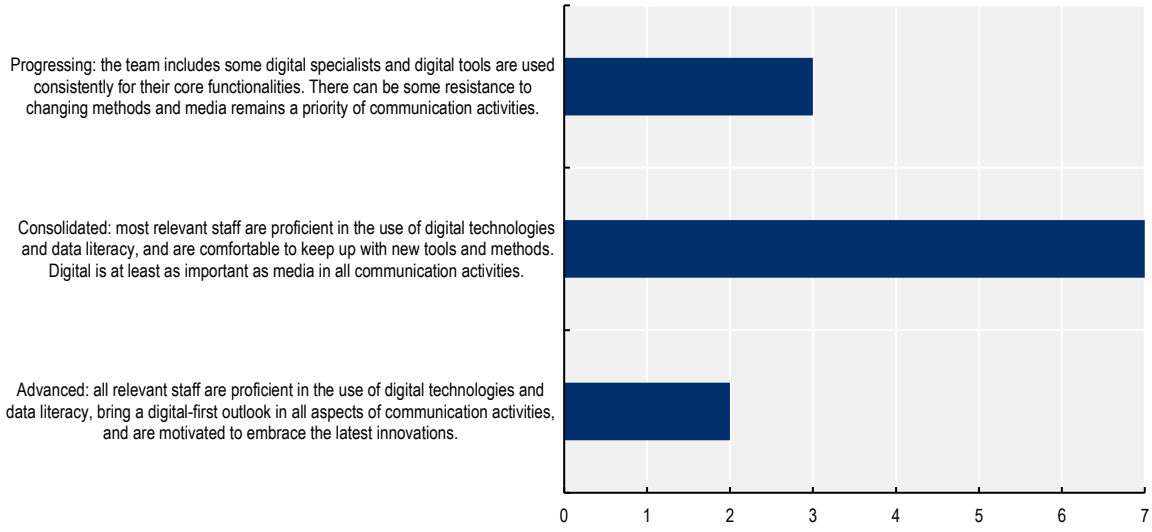
Despite these extensive initiatives, and due in no small part to the "inherent dynamism" of the communication field (GCS, 2018[43]), capacity and expertise in some important disciplines could be further enhanced. Surveyed departments cited staffing-related issues 10 times while noting their top challenges. Interviews confirmed the survey responses that identified pressures on team capacity linked to high staff turnover and low access to certain skill profiles. Factors sometimes outside the control of DoCs and GCS leadership such as lengthy clearance processes for civil service recruitment and a highly competitive labour market also mean that reforms outside of the training realm may be necessary to address the skills shortage.

Skills and specialisations in the areas driving innovation are among the most urgent that GCS could further develop. Asked about the stage of advancement of teams' digitalisation and working methods, the 12 surveyed departments were split, with only two considering themselves 'advanced' (Figure 1.7). Interviews confirmed varying levels of proficiency in this respect. Recent analyses validate that GCS "is still lacking in digital, broadcast and data visualisation skills" (Urban, 2023[29]), echoing the GCS 2022-25

strategy's own acknowledgement of this challenge. Market competition for data and digital skills was highlighted across interviews and surveys as an issue standing in the way of expansion in this domain. This raises considerations of how to best organise these specialist capabilities so that they support the widest possible range of communication projects.

Figure 1.7. Departments' split in level of digitalisation

At what stage of advancement is the digitalisation of communication activities and working methods within the institution's communication team?



Note: Note: N=12, single choice answer.
Source: OECD survey of UK government communication offices at departmental level, 2022.

The GCS 2022-25 multi-annual Strategy offers a comprehensive and forward-looking response to the interconnected challenges of attracting and maintaining a highly capable and professional workforce that can help GCS achieve its objective "not merely to keep up with the pace of change, but to actively lead the way" (GCS, 2018[43]). The strategy reveals a solid grasp of the same issues that emerged across OECD interviews and literature as well as providing targeted plans to address them. In particular, GCS management's response to the need to attract and retain top talent is captured in the strategy pillar on "Great People" and its emphasis on "purpose".

Expanding professional development and accreditation is an important focus of the strategy. It is a central objective along with the review of talent schemes, dedicated strategies for "talent and succession planning", greater internal diversity, and a branding exercise to promote the "GCS people brand" and future offer (GCS, 2022[9]). The GCS strategy and interviews with leadership stressed the intention to build the brand incorporating a values-based approach to promote the function's social impact and gain an edge over employers in other sectors.

The emphasis on purpose and positive impact of communication as a factor for attracting new talent is commendable. It would help to attract professionals motivated to make public communication ever more effective and could contribute to an impact- and citizen-centred culture within teams. However, in order to achieve this, the GCS leadership may need to address, among other issues, external perceptions of the politicisation of the function (which is discussed in Chapter 3).

According to several interviews with both government communicators and external observers, public communication in the UK can sometimes be associated with political messaging and reputation management rather than work to "change our world and people's lives for the better", which GCS champions (GCS, 2022, p. 23[9]). Interviewees claimed that this deters potential candidates who would otherwise give up higher salaries for a career that gives them a sense of purpose. Such observations add weight to considerations in Chapter 3 on building the reputation of and trust in public communication.

Focusing innovation efforts to bring about a more citizen-centred public communication

After being disrupted by the rise of social media, large-scale mis- and disinformation, and increasing "datafication", the communication field is now on the threshold of a new wave of disruption brought on by recent developments in AI. It is a top priority of the GCS senior leadership team to be prepared for this change, as acknowledged in interviews with the OECD. As in many governments across the OECD and beyond, UK communicators are working to close gaps in their uptake of digital communication practices while scanning the horizon for potential innovations that can transform their operating environment or make them more effective. This section identifies key avenues that could support innovation in the pursuit of a more citizen-centred public communication.

Innovation is high on the GCS leadership's agenda and is a pillar of the 2022-25 Strategy. The current CEO has committed publicly to directing a greater proportion of the GCS budget towards innovation alongside a plan to publish a dedicated Innovation Strategy by October 2023 (CSW, 2023[27]). The latter will focus on identifying how GCS can streamline tasks and increase efficiency through automation, following on from the government's existing National AI Strategy (GCS, 2022[9]).

Interviews with top officials indicated a focus on the growing potential for applying AI and big data solutions to shift towards the "mass personalisation" of content and messages. At the time of writing, GCS was preparing to introduce its own large-language model (LLM) to act as a virtual assistant and support a wide range of communication tasks.[10]

OECD research indicates that, in the field of communication, innovation can often be taken as synonymous with technology. However, there is a risk that this focus clouds the underlying objective of innovating – which for governments is to find more efficient and effective ways to generate better outcomes for citizens (Alfonsi et al., 2022[30]; OECD, 2021[2]; 2019[44]; 2022[45]). In this sense, innovating public communication means finding new approaches and solutions that can reach more and diverse people with relevant information and meaningful opportunities for interaction. For example, Chapter 2 calls for innovating how institutions gather insights to understand public preferences and attitudes. This can inform policy making and enable two-way communication by leveraging traditional and digital feedback channels in new ways.

Such an understanding appears to be shared by some senior GCS officials, but there is scope to reinforce it and embed it further in the organisational culture. This can, for example, be achieved via outputs linked to the innovation pillar of the GCS 2022-2025 Strategy, with greater emphasis and articulation of how innovations ought to improve citizens' experiences.

The COVID-19 pandemic made this a central paradigm to drive improvements in the function around the world. This crisis acted as a catalyst to experiment with new channels and tactics, and mainstream practices that make communication more inclusive, responsive and compelling (Alfonsi et al., 2022[30]). UK communicators have been leaders in seizing some of the new approaches and innovating practices based on the latest industry trends. Interviews and survey responses also indicate that departments are making important efforts to develop more precise insights and leverage digital channels to target audiences' needs (which is the focus of the next chapter).

Nonetheless, improvements in the gathering and management of data can pave the way for new and better ways of working. This can also set communicators up for success as a new wave of transformations in the field accelerate.

Working with data and making the most of it emerged as challenges in surveys and several interviews with communicators. Data on anything from audience characteristics and trending topics of discussion to sentiment, attitudes, and behaviour on a specific issue are at the heart of an evidence-based and citizen-centred outlook for public communication (Alfonsi et al., 2022[30]).

Although communication teams across departments indicated using insights sources extensively, many expressed awareness of the limitations of their approaches vis-à-vis the potential ways they could leverage larger and more varied sources of data and evidence. Some teams, for instance, reported advanced research and data analysis operations within their department. In two cases these were well-integrated with the research capabilities of policy and delivery teams. Others indicated struggling to move past the status quo and over-reliance on public polling.

Two issues were raised as the main barriers to effectively leveraging data for public communication. The first relates to how data is managed within and across institutions. Interviews revealed that often the issue is an excess of research and data that is spread across different departments, teams and even within different parts of the communication unit. However, interviews noted such data is often kept in siloes, reducing other teams' visibility over what information is already available or relevant. These siloes also apply to communication teams across government, as noted in the GCS 2022-25 Strategy (GCS, 2022[9]).

Some suggested it can be easier to commission new research than navigating existing scattered data. Where data is better integrated and accessible, on the other hand, teams point to the challenge of making sense of it and extracting relevant and actionable insights from the vast trove of information.

This latter challenge with data analysis links to the second main barrier, namely capacity and proficiency in data analysis within communication teams. Not enough specialists are in place at the advanced end of the spectrum, and it appears from interviews that too few communicators are adequately proficient in interpreting and using data to inform their work. Some interviewees remarked that, at present, the community of expertise remains too small in comparison to the importance of data analysis in all communication operations. The high demand across the labour market for advanced data skills makes it difficult to recruit externally. This means that the GCS might need to further cultivate this expertise as part of its talent development schemes.

Nonetheless, notable steps in this key area of innovation are underway. Eleven of the twelve surveyed departments reported their teams currently receive training in data analytics or data science. Steps are additionally being taken to raise internal standards and provide guidance in how data is leveraged for more efficient and effective communication. A commitment in the GCS 2022-25 strategy promises a GCS Data Strategy in 2024, drawing on the UK's existing National Data Strategy to address data-sharing and ethical safeguards in its handling. In this regard, GCS can consider the OECD's recommendations for the "Path to Becoming a Data-Driven Public Sector" (2019[46]) and the example of Denmark (see Box 1.8).

The question of ethics is an especially important one, particularly when privacy rules are concerned. The backdrop of personal data extraction and lax privacy rules that preceded recent waves of regulation has dented public confidence in how their data are used (Alfonsi et al., 2022[30]). This is accentuated by the negative connotations that often linger around the communication sector, with implications for their social license to operate. The OECD Trust Survey found that 52% of UK respondents characterised the government as likely to only use their personal data for legitimate purposes, with 32% characterising this as unlikely (OECD, 2022[47]). This indicates a measure of confidence in existing data regulations among the majority of the public, but points to sizeable groups who remain concerned.

The GCS strategy recognises the need to build trust in the function. It can achieve this in part by being open and transparent about what data it uses and how, and the precautions that are taken to handle it responsibly. The OECD Trust Survey also highlighted that governments' efforts to inform the population about how their personal data are processed, stored, and used is an important aspect of government

reliability, which is a driver of trust (OECD, 2022[47]). Transparency is similarly core to the UK's existing National Data Strategy, of which ethics is a cross-cutting element.

Box 1.8. The Danish Basic Data Program

Launched by the Danish government in 2013, the Basic Data Program allows data collected in unique registers across different institutions to be easily accessed and combined through a single platform, the Data Distributor. Containing information on Danish citizens, companies, property, buildings, geography, and climate, the Data Distributor facilitates efficient access to and use of basic data for private and public actors alike.

The Basic Data Program and the launch of the Data Distributor serve three core objectives:

- Standardisation: Standardising data from different sources so it can be easily combined.
- Quality: Ensuring that data is accurate, complete, and updated.
- Distribution: Distributing data and support through a single platform to make it easily accessible.

Above all, the Basic Data Program allows public officials to access and reuse data collected by other institutions. Prior to the launch of the Basic Data Program, the challenge of navigating public data ownership often meant that officials would re-collect data for their own use. Sustaining multiple registers for the same data, however, was recognised as inefficient, expensive, and prone to error. The new system prevents duplication as it prohibits public authorities from requesting data from citizens that is already featured on the platform. At launch, the Basic Data Program was projected to result in an annual decrease in public expenditure of DKK 260 million (EUR 35 million) from 2020 onwards.

Source: SDFI (2022[48]), *Basic Public Data*, https://eng.sdfi.dk/data/basic-public-data; Danish Ministry of Finance (2012[49]), *Faktaark – Grunddata*; EC (2019[50]), *Danish Basic Data Program*, https://ec.europa.eu/digital-building-blocks/wikis/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=533365971.

Ultimately, genuine innovation will depend on how data, content, channels, old and emerging technologies are applied in new and useful ways to solve problems. In this respect the ambition of the GCS leadership to establish a "GCS innovation lab" and work with the Open Innovation Team[11] across government is a welcome one (GCS, 2022[9]). Innovation is often the product of collaboration, and some departments have pointed to ways they foster an enabling environment for new ideas.

Several surveyed departments noted taking part in cross-government best practice and skill-sharing networks on areas including strategic communication and digital. Similarly, departments noted interacting with external partners and industry leaders through the likes of contracted projects and external conferences to source expert advice and research in the sector. One of the departments also specified having a dedicated Digital Strategy Team, whose remit includes assessing available technologies to enhance insights-gathering. UK communicators are also active in international networks of practitioners that enable the flow of ideas and expertise across borders.[12]

Finally, together with the pursuit of "mass personalisation" of communication, the next frontier for innovating the function could be to develop better practices and opportunities for "mass conversation", providing expanded opportunities for two-way interaction with citizens at scale. This can serve as the basis for gathering continuous feedback that can inform policy, services and the information citizens need, which is the focus of the next chapter.

Currently, communication teams rely on focus groups and similar methods for a qualitative understanding of public sentiment or the efficacy of a given message. The use of interactive platforms, such as direct messaging apps or chatbots could offer additional opportunities for UK communicators to increase interactions, based on research for this *Scan*.[13] While there are limitations to these solutions, notably concerning the digital divide, expanding the avenues and frequency of direct interactions can eventually contribute to more meaningful two-way communication.

Key findings and recommendations

- The Government Communication Service's (GCS') 2022-25 Strategy is a blueprint for meeting the function's most difficult challenges in the medium and long term. Staying on track to deliver on each of these commitments is a welcome priority, and progress by late 2023 showed that 75% of commitments in the Strategy have been fulfilled.
- The Government Functional Standards on Communication are a powerful instrument to support the institutionalisation of core communication practices. They could be used to consolidate a common understanding of the function's contribution to democracy. There is an opportunity to articulate explicitly how communication ought to be trustworthy and responsive to public needs, or how it should foster meaningful engagement with policy through a larger emphasis on listening and dialogue. This focus could be emphasised in the Modern Communication Operating Model (MCOM) 3.0, as the primary resource for communicators.
- The multiple structures and advisory bodies that support the GCS leadership are a valuable asset but could be made more inclusive of key stakeholders. GCS could consider expanding the representation of stakeholders on relevant Boards to ensure that the perspectives of more diverse users and beneficiaries of public communication feed into top-level decisions.
- GCS has an important task of breaking organisational siloes and supporting more integrated cross-government initiatives. This could be achieved by providing greater incentives, in line with the commitments under the "Collaboration" pillar of its strategy.
- The empowerment and recognition of communicators varies across departments and with changes to top officials. GCS could support Directors of Communication (DoCs) in gaining access to and trust of top decision makers by formalising lines of reporting within departments and offering leadership training.
- Securing talent and building capacity in specialised areas of communication, such as data and insights, are key priorities. Efforts underway to expand training and development opportunities are essential to the effectiveness of communication teams in this rapidly transforming field. New training could be more actively promoted to ensure widespread uptake.
- Innovation and modernisation are high on the GCS leadership's priorities and communication teams are generally agile and open to change. There is an opportunity to focus on exploiting new technologies to enhance meaningful engagement and interaction with citizens, and improve how departments listen to and tailor approaches to specific segments of the population.
- GCS could support innovation through the development of communication "sandboxes" (or experimentation labs). It could also incentivise creative exchange among teams and communities of specialists under the heads of disciplines to foster innovation and the spread of good practices across its membership.
- Ethics and trust ought to be at the forefront of innovation, as acknowledged in the GCS Strategy. GCS leadership has an important task to ensure innovation and experimentation happens in parallel with updated ethical guidance.

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Notes

[1] The above roles for public communication have been elaborated by the OECD Secretariat and validated in discussions with representatives of Member and non-Member countries and selected experts who participated in the OECD Experts Group on Public Communication in June 2022.

[2] The Cabinet Office is the government department responsible for supporting the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers – secretaries of state and other senior ministers chosen by the Prime Minister from members of the House of Commons and House of Lords.

[3] ALBs in the UK comprise a wide range of public sector agencies and service delivery entities that are directly or indirectly under the responsibility of government departments. Some are executive agencies, such as the Met Office or HM Prison & Probation Service; others are non-departmental public bodies, such

as the Environment Agency; and others are non-ministerial departments, such as HM Revenue & Customs or Ofgem.

[4] See GOV.UK for more examples: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/functional-standards.

[5] The OECD defines open government as "a culture of governance that promotes the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation in support of democracy and inclusive growth" (see the OECD *Recommendation of the Council on Open Government* (OECD, 2017[51])).

[6] The OECD *Report on Public Communication* (2021) notes that communication "can enhance active transparency (understood as the obligation of public institutions to disseminate information without citizens having to request it). […] In this way, communication complements and potentially expands the reach of policy or legal frameworks, such those related to Access to Information, that are designed to disclose information both proactively and reactively.".

[7] Remarks delivered during the 5th meeting of the OECD Experts Group on Public Communication, 27 September 2022.

[8] Satisfaction could be measured in terms of relevance, ease of access, understandability and timeliness of the communication, for example.

[9] See for instance the schemes featured under the GCS website's careers page: https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/career/progress-your-career/ (accessed on 13 March 2023).

[10] Speech delivered by Simon Baugh at the Government Communication Service Leadership Event, 21 September 2023.

[11] The Open Innovation Team is a government unit that works on a project basis to support entities in the public sector with finding innovative solutions to meet their objectives. For more details see https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/open-innovation-team (accessed on 31 March 2023).

[12] Such as the Club of Venice, the OECD Experts Group on Public Communication and Working Party on Open Government, NATO Strategic Communication Center of Excellence, etc.

[13] For instance, only one of the twelve departments surveyed claimed to use direct messaging or chat functions.

2 Integrating communication in the policy cycle and supporting citizen participation

This chapter explores how public communication supports the development of policies and services, and their effective delivery. It analyses how communicators in UK government departments work alongside policy and service teams to add value throughout the policy cycle. Despite closer integration of the communication and policy making disciplines, evidence points to cultural and structural barriers to effective collaboration. This is particularly true at the early stages, where communication insights have the potential to inform policy decisions. Conversely, policy implementation is where the function's role is most established, as illustrated by the use of evidence-based campaigns for achieving strategic objectives.

The chapter discusses the opportunity for expanding communication's contribution to participative and responsive policy making. Building on evidence that public trust suffers from citizens' perceived lack of say in government decisions, the chapter proposes ways to leverage the function to close the feedback loop between citizens and policy. This includes exploring the emerging practice of organisational listening and means to increase interaction with citizens and stakeholders. The chapter concludes with recommendations for improving public communication's support of participation initiatives and the UK's open government agenda.

Public communication can play a critical role in the successful development and implementation of policies and the delivery of services. It does so by listening to and understanding citizens' needs and expectations in the first instance, and by providing the necessary information to empower them to make informed choices for themselves and society more broadly (as described in the analytical framework in Chapter 1).

However, internationally, the recognition of communication as a lever to both inform and implement public policy has been lagging. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly raised expectations and awareness of the potential and importance of public communication (OECD, 2021[1]; Alfonsi et al., 2022[2]; WPP, 2016[3]). Data from the OECD's 2020 international survey on public communication indicated that simple awareness-raising was the most common goal for the function, compared with fewer respondents noting service uptake or stakeholder engagement as key objectives (OECD, 2021[1]).

These dynamics call for a deeper analysis of how communication is used by governments and how it can be integrated into both the development and the delivery of policies and services. This chapter explores these interrelationships in the UK context, highlighting important lessons and scope for further progress.

Communicators in UK government departments and in selected devolved and local administrations interviewed for this study mostly share an advanced view of how they can contribute to policy and services. The Government Communication Service (GCS) has developed sophisticated approaches and models to ensure this support is optimised and measurable according to practices that are often recognised as industry-leading, as described in this chapter. Nonetheless, the degree of integration of communications in policy is not yet homogenous across the board. Efforts are still needed to elevate teams in all departments and agencies to the standards of the more advanced ones.

The opportunity is greatest when it comes to leveraging public communication as a vehicle to improve and complement initiatives for citizens and stakeholders[1] to inform or participate in decision making. In this respect, there is scope to expand and enhance efforts for more open and participative policy making, which was identified as an essential catalyst to build public trust in government institutions in the OECD Trust Survey (OECD, 2022[4]).

As part of the ongoing trajectory towards innovation and impact described in the previous chapter, this one puts forward recommendations to expand communication's role in facilitating stakeholder participation.[2] This focus can help maximise the potential for communication's role in government and move beyond dissemination of a policy or programme to instead contribute constructively to its development and continuous improvement with public input.

The role of communication in the policy cycle: From design to implementation and impact

Public communication can support policy and services in multiple ways, as illustrated in this section. The function's potential value-added is likewise expanding as approaches in the field continue to evolve. Several government communicators interviewed for this *Scan* provided a useful lens to understand how this support occurs in practice. They indicated that they see their role vis-à-vis policy in terms of three core responsibilities illustrated in Figure 2.1.

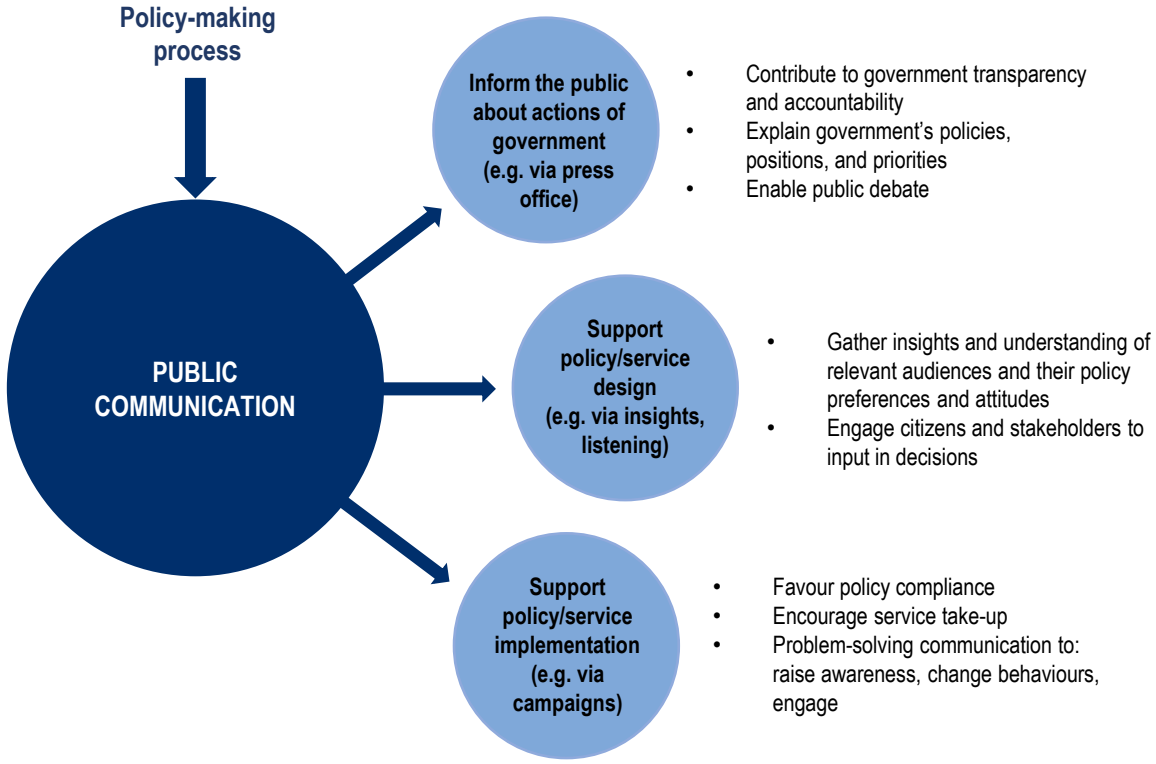
The first is to provide information on the day-to-day actions of government (intended here as both elected and appointed officials as well as the whole public administration), explain its policies, positions, and priorities, and enable public debate around these subjects. This is in large part the work of the press office in providing information and handling enquiries from journalists, as well as the external affairs discipline (or what is commonly referred to as stakeholder engagement). Increasingly, digital communication is involved too.

The second and third core responsibilities in relation to policy, according to interviews, are more operational: they refer to communication's practical contribution to the design and implementation of specific policies, programmes, and public services. This is often understood or referred to internally as "strategic communication" focused on precise objectives and problem-solving, in the language of the Modern Communication Operating Model (MCOM) 3.0.

The second responsibility, as discussed in further depth later in this chapter, concerns the role of communication for informing policy agenda-setting and design via insights, listening and engagement of citizens and stakeholders.

The third responsibility on the implementation or delivery of policy and services is carried out most visibly via communication campaigns. By and large, strategic campaigns based on comprehensive insights and drawing on marketing methods are a major pillar of GCS's work and one of the areas it excels at. Through these activities, communicators across government stressed that they were able to demonstrate impact towards cross-cutting policy goals, as described below in the chapter. The growing focus on campaigns mirrors the gradual shift in the function in the UK, as in many OECD countries, towards a more instrumental understanding of public communication's added value for government.

Figure 2.1. Three core responsibilities of UK public communication



Although still influential for public information and debate, mass media is less effective as a primary channel for the design and implementation of policy and services than in the past. As Chapter 3 argues, the media and information space has grown increasingly divisive, and often tends to favour a more politics-centric lens versus a policy-centric one. With a greater focus on supporting policy, the legacy emphasis on traditional media is bound to give way to a greater use of direct channels (e.g. social media, official website, and other owned channels) that facilitate the delivery of relevant information and, importantly, allow interaction by and with citizens.

This observation can also be inferred from the focus of the GCS 2022-25 Strategy (described in detail in the previous chapter), which emphasises more direct communication with citizens (GCS, 2022[5]). As one senior communicator put it in an interview, press office work relates to the legitimate democratic function of enabling media scrutiny and holding government accountable, while campaigns are seen internally as how public communication can add value to policy.

This expectation of communication's role and focus is likely to require some cultural adjustment among senior communicators in the UK and OECD countries alike, many of whom have spent part of their career in journalism and who consequently tend to overestimate the influence of news media (Garland, Tambini and Couldry, 2017[6]). To this end, research has described much of government and corporate communication alike as primarily "media-centric" and called instead for a more "audience-centric" approach (Macnamara, 2023[7]).

The same adaptation is needed on the part of policy and programme teams – if not also the political level – to acknowledge and exploit the strategic value of communication to their work and leverage the function accordingly. Personal experiences and culture of respective teams and their leadership were noted across interviews as a key factor in policy teams' eagerness to work with communicators and vice-versa. Building shared expectations and understanding of how to collaborate effectively is therefore one of the main ways GCS can help improve how communication is leveraged in policy and services.

Fostering effective collaboration between communicators and policy and delivery teams

The official mandate for public communication to support policy and services in the UK is explicit. The Functional Standards on Communication (UK Government, 2020[8]), described in Chapter 1, recognise a duty to deliver "responsive and informative public service communication that supports the effective delivery of HM Government policy and priorities, and assists with the effective operation of public services" (p. 6). Going further, it sets out that communication objectives ought to be "aligned to government policy and organisational objectives" (p. 7). These principles are common to equivalent policy documents in a number of OECD Member countries (OECD, 2021[1]).

Notably, the Functional Standards on Project Delivery (UK Government, 2021[9]), which govern the processes for managing and executing policy and programmes, are even more expansive in defining the purposes of communications in policy. The document states that communication's purpose is to "ensure interactions with the stakeholders are effective and likely to contribute to the successful delivery of the work", and that it "should be planned to match the *stakeholders' needs* and include *feedback mechanisms* and effectiveness measures" (p. 33, emphasis added).

The above Functional Standards additionally set requirements for stakeholder engagement that include communication, among other means. Communication also features in the Policy Profession Standards (Policy Profession, 2021[10]) within its section on participation and engagement. This represents a welcome acknowledgement of the function's complementary role alongside other avenues for user-centric design and the collection of insights on citizens' needs.

The above documents broadly synthesise why communication ought to be integrated with policy and services across government. However, they are less prescriptive on what it means for communication and policy to be aligned in practice, the process for ensuring this, or the expectations on outcomes. These are important aspects that require further elaboration to encourage more effective and sustainable ways of working.

Recognising the practical considerations that stand in the way of effective collaboration between communicators and their peers in policy and delivery, GCS has published a set of recommendations on "Working with policy" (GCS, 2020[11]). The guidance acknowledges some of the common challenges and misperceptions about when and how to collaborate. However, it appears to prioritise policy announcements rather than capture the full scope of how communication can contribute to policy at various stages of

development. This is mentioned briefly in other key GCS documents, such as the Modern Communication Operating Model (MCOM). Notably, this GCS guidance on working with policy does not place a significant emphasis on public insights gathered by communicators. This can be of great value to getting policies right, as this chapter discusses.

Strengthening guidance for communicators and policy teams can foster a mutual understanding of how and when to embed communication for best results. The observations noted in the following paragraphs point to identifying barriers and opportunities for better integrating communication in policy and services.

The inclusion of communication at each stage of the policy cycle, especially early on, indicates how well the function is leveraged to support government objectives. An overview of the value the function brings throughout the process is illustrated in Box 2.1. The same is true of high-level GCS guidance documents, some of which acknowledge the importance of integrating communication early and meaningfully.

For instance, the Functional Standards note that "Strategic communication specialists should work alongside policy, operations, human resources and project delivery colleagues from the outset" (UK Government, 2020, p. 18[8]). The MCOM further highlights that "to operate at a truly strategic level, government communicators must be part of the decision-making process, rather than a tactical consideration at the end of the policy development process" (GCS, 2019, pp. 13, version 2.0[12]).

Box 2.1. The role of public communication at each stage of the policy cycle

While recognising that policy advisers and other disciplinary specialists play a central role in policy development, and that the process is not linear or uniformly structured, the important role of public communication needs to be fully identified and utilised. Two-way interaction is fundamental for engagement, relationships, learning, organising, collaboration, co-design, and for democracy to function. In the policy-making cycle (illustrated in Figure 2.2), public communication can make a valuable contribution at all stages.

Stage 1. Definition of policy priorities

Public communication practitioners maintain ongoing monitoring of public opinion and issues through traditional and social media monitoring and other methods such as social network analysis. Many also commission or undertake formal audience research. These research activities help to identify issues of public concern, including emerging issues that can assist in definition of policy priorities. Public communication can contribute to understanding of diverse stakeholder experiences, needs, concerns, and expectations. Public communication units also typically hold such data over a number of years, providing intelligence and insights beyond the policy development cycle.

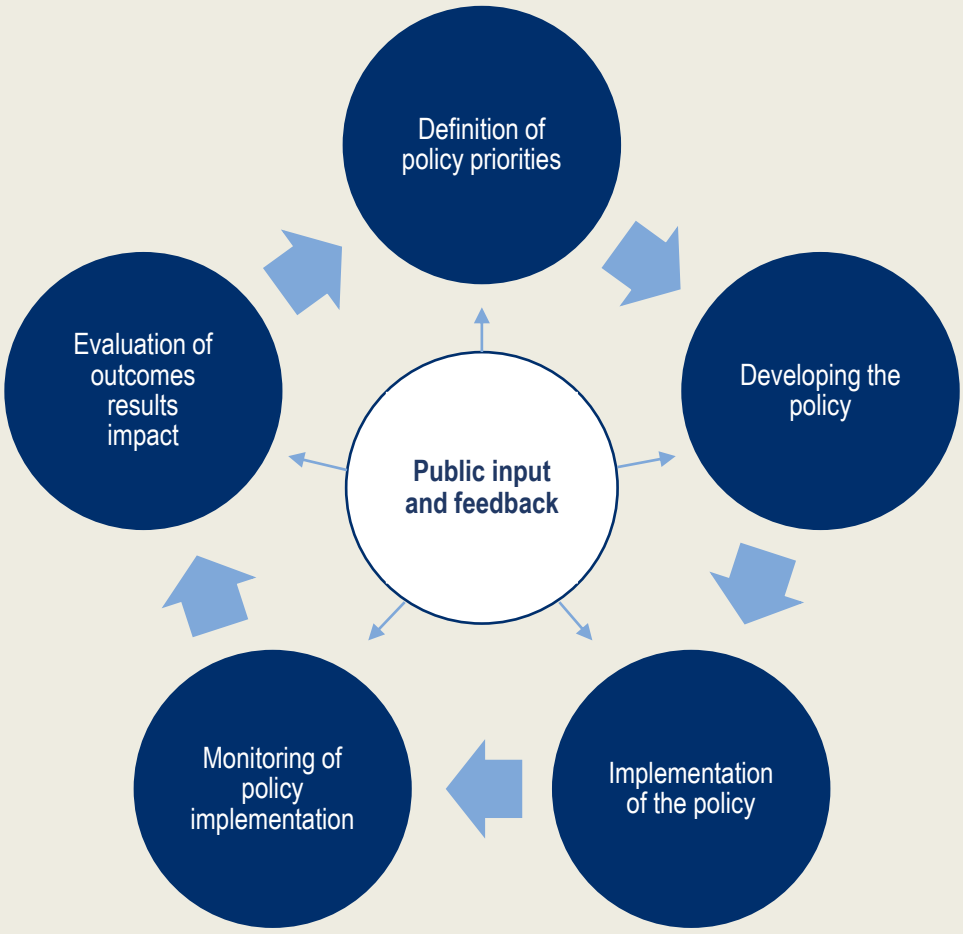
Public communication monitoring and analysis can also identify the media environment and how it is likely to impact policy announcements and implementation.

Stage 2. Developing policy

In addition to the central role of subject matter expertise, and economic and political input, public communication can support policy design, drafting and testing by ensuring it is responsive to current needs and expectations of various stakeholders through its ongoing monitoring and environmental scanning.

Public communication can also contribute to the important testing phase of policy development through ex-ante evaluation based on traditional and social media monitoring, stakeholder engagement, journalists' feedback gained through media relations, and, if required, interviews with key informants, and/or surveys.

Figure 2.2. The policy cycle



Source: Adapted from OECD (2016[13]), *Open Government: The Global Context and the Way Forward*, https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264268104-en.

Stage 3. Policy Implementation

Policies need to be explained to those they are aimed at or who are intended to comply. This requires information campaigns that typically develop and distribute content through traditional and social media, websites, and publications such as pamphlets, direct mail, and other communication media. Public communication professionals have specialist skills and experience in information campaigns. Explaining policies to ensure they are understood and how and why they were developed ensures transparency, strengthens government accountability, and ultimately enhances support.

Public communication mobilises support and adoption of policy through specialised marketing and promotion techniques such as advertising, media publicity, events such as launches and conference presentations, and a range of other methods in which public communication professionals specialise. This is the most recognised role of public communication in policy development.

Stages 4 & 5. Monitoring and evaluation of policy acceptance and response

Once a policy is announced, monitoring and evaluation of response is important to gauge acceptance and identify whether clarifications are required or adjustments need to be made to implementation. This also extracts learning for the next steps or iterations of policy. Public communication can contribute to

ex-post evaluation through its ongoing media monitoring and analysis, and stakeholder engagement activities.

Integration of public communication insights, monitoring, and evaluation with feedback and research findings gained by policy teams can expand the evidence base, further identify outcomes and impact, and ensure communication effectiveness in relation to policy. The OECD *Recommendation of the Council on Policy Evaluation* points to the need to "tailor the way evaluation evidence is presented and communicated to its potential users, in terms of timing, communication channel, format and messaging, by developing a dissemination strategy".

Source: Based on OECD (2021[1]), *OECD Report on Public Communication: The Global Context and the Way Forward*, https://doi.org/10.1787/22f8031c-en.

In practice however, the picture is more mixed. Survey data suggest departments use communication most consistently for the announcement and implementation stages of policy when the scope for stakeholders to engage is reduced (see Figure 2.3). Communication is also often used in public consultation stages, although interviews indicate this usually refers to the work carried out by the external affairs discipline (commonly referred to as stakeholder engagement, discussed further in the section on two-way communication to complement actions for greater citizen participation) of engaging with representatives from industry or civil society groups rather than broader forms of participation noted in this chapter.

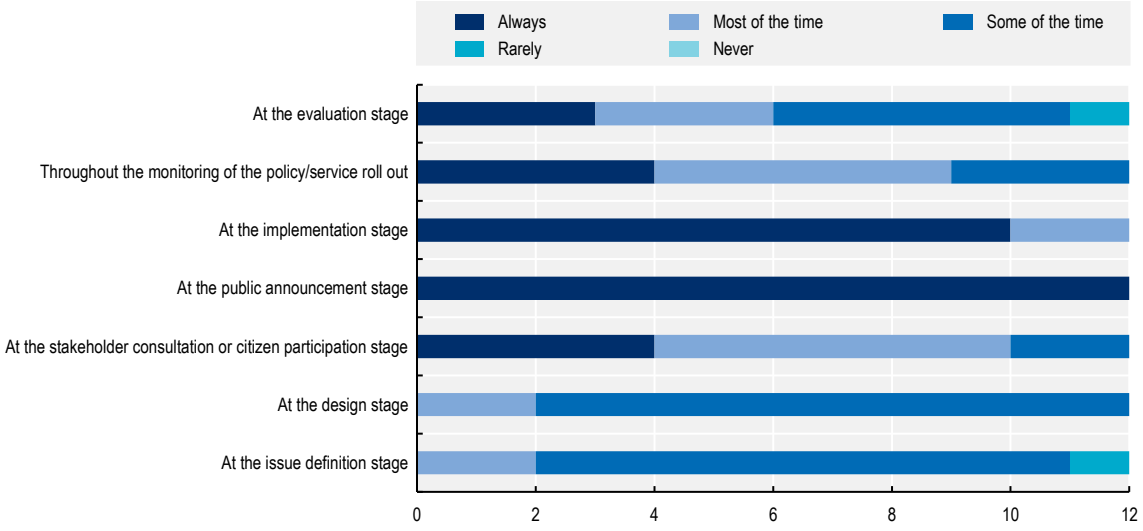
Conversely, communication teams are less frequently involved in the problem definition or design stages, where their insights into public opinion would add value. Interviews and survey data highlighted that the contribution of communication insights to the early stages of policy design happens sporadically and on an ad hoc basis. This finding is corroborated by research noting that policy reversals or backlashes are often a result of the late or non-involvement of communicators early on (Urban, 2023[14]). A similarly low frequency of collaboration applies also to the monitoring stage of a policy or service roll-out and its evaluation (Figure 2.3), where listening and feedback can help improve outcomes and provide lessons for the future.

There is a strong case for involving communicators in the early stages of the policy cycle. They tend to have a wider understanding of audiences and their attitudes towards a broader range of issues than just those with which a given policy or service is concerned (as discussed further in the next section of this chapter). Several government communicators interviewed for this *Scan* stressed their role within departments as "bringing the public in the room" where decisions are made. They also suggested they provide a realistic and holistic understanding of the intended beneficiaries of a policy or service – which siloed policy teams were said to sometimes lack. Indeed, some research has shown that policy makers' "deep involvement" with their specific area may cause them to "overestimate how much people will understand or embrace the policy in question" (Hallsworth et al., 2018[15]).

Conversely, a reliance on communicating only at the announcement stage, once policies are fully formed, carries risks in how they are received. There can even be public perceptions of a lack of government openness and responsiveness. Focusing on securing a positive reception for a policy can misfire and cause distrust or reputational damage, aggravating perceptions that citizens are not being listened to (OECD, 2022[16]). Contributing early in the process, communicators can be a valuable sounding board to test assumptions. They bring an additional layer of insights to the development of policy that contribute to greater responsiveness to public needs and attitudes, a driver of trust in government (OECD, 2022[16]).

Figure 2.3. Frequency of collaboration between communication and policy teams at each stage of the policy cycle

At what stages of the policy cycle does the communication team in the department typically co-operate with policy or service teams or are brought into the process?



Note: N=12, multiple responses possible.
Source: OECD survey of UK government communication offices at departmental level, 2022.

Addressing barriers to collaboration and fostering new ways of working

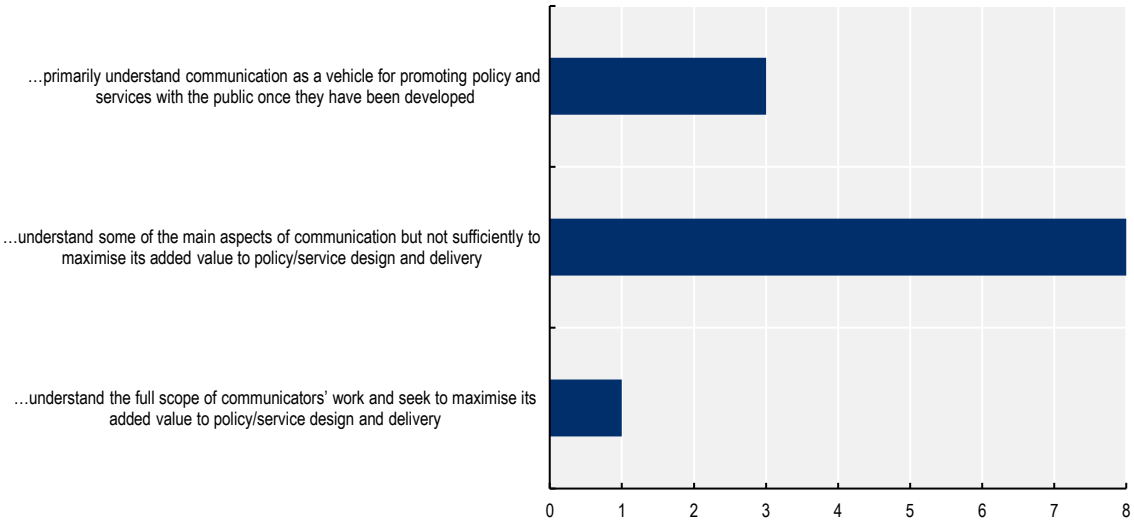
The insufficient collaboration between communication and policy teams is due to a number of barriers that were discussed throughout interviews. These range from limits on resources, siloed ways of working, institutional culture to changing political priorities.

Most communicators interviewed by the OECD Secretariat expressed satisfaction with progress towards the acknowledgement of their value-added by policy colleagues. Nonetheless, 8 of the 12 departments surveyed answered that policy teams "understand some of the main aspects of communication but not sufficiently to maximise its added value to policy/service design and delivery" (see Figure 2.4). Survey responses also feature multiple mentions of communicators being brought in too late in the process as one of the top challenges they face. A recent study supported the finding that policy makers often still do not recognise the value of communication beyond announcement or implementation (Urban, 2023[14]). Interviews stressed that often the picture is highly varied even within the same department, with certain policy or delivery teams going as far as embedding communicators within projects full-time, and others regarding it primarily as a vehicle for publicity.

One prominent barrier that emerged during interviews is the siloed approach in data governance both within and between departments, as noted in Chapter 1. According to these accounts, UK government departments and public agencies collect vast amounts of valuable research and data that both communicators and policy makers could rely on if it they had knowledge of and access to it. Instead, the present system seems to create challenges and additional costs for timely data analysis and limits opportunities for communication and policy teams to co-operate.

Figure 2.4. Policy makers' understanding of communication's role and value

Complete this sentence: "Policy and programme teams in the department…"



Note: N=12, single choice answer.
Source: OECD survey of UK government communication offices at departmental level, 2022.

Where it has worked well, interviewees recognised the sharing of research, data, and insights as one of the most valuable forms of collaboration between disciplines and across departments. Indeed, several officials noted that two-way data-sharing was a starting point for collaboration and an avenue for recognition and value-added vis-à-vis other disciplines. However, departments' survey responses indicate that data on service utilisation or on policy compliance is one of the least common sources of insights used to inform communication.

Reviewing existing data governance practices[3] in the UK government would address some of the above-mentioned challenges and capitalise on the vast citizen insights that exist within departments. It would additionally facilitate more responsive policy and communication. Although more comprehensive reforms in this field go beyond GCS's remit, one opportunity to improve current practices is offered by the planned development of a GCS Data Strategy in 2024 as one of the commitments made within its 2022-2025 Strategy. One element of this prospective strategy could concern the versatility of data and analysis gathered by communication teams to meet relevant criteria for interoperability ease of use in policy or service development (OECD, 2019[17]).

Government communicators interviewed were generally optimistic about the outlook for communication's role in policy. Several of them credited the experience of communicating policy during the COVID-19 pandemic with the acceleration of a shift towards more effective integration and collaboration. For instance, the COVID-19 vaccination roll-out and its related campaign was noted as one case where communication and delivery teams worked side-by-side from the outset, building on the experience of the crisis management phase of the pandemic. Another such example highlighted was the campaign to accompany EU citizens in obtaining settled legal status following Brexit.

Some departments have also introduced organisational changes with the intent of strengthening the integration between communication and policy. The Department for Education and Home Office have structured their communication teams according to core departmental policy clusters rather than the disciplines set out in the Functional Standards on Communication. This is meant to encourage communicators to build expertise in the core areas that the departments work on to maximise their contribution to the respective policies.

Interviewees from the Department of Education noted that for some large-scale policies or programmes they embed communication staff in all stages of development and delivery (see Box 2.7 further below). This approach is not commonplace, interviews revealed, and may not be suitable in all cases. Yet, piloting it across additional departments could further culture change and collaboration, consolidating collaboration overall.

There is an opportunity to embed communicators more closely in the work of policy teams and disseminate them further across departments. Expanding guidance and frameworks for communication and policy teams can help consolidate positive lessons and correct misperceptions about the function and what it can offer.

GCS guidance could be revised to include practical illustrations of communication's contribution at all stages of the policy cycle, drawing on successful case studies and demonstrating the different approaches to collaboration that suit different scenarios. As part of considerations to develop a more responsive and citizen-centred communication and policy, both practical guidance and the relevant Functional Standards could be revised to add emphasis on integrating citizens' feedback from planning stages to implementation of policies and services.

Communication campaigns as a vehicle for policy delivery

Although the potential of public communication in the earlier stages of policy and service development is yet to be fully realized in the UK, as is also the case in most OECD countries, its role in the implementation stage is well established. This is most visible in the extensive use of communication campaigns. The strategic approach to this discipline, with its emphasis on evidence, customer-focus, and return-on-investment, stands out as one of the main factors driving communication's growing recognition as a lever of government.

Interviewees point out that, in some cases, communication is the primary means to enact a policy. This applies particularly when enforcement is difficult and costly, or where citizens are faced with explicit or hidden choices that can improve their own or their communities' well-being. Such was the case with COVID-19 lockdowns, for example, where compliance often came down to individual choices and values over the ability of authorities to fine those in breach (Alfonsi et al., 2022[2]). To this end, some internal stakeholders have characterised it as a "relatively low-cost contribution to achieving the government's priorities" (Urban, 2023[14]).

Recognition of the effectiveness of campaigns as a policy delivery instrument owes much to the considerable investment by GCS to continuously improve practice and raise standards for measurable impact in this domain. Some of its essential guidance on campaign development, such as the OASIS Campaign Framework (see Box 2.2), has also become a reference guide for the profession across borders. The UK's OASIS approach rests on its focus on strategy as a means to pursue a well-defined objective, which is often linked to the objective of a given policy that is achievable through communication.

The UK approach to campaigns emphasises evidence and insights as the basis for their effectiveness, making it closely centred on citizens and on tailoring all campaign tactics around them. Indeed, several communicators interviewed noted that strategic campaigns or marketing (as the discipline is commonly referred to internally) could be distinguished from other communication disciplines as being consistently audience-led, with the explicit intention to produce tangible outcomes in target audiences.

Box 2.2. The OASIS Campaign Framework

The OASIS Framework for campaign planning offers a series of steps guiding the development and implementation of strategic communication campaigns. Relating to each step of the planning process, the acronym refers to: Objectives, Audience Insight, Strategy Implementation, and Scoring and Evaluation.

The Framework focuses on defining campaign objectives grounded in a policy aim. Such objectives ought to fit the SMART criteria, meaning they must be Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound. These criteria are also a precondition for the rigorous use of evidence as a starting point for developing the campaign. Beyond objective-setting, audience insights inform the choice of campaign strategy and planned evaluation.

The guide notes that for the purposes of evaluation, objectives must contain a numerical prediction of what would be observed if no communications took place, a numerical forecast of the difference the planned campaign will make, and a reference to the evidence base that justifies the change being targeted.

Sources: GCS (2020[18]), *Guide to Campaign Planning: OASIS*, 2020, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/guidance/marketing/delivering-government-campaigns/guide-to-campaign-planning-oasis/.

Behaviour change is a common objective of campaigns carried out across UK government, often to encourage compliance with a given policy or encourage choices that benefit audiences and their communities. This is a core competency that GCS has sought to reinforce through guidance, such as its Principles of Behaviour Change Communications (GCS, 2021[19]), as well as through the establishment of a GCS Behavioural Science sub-discipline. Whereas behavioural campaigns have been commonplace for some time, the rigorous application of scientific approaches to their design has not always been consistent. For instance, survey responses indicated that departments tend to rely more often on secondary data and evidence on behaviours, drawn from literature or similar cases, rather than conducting behavioural experiments to test their specific interventions. Such practice is not always necessary, but can be valuable to test the efficacy of campaigns to which large budgets are attached, for example. This is one aspect that GCS has been working to improve and codify so as to ensure that behavioural evidence is appropriately informing campaign development.

Behaviour change is also one of the core outcomes against which campaigns are evaluated. As referenced in the first chapter, evaluation is heavily emphasised by GCS as a means to prove the value communication adds to policy and government. Due to their format, fixed duration and benchmarking, campaigns are especially well-suited to proving tangible outcomes and impact towards policy goals. To this end, the new version of the GCS Evaluation Framework 2.0 (GCS, 2018[20]) reflects a focus on campaigns, particularly paid ones, with guidance on calculating return-on-investment (ROI). Interviews with campaigns specialists also indicate they recently introduced a requirement for the allocation of 10% of campaign budgets towards their evaluation.

Campaign outcomes measured can range widely, but some successful examples demonstrate their tangible contribution to policy goals. For instance, the UK's flagship international investment attractiveness campaign "GREAT" measured the ROI of its drive to attract foreign students in terms of the share of their contribution to the UK economy and individual spend that can be directly attributed to the campaign (UK Government, 2022[21]). The "It All Adds Up" campaign supported the government objective of a 15% reduction in energy consumption by 2030, by increasing awareness of simple measures for saving energy and money. Drawing on insights identifying barriers to behaviour change, the campaign achieved a

statistically significant increase of four percentage points in the uptake of the energy-saving measures promoted, with a 12 percentage-point increase recorded for reducing boiler flow temperatures. It also calculated a reduction in household energy consumption of 1200 GWh.[4] Finally, a Meteorological Office campaign to encourage compliance with extreme temperatures mitigation guidance measured its reach in the geographical areas worst affected by the phenomenon and recorded positive behaviour change in 97% of the surveyed public (GCS, 2022[22]).

Despite the many impactful, state-of-the-art campaigns UK communicators have delivered, there are areas for further progress. A study based on discussions with UK government communicators suggests that there is a large number of less strategic campaigns carried out by departments that do not necessarily contribute to meaningful policy outcomes (Urban, 2023[14]). These campaigns, according to the study, can sometimes derive from short-lived "pet project" policies of ministers, intended to achieve visibility and political salience (Urban, 2023, p. 13[14]). Other observers have suggested that evaluation often still focuses more on communication outputs (such as volume of media coverage or reach of a given piece of content) rather than on their outcomes in the audience that matter for policy (Macnamara, 2023[23]).

One senior communicator interviewed for this Scan stressed the need for better collaboration between departments to create efficiencies and reduce duplication of campaigns with similar objectives and target audiences. Such efforts are underway with the goal to centralise further large-scale campaigns on cross-cutting policies and several communicators interviewed have noted examples of such inter-departmental collaboration. One such notable case is the Help for Households campaign, co-ordinated by Cabinet Office with multiple departments, offering a range of benefits and assistance to alleviate the financial strain caused by the spike in living costs in 2022 (Box 2.3).

Box 2.3. The "Help for Households" cross-government campaign

As in many OECD countries, the cost of living became the biggest concern for households in the UK in 2022 as higher energy bills, rising inflation and tax changes put pressure on household finances. At the time, 48% of people ranked this as one of the top three issues that the government should address. Although multiple government support measures had existed before the cost of living crisis became acute, these often went unclaimed, due to low awareness levels, difficulty searching and navigating schemes by different departments and misperceptions about eligibility criteria. As of June 2022, GCS measured awareness of government actions in this domain as low. Only 29% of people surveyed recalled messages about addressing the cost of living.

The Help for Households campaign was developed to increase public awareness of the government's actions to alleviate the cost of living crisis and increase uptake of support measures and financial assistance, while encouraging people to maintain their normal spending habits.

The campaign sought to bring the full breadth of the government's assistance to households under one roof and communicate on these as a single initiative. To do so, it brought together over 40 different types of government support that eligible citizens could potentially claim into one central, easy-to-access online portal. This central website was promoted via an offline and online marketing campaign targeting a wide range of audiences.

The campaign featured paid content across traditional and digital media, and outdoor advertising aimed at general audiences. A dedicated effort went into reaching lower income and vulnerable audiences, which saw the geo-targeted dissemination of content at ATMs, on buses, and during the men's 2022 FIFA World Cup televised matches. Additionally, information was disseminated via leaflets distributed in food banks, hospitals and doctors' offices, and job centres. Content was additionally translated in other languages spoken by target audiences for dissemination on multicultural media.

The campaign website has seen consistently high traffic since the campaign launch. As of November 2023, the online website for the campaign had received over 18 million visits. Awareness of the Help for Households campaign and where to go for information was measured as high across all target audiences: metrics for aggregate advertising recognition of the campaign stood at 56%. Population awareness of the support available had climbed to 85%.

Significantly, two-thirds of citizens who became aware of support via the campaign subsequently took action. This entailed an increase in the numbers of people claiming support they were eligible for, such as 87 000 additional claims for pension credit as of March 2023 compared to six months prior.

Sources: Case study provided by Cabinet Office to the OECD Secretariat, March 2023; OECD interviews with Department for Work and Pensions; GCS (2022[24]), *Speech: "Collaboration, Innovation and Great People: The GCS Strategy"*, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/news/speech-collaboration-innovation-and-great-people-the-gcs-strategy/.

Besides creating efficiencies, these joined-up efforts, which often make good use of a single recognisable brand, also cater to the public's understanding of government as unitary (as opposed to associating policies with each department or agency in charge). Nonetheless, interviewees cited issues with ownership, visibility, and co-ordination, as well as budget and staff pooling, which tend to hinder collaboration.

Due to the prominence of campaigns as a public communication instrument and the considerable taxpayer funding associated with them, it is important to ensure their effective contribution to policy and their ROI – whether monetary or other. The trajectory for more integrated campaigns is part of the "Collaboration" pillar of the GCS 2022-25 Strategy, which seeks to use the annual strategy and planning cycle and its spending controls to 'nudge' departments into collaborating more effectively on common governmental priorities (GCS, 2022[5]). These steps will elevate more campaigns to the high standards achieved by top-performing ones. It will also be important that the same efforts include a focus on strengthening campaigns' measurable contribution to policy outcomes.

Inclusive and responsive campaign design for greater policy impact

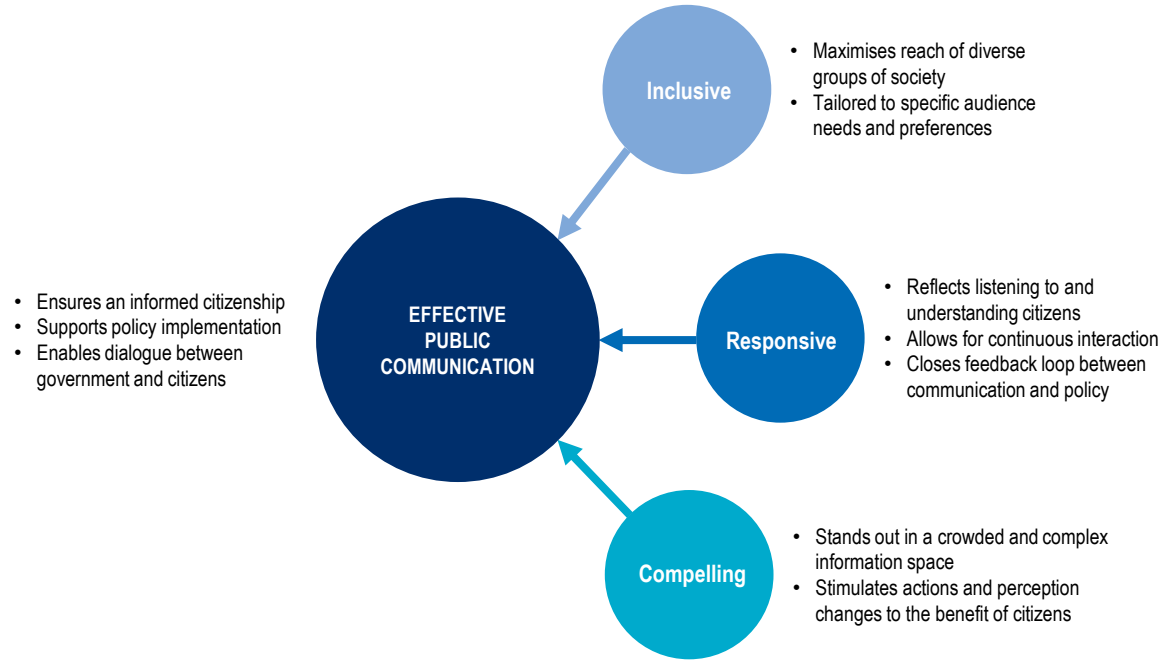
Achieving policy impact via communication campaigns has become synonymous with an audience-centric design focus. The emphasis on more inclusive, responsive, and compelling communication was consolidated during the COVID-19 pandemic response. The crisis accelerated experimentation in the public sector with innovative approaches to get impactful health messages through to even the hardest-to-reach groups (Alfonsi et al., 2022[2]). These key attributes for public communication, illustrated in Figure 2.5, are an important basis for the function to increase its added value to policy and services.

In the UK, the focus on inclusion and responsiveness in communication campaigns has been established for some time and is grounded in its emphasis on evidence-driven campaign design. In particular, communicators across departments are highly aware of how diverse their audiences are in their information needs and consumption habits. As a result, they have widely adopted a range of practices, illustrated in Figure 2.6, that serve to make communication more relevant and tailored to their audiences. These approaches are also broadly aligned with five principles to make campaigns more inclusive, as described by GCS (Box 2.4).

In interviews conducted for this *Scan*, most communicators stressed their focus on targeting their campaigns narrowly to relevant groups and differentiating their content and channels for specific audience segments. For instance, some departments such Department for Education, have shifted to an audience-type lens based on core categories of customers for whom each of their policies and services are developed (such as teachers, parents, students, or people in training). The same emphasis on targeting is also articulated in the 2022-2025 GCS Strategy, which sets the direction for campaigns to increasingly use

data-driven methods to deliver an “individual experience, with less use of mass communications” (GCS, 2022[25]).

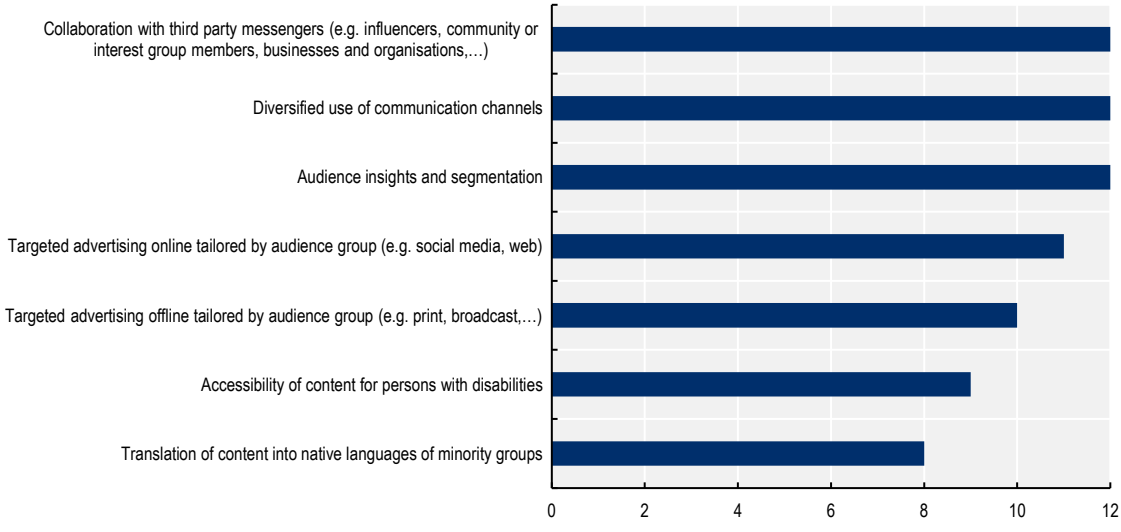
Figure 2.5. Effective public communication



Source: Alfonsi, C. et al. (2022[2]), “Public communication trends after COVID-19: Innovative practices across the OECD and in four Southeast Asian countries”, https://doi.org/10.1787/cb4de393-en.

Figure 2.6. Practices used to tailor communication to specific audiences

Which practices, approaches and/or tactics does the department apply in the delivery of its communication to ensure that it is relevant and tailored to diverse audience groups?



Note : N=12, multiple responses possible.
Source: OECD survey of UK government communication offices at departmental level, 2022.

There is a similar attention given to the challenges of reaching some of the groups in society who are less engaged, less trusting or otherwise vulnerable. Most departments have noted in survey responses that they take dedicated action to understand and improve communication with several of these groups (see Figure 2.7). These steps ensure communication is more inclusive and deliver policy impact for the intended beneficiaries. They can also build public trust among groups that are least trusting of government, such as young people (OECD, 2020[26]; OECD, 2022[27]).

The OECD Trust Survey (2022[4]) (further detailed below) measured that 24% of young people (aged 18-29) trusted government in the UK compared to 31% of adults between 30-49 years old and 41% of those over 50. Women also reported lower trust than men, at 32% versus 38%. Income is another important factor, with 32% of people on lower incomes reporting that they trust government against 42% on higher incomes. A similar gap (roughly 10 percentage points) appears between people who reported personal financial concerns and those who did not, and people who reported a lower social status (OECD, 2022[4]).

Box 2.4. GCS principles for more inclusive campaigns

To ensure that government communication is accessible and inclusive, GCS has issued a number of guiding principles for campaigns with regard to creative content, channel selection, community engagement, language, and accessibility. When relying on the OASIS Framework (Box 2.2 above), GCS recommends that these principles be considered at the planning stage and subsequently at every step of development and delivery.

- Creative: Campaign material should draw on creative content – such as imagery, case studies, and videos – that reflects and resonates with a diverse audience and society.
- Channel selection: The selected channels of communication should account for literacy levels and wherever relevant, public communicators should seek to collaborate with local authorities and organisations to reach the targeted audience.
- Community engagement: In communities where trust in government is low, public communicators should seek to engage the community, for instance, by co-creating campaign material and sustaining relations with local groups throughout the campaign.
- Language: Campaign material should be translated into all relevant languages and local authorities can request that material be translated for their local communities.
- Accessibility: All content should adhere to GCS criteria for readability, colour, images, and videos to ensure that campaign material is accessible. Digital resources should be thoroughly tested to ensure that such criteria are satisfied.

Source: GCS (2022[28]), *Five Principles to Make Your Campaigns More Inclusive*, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/guidance/marketing/delivering-government-campaigns/five-principles-to-make-your-campaigns-more-inclusive/.

Communicating effectively with these groups ought to ensure they understand and benefit from public policy. Ensuring their needs are met with relevant and resonant information can help to counteract perceptions they are left behind, by demonstrating instead that government institutions are both reliable and fair for all. In turn, this can help drive up trust in government, as this chapter discusses.

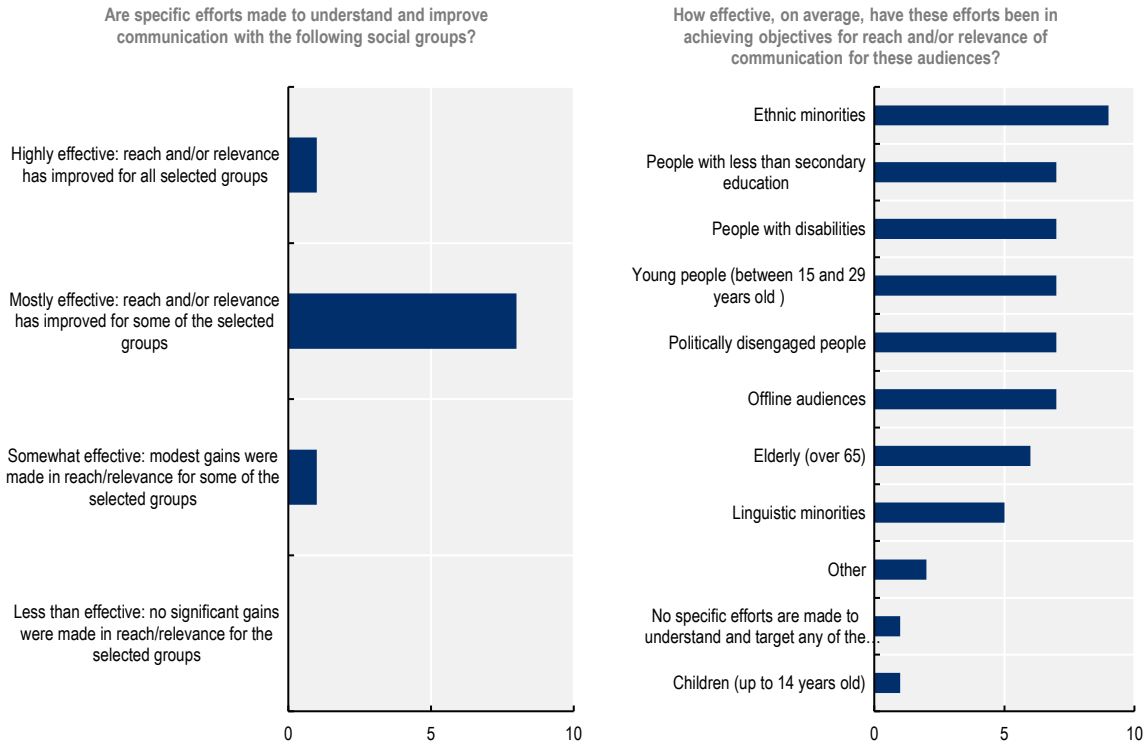
Departments' survey responses provided a positive snapshot that their efforts on inclusion are working but leave some scope for further improvement (Figure 2.7). Audience insights are an important part of recognising where communication needs differ between groups and for informing the course of action. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, audience polling highlighted that business owners from ethnic

minority backgrounds had lower awareness levels of government support schemes for businesses. Communicators in the former Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS)[5] devised a targeted multi-channel communication campaign that also accounted for the diversity within this audience group and helped drive up visits to the online portal to claim support (Cutting, 2021[29]).

Notwithstanding the above examples and many more such cases, the ability to acquire and leverage data to develop more precise strategies is a constraint for several departments, as noted in Chapter 1 and above. Interviews revealed that in practice this entails some selectiveness and prioritisation in how the few data analysts in teams are deployed. Efforts to expand the capacity for data-gathering and analysis, also noted in the GCS Strategy for 2022-25, will help enhance the citizen-centred design of campaigns and other forms of communication.

Another dimension where communicators identified further scope for improvement, also based on survey data in Figure 2.6, is the accessibility of their content. Despite ample guidance from GCS on developing accessible social media and web content, as well as video and sign language interpretation,[6] interviews with communicators suggested some of these measures are not consistently applied. This is the case particularly for steps that can be costlier or more time-intensive. Better compliance with accessibility standards can be encouraged with the assistance of some nudges, as per the example in Box 2.5. A newly-introduced on-demand training in accessibility can help further compliance, while the costs and complexity of measures such as captioning or sign language interpretation could soon be aided by AI solutions.

Figure 2.7. The effectiveness of efforts to reach certain audiences



Note: N=10, left figure: multiple responses possible; right figure: single choice answer.
Source: OECD survey of UK government communication offices at departmental level, 2022

Box 2.5. Accessibility and usability seal to promote application of central guidelines in Portugal

To improve institutions' compliance with its usability and accessibility guidance, the Portuguese Agency for Administrative Modernisation (AMA) introduced a certification model in 2021 for government web pages. The AMA assesses and rates pages with a gold, silver or bronze seal. The seal serves both to inform users about the level of accessibility of a site and as a nudge for webmasters to comply with relevant criteria. AMA has additionally developed a toolkit to assist institutions with meeting each of the criteria for achieving a higher seal.

Source: Government of Portugal (2021[30]), https://www.acessibilidade.gov.pt/blogue/categoria-acessibilidade/portugal-pioneiro-nacertificacao-digital/; Government of Portugal (2019[31]), *Selo de Usabilidade e Acessibilidade*, https://selo.usabilidade.gov.pt/Selo_de_Usabilidade_e_Acessibilidade_v1_1.pdf.

Finally, some important actions on inclusion are also envisaged for the composition of GCS and communication teams across government. Both interviews and the GCS 2022-2025 Strategy noted the need for communication teams to reflect the diversity of the UK population to communicate more inclusively with a wide range of audiences (GCS, 2022[5]). The "Great People" pillar of the Strategy makes commitments to increase diversity within the profession and to provide career opportunities outside of London and across the country. A dedicated GCS Locations Strategy 2023-25 (GCS, 2023[32]) is helping to achieve these objectives.

This effort was welcomed in one interview in which the department praised the value and diversity of perspectives of having a communication team spread across multiple locations. Similarly, other communicators interviewed lamented their limited contact "on the ground" with communities they aim to reach as a constraint to deepening their understanding of audiences.

An outlook for co-creating campaigns with target audiences

While the emphasis on audience and insights in planning and conducting campaigns has allowed a positive focus on their inclusive and responsive design, it is still important to acknowledge the limitations of this communication approach for engendering genuine two-way engagement and interaction with citizens (the next section of this chapter will indeed shift the focus on methods of communication that facilitate these outcomes, so as to help shape decisions on public issues with citizens' inputs).

Literature has recognised the essentially top-down nature of campaigns, based on internal priorities and objectives and where the main purpose of understanding citizens is to be more effective in persuading them to change perceptions or behaviour (Collier et al., 2022[33]; Macnamara, 2022[34]). Government campaigns' objectives in themselves tend to be mostly justifiable, especially when they serve policy goals that further society's well-being. Yet the reliance on behavioural and marketing approaches and the relative absence of feedback loops (i.e. mechanisms to obtain feedback on certain outputs and respond on a continuous basis) has raised questions over their legitimacy and concerns about manipulation, as remarked in an interview and raised in recent research (Collier et al., 2022[33]; Alfonsi et al., 2022[2]) (ethical considerations are addressed further in Chapter 3).

As such, there are opportunities for campaigns to reinforce their legitimacy in the eyes of potential critics by better integrating public input and feedback. One notable way is listed in the GCS principles on inclusive campaigns (Box 2.4) in relation to community engagement. This principle lists some welcome actions for co-creating aspects of the campaign with relevant communities and involving them throughout the process. Emphasising this principle could improve the quality of campaigns and their trustworthiness.

Additionally, as noted above, different groups in society are less trusting of government than others. This makes it more challenging to reach them via institutional voices and channels – but it also makes them priority audiences to engage with (OECD, 2020[26]). To overcome this barrier, communicators in the UK, as in a growing number of OECD countries, are drawing on trusted third-party messengers such as social media influencers, representatives of communities, youth groups and even businesses (see, for instance, Figure 2.6, all surveyed departments noted collaborating with external messengers). This approach offers another way to co-create and partner on campaigns that is less top-down and even stakeholder-led, such as the example of ethnic minority outreach during COVID-19 described in Box 2.6.

Whereas some of these third-party engagements are paid, as in commercial marketing contexts, there is value in working with previously vetted messengers who voluntarily support policies and other initiatives as this affords authenticity and credibility. Earning (rather than buying) the support of key stakeholders in a campaign who share the campaign's values and objectives, gives it legitimacy and viability (this is also a responsibility covered by the External Affairs function, as discussed in the next section). In this respect, de-centralising messages and the voices that amplify them can help diffuse ownership and have an almost democratising effect on campaigns' design and delivery.

In this light, GCS guidance can help encourage communicators across government to lean further into these approaches. As the information ecosystem grows more fragmented and both algorithms and personal networks play a greater role in determining the information audiences receive, focusing on a networked and multi-stakeholder way of communicating will become increasingly important.

Box 2.6. Community-level engagement and collaboration during COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Cabinet Office National Resilience Hub's External Affairs team was notified through community engagement that some ethnic minority and religious communities were less receptive of government public health messages. Sources indicated these groups would need figures from their own communities to endorse messages from central government in order to trust them and validate their compatibility with their communities' values and beliefs.

COVID-19 health data likewise illustrated that some communities were experiencing higher than average numbers of cases. Collaboration with partner organisations from that group highlighted insights about reasons behind these higher transmission rates, ranging from community mistrust of government guidance to language barriers and digital exclusion. Drawing on these insights, government communicators worked with trusted figures in relevant communities to identify the best channels and trusted voices to reach these groups and collaborated to co-create offline and online COVID-19 safety content in their language.

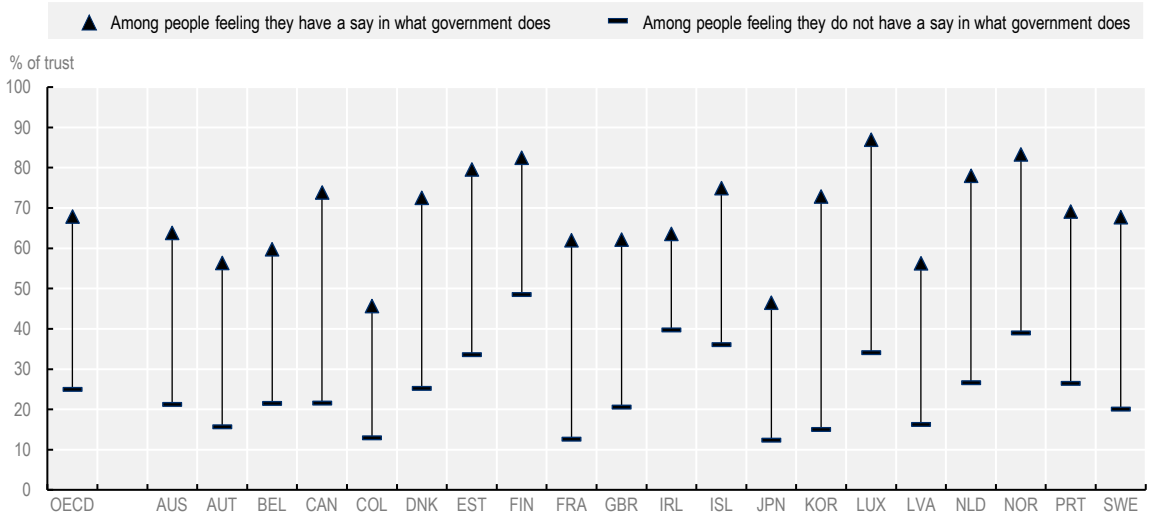
Source: GCS (2021[35]), "How focused communication benefitted a vulnerable community facing a surge of COVID-19", https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/blog/how-focused-communication-benefitted-a-vulnerable-community-facing-a-surge-of-covid-19/.

Two-way communication as a means for more responsive policy making

Against the backdrop of declining satisfaction with democracy and waning trust in many societies across the OECD, governments are reforming and innovating how they bring citizens' voices into their work (OECD, n.d.[36]). This is manifested through a wave of deliberative processes, public consultations, citizen engagement platforms, participatory budgeting, and more (OECD, 2020[37]).

Such opportunities for dialogue and participation are paramount to addressing the underlying causes of low public trust. According to the 22-country OECD Trust Survey (2022[4]), trust is strongly associated with the perception that government acts on citizens' inputs. In the UK, trust in government stands at 60% among those who feel they have a say in what the government does (22-country average is 68%). Conversely, among citizens who feel they do not have a say, only 21% reported trusting government (22-country average is 25%, see Figure 2.8. More detailed findings from the Survey are included in Box 3.1 in the following chapter).

Figure 2.8. Trust in government is associated with people's feeling that they have a say in what the government does



Note: Figure presents the within-country distributions of responses to the questions "On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all and 10 is completely, in general how much do you trust the national government", and "How much would you say the political system in [country] allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?". Shown here is the proportion of respondents that reported trusting the national government (response categories 6-10) by whether they feel they have a say in what the government does. "OECD" presents the unweighted average across countries. Mexico and New Zealand are excluded from this figure as respondents were not asked about trust in the national government. For more detailed information please find the survey method document at http://oe.cd/trust.
Source: OECD (2022[38]), *OECD Trust Survey*, http://oe.cd/trust.

The Survey highlighted that less than a third of citizens across countries feel that the political system lets them have a say. Similarly, only about a quarter believe their government would act on public feedback to change a policy, implement an innovative idea, or improve a poorly performing service (OECD, 2022[16]). In the UK specifically, 48.5% of citizens thought it was unlikely that a poorly-performing public service would be improved if many people complained about it, and only 30.4% of citizens thought it likely that a national policy would be changed if a majority of people expressed a view against it (OECD, 2022[16]).

Public communication can be an asset to improve citizens' perceptions that they are listened to and that their voices matter in what the government does. In the first instance, it can serve to raise citizens' awareness of the ways they can weigh in on public decisions, and of how their contributions are used by the government. Along the same lines, the communication profession has long placed emphasis on the *engagement* of its audiences, where this term is often used as a catch-all to refer to anything from a "like" on a social media post to more consequential actions to respond to or act on the message (Johnston and Lane, 2021[39]).

Today, there is an opportunity for enhanced interaction and concrete engagement across communication channels to complement formal participation processes and act as a bridge between the public and policy makers (OECD, 2021[1]; 2022[40]).

This role for public communication is recognised in the OECD Action Plans on Building Trust and Reinforcing Democracy, endorsed by OECD Members in 2022. The Pillar on *Enhancing Participation, Representation and Openness in Public Life* calls on governments to "Promote a more structured and institutionalised approach to participation and deliberation by […] Communicating with and listening to citizens through online and offline channels, while using the same channels to foster dialogue" (OECD, 2022[41]).

The following section looks at the role public communication plays in existing and emerging practices for citizen participation initiatives. It explores the concrete ways in which communication itself can complement these efforts, providing an additional channel for citizens to feed back to public institutions and shape decisions.

Two-way communication to complement actions for greater citizen participation

The field of citizen participation in public decision making has been expanding and innovating rapidly in recent years. Many governments across the OECD and beyond are responding to increased citizens' expectations for a say on public matters while acknowledging the value that such inputs bring to the quality and efficacy of policies. Different forms of stakeholder engagement, such as public consultations or participatory budgeting, are increasingly common. As of 2019 the OECD has compiled an international database of nearly 300 deliberative processes (OECD, 2020[37]).

However, in many countries opportunities to participate in public decision making are scattered and can lack visibility and political weight. If not purposefully designed to be inclusive, participation initiatives can also fail to reach vulnerable groups who feel they do not have a say and are the least trusting of government. The OECD Trust Survey finds that a perceived lack of say in government decisions is a root cause of low public trust.

The OECD has developed guidance to support its Members in improving the design and institutionalisation of different forms of citizen participation so that they can achieve better impact and scale (OECD, 2022[42]; OECD, 2022[43]). These guidelines note explicitly that "quality communication is a prerequisite to organising a successful participatory process. It can help at every step of the way – from recruiting citizens and ensuring transparency of the process to extending the benefits of learning about specific policy issues to the broader public" (OECD, 2022, p. 11[42]). It is also key at the final stages, to feed back to participants and the wider public about how their inputs in a process were used and to demonstrate their views were valued (see Box 2.7).

Box 2.7. OECD Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes

The OECD guidelines on citizen participation outline a 10-step path to planning and implementing citizen participation in the policy-making process. These guidelines notably differentiate between ways of involving individual citizens as opposed to stakeholders, who are understood as representing an interested or affected party, be it a public, private or non-profit institution or organisation.

The guidelines set out the steps for participation, beginning with identifying a problem that the public can be meaningfully engaged in solving. Once such a problem is determined, the expected outcomes of engaging citizens ought to be defined and a relevant group of people to involve should be likewise identified and recruited.

The choice of method of participation is an essential step. The OECD guidelines consider eight different methods of participation – though new methods are constantly developing and evolving. The selection of which method depends on the type of input sought, the stage of the decision-making process, and potential associated costs. The use of digital tools is also discussed, in relation to the chosen method of participation.

The guidelines emphasise communication in the aftermath of the process where citizens' inputs and the ultimate outcome of their participation must be carefully communicated to participants and the public. This includes cases where certain recommendations are not adopted, for which decisions should be clearly justified and communicated. The existence of this feedback loop is crucial to shore up trust in the policy-making process and ensure that citizens feel encouraged to participate in similar activities in the future.

Sources: OECD (2022[42]), *OECD Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes*, https://doi.org/10.1787/f765caf6-en.

In parallel with these efforts, governments can additionally leverage the communication function as a complement to participation and engagement initiatives. The evolution of digital technologies and the communication field has unlocked unprecedented opportunities for the function to gain an increasingly advanced understanding of citizens' information needs, their concerns with public services, policy preferences, and attitudes towards key public issues. The Internet has given rise to many-to-many communication, with citizens and stakeholders routinely exchanging opinions, preferences, and concerns across online platforms that amount to a virtual public square. These are the same open channels that communicators are tasked with monitoring and analysing on a daily basis with the help of increasingly sophisticated AI-powered analytics software (considerations about ethics and propriety in this field are addressed in Chapter 3).

With the aid of dedicated analytical tools and increasingly advanced practices, communicators are uniquely positioned to interact at scale with specific segments of the population that can be hard to reach. They are trained to regularly analyse vast amounts of data to understand audience perceptions and attitudes on a given issue as well as feedback on specific policies. In turn, the information exchanged via this public square can be harnessed responsibly by governments to both feed into the policy agenda and the design of services, and to engage in dialogue on these channels.

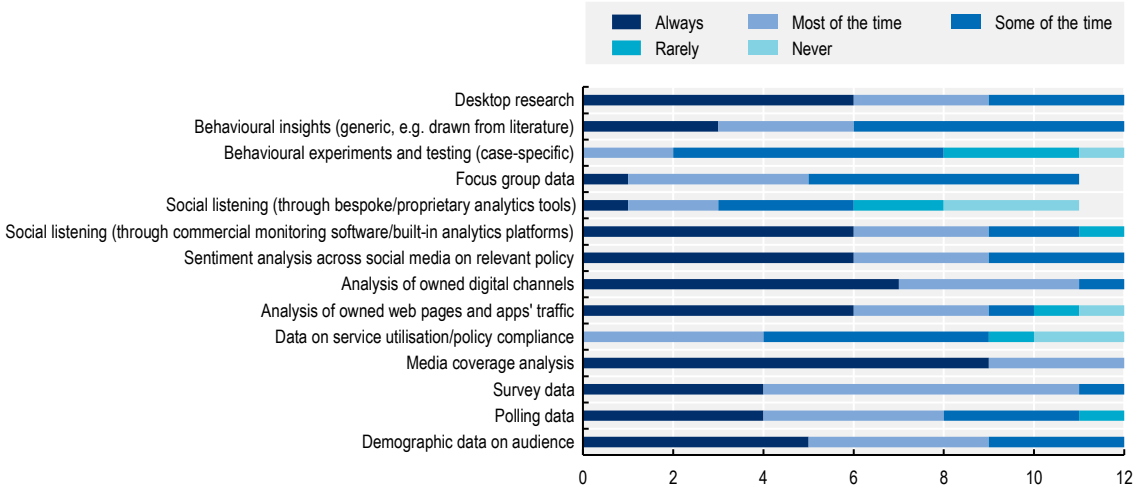
Strengthening and innovating how UK institutions listen to citizens

The emerging practice of *organisational listening*[7] provides one important way to process and take on board the vast input citizens provide in unstructured ways on a continuous basis. It can contribute to a more responsive policy making, providing ongoing feedback and insights to policy makers and delivery teams. This is an innovative field in communication, and one that offers considerable opportunities for transforming the function and how it contributes to better policies and greater trust.

In the UK, public communication already plays such a role to an extent, and there is scope to consolidate relevant activities and examples of excellence into a systematic approach. Departments interviewed for this *Scan* stressed that their continuous monitoring and analysis of communication channels, their regular audience research, and the contact with core stakeholder groups via the external affairs discipline provide key resources to understand what people are discussing and their attitudes on any given issue. Figure 2.9 provides a non-exhaustive snapshot of the variety of sources routinely used to this end across departments.

Figure 2.9. Sources and frequency of evidence-gathering on public discourse and audiences

What sources of insights and evidence are gathered to inform communication?



Note: N=12, single choice answer.
Source: OECD survey of UK government communication offices at departmental level, 2022.

There are some intrinsic benefits to several of these evidence sources that are valuable to shape communication but can also support efforts to build citizen feedback into policy. First, public discourse analysed across most communication channels is open-ended, meaning it reflects organically what citizens are saying rather than answers a specific prompt or question. Formal participation processes commonly revolve around obtaining inputs on a defined issue, which is still too often set according to the government's own agenda. Conversely, public discourse analysis can inform agenda-setting by highlighting issues citizens are concerned with and eager to weigh in on. It can offer a more holistic view of perceptions around certain topics and how salient they are compared to others.

The other benefit of these types of insights is that they are gathered on a frequent and even continuous basis. This can facilitate understanding of the evolution of public perceptions and attitudes on a given issue over the course of time and allow adjustment of policy and communication as needed. Communication insights also tend to be more timely and readily available than other official statistics or research outputs, as one interviewee stressed. The timeliness of communication insights can allow institutions to identify potential issues early on or inform decisions on when and how to consult citizens and stakeholders.

The value of both of the above elements is recognised in Macnamara's (2017[44]) theory of organisational listening. Still, there are limitations to these types of insights that make them insufficient proxies for citizens' voices.

First, this listening is only as good as the methods employed and the data that underpin them. When it comes to the more common evidence sources used in Figure 2.9, these tend not to match the rigour of social research employed in other disciplines. There is often need for more qualitative data to explain the reasons behind public sentiment.

Second, communicators rely on opaque algorithms and commercial software to yield analysis, especially with regard to social media analytics (Alfonsi et al., 2022[2]; Zerfass, Hagelstein and Tench, 2020[45]). There is a degree of risk of bias and self-selection inherent to online discourse whereby highly vocal but unrepresentative groups can dominate certain issue areas more than wider but less outspoken audiences

and create echo-chambers. Representativeness is an additional concern with regards to factors such as digital inclusion, language of analysis, or accessibility of channels.

These limitations on communication insights as proxies for citizens' voices point to an opportunity for GCS to develop an innovative, rigorous, and comprehensive model for organisational listening with communicators across government. Such a model or framework could be developed in consultation with experts from different disciplines across data science, social research, and participation, and be based on experimentation within departments. A range of valuable lessons and recommendations to guide this endeavour are already available from a field study whose first phase began in 2014 (Macnamara, 2017[46]; 2022[34]).

This kind of exercise could align well with the GCS 2022-25 Strategy commitments on innovation and serve to further its vision for how the function supports core government objectives. Senior communicators interviewed for this *Scan* noted such listening remained an important yet underdeveloped area of their work they would be keen to invest in. As they stay on track with their ambitious commitments for the reform of the function, a focus on the capability to listen and close the feedback loop with policy could be a top priority in the GCS strategy post-2025.

To reflect the importance and value of listening to and acting on citizen feedback, this could be defined as a discipline in its own right within the Functional Standards on Communication or a future edition of the MCOM. This could represent a new frontier for the function internationally since even governments that are most mature in this domain lack a sophisticated approach to listening to and understanding citizens at scale.

The integration of communication with policy, especially at the early formulation and consultation stages, remains a precondition for the efficacy of organisational listening as a vehicle for more responsive policy making and service design. As with the findings in the above section, this role for communication is not yet widely acknowledged or understood.

Efforts by the GCS to consolidate its approach and capacity for listening ought to go hand-in-hand with initiatives to promote this discipline and foster culture change within institutions. It may be even desirable to co-lead efforts in this area with central government teams working to enhance participation and drive open government reforms.

In the absence of full integration between communication and policy, listening to citizens and understanding their needs remains an essential requirement for more responsive public communication. Similar to the emphasis on evidence-based campaign design noted above, survey responses illustrated in Figure 2.10 point to the established role of audience feedback in shaping core aspects of communication delivery.

Building on strengths for listening to and engaging wider audiences

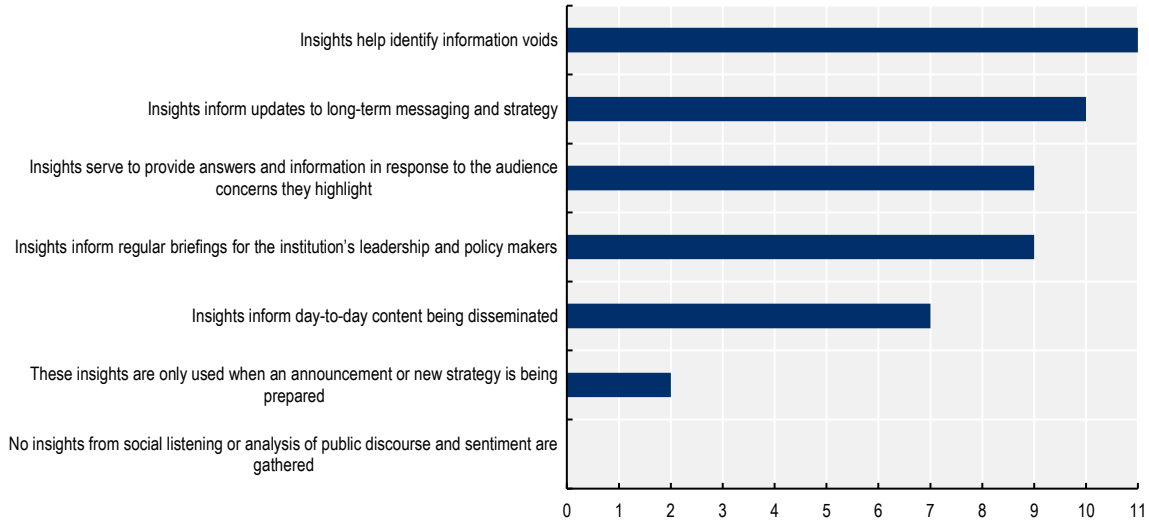
Mass communication channels are not the only sources of listening available – on the contrary, good practice for organisational listening calls for consolidating and analysing all forms of feedback that result from interactions with citizens, whether call centre data, correspondence, or other. Moreover, there is a case to widen opportunities for citizens to interact with public institutions across different channels so that their views and inputs can also be sought out more proactively and purposefully.

In the UK, there are some noteworthy practices that can form core pillars of a consolidated approach to organisational listening if properly integrated with the above activities. For instance, some departments have embedded teams in charge of correspondence with the public in their communication directorates. Some examples, such as in Box 2.8, highlight the potential to enhance listening and inform policy development.

The most established of these practices concerns the discipline of external affairs, which is recognised by MCOM as core to the function and is under the responsibility of communication directorates within departmental structures. It is defined as “building and maintaining relationships with influential individuals and organisations for the public benefit” (GCS, 2018[47]).

Figure 2.10. Public discourse and feedback inform communication delivery in most departments

How are insights from social listening or analysis of public discourse and sentiment used to inform communication?



Note: N=12, multiple responses possible.
Source: OECD survey of UK government communication offices at departmental level, 2022.

Its core remit, as noted in the relevant GCS guidance document, consists of listening, dialogue, awareness, and co-ordination with relevant stakeholder groups. External affairs is used to consult on and in some cases even co-create policy with representatives of different sectors and interest groups, and to test and secure buy-in for policy propositions (GCS, 2018[47]).

External affairs teams have contributed to more participative policy making through engagement of and collaboration with stakeholders. As a customer-facing department, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), the UK’s tax authority, places great emphasis on ensuring its operations are responsive to citizens’ and businesses’ needs, according to communicators interviewed. It does so by supporting and facilitating co-creation of programmes with key stakeholders, including a large annual stakeholder conference.

The conference serves as an avenue for HMRC to gather representatives of citizen and consumer groups, businesses and organisations of all sizes, and interviewees stressed the event has a practical, workshop-style focus to identify solutions with these stakeholders as equal partners. The conference also results in a set of commitments, which communication teams are tasked with following up on and reporting progress to the stakeholders, a valuable example of closing the feedback loop.

Interviewees stressed that the focus on stakeholder representatives and their role as intermediaries is core to the objective of making policy more participative, due to the practical difficulty of listening to individual citizens and engaging them in such co-creation. Another department, the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA), has bridged this challenge by establishing a large forum of individual stakeholders to engage in agricultural reforms, according to interviews.

The Farming Forum, a group of over 8 000 individual British farmers covering different territories and farm sizes, was set up as a platform for continuous dialogue and co-designing policy. The Forum initiative, managed jointly by policy teams with embedded communicators, was meant as a channel for grassroots engagement compared to other forms of engagement that tended to be dominated by trade unions and other large interest groups. This is indeed a risk linked to engaging narrowly with advocates and stakeholder groups, whose lobbying claims to represent the voices of constituents but can also disproportionately skew the debate (OECD, 2021[48]). The initiative was regarded as very valuable for generating important insights for policy and catering to the needs of the target group through new forms of engagement.

Box 2.8. Enabling a feedback loop between citizens, stakeholders and policy makers in the Department for Education: The case of School Meal Vouchers

The Department for Education's (DfE) communication directorate has introduced new organisational approaches to better align its work with core departmental policy and delivery areas, and with the different categories of audiences and stakeholders concerned with each area. For instance, communicators have designated topics such as Schools, Children and Families, Post-16 Education and Skills, and even specialised teams for recruitment to build the teaching workforce. According to this model, departmental communication is planned and structured from the perspective of the intended audiences, interviews emphasised.

To operationalise this structure, DfE works both on embedding communicators in policy teams (as mentioned earlier in the chapter), but also on better aligning central-level professional communication (intended as roles carried out by qualified professionals under the GCS competency framework) with operational information teams (civil servants carrying out tasks that do not require specialist communication skills). The latter teams include, for instance, all communication linked to stakeholder information and consultation, correspondence, project- or service-related information for users and similar. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, DfE communicators have worked to bring professional and operational communication in lockstep, reflecting an audience-centric focus on ensuring rapid delivery of information consistently and across all channels and messengers.

Within this approach there is a significant emphasis on analysing and integrating different channels for feedback to the department. Close collaboration with policy and delivery teams means that insights from user research, customer journey analysis, and communication are shared across teams and combined to support decision making. For instance, this includes data from the journeys of around 2.5 million individual users interacting with DfE digital content each month.

As distinct from most other government departments, DfE's communication directorate has oversight of the correspondence function. Correspondence teams manage inbound queries and complaints from the public, as well as consultations and inbound telephone calls. It is therefore a core pillar of public feedback and a key source of analysis for communicators and policy makers alike.

Leveraging public feedback to improve outcomes for the DfE's School Meals Voucher scheme

The example of adjustments to the School Meals Voucher scheme delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates how departmental teams collaborated to improve and extend the service based on citizen and stakeholder feedback. When the pandemic forced UK schools to close in March 2020, children from economically disadvantaged households who had been eligible for free meals in their schools were suddenly no longer receiving these meals. Within 18 days, the DfE changed the national scheme for free meals at the school into a weekly supermarket voucher scheme that eligible parents could claim to supplement their children's healthy eating.

Although the scheme's adjustment addressed the identified needs and new circumstances of beneficiaries, its roll-out by a government-procured administrator suffered from practical challenges that delayed access. Notably, complaints from schools and parents analysed by the DfE correspondence team highlighted that the department had not adequately anticipated the volume and variation of issues that families were encountering when taking up the service. Insights from users and ongoing liaison with schools at the frontline of administering the vouchers helped the DfE identify and address delivery issues and ensure the success of the scheme. By the first extension of the vouchers scheme, 94% of schools were participating and beneficiaries' satisfaction levels peaked.

Interviews indicated again that a high volume of inbound correspondence and queries analysed highlighted that families facing financial stress during the pandemic were eager for the vouchers scheme to be extended beyond its foreseen termination at the end of the school term. Combined with amplification by media and high-profile advocates, such as football star Marcus Rashford, stakeholder and parent feedback relayed to policy makers resulted in a new budget allocation allowing the programme to run through the summer school closure. Based on its previous success, the vouchers scheme was eventually replicated smoothly during the 2021 lockdowns.

This case was highlighted by interviewees to demonstrate the value of close collaboration between professional and operational information teams, as well as the feedback loop with policy makers that brought stakeholder and beneficiary voices into decision making, resulting in improved outcomes.

Source: Secretariat interviews with DfE (December 2022); internal presentation by DfE "When policy delivery doesn't go to plan Free School Meals national voucher scheme" (December 2022); GCS (2023[49]), *Case Study: Working with Embedded Communicators*, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/case-study-working-with-embedded-communicators/; Committee of Public Accounts (2021[50]), *COVID 19: The Free School Meals Voucher Scheme,* https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4569/documents/46230/default/; NAO (2020[51]), *Investigation into the Free School Meals Voucher Scheme*, https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Investigation-into-the-free-school-meals-voucher-scheme.pdf.

The above examples represent good practices found across departments, although the effectiveness of external affairs teams in supporting participation and their collaboration with policy teams is not uniform across the board, according to interviews the OECD held. The inclusion of stakeholder engagement under the broader umbrella of the public communication function (in the form of the external affairs discipline) represents in itself an opportunity to integrate this source of evidence and listening with other communication insights. However, some interviews suggested that this discipline can sometimes operate somewhat separately from other fields of communication. Some also indicated that, rather than working in tandem, policy teams can sometimes take the lead on relationships with certain groups and on substantive issues, leaving external affairs teams to handle publicity-related aspects of the engagement such as events and ministerial visits.

Interviews also point to political volatility and associated changes in direction as a challenge in managing long-term relationships with stakeholders. Some interviews noted the risk to maintaining stakeholders' trust if their views are not taken on board without relevant justifications. One interviewee suggested that the political climate can cause some policy and external affairs teams to be cautious about seeking policy inputs from stakeholders. Such considerations link to the above findings on government responsiveness and trust, and emphasise the importance of closing the feedback loop with citizens and stakeholders regardless of how their inputs are used.

UK departments can explore more interactive ways to communicate with wider audiences to facilitate the gathering of citizen inputs to inform policy. This is another key area of innovation that GCS could focus on going forward. A noteworthy example to build on is that of the online page, "Ask the government a question"[8], which was introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic to source and answer public questions

on this subject. A number of questions submitted each day, selected by an external polling firm, were then answered by ministers and government spokespeople during daily press conferences.

According to interviews, over the initial stages of the pandemic, over 650 000 questions were received. They provided deep insights into what information citizens were looking for and their top concerns. With the help of natural language processing tools communication teams in the Cabinet Office were able to identify trends and adjust their messages and delivery. Related to this example are the Lockdown Dialogues held in Finland, another format of public interaction and listening carried out during the pandemic described in Box 2.9.

Although the "Ask a question" page was highlighted as a successful initiative, communicators interviewed caveated that it may not be easily replicable or scalable on other topics that are less salient or prone to be dominated by interest groups. Operating the programme was also resource-intensive. Nonetheless, technologies such as AI are gradually expanding possibilities for this kind of interaction while lowering their costs. For instance, channels such as chatbot-enabled instant messaging are becoming more common and better-performing across countries and sectors (Alfonsi et al., 2022[2]). They could complement or automate aspects of the correspondence function, for instance, and generative AI combined with content targeting could contribute to the "mass personalisation" of communication noted in the innovation section of the GCS 2022-25 Strategy.

For public communication to grow and consolidate its role in support of citizen participation, it must expand opportunities for citizens to provide more and higher quality contributions. Expanding the use of channels that allow for two-way interaction will be an important step in this direction. This should not be limited to technological solutions, however. Direct human contact on the ground with diverse communities will remain important for understanding their needs and contexts, and building public trust that institutions are listening.

Box 2.9. Lockdown Dialogues in Finland

A series of public discussions were launched in Finland at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic and continued into late 2021 as lockdown restrictions began to be lifted. The discussion brought together a diverse range of Finnish citizens to discuss their experiences and perspectives, and listen to one another, without the expectation of focusing on or solving pre-defined issues.

The dialogues were organised in collaboration with local civil society organisations, and a summary of the topics discussed were compiled and sent to both central and local government, in addition to an open-access publication.

This has been the case in Finland, where the Open Government team within the Ministry of Finance collaborated with local government and CSOs to hold the "Lockdown Dialogues". These consisted of 232 sessions organised by multiple entities that involved over 1 600 individuals over the spring of 2020 to discuss the effects of the pandemic and connect with communities across the country and abroad (Finnish Government, 2021[52]). A distinctive feature of these dialogues is that they were open-ended discussions where the goal was to listen, without an intended outcome or a pre-defined policy to deliberate on.

Source: Finnish Government (2021[52]), "Reopening of society brings joy but polarisation of public discussion causes concern – Lockdown Dialogues recount experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic", 2021, https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-//10623/reopening-of-society-brings-joy-but-polarisation-of-public-discussion-causes-concern-lockdown-dialogues-recount-experiences-of-the-covid-19-pandemic; Sitra (2022[53]), *Lockdown Dialogues: Crisis Experiences and Model for National Dialogue*, https://www.sitra.fi/app/uploads/2022/06/sitra-lockdown-dialogues.pdf.

While the value of organisational listening for responsive policy making and communication may be evident, it must be noted that this practice does not equal or serve as a substitute for formal participation processes. Concerns and opinions voiced by citizens, whether on open forums or raised directly to institutions, do not amount to deliberation or intentional expression of their position on an issue, which is the case of structured participation processes. For this reason, such listening can be highly informative and span a wide range of policy topics, but enhancing participative and deliberative decision making will remain an essential way to address complex questions and deliver better outcomes that reflect public preferences.

In the UK there is significant scope to expand participative and deliberative processes, especially at the national level. Examples of citizen assemblies, juries and panels are increasing: the OECD Deliberative Wave Database recorded 43 such processes, predominantly at the level of local administrations or devolved nations.[9] With regards to UK national policy making, consultations remain the more common form of involving citizens and stakeholders in decisions. These are increasingly used to seek feedback and input from stakeholders at the design stages of the policy cycle and have even become a mandatory requirement for policy development in some cases.

Public communicators can make an important contribution to the effectiveness of consultations. Although survey responses indicate that all departments' communicators collaborate with policy teams at the consultation or citizen engagement stage of the policy cycle, interviews downplayed the extent of this collaboration. Notably, interviewees suggested that there is scope to expand the reach and visibility of consultations to target groups and especially individuals who are less likely to otherwise know and participate. One communicator noted the opportunity to reach the "silent middle" of stakeholders to counterbalance the perceived tendency for organised interest groups to dominate and even polarise these processes. This aligns well with the government's principles guiding how consultations are run (Box 2.10).

Conversely, interviews also cautioned on the reputational risks, breach of trust and potential consultation fatigue that can come from promoting consultations without having the adequate capacity for the relevant teams to process a potentially larger volume of inputs. Some noted that this can often be a constraint and discourage such wide dissemination, pointing to cases that attracted volumes of responses beyond what the institutions could process with the available means and timeframes.

Another cautionary factor noted in interviews was the potential for top decision makers to override consultation outcomes. In this regard, interviews tended to validate the finding in previous research that characterised UK consultations as being "more about meeting legal requirements than listening" (Macnamara, 2017[46]). This speaks to a broader challenge with regards to listening, participation and open government more broadly – that of the organisational culture, identified in the OECD *Recommendation on Open Government* (2017[54]).

Box 2.10. Principles of Consultation in the UK

In the UK, consultation is legally mandated in some cases, although dedicated guidance encourages consultations to be conducted when issues are "genuinely undecided". To carry out these processes UK departments can refer to the Consultation Principles, which have been periodically updated since their initial publication in 2012. The principles state an intention to use more digital methods to consult with a wider group of people.

Although communication is not explicitly noted in the principles, they refer to the need to target consultations well and design them to suit different groups and categories of stakeholders.

Consultations and responses are published online on the central GOV.UK website. Several government departments and ALBs also have dedicated online "Citizen Spaces", which publish all consultations specifically related to their policy areas of focus. These are often structured around a tagline of "We Asked, You Said, We Did" to clearly signpost the different stages within the contribution of citizen participation to decision making.

Sources: UK Government (2018[55]), *Consultation Principles: Guidance*, 2018 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/consultation-principles-guidance.

This section has illustrated the potential for public communication to play an important role in enhancing how open and participative government in the UK is. At present, however, this function remains an under-exploited tool to support greater citizen participation and dialogue internationally. Although it is noted in provisions within the OECD *Recommendation of the Council on Open Government* (2017[54]), there is significant scope to embed the function more formally in efforts to make the government more transparent, accountable and participative.

Given how advanced and sophisticated public communication is in the UK, the country could play a leading role in this domain. At present, however, the UK's Open Government Playbook falls short of recognising this sufficiently. The document characterises strategic communication as "advancing open government principles", and "serving as a tool to improve policy-making, service design, and delivery" (UK Government, 2020[56]). However, the related guidance predominantly focuses on communicating pre-defined policies rather than using communication as a channel and a lever to support the design of policies and facilitate two-way dialogue.

According to both interviews with civil society and the current UK Open Government Partnership (OGP) National Action Plan for the UK,[10] the government has focused more heavily on digital government issues such as open data and algorithmic transparency, as well as transparency and anti-corruption. Citizen participation (and notably communication and dialogue) is less prominent and was also a point of contention for civil society during the Plan's elaboration process (Open Government Partnership, 2022[57]). Going forward this will be an important area for the UK to invest in to build public trust, including by leveraging the role of public communication.

Key findings and recommendations

- There are untapped opportunities for communicators, policy makers and delivery teams to collaborate more effectively and improve outcomes for citizens. Presently, communication is mostly used for announcing and delivering policies or services that have already been developed.
- The government could expand guidance for integrating communication throughout the policy cycle to improve outcomes. One way would be to provide more practical recommendations for communicators and policy teams on forms of co-operation at each stage of policy or service development and delivery.
- New guidance for integrating policy and communication, and existing relevant Functional Standards could emphasise embedding public insights and feedback from the outset until the final evaluation of policies and services, with a focus on increasing responsiveness to citizen needs.
- Government departments could promote two-way data and insight-sharing between communication and policy or delivery teams that would inform their respective activities at earlier stages. GCS could lead on developing a template or toolkit for departments.

- Building on successful examples of embedding communicators within policy teams throughout the cycle, departments could establish pilot schemes to widen this practice across government. This would improve mutual understanding between communication and policy disciplines, and offer new ways to improve collaboration.
- Communication campaigns are the most common and advanced way for the function to contribute to implementing policy. By widely applying strategy development and tactics from the field of marketing, government departments have obtained measurable outcomes for perception and behaviour change.
    - The effectiveness of campaigns is derived from their evidence-based, audience-centred design. GCS can further strengthen insights capabilities and adopt more advanced methods so that all departments achieve the same high standards.
    - GCS can also focus on making the inclusive and responsive design of campaigns more mainstream. This would help to serve all societal groups equitably, cater to audiences' diverse needs, and enjoy wide buy-in. This includes encouraging better compliance with accessibility guidelines and promoting practices for collaboration and co-creation of campaigns with key members of target communities.
- Communication can strengthen the feedback loop between government and citizens. This builds public trust, which suffers from the perception that citizens do not have a say in what the government does. GCS could support better two-way dialogue and actions to expand citizen participation in decision making.
- GCS could create a dedicated framework and build capability for organisational listening with an eye to consolidating it as a core component of the Modern Communication Operating Model (MCOM). This will require innovation, experimentation, and skills capacity in AI to gather and analyse unstructured information such as public comments and feedback, and structured data (e.g. surveys and statistics) to inform more responsive policy making and communication.
- GCS could invest in developing and testing rigorous methods of analysis to mitigate factors that might distort its accuracy and ensure organisational listening is representative of society. In particular, GCS could integrate multiple and diverse sources of feedback beyond mainstream communication channels, such as correspondence, complaints, call-centre records, social media comments, and more. However, listening that is representative requires government to reach out to diverse communities and groups on the ground as well. The external affairs discipline offers a key avenue for building a holistic approach to organisational listening and to go beyond this by actively engaging citizens and stakeholders on core issues.
- In line with the outlook for better two-way communication, and as part of the commitments on innovation, GCS could focus on building on practices that enable more direct interaction with citizens and provide ways for them to communicate with public institutions.
- Strengthening and innovating how institutions listen can facilitate closer collaboration with policy and delivery teams. In this respect, GCS could co-create and promote listening across relevant units and departments working on citizen participation and open government reforms.
- Communication could be an asset to UK’s open government agenda and serve to further transparency, accountability and participation. Its role in the numerous consultations carried out by institutions could be recognised more formally, expanded to improve their outcomes, and integrated in future commitments to openness.

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Notes

[1] The OECD uses the following definitions to distinguish between citizens and stakeholders, based on the OECD Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes (OECD, 2022[42]):

- "Stakeholders: any interested and/or affected party, including institutions and organisations, whether governmental or non-governmental, from civil society, academia, the media, or the private sector."
- "Citizens: individuals, regardless of their age, gender, sexual orientation, religious, and political affiliations. The term is meant in the larger sense of 'an inhabitant of a particular place', which can be in reference to a village, town, city, region, state, or country depending on the context. It is not meant in the more restrictive sense of 'a legally recognised national of a state'. In this larger sense, it is equivalent of people."

[2] Participation is defined as "all the ways in which stakeholders (including citizens) can be involved in the policy cycle and in service design and delivery" (OECD, 2017[54]). The OECD *Recommendation of the Council on Open Government* identifies three levels of participation linked to the degree of citizen involvement:

1. "Information: an initial level of participation characterised by a one-way relationship in which the government produces and delivers information to citizens and stakeholders. It covers both on-demand provision of information and "proactive" measures by the government to disseminate information."
2. "Consultation: a more advanced level of participation that entails a two-way relationship in which citizens and stakeholders provide feedback to the government and vice-versa. It is based on the prior definition of the issue for which views are being sought and requires the provision of relevant information, in addition to feedback on the outcomes of the process."
3. "Engagement: when citizens and stakeholders are given the opportunity and the necessary resources (e.g., information, data, and digital tools) to collaborate during all phases of the policy-cycle and in the service design and delivery. It acknowledges equal standing for citizens in setting the agenda, proposing project or policy options and shaping the dialogue – although the responsibility for the final decision or policy formulation in many cases rests with public authorities."

[3] Data governance refers to diverse arrangements, including technical, policy, regulatory or institutional provisions, that affect data and their cycle (creation, collection, storage, use, protection, access, sharing and deletion) across policy domains and organisational and national borders.

[4] Presentation given by James Staff, UK Department for Energy Security & Net Zero, at the meeting of the OECD Experts Group on Public Communication held on 14 June 2023.

[5] BEIS was reformed in 2023, with policy areas under its mandate reorganised under the new Department for Business and Trade (DBT), the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT).

[6] See for instance: GCS (2021), *Planning, Creating and Publishing Accessible Social Media Campaigns*, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/guidance/digital-communication/planning-creating-and-publishing-accessible-social-media-campaigns/; GCS (2021), *Planning, Creating and Publishing Accessible Website Content*, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/guidance/digital-communication/planning-creating-and-publishing-accessible-website-content/; GCS (2021), Adding an audio description to your videos, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/guidance/digital-communication/accessible-communications/adding-an-audio-description-to-your-videos/; GCS (2003), *British Sign Language Act: A Guide to BSL Translating and Interpreting for Public-Facing Communications*, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/news/guidance-published-on-delivering-british-sign-language-content/#:~:text=The%20British%20Sign%20Language%20Act,is%20devolved%20in%20Northern%20Ireland.

[7] Organisational listening is defined by Macnamara (2023[23]) as follows: "Organisational listening comprises the creation and implementation of scaled processes and systems that enable decision makers and policy makers in organisations to actively and effectively access, acknowledge, understand, consider, and appropriately respond to all those who wish to communicate with the organisation or with whom the organisation wishes to communicate interpersonally or through delegated, mediated means.".

[8] The page is available at https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ask-the-government-a-question (accessed on 30 May 2023).

[9] Consult the OECD Deliberative Wave Database at https://airtable.com/shrHEM12ogzPs0nQG/tbl1eKbt37N7hVFHF/viwxQgJNyONVHkmS6?blocks=hide (accessed on 12 June 2023).

[10] The current Open Government Partnership National Action Plan is available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-national-action-plan-for-open-government-2021-2023/uk-national-action-plan-for-open-government-2021-2023#introduction (accessed 30 May 2023).

3 Building trust in public communication to succeed in a complex information ecosystem

This chapter discusses the complex information ecosystem in which communicators operate. It proposes recommendations to strengthen the function as a trustworthy source of information against the spread of polarising and false content. The function must be trustworthy to be able to effectively support policy objectives and combat mis- and disinformation. The analysis stresses the risks posed by perceived politicisation and the disproportionate focus on managing a few politically influential media. It proposes measures to strengthen guidance on impartiality and introduce oversight mechanisms as safeguards. In a similar vein, it raises considerations for reinforcing ethical standards that can reassure the public about legitimate uses of new technologies and communication methods. The chapter also discusses the UK government's evolving range of responses to the proliferation of mis- and disinformation. It acknowledges the role of public communication as integral to multi-disciplinary interventions, both domestically and internationally. It highlights the growing focus on pre-emptive actions, such as in Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, to highlight practices that can be strengthened in this dynamic field.

This *Scan*'s first two chapters emphasised opportunities for public communication to contribute to greater policy impact, improved outcomes for citizens, and more constructive dialogue and engagement. However, as ambitions and expectations for the function grow, the communication environment is becoming more challenging than ever.

Public discourse, the media, and political rhetoric have grown increasingly fragmented and polarised in many democracies such as the UK (More in Common, 2021[1]; Matasick, Alfonsi and Bellantoni, 2020[2]; Norris, 2022[3]; Newman et al., 2022[4]). Fringe views are amplified over moderate ones by social media algorithms, and, along with mis- and disinformation, they pollute the public sphere where democratic societies form opinions and debate policy questions (More in Common, 2021[1]; Matasick, Alfonsi and Bellantoni, 2020[2]). The challenges of the information ecosystem are fuelled by and deepen a persistent lack of trust and social cohesion. These problems underpin a broader threat to the resilience of democracies, recognised by the OECD's initiative on Building Trust and Reinforcing Democracy (OECD, 2022[5]).

While this can make public communication's tasks difficult to achieve, it also makes the function's success all the more urgent. Effective, citizen-centred public communication can help build trust in democratic institutions by ensuring and demonstrating that the government is reliable, responsive, open and fair.[1] It is an essential asset to prevent and counteract mis- and disinformation, along with other governance responses (OECD, 2022[6]). As described in the preceding chapter, it can be leveraged as an important vehicle for dialogue and participation, the lack of which the OECD Trust Survey (2022[7]) finds is at the heart of citizens' frustrations with their governments (see Box 3.1).

This chapter outlines how the UK is navigating this difficult context and addressing the issues of declining public trust in both institutions and information at large. The first part of this chapter calls for continued efforts to ensure high ethical standards in public communication. This is essential for maintaining the function's social licence to apply new technologies and methods responsibly. This requires rethinking the complex relationship between public and political communication and the media, which is vulnerable to underlying socio-political tensions in the UK as played out in the information space.

UK government communicators have made important efforts to manage the impact of mis- and disinformation[2] through targeted communication interventions, especially with regards to foreign threats. The second part of the chapter looks at how institutions took on board the lessons of the pandemic and built greater resilience against mis- and disinformation. Such resilience will remain crucial to supporting fact-based public debate, rebuilding trust in information, and increasing the efficacy of public communication to change behaviour or perceptions for the public good.

Navigating a complex information ecosystem in a climate of low public trust

The OECD has recognised that "the resilience of our democratic systems comes from the open public debate they foster" (OECD, 2022[7]). In the UK, like many other OECD members, the space for such open debate has been occupied by polarising narratives, and mis- and disinformation, which have resulted in growing public disengagement from political and civic participation. These are related, self-reinforcing elements in the UK's public communication environment.

The Edelman Trust Barometer (Edelman, 2023[8]) characterised the UK as being "in danger of severe polarisation" based on public perceptions of how acute and entrenched social divisions are. About half of respondents in another survey claimed that "they had never seen the country so divided" (Juan-Torres, Dixon and Kimaram, 2020[9]). New social and cultural fault lines are forming in this trend. For example, studies on affective polarisation[3] in the UK public have found that identification with either side of the Brexit referendum supersedes party-political affiliations (Duffy et al., 2019[10]; Curtice, 2018[11]). Combined with a

divisive media landscape that often sets the tone for public discourse, these tensions make it difficult to promote constructive debates on important policy issues.

Box 3.1. Measures of public trust in key institutions in the UK and in the OECD

The OECD's focus on understanding and measuring trust is based on the premise that "trust is an important indicator to measure how people perceive the quality of, and how they associate with, government institutions in democratic countries" (OECD, 2022[7]). Many established democracies, including the UK, have experienced relatively low levels of public trust in government dating back to the 2008 global financial crisis (OECD, 2017[12]). Against the backdrop of recent crises affecting citizens' lives and livelihoods, the OECD Trust Survey of publics in 22 Member countries found that governments are generally trusted to deliver services or handle a future pandemic. Conversely, the roots of mistrust relate more to responsiveness and fairness, such as perceptions that governments do not act on citizen concerns and that powerful officials lack integrity (OECD, 2022[7]).

In the UK, trust in national government stood at 34.8% compared to an OECD average of 41.1% in 2021 (OECD, 2022[7]). When measures of trust are disaggregated for different public actors, they provide a more complete picture of how citizens trust different institutions and what drives their trust. The UK civil service, for example, is trusted by 55.5% of the public, above the OECD average of 50.2%, similarly to other service-providing institutions like the health system and the police and courts. On the other hand, similarly to other OECD countries, political parties are the least trusted institution in the Survey, at 19.9%, below the media and national legislature (OECD, 2022[7]).

The above findings are largely consistent with other studies of trust, including the 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer UK supplement. The latter additionally found that 57% of respondents feel their interests are not represented in British politics and a greater share hold politicians responsible for driving social divisions (80%) and eroding public trust in government (85%) (Edelman, 2023[13]).

As the OECD Trust Survey report states, this picture owes to "a broader pattern of feelings of disempowerment" vis-à-vis political elites' perceived agendas (OECD, 2022[7]). The sense of disempowerment may also be a factor making some citizens more susceptible to suspicions and even conspiracies about powerful individuals and groups, which are common to disinformation circulating online.

Source: OECD (2022[7]), *Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy: Main Findings from the 2021 OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions*, OECD, Paris; OECD (2017[12]), *Trust and Public Policy: How Better Governance Can Help Rebuild Public Trust*, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264268920-en; Edelman (2023[13]), *2023 Edelman Trust Barometer - UK Supplement Report*, https://www.edelman.co.uk/sites/g/files/aatuss301/files/2023-03/UK%20Trust%202023%20Website.pdf.

The UK has a vast market for news media, with global reach and influence. This includes some of the world's most recognised journalistic brands, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which is one of the most recognised and trusted news outlets domestically and internationally (Newman et al., 2022[4]).

Nonetheless, British tabloids, known for sensationalist headlines, enjoy some of the highest circulation figures in the country, surpassing those of other highly regarded news organisations (Mayhew, 2020[14]). A number of top outlets also hold large sway on the news cycle and the political and policy agenda despite a global trend of greater fragmentation and digitalisation of news content and consumption (Garland, Tambini and Couldry, 2017[15]; Simpson and Startin, 2022[16]). This makes relations with the media a high-stakes endeavour for public communicators and political actors.

Notwithstanding its established status, the UK media market is vulnerable to some of the same pressures visible in other OECD countries. It is marked by dwindling revenue streams and intense competition on mobile screens for the public's finite attention span (Matasick, Alfonsi and Bellantoni, 2020[2]). The economic model for quality journalism has been under strain, with a quarter of all regional and local newspapers closing between 2007-2017 (DCMS, 2018[17]). Over the same period the number of full-time journalists in print and online media in the UK dropped by 25%, and the downward trend is set to continue as of 2023 (DCMS, 2018[17]; Maher, 2023[18]).

Among some tabloids and clickbait news platforms, this context has favoured an inclination towards sensationalist rhetoric and provocative content that perform well with time-poor audiences and social media algorithms. Combined with what observers qualify as some media's own political and commercial agendas (Simpson and Startin, 2022[16]; Tryl et al., 2021[19]; Yonder, 2021[20]), these practices contribute to the deteriorating supply of quality information in the country.

Indeed, tabloids have been characterised by observers as "uniquely hostile" (Simpson and Startin, 2022[16]), and "not conducive to fact-based communication".[4] The phenomenon has longstanding roots: a decade ago, the British media's "culture, practices, and ethics" were the subject of a high-profile judicial inquiry by Lord Justice Leveson following a series of scandals over the conduct of a number of outlets and calls for regulation (Leveson, 2012[21]).

Some of these lower-quality outlets have also been alleged to exaggerate or distort facts to shock or provoke readers, to the detriment of constructive public debate. For example, some British tabloids used misleading statistics and narratives in reporting topics such as migration (Full Fact, 2023[22]) and climate change (Ward, 2019[23]). Similarly, several instances of inaccurate media reporting related to the European Union (EU) prompted the European Parliament's UK liaison office to issue fact-checks to correct inaccuracies.[5] As a result, complex policy issues such as migration, welfare, and relations with the EU have been rendered increasingly intractable by media narratives, exacerbating existing social fault lines (Tryl et al., 2021[19]).[6]

The divisive discourse encouraged by certain news outlets is not lost on the British public. Today, it is among the least trusting public of news media compared to other countries (Edelman, 2023[8]). At 38.8%, the media was the second-least trusted institution out of nine covered in the OECD Trust Survey (2022[7]). Three-quarters (74%) of respondents in the UK surveyed by non-profit More in Common held "the media" directly responsible for making the country "feel more divided than it really is" (Tryl et al., 2021[19]). More worryingly, a growing proportion of the public is avoiding news altogether because "they anticipate news will make them anxious without being relevant to their lives, resulting in limited engagement with news, and by extension, civic and political affairs" (Toff and Nielsen, 2022, p. 697[24]).

It is worth noting that this context is not unique to the UK. In 2022, the Edelman Trust Barometer found that 67% of respondents across 28 countries surveyed worried that the media were purposely misleading people with headlines they know to be incorrect or exaggerated (a similar share as those who say the same about government and political leaders). As a result, the study warned of "governments and media fuel[ling] a cycle of distrust" (Edelman, 2022, p. 4[25]). These commonalities make the considerations in this *Scan* relevant to other OECD Members operating in similar environments.

Finally, the issue of mis- and disinformation erodes trust further. Two-thirds of British people polled by YouGov indicated being either "very" or "generally" concerned about the spread of "fake news"[7] (Kersley, 2022[26]). The scale of the problem has concrete implications for policy. Analysis carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that anti-vaccine accounts experienced a 25% increase in following from 2019 to 2020 and that some 5.4 million UK Twitter users followed such accounts (Christie, 2021[27]). Moreover, one year into the pandemic a survey by the UK communications regulator Ofcom found that 28% of respondents reported being exposed to false or misleading claims about the coronavirus in the previous seven-day period, a figure that remained broadly similar over monthly editions of the survey (Ofcom, 2021[28]).

Beyond its effects on policy, the amplification of falsehoods on communication channels by ill-intentioned actors deepens the perceived rifts between societal groups and distrust of those with opposing views. A study commissioned by Ofcom finds that audiences who question or reject mainstream media actively seek sources that confirm their world views, with less regard for accuracy. Notably, these groups also tend to treat all sources as subjective and attribute misinformation to mainstream media as much as alternative sources (Yonder, 2021[20]).

The important interplay of identity, values, and world views with mis- and disinformation is at the heart of its complexity. Addressing it requires more than supplying factual information against rumours: it requires a sustained effort to build social cohesion and genuine dialogue with groups in British society who feel marginalised or distrust the political system.

There are encouraging signs that point to how such cohesion can be built, with support from public communication. Whereas the findings in this section highlight perceptions of opposing groups with irreconcilable preferences, studies suggest that British citizens share more common ground on policy questions than some of the media discourse lets show (Duffy et al., 2019[10]; Tryl et al., 2021[19]). Importantly, there is an appetite for less political and more relatable content across news and communications. A survey identified "political reporting [that] is disconnected from what matters in the lives of most Britons" as a key source of public distrust and frustration with the media (Tryl et al., 2021, p. 16[19]).

Public service media and public communicators can act as impartial vehicles for reliable and relevant information that helps citizens understand, form opinions, and weigh in on public issues. A useful parameter for this is included in a recent review of BBC coverage, which advances the case for "broad impartiality" (Blastland and Dilnot, 2022[29]), building on the BBC pledge in 2021 to "address the issue of impartiality in its broadest sense, pushing the debate beyond traditional left/right divides and addressing the challenge of audiences who do not currently feel their lives, attitudes and opinions are adequately represented or portrayed on the BBC". (BBC, 2021, p. 2[30]). This pledge followed a rise in audience concerns with impartiality and criticism of perceived bias and political interference (Newman, 2022; Martin & Revoir, 2022; Elgot & Mason, 2023).

By this metric, the review found that BBC coverage on the topics of taxation, public debt and spending fell short of serving audiences adequately rather than being politically partisan. In particular, the review noted journalists' insufficient grasp of subject complexity and their focus on relaying political arguments over explanation of the underlying topics. This made for reporting that unintentionally favoured some interests over others (Blastland and Dilnot, 2022[29]). Additionally, the review noted that, as a result, "broad interests that lack political salience can be neglected" as well as voices that represent vulnerable audiences (Blastland and Dilnot, 2022[29]).

This example has useful implications for both journalism and public communication. Serving the public requires meeting the information needs of all citizens. This entails content that is informative, relevant, and understandable to all (Cazenave and Bellantoni, 2022[31]). The BBC review also points to the importance of rebalancing communication's focus away from presenting and discussing political positions that tend to drive the news agenda on most topics, and towards context and facts underpinning the same topics. UK public communicators have an important opportunity to contrast divisive narratives with unifying, fact-based messages to safeguard the space for constructive engagement.

Reinforcing trust in public communication: The role of ethics and propriety

Public communication has an important role to play in counteracting mis- and disinformation and supporting governmental efforts to build social cohesion against the divisive and polarising trends that characterise the information ecosystem in the UK and many other OECD countries. However,

communication's effectiveness vis-à-vis these objectives rests significantly on how much it is trusted by audiences across society.

The GCS Strategy (2022, p. 19[32]) recognises that "[p]ublic confidence and trust in government communications is critical to our national security and well-being". Public confidence is equally necessary to grant the function its social license to use certain personal data, behavioural insights, and new technologies responsibly so as to make its communication more relevant and responsive to audiences. Furthermore, and as the following section highlights, communication-based responses to mis- and disinformation rest on the criteria that the sources of information are truthful and reliable.

To this end, it is essential that citizens see public communication as serving their needs for information and participation. It is equally important that the public perceives the function to operate according to high ethical standards and to put the needs and interests of its audiences ahead of political motives.

This section puts forward considerations for reinforcing the current ethical and propriety frameworks to ensure GCS and its work remain trusted. It also discusses opportunities for constructive multi-stakeholder engagement to redefine norms and standards for public communication in light of developments in the information ecosystem described above.

Trust and the separation between political and public communication

The role for public communication to help build trust in the difficult environment described above rests on institutions' ability to remain trusted sources of information, rather than being associated with the divisive discourse that citizens tend to attribute to the media and political actors. Yet, a recent global study comprising over 150 public communicators warned that politicisation of the function has increased around the world, with adverse consequences for the efficacy of and public trust in messages from government channels. The study, conducted by a leading consulting firm, stressed the concern "that continued politicisation of communications may lead governments into a doom loop of distrust that they will struggle to recover from" (WPP/Kantar Public, 2023, p. 27[33]).

As this section discusses, a similar trajectory has been noted in the UK (Urban, 2023[34]; Barwick, 2019[35]; Garland, 2021[36]). Recent episodes of politicised communication breaching the propriety rules of the civil service in particular have brought renewed attention to historical concerns over the conduct of communicators that were the subject of external inquiries (BBC, 2022[37]; Garland, 2022[38]; Phillis, 2004[39]; Macnamara, 2020[40]). Such instances can dent public trust in the function at a time when addressing misinformation and embracing technological change require it to demonstrate unwavering integrity and responsibility. This sub-section therefore advances recommendations for reinforcing mechanisms that limit the potential politicisation of public communication and supporting efforts for greater separation from its political counterpart.

Internationally, the OECD *Report on Public Communication* (2021[41]) highlighted the distinction and separation between public and political communication as an essential criterion for the governance of the function and for it to serve all citizens and merit their trust. The Report notes that several OECD countries, like the UK, stipulate this distinction formally in the relevant policies governing public communication. This is reflected, for example, in commonly found policies on the neutrality or impartiality of civil servants; the use of institutional branding, channels and resources; and the separation of roles between political appointees and civil servants.

A common criterion for differentiating between *political* (or party-political) and *public* communication is proposed by Sanders and Canel (2013[42]). It focuses on the purpose of communication: whether it relates to reputation management or promoting a favourable perception of incumbent political parties and officials or aims to inform and engage citizens on issues that concern them. In practice, the boundaries between these two realms of communication tend to be blurred and citizens themselves often do not distinguish between the two (OECD, 2021[41]; OECD, 2022[6]).

This distinction should not be seen to discredit political communication, which in a democracy is not just legitimate, but also necessary. Citizens choose their representatives and hold these officials accountable for their actions. The public must therefore be able to understand elected officials' positions on policy issues and to judge their record in office. It is the reason why politicians, rather than the civil service, ought to be the ones to relay their arguments and justify the decisions they make.

In the UK context the parameters of this distinction are reflected in the UK's Civil Service Code of Conduct and in the GCS Propriety Guidelines. These are the two documents setting out formal provisions on the separation of public and political communication alongside specific guidance for politically-appointed ministerial Special Advisers[8] (see Box 3.2). However, impartiality rules in the UK require civil servants to set aside their own political views in supporting the sitting government. As such, institutions have a duty to present the government's view on policy issues, but refrain from carrying out communications that would be intended to derive electoral advantage for the government of the day.

As was also stressed in a number of interviews, such provisions do not imply a requirement for neutrality in communication carried out by the civil service. Nonetheless, guidance specifies that it should not be "biased or polemical" nor "liable to be misrepresented as being party-political" (GCS, 2022[43]). Furthermore, the Civil Service Code prohibits the use of public resources for party-political activities, including communication (UK Government, 2015[44]). These activities are instead carried out by Special Advisers, who are commonly responsible for managing ministers' relations with the media and their personal communication channels.

POLITICISATION RISKS AND CHALLENGES FOR PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

Although the existing guidance makes an explicit distinction between public and political communication, OECD interviews with communicators highlighted significant scope for individual judgement and subjective interpretation of subtle boundaries. This can lead to activities that cross the fine line into impropriety through, for example, the selective presentation of statistics, overstating facts, and profile-raising for ministers (such examples were cited in OECD interviews with government communicators, as well as in Urban (2023[34]) and Garland (2022[38])).

Studies based on communicators' own accounts warned of a trend for public communication being "overly driven by political priorities and ministerial demands, rather than serving the public"[9] (Urban, 2023, p. 11[34]). A number of OECD survey responses and interviews carried out in the context of this *Scan* also cited changing priorities at the political level as a top challenge. These findings have important implications for the function's reputation and trustworthiness, and call for enhanced solutions to mitigate potential vulnerability to politicisation.

First, GCS communicators interviewed by the OECD were nearly unanimous in commending present recourse mechanisms for flagging ministerial or political-level requests in breach of propriety guidelines (see Box 3.2) and the ability of senior communicators to push back against this kind of requests. Such comments indicate that, when it is applied, the mechanism is effective at managing potential political pressures to shield the function from politicisation.

However, interviews suggested that pushing back or resorting to the recourse mechanism can be complicated by the dynamics of individual relationships between public communicators and political advisers and ministers, whose trust and respect the former rely on to be effective in their jobs. As noted in Chapter 1, the empowerment of the function rests in part on earning a seat at the table and communicators interviewed noted the need to be politically astute with regards to political priorities. Conversely, several interviewees indicated that being seen as uncooperative or obstructive can come at a cost for both individual communicators and the function. They can be side-lined or rendered irrelevant vis-à-vis politically appointed advisers. Recent academic research has also emphasised concerns and precedents related to this (Garland, 2021[36]).

Box 3.2. Guidance and standards on the impartiality of public communication in the UK

The British **Civil Service Code** defines the core values of the civil service as integrity, honesty, objectivity, and impartiality. Political impartiality is characterised as requiring civil servants to serve the government to the best of individuals' ability, regardless of the sitting governments' political persuasion.

Simultaneously, civil servants must act in a way "which deserves and retains the confidence of ministers, while at the same time ensuring that you will be able to establish the same relationship with those whom you may be required to serve in some future government" (UK Government, 2015[44]) The use of government resources for party political purposes is prohibited. Objectivity is described as obliging civil servants to provide information and advice on the basis of the evidence, with accurate presentation of options and facts. Inconvenient facts or relevant considerations must not be ignored when providing advice or making decisions (UK Government, 2015[44]).

Separately, the **GCS Propriety Guidance** specifies that government communication:

- Should be relevant to government responsibilities.
- Should be objective and explanatory, not biased or polemical.
- Should not be – or liable to be – misrepresented as being party political.
- Should be conducted in an economic and appropriate way.
- Should be able to justify the costs as an expenditure of public funds.

The guidance outlines a three-step procedure whereby communicators can raise concerns on issues relating to impartiality or propriety, stipulating that in the first instance, concerns should be raised with individuals' line managers and at the team level, before then being escalated to the departmental Director of Communications if the concern has not been resolved. Further advice beyond that is available via the dedicated GCS propriety email inbox. The latter is a new centralised reporting email mechanism whereby communicators can report issues directly to the central GCS team, who aim to reply within three working days.

The work of Special Advisers is guided by their respective Code of Conduct. This outlines that by adding a distinguishable political dimension to advice and assistance to Ministers, Special Advisers reinforce the political impartiality of the Civil Service. They are able to support Ministers with work that would be inappropriate for civil servants to carry out, including representing the views of the Minister to the media.

The Code of Conduct specifies that Special Advisers can, "review and comment on – but not suppress or supplant – advice being prepared for Ministers by civil servants" and are able to "give direction to civil servants in relation to their day-to-day work". (Cabinet Office, 2016[45]). However, they must not, "ask civil servants to do anything which is inconsistent with their obligations under the Civil Service Code" (Cabinet Office, 2016[45]).

Source: UK Government (2015[44]), *Statutory Guidance: The Civil Service Code*, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-code/the-civil-service-code; GCS (2022[43]), *Government Communication Service Propriety Guidance*, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/propriety-guidance/; Cabinet Office (2016[45]), *Code of Conduct for Special Advisors*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/832599/.

Such accounts suggest these dynamics are an important factor impacting on the judgements of senior communicators, one that the present ethical framework could better address (Urban, 2023[34]). Mitigating this may require introducing mechanisms that rebalance the distribution of incentives for upholding standards of propriety so that responsibility does not fall disproportionately on communicators. Such options are proposed below.

Second, emphasis placed on managing the reputation of government constitutes another risk factor for the politicisation of public communication. According to OECD interviews and recent studies, reputation management remains a dominant feature of the organisational culture in UK communication units and internationally (Urban, 2023[34]; Garland, 2021[36]; WPP/Kantar Public, 2023[33]). This practice is not *per se* problematic and reputation matters to how people trust an institution. However, based on these accounts, the often-politically driven goal to maintain a positive reputation can on occasion come into tension with rules on objectivity and the duty to "make as positive a case as the facts warrant" (GCS, 2022[43]). This can be the case especially in situations where communication is intended to make the case for or defend policy decisions vis-à-vis an often adversarial media.

Reputation management tends to be more closely related to the work of press offices, which are most exposed to these risks. Confirming the accounts of several communicators interviewed by the OECD, recent publications have stressed the extent to which press headlines constitute a "primary focus" of ministers and their advisers (Cain, 2021, p. 2[46]), "even influencing the timing and content of policy making" (Garland, Tambini and Couldry, 2017, p. 20[15]). The emphasis on managing an influential group of political media, what insiders call the lobby of journalists (Urban, 2023[34]), appears to spill over into the work of government press offices. This is often a result of a disproportionate focus on reputation management from their hierarchy (Garland, 2021[36]).

This attention to reputation management regarding a narrow group of news outlets and related allegations of the politicisation of public communication have a longstanding legacy. They have been the subject of independent inquiries, chiefly the Phillis Review of 2004 (see Box 3.3), which, at the time, found considerable political interference and breach of impartiality within the public communication function. A decade later, the Leveson Report into British media highlighted "perceptions and concerns that politicians and the press have traded power and influence in ways which are contrary to the public interest" (Leveson, 2012, p. 29[21]).

Box 3.3. The Phillis Review: An Independent Review of Government Communication

The review of GCS's predecessor, the Government Communication and Information Service, resulted from controversy around prevalent communication and media relation practices in government that became derogatively labelled as 'spin' and blurred the lines between party-political communication and the civil service. The report advanced 12 substantial recommendations for the reform of the function that urged an increased focus on serving citizens and being "customer-driven", an elevated role for professional public communication, and greater separation from political communication. The recommendations were taken on board by the then government but subsequently dropped (Gregory, 2012[47]).

The Review highlighted a number of principles for public communication in the UK, which continue to be valid and relevant beyond its borders (extract from Phillis, 2004, p. 2):

- Openness, not secrecy.
- More direct, unmediated communications to the public.
- Genuine engagement with the public as part of policy formation and delivery, not communication as an afterthought.
- Positive presentation of government policies and achievements, not misleading spin.
- Use of all relevant channels of communication, not excessive emphasis on national press and broadcasters.
- Coordinated communication of issues that cut across departments, not conflicting or duplicated departmental messages.

- Reinforcement of the Civil Service's political neutrality, rather than a blurring of Government and party communications.

Source: Phillis, R. (2004[39]), *An Independent Review of Government Communications*, http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Politics/documents/2004/01/19/Phillis.pdf; Gregory, A. (2012[47]), "UK Government communications: Full circle in the 21st century?", https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2012.01.002.

These perceptions have persisted among the public in the decades since these inquiries were conducted: in 2022 just 20% of respondents surveyed by the Reuters Institute believed that the media were independent from political influence (Newman et al., 2022[4]). Stakeholders and communicators interviewed by the OECD in the context of this *Scan* have similarly pointed to alleged episodes of preferential treatment of news outlets aligned with incumbent governments' policy stances (Thorpe and Savage, 2023[48]).

Several observers, including senior communicators interviewed by the OECD and, even, the GCS 2022-25 Strategy, suggest that the focus on daily press headlines likely exceeds their strategic significance and is to the detriment of longer-term planning and objectives (Cain, 2021[46]; Urban, 2023[34]; GCS, 2022[32]). Considering the divisiveness of some British media and how distrusted it is across large swathes of society, there is an argument for allocating less attention and public resources to managing government reputation via these outlets.

Under the GCS 2022-25 Strategy there is an opportunity to shift focus away from reputation management vis-à-vis a narrow group of news outlets. Instead, focus could be to strengthen the trustworthiness of the communication function and counter the divisiveness of the information ecosystem with citizen-centred outlook for public communication.

Transparent oversight and updated ethical standards

Reputation management as a purpose of communication is not in itself problematic: building a reputation that the government and its institutions are reliable, responsive, open, and fair is valuable in improving public trust towards them (OECD, 2022[7]). The reputation of the public communication function itself ought to be safeguarded to ensure its effectiveness amid multiple challenges to the information ecosystem (WPP/Kantar Public, 2023[33]).

Through considerable efforts, GCS has made advancements to build trust in public communication and earn recognition for its value as a lever of government, as discussed in previous chapters. Multiple government interviewees stressed, for example, how their response to the COVID-19 pandemic earned the public's trust by demonstrating competence and reliability.

Yet, the function's reputation remains vulnerable and has not wholly overcome its troubled legacy. It is important that public communication does not become associated, even if undeservedly, with polemical narratives and tactics employed by some media and non-governmental actors.

To this end, ensuring a visible distinction from political communication could be most valuable, for instance, by supporting a more conservative application of the Propriety Guidelines and complementing these with more prescriptive examples.

Likewise, reviewing the definition, scope and methods for reputation management could help reduce room for grey areas that blur the line of impartiality. This could be elaborated in the Propriety Guidelines in the Modern Communications Operating Model (MCOM), where maintaining the reputation "of the UK" and the government is listed as a core purpose of government communication.[10] Updates to guidance could, for instance, link reputation management more tangibly with drivers of trust[11] (OECD, 2022[7]) so that these activities are aimed at demonstrating attributes citizens will value. The work of HM Revenue and Customs

(HMRC) to ground its organisational objectives in public trust offers a useful example for linking it concretely with reputational concerns (Box 3.4). Proposals for a similar "GCS Charter" are discussed at the end of the chapter.

Box 3.4. Public trust at the heart of HMRC's strategic vision

HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC), the department responsible for tax collection, administration of national insurance, and the national minimum wage, established a dedicated "Trust Team" to lead organisation-wide efforts to measure and drive trust in the department. The team's work is underpinned by the understanding that greater trust "improves voluntary compliance with tax regulations and obligations; it improves the customer experiences, strengthens [HMRC's] license to operate".

HMRC has elaborated this commitment into its public Charter, which articulates and stresses the values of transparency, reciprocity, fairness, competence, and the role of social norms and expectations. These are articulated in a set of standards in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1. HRMC trust charter



The Charter was built upon research identifying institutional fairness and reputation as key drivers of trust, along with transparency, and measures of competence (clarity and ease of interactions). HMRC's performance against the Charter is assessed annually against a set of indicators via independent review and customer surveys.

Communication channels, their clarity, simplicity, accessibility and the messages they transmit, are core to HMRC's ambition to build trust, along with interactions with customers.

Source: HMRC (2022[49]), *The HMRC Charter*, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hmrc-charter/the-hmrc-charter; "Building trust in HMRC" presentation provided to the OECD Secretariat.

Such an approach to reputation management could be reflected in the GCS Propriety Guidelines related to media handling, considering the above discussion and evidence. For example, provisions in the document urge caution towards "Ministers using the Press Office to ensure that their policy and actions are explained and presented in a positive light", specifying that "Ministers can do this, but care must be taken that any press activity is designed to further government objectives" (GCS, 2022[43]). Such language can remain susceptible to subjective interpretation, which could be remedied, for instance, with the provision of concrete scenarios illustrating common challenges.

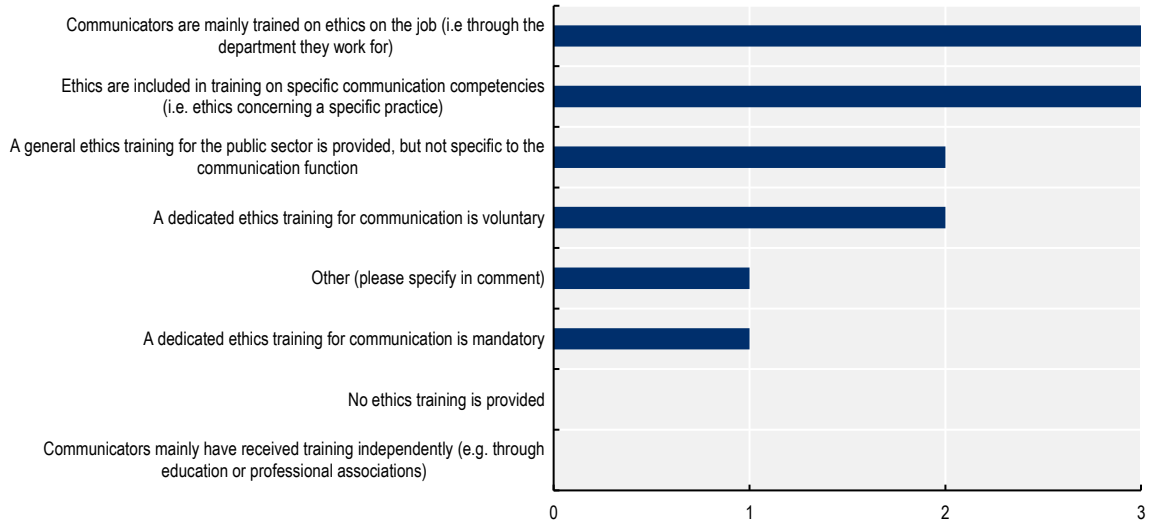
Supporting a more cautious reading of the Propriety Guidelines may also help keep civil servants clear of the potentially political type of media relations that political parties' press offices and spokespeople handle (Urban, 2023[34]). It is therefore also important that the Guidelines are well publicised with these specific

stakeholders to reinforce their awareness and limit requests that can potentially fall in grey areas, as reinforced by one of the communicators interviewed for this *Scan*.

Concurrently with a revision of the GCS Propriety Guidelines, promoting uptake of new practical training on ethics would be a worthwhile intervention. At the time of writing, departments reported mixed approaches to ethics training based on survey responses (see Figure 3.2). The need to reinforce this has been recognised in the GCS 2022-2025 Strategy. This has led to the introduction of annual mandatory training with case studies that will be complemented with updated guidance on the ethical use of new technology, further discussed below (GCS, 2022[32]). The new propriety and ethics training, mandatory for all GCS members in ministerial departments, includes imagined and real-life scenarios for people to test their knowledge and assess situations.

Figure 3.2. Practical training on ethics and integrity

Is practical training on ethics and integrity provided to communication personnel?



Note: N=12, single choice answer.
Source: OECD survey of UK government communication offices at departmental level, 2022.

New mechanisms for oversight of the public communication function

Some studies and stakeholders interviewed for this *Scan* have additionally called for more extensive oversight and accountability for the function, which they argued is opaque. For instance, some communicators who contributed to a recent Institute of Government study suggested instituting a "communication watchdog" (Urban, 2023, p. 11[34]). Similar proposals by academics have also been advanced to introduce greater parliamentary scrutiny (Garland, 2021[36]). These suggestions indicate that the function's system of internal self-regulation is perceived by many as needing rethinking.

For these reasons, engagement of non-governmental stakeholders is arguably a valuable factor to lend greater legitimacy to any supervisory initiative. At present, according to OECD interviews with government and civil society stakeholders, it is mainly fact-checking and civil society organisations that carry out some external review of communication by departments and Number 10. Often, interviewees pointed out, this occurs through requests submitted via the UK's Freedom of Information (FOI) regime. These actors could similarly play a role in formal mechanisms to review the function.

Some interviews pointed to the example of oversight applied to official statistics, which is under the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA), an independent arms-length body that reports directly to Parliament. Among its responsibilities, the UKSA is officially tasked with "publicly challenging the misuse of statistics" (UK Statistics Authority, 2023[50]), including highlighting when communications by government agencies and politicians are misinterpreting or misrepresenting statistics. Inherent to this example is the recognition of the value of rigorous statistics as an indisputable source of evidence. The same reasoning could be extended to certain information relayed via public communication, which can be regarded as essential to the public.

A similar model to that of the UKSA could be adapted to review public communication by GCS on a periodical basis and report to Parliament, which would then have the authority to act on any findings and recommendations. To this end, Garland (2021[36]), for example, suggested establishing a "Communication and Digital Committee" within the House of Commons to address the absence of a dedicated Committee with this focus.[12] An additional example of external oversight is that applied to advertising by public institutions in Canada, which is concerned with ensuring compliance with non-partisan communication requirements (see Box 3.5).

Box 3.5. External oversight for non-partisan government advertising in Canada

In 2016, the Government of Canada put in place an external oversight mechanism to ensure that government advertising meets criteria based on the definition of "non-partisan communications" as outlined in the Policy on Communications and Federal Identity.

While federal departments are responsible for ensuring that all campaigns are non-partisan, Ad Standards, the not-for-profit organisation responsible for administering the Canadian Code of Advertising Standards, has been under contract with the Government of Canada since 2016, to conduct independent reviews of government advertising.

Ads are reviewed at two stages. The initial review examines preliminary versions of departmental advertisements before the department incurs additional costs for the development of the creatives. All ads have passed a final review by Ad Standards before being placed in media.

The initial threshold for mandatory reviews was CAD 500 000 in 2016 but was lowered to CAD 250 000 in 2020.

Ad Standards has extensive experience reviewing advertising against legislative and regulatory requirements through their fee-based pre-clearance service for industry in the following areas: alcoholic beverages, children's advertising, cosmetics, food and non-alcoholic beverages and health products.

Note: The example was prepared by the peer reviewer from the Government of Canada for this scan.
Source: Government of Canada (n.d.[51]), *Advertising Oversight Mechanism*, https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/government-communications/advertising-oversight-mechanism.html; Government of Canada (n.d.[52]), *Policy on Communications and Federal Identity*, https://www.tbs-sct.canada.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=30683.

The idea of introducing additional layers of oversight, scrutiny, and accountability external to GCS has a number of merits. First, independent reviews or auditing can heighten the consequences of a breach of propriety by political and civil service actors. This provides more powerful incentives for compliance. Second, such a mechanism could be useful for reinforcing the public service mission of the function's mandate. Depending on its form and scope, the introduction of such an oversight body or process would likely require primary legislation.

If public communication activities are reviewed against the principles outlined in the Phillis Review (Box 3.3) alongside the Functional Standards and Propriety Guidelines, it could motivate greater observance of these principles and focus on citizens. Finally, such oversight can facilitate greater transparency and accountability of the function. Where institutions are found to be communicating with impartiality and in the public interest, this external review can provide important validation to help build the public's trust in the communication function and overcome legacy reputational issues.

It is not enough to simply make a greater distinction between party-political and public communication. While special advisers do not face the same constraints as civil servants in their interactions with the media, the conduct and tactics of the former nonetheless affect how the communication profession as a whole is perceived and can indirectly cast wrongful perceptions of the public function with which they are associated. Instead, reinforcing trust in impartial public communication should remain an important long-term goal to better contribute to positive outcomes for policy and democracy.

As this *Scan* finds, and according to observers (Garland, 2021[36]; Gregory, 2012[47]), several of the issues and recommendations contained in the Phillis Review have remained relevant in the two decades since it was published. Serving the public and helping citizens make informed choices to improve their lives would likely benefit from a public communication function that is less political and more trusted. The 20th anniversary of the Review provides a timely opportunity for internal stocktaking to identify potential priorities to integrate in the GCS 2022-25 Strategy or pursue in a second phase.

Reviewing ethical standards for the age of algorithms

To conclude this section, it is important to discuss how GCS maintains its trustworthiness with regards to the adoption and application of new technologies and methods. The evolution of the communication profession, and the tools at its disposal, continues to raise novel ethical questions and challenges (for an overview of relevant concerns, see Alfonsi et al. (2022[53])).

Before generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) became an immediate tool for communicators to experiment with in 2023, studies showed practitioners were already grappling with ethical questions linked to recent innovations. For instance, government communicators surveyed in the 2020 European Communications Monitor rated as ethically challenging common practices such as paying influencers to communicate on their topics; using sponsored content to look like regular content; using audiences' personal data; and profiling and targeting audiences based on age, gender, ethnicity, job, or interests (Zerfass et al., 2020[54]).

GCS has made clear its intention to seize new technologies for the improvement and innovation of communication practices, which is a valuable priority. In its yearly communication plan for 2023/24, GCS has claimed to focus on harnessing the latest technologies through its new GCS Innovation Lab and by encouraging the allocation of 10% of departmental campaign spend towards innovative approaches (GCS, 2023[55]). In parallel, its multi-annual reform Strategy also lists commitments for updating existing guidance to incorporate the ethical use of new technology (GCS, 2022[32]).

When it comes to ethical guidance there are a number of important considerations for GCS and its leadership. First, it would be valuable to ground the above efforts at experimentation and innovation in ethical principles and the service of the public good. Especially with new and advanced technologies such as generative AI, the potential risks are yet to be fully understood. Developing living guidance for experimentation, drawing on external research and internal insights from teams' experiments can help mitigate risks and foster a safer environment for innovation.

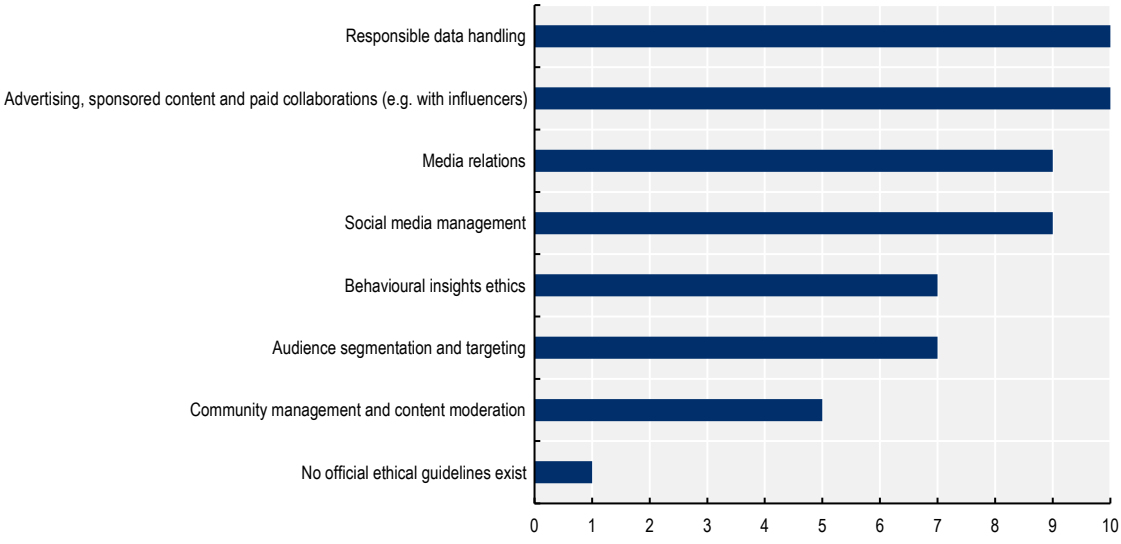
Second, a greater focus on applying technologies and innovative approaches would benefit from a greater emphasis on raising communicators' literacy and understanding of how these work and their potential shortcomings and ethical pitfalls. UK communicators, like most practitioners in the field, rely on a wide range of software and platforms, including social media and dedicated analytics tools. While the latter mostly function based on complex algorithms and big data gathered from online users, they tend to be

used by communicators as “black boxes”, without a meaningful grasp of how they work (Zerfass, Hagelstein and Tench, 2020[56]; Wiesenberg, Zerfass and Moreno, 2017[57]). As the use of AI- and big data-powered tools expands, greater understanding of and confidence in their properties could support a more responsible use of these technologies and mitigate unwanted consequences.

Third, updates to the GCS Propriety Guidance can focus more explicitly on recent but increasingly common communication practices, for instance, those related to online targeting based on demographic and behavioural profiling or applications of behavioural science. Data from the *OECD Survey* revealed some discrepancies among departments on the availability of ethical guidance on a range of such practices (Figure 3.3). This may indicate that departments have developed own guidance or that their interpretations of central guidance are not consistent, which would warrant greater investment in training.

Figure 3.3. Ethical communication guidelines

Do official ethical communication guidelines address the following areas?



Note: N=12, multiple responses possible.
Source: OECD survey of UK government communication offices at departmental level, 2022.

In these respects, GCS has made important progress with new initiatives that will address the challenges identified in the research. It recently introduced a core training module as part of its GCS Advance programme (see Chapter 1) focused on “AI for communicators”. Besides providing guidance on how to apply AI and Large Language Models (LLMs) in their work, the training explains the ethical questions associated with the technologies and gives guidance on balancing opportunities and risks. Notably, completion of the training module has been made a prerequisite for accessing the bespoke LLM developed by GCS. An upcoming Ethical Decision-Making Framework will accompany practical adoption of AI and support decision making.

Expanding the publicly available Propriety Guidelines with comprehensive standards and rules on potentially risky approaches can also help reinforce the notion that GCS is applying such methods only for legitimate purposes. As noted earlier in the chapter, the UK government enjoys the trust of slightly over half of its citizens to use their personal data for legitimate purposes (OECD, 2022[7]). A study by the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation for the UK government found that attitudes towards online targeting were equally favourable, but concerns remained about “lack of awareness, understanding and control over online targeting systems, and about the potential negative impacts” (UK Government, 2020[58]).

Engaging citizens and stakeholders to build resilience and trust in the information ecosystem

In the current climate of misinformation and low public trust there is a case to broaden the debate on societal expectations and norms surrounding the role of public communication and how it can support greater trust in both information and government. Across OECD countries, governments have been reacting and adapting to transformations and disruptions to the information ecosystem (Alfonsi et al., 2022[53]; OECD, 2021[41]). However, as illustrated above, these changes have profound effects on society, democratic governance and trust that warrant a rethink of the models, purposes, and ethics of communication.

Against this backdrop, a whole-of-society exercise to involve citizens and stakeholders in re-defining public communication's role and rules of engagement could be an important way to reflect on these questions and help define a way forward.

As noted in Chapter 2, citizen participation initiatives allow governments to take into account and use citizens' experience and knowledge to address pressing public needs. Concretely, a powerful approach for involving citizens in shaping decisions is through deliberative processes, in which a broadly representative body of people weighs evidence, deliberates to find common ground, and develops detailed recommendations on policy issues for public authorities (OECD, 2020[59]). Common examples of one-off processes are citizens' assemblies, juries, and panels.

These types of innovative participatory initiatives are especially valuable to discuss and build a consensus around divisive issues or ones that touch on societal values and trade-offs. This is the case, for example, with efforts to tackle mis- and disinformation, which raise important questions about freedom of speech and the authority to determine what is true or false (Matasick, Alfonsi and Bellantoni, 2020[2]). Likewise, common practices for behaviour change, ad targeting, and social listening can cause concern among some over manipulation and privacy (Alfonsi et al., 2022[53]). Generative and other categories of AI stand to further challenge social norms in this domain. Yet all these are necessary communication tools and activities that can, and do, have significant positive impact, particularly against the backdrop of a deteriorating information ecosystem.

Deliberation has already been used in OECD countries to discuss and inform governmental action on complex questions surrounding the information ecosystem and offer examples that can be relevant to the UK context (see Box 3.5). In Canada, three Citizen Assemblies on Democratic Expression have been underway since 2020 to define public expectations and issue recommendations on issues of mis- and disinformation and other online harms that challenge democratic debate. A Citizens' Panel on Freedom of Expression was similarly held in Finland in 2021 to issue recommendations on actions that support freedoms against the challenges of hate speech online.

An inclusive and focused societal discussion can help define what citizens expect from their government's communication and how the latter should be conducted to support constructive public debate. A valuable exercise would be to reflect on the principles and recommendations of the Phillis Review two decades after its publication, to update it and strengthen it with the legitimacy that comes with public deliberation (OECD, 2020[59]).

A deliberative process of this kind could be designed collaboratively with key stakeholders and result in a set of recommendations or a charter on communication (such as the HMRC example discussed above) to serve as a reference for the function and inform its oversight. These types of outputs can also serve as the basis for bringing a renewed focus on citizen-centred communication to the GCS 2022-25 Strategy or a future edition of it, as recommended in previous chapters of this *Scan*. Additionally, they could provide communicators, and those overseeing their work, with more detailed guidance on the boundaries between party-political and public communication.

Such an exercise could also help reinforce trust in the function and the information it provides. It could strengthen GCS' social license to leverage new technologies and methods responsibly and for the public good, which is critical for its effectiveness in the current context and near future. Finally, the questions up for public deliberation on communication for trust could further extend to the media and political sphere, which are central actors contributing to the quality of the information ecosystem.

Box 3.6. Public deliberation on democratic expression and online speech in Canada and Finland

Canada's Citizen Assembly on Democratic Expression

Canada's Citizens Assemblies on Democratic Expression have brought together 120 citizens to discuss the impact of technology on Canadian society and democracy, with a focus on how to retain freedom of expression online while also developing protections from a range of online harms.

Participants for the assembly are randomly selected from the Canadian population, with three assemblies taking place over three years. Citizens taking part in each assembly hear from a panel of experts drawn from academia, law, and the private sector and spend about 40 hours examining and deliberating on the questions at hand.

Each Assembly issued a detailed report to the Canadian public, the federal government and the Canadian Commission on Democratic Expression, a dedicated task force made of nine selected experts set up to advise government on this area of policy. The 2020 Assembly focused on reducing the prevalence and impact of harmful and hateful online speech, and produced 33 recommendations. In 2021 the Assembly discussed how to strengthen Canada's response to the spread of online disinformation. The 2022 Assembly instead capped the exercise with a comprehensive report that serves as the basis for government regulations of digital platforms to safeguard democratic expression and protect rights. The recommendations inform ongoing conversations around the public policies needed to ensure that digital technology supports democracy.

Finland's Citizens' Panel on Freedom of Expression

In February 2021 a national-level Citizen's Panel on Freedom of Expression was conducted that resulted in 25 recommendations to the government on how to "protect people who are in the public eye due to their professions from hate speech and to safeguard free expression of opinion".

From 3 000 randomly selected citizens, the panel was ultimately composed of 29 volunteers that were representative of the geographic and socio-demographic composition of the country. The panel met virtually over one evening and two full days, during which it acquired in-depth background on the subject area, and received briefings from a group of experts on freedom of expression, hate speech and online harassment. Citizens in the panel held small-group discussions to elaborate their recommendations with the help of trained moderators.

The recommendations stretch across legislative, regulatory and administrative actions, and urge the development of updated guidelines, capability and research to uphold freedom of expression and safety from hate speech online.

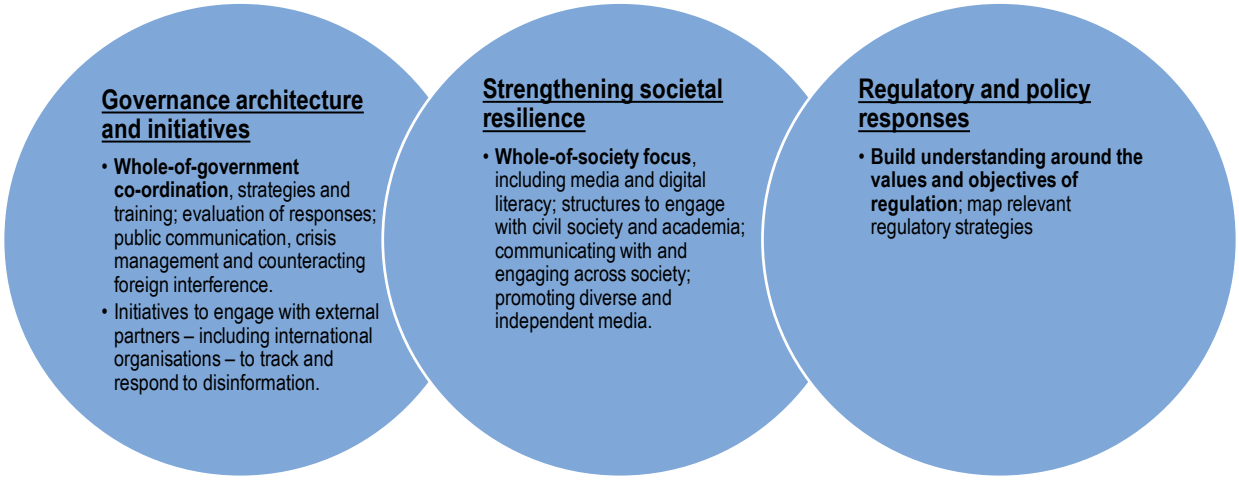
Source: Canadian Commission on Democratic Expression (n.d.[60]), "Examining the impact of digital technologies on Canadian society", Canadian Citizens' Assemblies on Democratic Expression, https://www.commissioncanada.ca/ (accessed on 28 April 2023); Jäske, M. et al. (2021[61]), *Citizens' Panel on the Freedom of Expression: Recommendations for Measures to Be Taken in Finland to Protect People in Public Professions from Hate Speech and to Safeguard Free Expression of Opinion*, https://avoinhallinto.fi/assets/files/2021/03/Citizens_Panel_on_the_Freedom_of_Expression-Final_Report.pdf.

Public communication as a pillar of government action against mis- and disinformation

The challenges to the information ecosystem in the UK and other OECD Members are more complex than just the spread of mis- and disinformation, as described above. Nonetheless, the latter phenomenon both thrives on and aggravates the low quality of information and deterioration of public discourse in many democratic societies (Matasick, Alfonsi and Bellantoni, 2020[2]). Combating mis- and disinformation is therefore a core priority for OECD Members to build the resilience of information ecosystems, recognised in the Ministerial Declaration on Building Trust and Reinforcing Democracy (OECD, 2022[62]).

Combating mis- and disinformation is a multi-disciplinary and whole-of-society endeavour (see Figure 3.4) which the OECD is working to document internationally and across a wide range of governance responses in a dedicated DISMIS Resource Hub.[13]

Figure 3.4. OECD framework of policy options to counter disinformation and strengthen information integrity



Source: OECD (forthcoming[63]), *DISMIS Resource Hub Report - Toward a Whole-of-society Approach to Building Societal Resilience*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

The *OECD Good Practice Principles on Public Communication Responses to Mis- and Disinformation* (hereafter "the Principles", see Box 3.7) highlight how the function has an important role to play in the context of a holistic response. The *Principles* capture how public communication emerged as one of the main tools to help governments prevent and mitigate the effects of false or misleading content, particularly during the COVID-19 "infodemic" and subsequent efforts to mitigate vaccine hesitancy. Due to the longer time-horizons for developing regulatory or systemic responses to mis- and disinformation (such as improving media literacy levels or increasing the supply and reach of quality journalism), communication-based responses such as debunking have become increasingly common. They play an important role in providing short-term responses to falsehoods while aiming to building trust in verified information over the long-term.

Box 3.7. OECD Good Practice Principles on Public Communication Responses to Mis- and Disinformation

The Good Practice Principles were identified based on the review of emerging practices to fight mis- and disinformation across OECD Members and beyond. They summarise the common principles underpinning governmental responses grounded in public communication. As such, they can provide a compass to develop, evaluate and better co-ordinate interventions against this challenge.

- **Institutionalisation**: Government should consolidate interventions into coherent approaches guided by official communication and data policies, standards and guidelines.
- **Public interest**: Public communication should strive to be independent from politicisation in implementing interventions to counteract mis- and disinformation.
- **Future-proofing and professionalisation**: Public institutions should invest in innovative research and use strategic foresight to anticipate the evolution of technology and information ecosystems and prepare for likely threats.
- **Transparency**: Governments should strive to communicate in an honest and clear manner, with institutions comprehensively disclosing information, decisions, processes and data within the limitations of relevant legislation and regulations.
- **Timeliness**: Public institutions should develop mechanisms to act in a timely manner by identifying and responding to emerging narratives, recognising the speed at which false information can travel.
- **Prevention**: Government interventions should be designed to pre-empt rumours, falsehoods, and conspiracies to stop mis- and disinformation narratives from gaining traction.
- **Evidence-based**: Government interventions should be designed and informed by trustworthy and reliable data, testing, and audience and behavioural insights.
- **Inclusiveness**: Interventions should be designed and diversified to reach all groups in society. Official information should strive to be relevant and easily understood, with messages tailored for diverse publics.
- **Whole-of-society collaboration**: Government efforts to counteract information disorders should be integrated within a whole-of-society approach, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, including the media, private sector, civil society, academia and individuals.

Source: OECD (2022[6]), *Principles of Good Practice for Public Communication Responses to Mis- and Disinformation*, https://www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/good-practice-principles-for-public-communication-responses-to-misinformation-and-disinformation.htm.

Across the UK government, communication-based methods are embedded across most interventions against mis- and disinformation, and strengthen the overall response in a way that is consistent with the OECD *Principles*. For this reason, and because of the nature of the field, such communication-based actions cannot be analysed in a vacuum, but rather should be understood as part of the full spectrum of governance responses to this challenge.

This section therefore provides an overview of the overall architecture of counter-mis- and disinformation efforts across the UK government. It highlights the role of public communication within it, focusing on emerging practices and lessons learned. It puts forward recommendations to build on existing good practices to pursue a more integrated multi-disciplinary strategy in this field.

Overview of governmental action against mis- and disinformation in the UK

The wider picture of governmental actions to counteract mis- and disinformation in the UK has been evolving along with the issue itself. Over time, the structures and entities tasked with the above activities, along with their mandates and objectives, have changed to adjust to the multi-faceted nature of the challenges and the policy areas they impact. At the time of writing, domestic-facing actions encompass developing legislation, analysis of threats across information channels, flagging of illegal or harmful content for removal by social platforms, media and information literacy (MIL) programmes, and both proactive and reactive communication.

At the international level, the UK additionally maintains counter-disinformation operations aimed at building resilience against hostile foreign actors. These involve intelligence-sharing among partner countries, support for civil society and media in third countries, and capacity-building for allied and friendly governments to deploy communications against disinformation.

Communication expertise is deeply embedded across most of these counter-disinformation actions, building on the longstanding role played by British communicators in this space (discussed in the following sub-section). Communication is inextricable from the country's multi-faceted approach to fight mis- and disinformation. This strengthens its efficacy.

Policy responses and legal frameworks

The UK, like most OECD countries, does not have an overarching strategy in the field of counter- mis- and disinformation. Rather, its actions are embedded into multiple policies, legislation, and guidelines, each covering different elements of the response. The right to freedom of expression forms the legal foundation of UK actions in this field and is defined in the Human Rights Act of 1998. In the UK this is not an "unfettered" or unlimited right and boundaries of legal and illegal forms of speech are included in several laws, including the Public Order Act of 1986, Malicious Communications Act of 1988, the Communications Act of 2003, and the Terrorism Act of 2006 (House of Lords, 2022[64]).

Legislative and regulatory responses to mis- and disinformation have been underway over recent years. These include the forthcoming Online Safety Bill, plans to increase market competition among digital platforms (House of Lords, 2022[64]; UK Parliament, 2023[65]) and the National Security Bill, which contains provisions on tackling foreign interference in the information ecosystem (UK Parliament, 2023[66]). However, at the time of writing, these much-anticipated regulations are yet to be passed and implemented. This context means that the UK continues to face an uncertain regulatory environment that has made non-regulatory responses – chiefly communication ones – a primary focus of short-term interventions against mis- and disinformation, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Beyond the legislative and regulatory framework, actions against mis- and disinformation are part of several policies advanced by the then Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS),[14] including the UK Digital Strategy (DCMS, 2022[67]) and the Online Media Literacy Strategy (DCMS, 2021[68]). However, these do not explicitly state a role for public communication. A separate media and information literacy strategy is also carried out by the UK communications regulator Ofcom. Notably, these actions aim to build society's resilience against the threats of a transforming information ecosystem. These include programmes and funding for civil society organisations, a multi-stakeholder Online Media Literacy Taskforce, and support for the "safety technology" sector of businesses developing tools and solutions against digital threats.

A noteworthy gap in the legislative and policy landscape concerns dedicated action on mis- and disinformation in the context of elections. Although provisions in the upcoming Online Safety Bill will address foreign interference in elections once it is passed, over recent years multiple actors have issued warnings about the present system. Public agencies such as the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) and the Electoral Commission have cautioned that the present system is "not fit for purpose", particularly

due to what they claim are lax rules on digital campaigning that leave voters potentially exposed to targeting by anonymous actors (Scott, 2019[69]). Civil society experts have similarly advocated for the inclusion of more extensive provisions in the Online Safety Bill and transparent measures to monitor and address information manipulation around elections (Full Fact, 2022[70]). These would be important complements to the actions described below.

Agencies and units working to combat mis- and disinformation

As a relatively recent hybrid threat, mis- and disinformation have required the introduction of new governmental structures and mechanisms capable of dealing with evolving and multi-faceted challenges. In the UK, this architecture has emerged in tandem with the evolution of interventions and approaches to tackle several waves of mis- and disinformation over recent years. Similar to the policy and legislative context above, responsibility for counter-mis- and disinformation measures is distributed across a number of entities, targeting different dimensions of the problem.

The Counter Disinformation Unit (CDU) leads ongoing actions to monitor and flag false and misleading content, either to prompt debunking or to liaise with online platforms to take appropriate action (in cases where an item violates platforms' own content policies or UK law). During the COVID-19 pandemic its mandate was expanded to cover not only deliberate disinformation, but also misinformation that could affect the success of measures to contain the virus (DCMS, 2020[71]). The CDU is housed within the new Department for Science, Innovation & Technology (formerly DCMS) but plays a cross-government role with multi-disciplinary capability and expertise from across Home Office, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, and Cabinet Office, including communicators and Ministry of Defence specialists.

The Unit was originally established during the 2019 European Parliament elections and UK General Election, before being re-focused on the pandemic and most recently on the war in Ukraine (DCMS, 2020[71]; DCMS, 2022[72]). The role of the CDU during election periods is especially important, given the potential threats of external or internal interference and the vulnerabilities highlighted above. Yet it is difficult to assess such a role for the Unit, or its capabilities and methods (about which relatively little information is disclosed). Nonetheless, OECD Members faced with similar threats have increasingly developed mechanisms to deal with disinformation around elections that include elements of communication, as in the examples shown in Box 3.8. These provide useful comparisons, particularly to define the criteria for action and ground the choice of interventions into official policy.

Box 3.8. Mechanisms for countering election disinformation in Canada and France

Canada's Critical Election Incident Public Protocol (CEIPP)

Canada's Critical Election Incident Public Protocol was initially established ahead of the 2019 General Election as a mechanism to communicate with Canadians if an information incident occurred during the period before an election that threatened its integrity, such as the wide-scale spread of disinformation around a specific topic.

A threshold was established that needed to be met in order for the protocol to be utilised, in cases where the country's ability to have a free and fair election had been jeopardised. A panel made up of five public servants would determine whether this threshold had been met, including the Clerk of the Privy Council, the National Security and Intelligence Advisor to the Prime Minister, the Deputy Minister of Justice and Deputy Attorney General, the Deputy Minister of Public Safety, and the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. Should the threshold be met, the Panel would inform the Prime Minister, political party officials, and Elections Canada of the incident. A public announcement would then be made. As

of May 2021, the CEIPP remains in place for all future general elections unless specifically amended or revoked by the Cabinet.

France's National Service in Charge of Vigilance and Protection against Foreign Interference (Viginum)

In advance of France's 2022 general election, a new administrative entity was created, The National Service in Charge of Vigilance and Protection against Foreign Interference (Viginum). A decree was published enabling the unit to use automated data collection to identify foreign digital interference in French elections. To ensure minimum risk to civil liberties, a two-part process was established: first, likely instances of disinformation would be identified by manually monitoring social media posts. Based on elements gathered during this initial monitoring phase, the unit could then decide whether the situation required automated data collection and if necessary, would determine the scope of the data collection exercise.

During the unit's design phase, a series of co-ordination and consultation meetings were held with relevant government departments including the Ministry of Armed Forces, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Interior, who agreed on its main missions and achieved consensus around four elements:

- That its scope would be limited to debates regarding topics of fundamental national interest, including the "integrity of its territory, its security, and the republican form of its institutions".
- That it would work exclusively on foreign threats.
- That it would only use publicly available open-source data.
- That its work would be monitored by an inter-ministerial Ethics and Scientific Committee, established within the Secretariat-General for National Defence and Security.

There was additional consultation with representatives of Parliament during the design phase where both the threat posed by foreign disinformation and the key features of the planned unit were explained. Alongside the creation of the unit, as a result of the aforementioned consultation process, a new inter-ministerial governance model was also established to fight foreign interference. It has a three-tier structure:

- A Monitoring, Detection, Characterisation, and Proposal Network was established, bringing together the unit and its counterparts within other ministries to share information on threats identified in addition to information on methodologies and tools.
- An Operational Committee for Fighting Information Manipulation was established, bringing together heads of services within relevant ministries (Armed Forces, Foreign Affairs, and Interior) to assess risks, discuss response strategies, and take action to neutralise threats.
- The pre-existing Committee for Fighting Information Manipulation convened wider ministries and agencies such as the media regulator, and focused on societal resilience and media literacy.

Source: Government of Canada (2020[73]), *The Critical Election Incident Public Protocol*, https://www.canada.ca/en/democratic-institutions/news/2020/10/the-critical-election-incident-public-protocol.html; Government of Canada (2023[74]), *Critical Election Incident Public Protocol*, https://www.canada.ca/en/democratic-institutions/news/2023/02/critical-election-incident-public-protocol.html; Bernigaud, A. (2023[75]), "Defending the vote: France acts to combat foreign disinformation", https://successfulsocieties.princeton.edu/sites/successfulsocieties/files/France_AB_Viginum_.pdf.

Although the CDU notes having strategic communication specialists on board, the dedicated capability for leveraging the communication function against mis- and disinformation is additionally vested in the National Security Communications Team (NCST) within the Cabinet Office, which draw on experts from GCS.

The National Security Communications Team (NCST) was established in 2018 following a National Security Capability Review with the goals of embedding strategic communications in the pursuit of security objectives, enhancing the capacity of security communications professionals across relevant government units, and "improv(ing) and exploit(ing) information through greater and more effective use of insight, all-source data, and effective analysis and dissemination" (UK Government, 2021[76]).

Set up around the same time as the NCST and disbanded in August 2022, the Rapid Response Unit (RRU) constituted a GCS-led effort to monitor mis- and disinformation narratives and support relevant departments with responses and rebuttals (GCS, 2018[77]). The work of these entities alongside communications units across all government departments is described further in the next sub-section.

Along with central government specialised units, Ofcom has a prominent role in the broader architecture of mis- and disinformation responses as the communications sector regulator. As noted above, Ofcom is also tasked with promoting media and information literacy (MIL) under the UK's Communications Act. Moreover, it will be designated with holding online platforms to account once the Online Safety Bill is passed, along with other relevant legislation (DCMS, 2022[67]).

Across government departments, additional teams are in place that carry out activities to counter mis- and disinformation relevant to their respective policy domains. For instance, the Department for Health and Social Care employs specialists who focus on health misinformation.[15] The Home Office has an established anti-radicalisation programme that leverages communication methods to counter propaganda by terrorist organisations targeting the UK (Home Office, 2023[78]).

UK efforts to counteract foreign disinformation internationally

The security and defence dimension of the fight against disinformation from hostile foreign actors constitutes an additional and central layer of the UK government's action against this challenge of which strategic communication is a prominent pillar. Like many OECD Members, the UK is building resilience domestically as a target of information operations originating in hostile states. It is additionally leveraging its capabilities on the international stage to counteract similar operations in allied and partner countries as a way to safeguard its foreign policy objectives (Baugh, 2022[79]).

At the centre of this effort is the recently established Government Information Cell (GIC) within the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The GIC, which has a primarily overseas focus, was set up on the eve of Russia's invasion of Ukraine with the specific mission of countering information operations by hostile actors that pose threats to UK security, foreign policy and democratic institutions. In the current context, the GIC is the central agency leading UK government actions to dispel Russia-sponsored propaganda relating to the invasion of Ukraine, an area in which it shares responsibilities with the Ministry of Defence and receives support from GCS and DCU (see Box 3.9).

Box 3.9. The evolution of the UK's communication strategy against disinformation from Russia: From reaction to prevention and resilience

The illegal invasion of Ukraine by Russia beginning in February 2022 has brought the largest physical war to Europe since the end of World War II. Even before the war in Ukraine, however, disinformation campaigns and initiatives carried out by hostile actors and states were a leading hybrid threat challenging the security of democracies around the world. Against a backdrop of technological transformation to the information ecosystem, hostile actors have become increasingly effective at using disinformation and propaganda tactics to sow conflict and destabilise societies in ways that favour their strategic objectives.

Like other democratic countries, the UK government has built on its experience in combating information operations by the Russian state and affiliated entities to counteract such threats on the eve of and in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine. Strategic communication action played a key role in this effort, alongside a range of governance responses.

The UK faced Russian-sponsored disinformation threats on its soil in the context of the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury (Gunter and Robinson, 2018[80]; Harding, 2018[81]). Since then, it has built its understanding of the narratives and tactics used by hostile actors, drawing on expertise built from international work in eastern European countries that have long been targets of Russian-led disinformation. At that point, actions against these threats were mostly reactive, according to OECD interviews with officials involved. Ongoing research and enhanced monitoring capabilities have been developed across UK communications offices, in addition to the publication of and continued revisions to the RESIST counter-disinformation toolkit (GCS, 2022[82]). The lessons learned from the Skripal experience informed the UK communications approach in subsequent incidents, leading to the strategy deployed on the eve of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

As a pillar of its diplomatic and security strategy, UK government communications sought to prevent false narratives from gaining traction and giving legitimacy or credibility to Russia's actions domestically, in Ukraine, or in third countries. Immediately prior to the invasion, the UK government gathered evidence of a mounting military presence and increasingly threatening Russian rhetoric. These included bogus claims that western Ukrainians were Nazi-sympathisers and accusations that the United States was using proxy forces to plan a chemical attack (Barnes, 2022[83]). Particularly, UK government analysts noted that Russian propaganda was aiming to create "false flag" or pretext claims with the objective of sowing confusion, masking operational planning, and creating a false pretext for invasion (Baugh, 2022[79]).

The war notably marked a shift from a prior counter-disinformation strategy based more significantly on reactive communications to an approach that prioritised prevention against now-familiar disinformation tactics. In the lead-up to the invasion, UK communication efforts against Russian information operations introduced the novel practice of declassifying selected intelligence and disseminating it across communication channels, both domestically and internationally. Intelligence released warned about Russia's intention to install new leadership in Ukraine, for example (Lombardi, 2022[84]). These actions aimed to reduce the scope for uncertainty and lack of evidence that falsehoods and rumours need to gain traction, while helping to keep the public informed and justify policy decisions. In this context, the UK has contributed to the growing practice of using open source intelligence (OSINT) to pre-empt and debunk disinformation. This content had both domestic and international audiences in mind, and served as a diplomatic tool for the UK to advance evidence-based narratives in an information vacuum.

Since 24 February 2022, intelligence has been distributed daily across major social media platforms via the Ministry of Defence's official handles. Ensuring the reach of these pieces of intelligence among priority audiences has been a considerable challenge, especially across borders and languages. As part of the dissemination effort, Ministry of Defence officials have held ongoing briefings with media, defence opinion leaders, and senior officials. This provides a consistent set of facts to engender alignment and consistency of messaging, and limit confusing or conflicting public claims by like-minded stakeholders. Accounts from the Ministry noted that significant amplification also occurred organically thanks to influencers in the geopolitical sphere.

The dissemination effort was matched with advanced monitoring of the information space to identify emerging and trending narratives, including focus groups and social media listening. Domestically, the Ministry of Defence communication team identified six attitudinal segments of the UK population based on their views on defence. Out of the six, an older and highly informed audience group was deemed a priority target.

Declassified intelligence was shared directly with 97 media outlets, and communication teams have worked with media from 26 countries, also in co-ordination with UK embassies overseas (Malnick, 2022[85]) GIC content has been translated into multiple languages, including German, Arabic and Mandarin (Dickson, 2022[86]). Reports indicate that to target Russian audiences, content has been distributed through advertising agencies on local sites such as VK, a Russian social media platform (Malnick, 2022[85]). Likewise, Telegram has also become a primary channel to circumvent bans introduced in Russia on other social and messaging platforms.

As the war entered its second year, UK communicators fighting back in the information war reported they were aiming to challenge the power of Russia's narratives, manage growing audience and message fatigue as the conflict continues, and consistently measure their impact to refine their methods.

Source: OECD interviews with Ministry of Defence, FCDO and Cabinet Office; Harding, L. (2018[81]), "'Deny, distract and blame': How Russia fights propaganda war", https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/may/03/russia-propaganda-war-skripal-poisoning-embassy-london; Gunter, J. and O. Robinson (2018[80]), "Sergei Skripal and the Russian disinformation game", https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45454142; GCS (2022[82]), *RESIST 2 Counter Disinformation Toolkit*, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/resist-2-counter-disinformation-toolkit/; Barnes, J. (2022[83]), "Russia steps up propaganda war amid tensions with Ukraine", https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/25/us/politics/russia-ukraine-propaganda-disinformation.html; Baugh, S. (2022[79]), "Responding to Russia's invasion", https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/news/responding-to-russias-invasion/; Lombardi, P. (2022[84]), "UK warns of Kremlin plans to install new leadership in Ukraine", Politico, https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-plan-coup-ukraine-uk-foreign-office/; Malnick, E. (Malnick, 2022[85]), "Inside the secret government unit returning fire on Vladimir Putin's 'weaponised lies'", https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/03/19/inside-secret-government-unit-returning-fire-vladimir-putins/; Dickson, A. (2022[86]), "Britain's (opaque) war on Russian propaganda", https://www.politico.eu/article/the-uk-counter-disinformation-russia-kremlin-cdu-media/.

The Cell has gradually gathered a range of government specialists working across diplomatic and security operations, drawing on staff from the then DCMS, Ministry of Defence, FCDO, Cabinet and Home Office. Its staff encompasses diplomats and experts in analysis, communications, disinformation, behavioural science, and attitudinal change (DCMS, 2022[87]). In this respect it is a valuable example of a multi-disciplinary entity equipped to tackle the multiple dimensions of the disinformation challenge.

International partnerships and co-ordination are at the heart of the GIC's mission. To this end, the GIC co-operates with peer groups in NATO, the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism and the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing community, although OECD interviews with officials have emphasised bilateral co-ordination as a primary mechanism for joint action with partner countries.

The Cell has a focus on building resilience in friendly third countries across Europe and in several low- and middle-income countries across continents, some of which are deemed more vulnerable to disinformation from foreign hostile actors. In this respect, the establishment of long-term multi-stakeholder networks and partnerships across countries has been central to its operations, according to OECD interviews with officials. Such networks have been built over recent years through diplomatic outreach and co-ordination. According to interviews with officials, this entailed identifying and supporting actors on the ground across government, journalism, fact-checking, OSINT communities, and activists by providing funding, training, and other forms of assistance. These activities bring together expertise from across the UK Government, with a prominent role for GCS in providing strategic communications support and capacity building.

Examples include actions to ensure reliable information reaches audiences in regions affected by the current war. The UK government has given GBP 4.1 million in emergency funding to support BBC Ukrainian and Russian language services in the region, to help it increase availability of verified and independent reporting about the ongoing conflict (UK Goverment, 2022[88]). Since 2016, the international branch of GCS has also helped the Ukrainian government with strengthening its strategic communications capabilities, including by helping to build a professional network across government and delivering joint campaigns (Baugh, 2022[79]). Since the beginning of the invasion, GCS and GIC have also used

communications to bolster morale and confidence within Ukraine through a sophisticated campaign described as a "leaflet drop operation for the social media age" (Baugh, 2022[79]). GCS has likewise worked with governments in 20 countries across Eastern and Central Europe, where it trained over 500 communicators on using its RESIST 2 toolkit for spotting and debunking disinformation (further details below) (Baugh, 2022[79]).

These objectives are also supported through dedicated actions included in the UK's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) with its Countering Disinformation and Media Development Programme in collaboration with relevant agencies. This programme works to strengthen partner countries' defences against disinformation by enhancing the quality of public service and independent media (UK Government, 2021[89]). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic the programme adapted to prioritise COVID-19-related disinformation sponsored by hostile states and malign actors (UK Government, 2021[89]). More recently, it has provided emergency support to media partners within Ukraine following Russia's invasion (UK Government, 2021[89]).

Finally, within the Ministry of Defence, the Army's 77th Brigade is a dedicated unit "with specialist skills to combat new forms of warfare in the information environment". It operates through non-lethal and non-military tactics to support military actions against adversaries (MOD, 2023[90]). Its mission complements the work of the GIC to include intelligence analysis and the deployment of information operations specifically intended to gain advantage over military adversaries.

While it is difficult to measure the impact of each of the above-mentioned actions, a year and a half after the invasion began it appeared that public opinion in the UK remained favourable to policies for assisting Ukraine. There has also been continued support for sanctions against Russia and measures introduced to deprive it of oil and gas revenues to fund the war. Within government, evaluation of communication and other interventions has been carried out through polling data (both open-source and proprietary), search trend data and focus groups. As of February 2023, 81% of UK citizens stated that they want Ukraine to win the war, with support for maintaining current sanctions against Russia standing at 75%, with a similar proportion (73%) in favour of further economic sanctions against Russian interests in the UK (Smith, 2023[91]). At the international level, UK government messaging exposing Russian disinformation has been shared in 108 countries.

Thorough evaluation of counter-disinformation activities is one of the priorities highlighted in the OECD *Principles* as vital to understanding efficacy of practices in an emerging field. Although UK communicators have a strong record of conducting rigorous evaluation, it will be important to evaluate all aspects of the government's responses. Additionally, data and analysis could be made available to contribute to research and knowledge that can help strengthen international action.

Transparency and accountability in counter-disinformation interventions

"Transparency" is one of the OECD *Good Practice Principles* noted in Box 3.7 and is important to proactively tackling rumours and falsehoods. This principle is equally relevant to government transparency in its actions against mis- and disinformation amid low public trust and concern over privacy and freedoms. Scandals like Cambridge Analytica's improper gathering and use of personal data have led to a public backlash in favour of greater privacy (Lapowsky, 2019[92]). These episodes dented public confidence in platforms worldwide and alerted citizens about how the information they see can be manipulated. In the current climate, this context calls for transparency and accountability in the approaches and means deployed in the fight against mis- and disinformation.

The UK government is trusted by over half of its citizens to handle their personal data "exclusively for legitimate purposes" (OECD, 2022[7]). Yet lack of transparency in the activities conducted against mis- and disinformation can work against the government's goals of building public trust in its communication. More worryingly, in a polarised context there is a risk that insufficient transparency can be weaponised by actors

who portray the government as playing “arbiter of truth” or even adopting the same manipulative tactics as disinformation peddlers.[16]

Officials interviewed by the OECD have stressed the sensitive nature of countering foreign disinformation, especially when national security is concerned. They have also noted the risks of compromising the efficacy of their actions by exposing them publicly, thereby allowing hostile actors to react. These are grounds for maintaining a degree of confidentiality.

On the other hand, there are aspects of counter-mis- and disinformation work that concern UK citizens and their data. Suppression of content can also be problematic. These would benefit from greater scrutiny. For example, the Counter Disinformation Unit (CDU) has “trusted flagger” status[17] on a number of online platforms. This facilitates its role in highlighting content that is illegal or violates platform content policies. Although decisions to take down content or add warning labels lie with the platforms themselves, civil society actors have urged the government to introduce requirements for the disclosure of efforts made to influence social media companies’ content moderation decisions (Full Fact, 2022[70]). Some of such government requests are disclosed by platforms themselves,[18] although the criteria and mechanisms for flagging or removal decisions remain opaque (Trendall, 2022[93]; Big Brother Watch, 2023[94]; Dickson, 2022[86]). Transparency in this domain, including over the criteria used for flagging content, would strengthen public confidence that freedom of speech is upheld while moderating content online. It would also enable external scrutiny that such actions are adequately addressing the problem.

The complex architecture of structures across the UK government working to counteract mis- and disinformation can be difficult to grasp for the public. The perceived opacity around these structures, their specific objectives, and the methods they employ have been remarked on by several observers (Trendall, 2022[93]; Big Brother Watch, 2023[94]; Dickson, 2022[86]). There has been a limited amount of public information, provided in the form of answers to questions by Members of Parliament seeking to exercise scrutiny over such activities.

Although many of the above structures are explicitly inter-governmental, the degree of integration and co-ordination among actors in different intervention areas could be strengthened to ensure a more whole-of-government approach, according to interviews with communicators. There is also little clarity from public information and interviews with stakeholders about potential overlap or complementarity in the activities of different teams, for instance, in monitoring online narratives or flagging content to platforms.

A comprehensive strategy encompassing all elements of government action against mis- and disinformation could be a valuable way to transparently lay out objectives, programmes and responsible entities. It would additionally ensure Parliamentary scrutiny, gain public legitimacy, and foster greater co-operation by ensuring relevant stakeholders can contribute towards shared goals in a whole-of-society effort.

For example, the process to establish Viginum in France (described in Box 3.8 above) sought specifically to ensure the legitimacy of and support for the initiative ahead of its establishment (Bernigaud, 2023[75]). Notably, it involved the introduction of an inter-ministerial Ethics and Scientific Committee to monitor activities that government units would be carrying out. It also included a consultative process to build political consensus around the eventual agency tasked with safeguarding the election from disinformation (Bernigaud, 2023[75]). Such measures help consolidate a whole-of-government approach to tackling misinformation that enjoys legitimacy and widespread support. Similar steps could be part of a review of the UK’s approach in line with the forthcoming passage and implementation of the Online Safety Bill.

Public communication approaches to prevent and respond to the spread of falsehoods

As in many OECD Members, communication interventions have played a central role in the UK's response to mis- and disinformation and helped build public resilience against them. During interviews with the OECD Secretariat, several public officials emphasised that reactive public communication was the primary tool at the government's disposal when online mis- and disinformation first emerged as a significant threat.

Since then, GCS and teams across departments have worked to develop a range of tools and approaches that adapt good communication practices to both prevent and respond to the spread of rumours and falsehoods in the British information space. The core of the government's approach, however, remains grounded in timely, insights-based, transparent and inclusive communication consistent with the above-mentioned *OECD Good Practice Principles on Public Communication Responses to Mis- and Disinformation*.

Misinformation, and, occasionally, deliberate disinformation, affect virtually all policy domains in the UK similarly to many other OECD countries. Indeed, most of the departments surveyed noted topics and policies in their areas of work that are subject to rumours or false narratives, which affect how policies are perceived and their take-up by citizens. Although prominent topics and events, such as COVID-19 or the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II, require the deployment of dedicated teams and resources across departments, misinformation around more routine policies is handled directly by the relevant department, according to interviews.

To this end, the central GCS team in Cabinet Office has led on developing a range of guidance and frameworks that help each department apply tested methods based on lessons learned and cross-government experience (see Box 3.10). The most established framework is the RESIST 2 Counter-Disinformation Toolkit, which guides communication teams in spotting disinformation, assessing the appropriate course of action, and crafting communication in response. The RESIST model is a primarily reactive means of assessing the potential risk of a given narrative or piece of content in order to determine if any action is needed and what kind of debunking is required.

Box 3.10. GCS guidance for tackling instances of mis- and disinformation

RESIST 2 Counter Disinformation Toolkit

The RESIST 2 Toolkit aims to support policy makers and communicators in identifying and reducing the impact of mis- and disinformation through strategic communication interventions. It was introduced in 2018 and has since been updated to reflect learning from tackling problematic content online, including misinformation.

- **Recognise**: Includes a checklist that can be used by communicators to determine whether a piece of information is likely to be false.
- **Early warning**: Outlines the tools that can be used to monitor the media environment and supports communicators to map vulnerabilities within their organisations.
- **Situational insight**: Explores how information can be turned into actionable insight in a way that is accessible for officials.
- **Impact analysis**: Explains how communicators can use "structural analysis techniques" to predict the probable impact instances of false information.
- **Strategic communication**: Examines the skills communicators should employ when developing and implementing communications strategies to maximise their impact.

- **Tracking effectiveness**: Sets out the importance of measuring the effectiveness of communication strategies against pre-defined objectives.

The Wall of Beliefs Toolkit

The Toolkit focuses on audience insight to develop appropriate strategies to respond to false narratives. It states that its aim is to take a broad perspective, "understanding the role of identity, relationships, and worldview in the development of beliefs and susceptibility to false stories".

It outlines four potential strategies to adopt, suggesting that communicators and policy makers should choose from among them depending on how embedded the false belief is and the extent to which it causes harmful behaviours.

- **Manage behaviours:** This approach is advised if beliefs are "highly embedded and also cause harmful behaviours in the short term". Communicators should work alongside policy makers to challenge harmful behaviours directly without initially challenging the false beliefs that led to them. This could take the form of making the desired behaviour as easy as possible through incentives and removal of practical barriers, or, alternatively, making the harmful behaviour as difficult as possible by introducing new barriers such as fines. Once harmful behaviours have been managed, communicators can shift to a proactive promotion strategy.
- **Proactive promotion:** This strategy focuses on communicating the truth without directly engaging with falsehoods, using a range of channels to develop a compelling story with a focus on presenting information in a way that is easy to understand and recall.
- **Reactive response:** This strategy is appropriate if beliefs are not particularly embedded, but they are causing harmful behaviour in the short term. In this instance, a reactive or counter-narrative response is advised. This can involve directly addressing disinformation, explaining clearly why it is false, and ensuring the truth is set out clearly. Communication should be targeted to specific relevant audiences, employing a range of channels.
- **Watch and wait:** This approach is appropriate when beliefs are neither causing harmful behaviour nor particularly embedded within the target audience. Watching and waiting involves taking no immediate action and, instead, monitoring the false belief for signs that it may become more embedded.

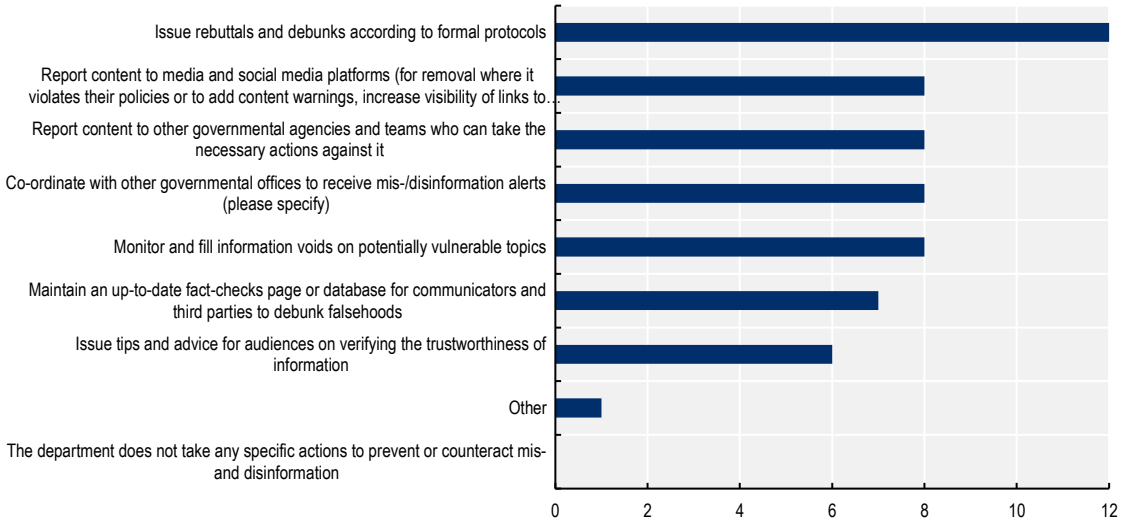
Source: GCS (2022[82]), *RESIST 2 Counter Disinformation Toolkit*, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/resist-2-counter-disinformation-toolkit/; GCS (2022[95]), *The Wall of Beliefs*, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Wall_of_Beliefs_-publication.pdf.

More recently, GCS has also developed a behavioural science-based tool, the "Wall of Beliefs", to help communicators and policy makers understand how false narratives and beliefs become entrenched in some audiences. The tool guides officials on how to approach these cases. Understanding motives and cognitive or social factors that explain why certain audiences are vulnerable to a given narrative or falsehood is important. This tool is especially relevant to navigating an environment in which confirmation bias linked to identities and values is a powerful predictor of how different groups engage with information and sources.

UK government departments reported taking the lead against false and misleading content and appear well-positioned to intervene effectively. Nine of twelve surveyed departments reported that their communicators receive training on mis- and disinformation responses. They noted taking a number of steps to deal with this challenge, which are illustrated in Figure 3.5.

Figure 3.5. Actions to prevent mis- and disinformation concerning policy areas

Which of the following actions does the department's communication unit perform to prevent or counter mis- and disinformation concerning its policy areas?



Note: N=12, multiple responses possible.
Source: OECD survey of UK government communication offices at departmental level, 2022.

All departments reported flagging problematic content within government and directly debunking it. Almost all departments also claimed reporting content to social media companies. According to interviews, departments tend to conduct their own detection and analysis of content, with some relying on a centralised service. Indeed, departmental communicators often see their teams as better placed to spot and act on misinformation in their own domains because of their deeper understanding of the topics.

Notably, several departments highlighted taking pre-emptive approaches to get ahead of potential mis- and disinformation. Figure 3.5 shows that a majority work to address information voids and proactively seek to issue information to avoid scope for rumours to take hold. The same proportion also publish fact-checks and up-to-date information, especially so that it may be accessed by media or fact-checking organisations also seeking to curb the spread of mis- and disinformation.

The Department for Education's *Education Hub* blog[19] is one such example of proactive filling of information voids. The communication unit actively monitors incoming questions and search queries to update their Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) page. It develops explanatory content that addresses identified information needs of audiences. It also provides facts for media and stakeholders to use in their reporting where such information is missing.

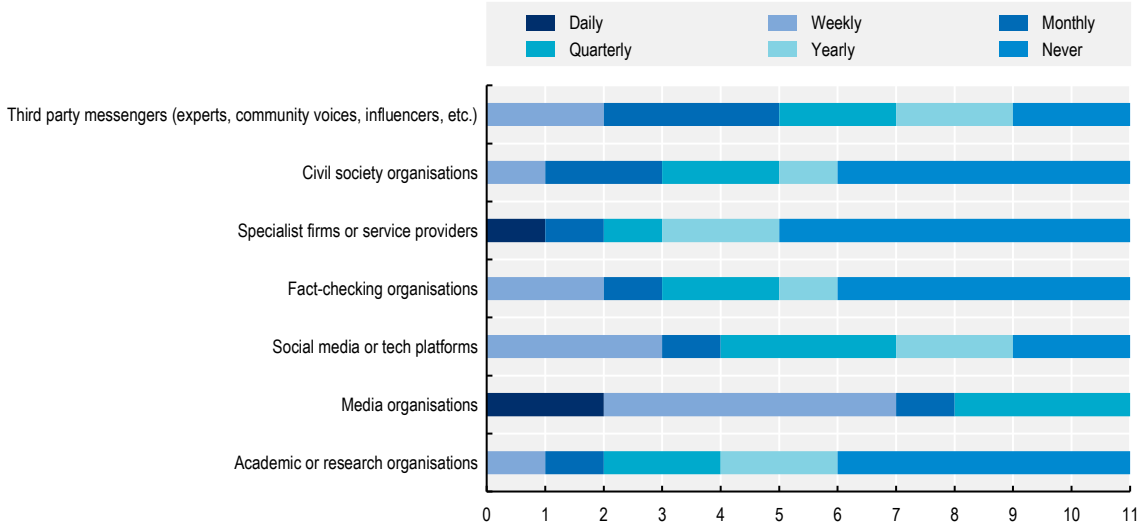
Related to this is the practice of pre-briefing internal and external messengers on facts, data and official lines. A few communicators interviewed identified diverging and inconsistent statements by officials, journalists, pundits and influencers as both increasing the risk of misinformation and hampering efforts to mitigate it. Conversely, they indicated that their efforts to issue topical briefings ahead of public announcements can serve to pre-empt dissonance over facts. A communicator interviewed stressed the importance of relationship-building and trust with such stakeholders and messengers. They suggested that briefings rely on neutral facts and data, and warned of the risks of politicised messaging with these third parties.

Some departments noted consulting or collaborating with a range of stakeholders as part of their efforts to counter mis- and disinformation (see Figure 3.6). Media and third-party messengers emerged as top stakeholders for collaboration. Conversely, half of departments in the survey also work with researchers, fact-checkers and civil society but less frequently. These examples illustrate whole-of-society collaboration against this challenge, which is one of the OECD *Good Practice Principles*, and highlight opportunities to make the most of the UK's strong civil society and media space.

Pre-emptive public communication approaches have also been applied to support media and information literacy (MIL) objectives and educate social media users about correct sharing behaviour on platforms that can amplify mis- and disinformation. A dedicated public information campaign by DCMS under the slogan "Don't Feed the Beast" targeted social media users with a five-step 'SHARE' checklist showing how to identify whether a given piece of content is misleading before sharing it. The campaign was deemed a successful contribution towards MIL policy goals: impact evaluation indicated that one in five adults recognised the campaign and saw a rise in awareness of disinformation. Statistics from Ofcom further highlighted that the campaign contributed to increased numbers of people using fact-checking websites (GCS, 2021[96]).

Figure 3.6. Consultation with non-governmental organisations on countering disinformation

How often has your office consulted or collaborated with non-governmental organisations on the issue of countering disinformation in the past two years?



Note: N=12, single choice answer.
Source: OECD survey of UK government communication offices at departmental level, 2022.

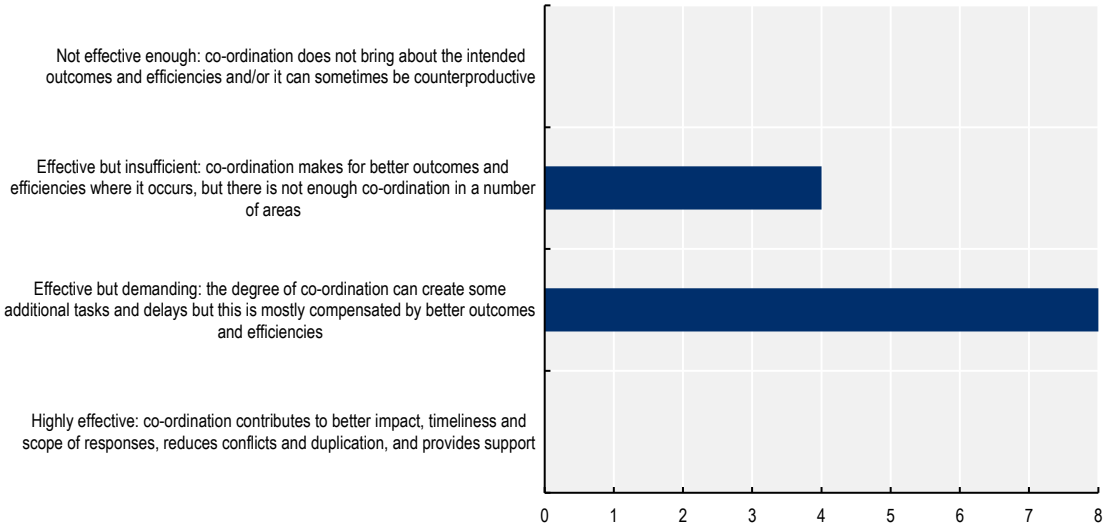
The role of GCS' central team in co-ordinating communication responses

At the centre of government in the Cabinet Office, the GCS team plays a co-ordinating role in relation to mis- and disinformation that cuts across departmental siloes and provides additional central capacity to monitor and respond to threats. Building on this role, there is scope to improve how the centre and the departments work together in this area. For instance, co-ordination was deemed "effective but demanding" by all but four of the departments that took part in the OECD survey, with the latter responding that co-ordination is insufficient (see Figure 3.7).

Some discrepancies are also visible in departments' responses on their reliance on central guidance and the clarity of the strategy and aims in this domain. Two of the six departments noted not relying on any central guidance on mis- and disinformation, whereas half of them said they "neither agree nor disagree" that their counter-disinformation communication strategy and aims are clear. These findings highlight the opportunity to better disseminate GCS guidance and common objectives across government.

Figure 3.7. Co-ordination on mis- and disinformation responses

How effective is co-ordination among departments and relevant agencies on mis- and disinformation responses?



Note: N=12, single choice answer.
Source: OECD survey of UK government communication offices at departmental level, 2022.

Overall, the above responses echo findings from OECD interviews that approaches to tackle mis- and disinformation are still evolving. This is also demonstrated by the recent updates to counter-disinformation guidance and the dismantling of the Rapid Response Unit, which has not at the time of writing been replaced with an alternative service. Yet, accounts from interviews with departmental communicators point to an appetite for more joined-up efforts and support.

One aspect in which this is valuable is practice-sharing and learning across departments, which is in high demand as each department seeks to stay up-to-date with emerging approaches and learn from the leaders. A successful example is that of the internal newsletter listing the "five things we learned", namely the top five insights on mis- and disinformation that were gathered first during COVID-19 and later around the war in Ukraine. This example was cited in interviews as being a useful tool to share knowledge and help make sense of the vast amount of false content and its relatively limited impact on audiences. To facilitate such transfer of practices, GCS could consider appointing a "Head of Discipline"[20] to act as the cross-government expert in charge of developing knowledge, guidance and training on this competency area.

A vision for comprehensive, co-ordinated communication actions against mis- and disinformation is notably absent from the GCS' 2022-2025 Strategy for reform despite its focus on innovation and fitness for the future. This area could also be more explicitly addressed in the Functional Standards on Communication. Although communication ought to be part of a holistic government approach, setting out commitments for a consolidated whole-of-GCS approach to mis- and disinformation could be a valuable addition to its reform Strategy. It would further institutionalise the role of public communication within government responses, thereby contributing to greater recognition for it as a main lever of government.

Key findings and recommendations

- Government action to build trust and counteract mis- and disinformation should take the identities, values and world views that underpin the British public's perceptions of trust and information consumption choices into greater consideration. This can help build social cohesion and dialogue to bridge divisions.
  - Government communicators could benefit from embracing "broad impartiality" in their work to strengthen unifying narratives and information. They can do this by prioritising communication that is relevant to and representative of the interests and experiences of the largest portions of society rather than content that merely drives the news cycle.
- GCS should focus on strengthening the reputation of the communication function for trustworthiness. It could consider ways to further shield the function from risk of politicisation. This is crucial to fulfilling its mandate and would help overcome unfavourable legacy perceptions surrounding public communication.
  - GCS might promote a more cautious and extensive application of its Propriety Guidelines, including narrowing the scope for subjective interpretation via illustrative examples such as those featured in the propriety and ethics training.
  - When conducting reputation management for the government, GCS could consider using the OECD Drivers of Trust (reliability, responsiveness, openness, fairness, integrity) as criteria to follow.
  - Some aspects of media relations such as reacting to certain media enquiries or rebutting coverage, emerged as the areas where civil servants can come under greater pressure to cross the boundaries of propriety defined in the GCS Guidelines. Reinforcing the division of responsibilities between party-political press officers and civil service ones could reduce civil servants' exposure to these risks.
- GCS should encourage wide uptake of the updated mandatory ethics and propriety training in its 2022-25 Strategy.
- The government could consider establishing an independent oversight mechanism to exercise regular scrutiny over the public communication function and ensure it is conducted with propriety and in the service of citizens. A parliamentary or independent body could be tasked with reviewing the delivery of public communication against the principles outlined in the 2004 Phillis Review or an updated version of the latter.
- The government could undertake a deliberative process to obtain recommendations on the role of public communication for building trust, combating mis- and disinformation and supporting social cohesion. The process could be the basis for a citizen charter on communication or a revised set of principles for the function, building on those provided in the 2004 Phillis Review. This will help discern citizens' expectations for public communication and build trust in a responsible use of new methods, data and technologies.
- Within the limits of non-sensitive or declassified information, units and agencies working to counteract foreign disinformation could contribute to a better understanding of this emerging practice by conducting evaluations of their programmes and co-operating with the research community to analyse their efficacy.
- With the passing of the Online Safety Bill, the government could consider developing a comprehensive strategy or policy document to define the existing and planned components of its action against mis- and disinformation, including mechanisms for evaluation, scrutiny and accountability to Parliament and the public.

- The emphasis on pre-emptive and proactive communication actions to monitor and fill information voids and deliver timely information ahead of rumours forming is welcome. GCS could help mainstream and reinforce this practice across departments by developing guidance and listing relevant examples.
- GCS could also encourage greater practice-sharing in this domain, including by appointing a "Head of Discipline" in the countering of mis- and disinformation.

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Notes

[1] These are among the drivers of trust identified by the OECD. For more information on OECD research on trust see https://www.oecd.org/governance/trust-in-government/ (accessed on 31 March 2023).

[2] This report relies on the following definitions of the terms used in the OECD *Good Practice Principles on Public Communication Responses to Mis- and Disinformation Misinformation*: "when false information is shared, but no harm is meant". This consists typically of rumour or misleading content shared unknowingly by individuals. Disinformation: "when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm". Disinformation can often be traced back to actors with malicious motives and can be part of concerted large-scale campaigns (https://read.oecd.org/10.1787/6d141b44-en, accessed on 31 August 2023).

[3] *Affective* polarisation is defined by Duffy et al. (2019[10]) to mean "when individuals begin to segregate themselves socially and to distrust and dislike people from the opposing side, irrespective of whether they disagree on matters of policy", as opposed to *issue* polarisation, which they define as "the divisions formed around one or more policy positions or issues.".

[4] OECD interview with civil society stakeholder, December 2022.

[5] See Euromyths, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/unitedkingdom/en/news-and-press-releases/euromyths.html (accessed on 31 March 2023)

[6] For example, see *Assessing government communication - A roundtable,* Kevin Rafter; Elizabeth Canavan; Fiach Mac Conghail; Derek McDowell (2022), p. 175, "I observe that to achieve attention seems to create more of a trend towards reductive, provocative headlines, 'hard case' stories... and purposefully dichotomist views.".

[7] The term 'fake news' reflects the wording used by YouGov for this poll.

[8] In the UK, Special Advisers (commonly abbreviated to SpAds) are political advisers hired to provide ministers with party-political counsel.

[9] Direct quote attributed to a government communicator and participant at the round-table on which the study cited is based.

[10] The language relates to the 2.0 version dated 2019, rather than the 3.0 version updated in 2023.

[11] The drivers of trust identified by the OECD are:
- Competence: responsiveness, reliability
- Values: fairness, integrity, openness

[12] The same committee exists in the House of Lords.

[13] The DISMIS Resource Hub is available online at https://www.oecd.org/stories/dis-misinformation-hub/ (accessed on 4 September 2023).

[14] At the time of writing, DCMS was beginning a reform to be split into a Department for Science, Innovation & Technology (DSIT), which would retain the oversight of digital markets policy and related counter-disinformation actions, and a Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

[15] According to OECD interviews with representatives from the Department.

[16] See for instance Big Brother Watch (2023[94]).

[17] Meaning it is one of the trusted entities which content moderation queries are treated as priority by social media platforms moderators.

[18] See for instance Meta's disclosures: https://transparency.fb.com/data/content-restrictions/country/GB/ (accessed on 30 May 2023).

[19] See https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/ (accessed on 30 May 2023).

[20] As discussed in Chapter 1, Heads of Disciplines are unofficial GCS designations for senior communicators who are the leading experts in a specific area or discipline of public communication.

OECD Public Governance Reviews

Public Communication Scan of the United Kingdom

USING PUBLIC COMMUNICATION TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC TRUST

This Public Communication Scan of the United Kingdom, the first such scan of an OECD Member country, brings new insights to the OECD's work on understanding how public communication contributes to democratic governance. The scan analyses how the United Kingdom's Government Communication Service (GCS) is building a more effective communication function amid changes to the information ecosystem and how it can help make policymaking more responsive to citizens' needs. The analysis and recommendations in this Scan highlight opportunities for the GCS and the UK Government to align ongoing communication reforms with actions to promote more inclusive and people-centred communication that contributes to greater engagement, improved public trust, and better policy outcomes.



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