



Government
Communication
Service

External Affairs operating model



The Government Communication Service (GCS) is the professional body for people working in communication roles across government. Our aim is to deliver world-class communications that support Ministers' priorities, improve people's lives and enable the effective operation of our public service.



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Purpose

The External Affairs operating model is an introduction for those considering setting up an External Affairs function or building their current capability in this area. It develops the 'strategic engagement' content in the GCS Modern Communication Operating Model (MCOM), focusing on the importance of building alliances with partners and third parties to disseminate messages and share content.

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Aspire Introduction to External Affairs

Introduction



Foreword



As government communicators, our job is to communicate with a range of organisations, civil society and charities across the UK.

To do this effectively, we need to act as ambassadors, explaining our policies, but also listening to what others have to say and using that intelligence to help build campaigns that deliver government objectives. Through that understanding we can both amplify our message and understand what society needs in order to achieve our shared goals in terms of public service.

Government communication teams have made great strides in recent years and MCOM has allowed us to develop our capability and skills across core functions.

Now with External Affairs – and proper, robust business engagement – I want to see the new model fully embedded in government communication and properly used, with colleagues going out and making sure we have allies and advocates from across society to help government communications improve, enhance and save lives.

External Affairs is a part of government communication that is expanding and developing. I wish everyone well and I look forward to hearing some amazing stories of External Affairs in practice.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'ASA', written in a cursive style.

Alex Aiken
Executive Director
of Government Communications

Context



The world of communication is changing. Building strong and trusted relationships with a range of stakeholders is more important than it's ever been. With social media increasingly influencing the way people consume information, and the growing tendency for us to operate in our own echo chamber, getting messages through to the public is becoming even more challenging.

We have established an External Affairs Forum to bring together Heads of External Affairs across government to build and promote the profession, co-ordinate stakeholder engagement and offer advice and support to departments as they set up and build their External Affairs capability and strategy.

Over the past two years, those of us working in the External Affairs profession have endeavoured to define what we do and why it's such an important pillar of communication. We have gathered best practice across Whitehall, including central government departments and our arm's length bodies, as well as from across the private sector.

Based on this insight, we have developed an operating model for establishing and strengthening External Affairs capabilities. The model has been designed to flex and adapt to the different priorities and demands of organisations that operate across government.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Suzanne Edmond'.

Suzanne Edmond
Head of Profession and External Affairs
Forum Chair

Strategic Engagement vs External Affairs

'External Affairs' captures better what we do as we grow and professionalise the function. But it goes beyond a definition. The External Affairs Forum – established early 2017 – adopted this name to also build a sense of pride in the profession. It has allowed us to recruit people with the right experience, and helped us make connections with our counterparts in the world of public affairs as we've looked to proactively develop relationships.



Governor
Com
Self

Introduction

Heads of External Affairs and cross-government forum members

External Affairs teams are responsible for building and maintaining relationships with a range of influential individuals and organisations. However, our purpose isn't simply to get them to share our messages, but to **listen** to what they have to say. Genuine two-way engagement improves our understanding of what our audiences are thinking and creates true advocates in the longer term.

We build **awareness** and understanding of government policies by explaining what we're trying to achieve away from the noise of the media. This **dialogue** can help achieve a better balance – encouraging supportive voices, but also answering concerns and mitigating criticism before the debate plays out in the public eye. Pre-briefing trusted partners under embargo allows them more time to consider their response.

We work in close partnership with our colleagues in policy who regularly engage with a range of individuals and organisations. Our role is not to micromanage every external conversation and meeting, but to **co-ordinate** high level and ministerial engagement and to encourage **best practice**. It's about seeing the bigger picture and considering the wider impact we can have.

By doing all this, we not only open up new and more direct channels of communication (many organisations are far better placed than government to speak to consumers and businesses), but demonstrate the true value the Civil Service puts on listening to people's views and working in partnership for the public benefit.



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office



Department for
Business, Energy
& Industrial Strategy



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs



Department
of Health &
Social Care



Department
for Exiting the
European Union



Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government



Department
for Work &
Pensions



Department for
International Trade



Department
for Transport



Ministry
of Justice



Department
for Education



UK Export
Finance



HM Revenue
& Customs



Legal Aid
Agency



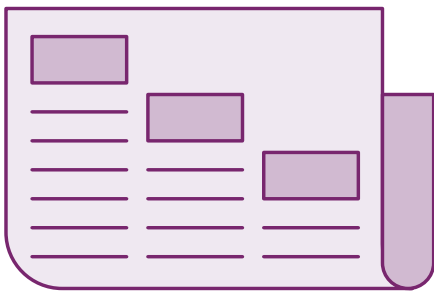
Cabinet Office



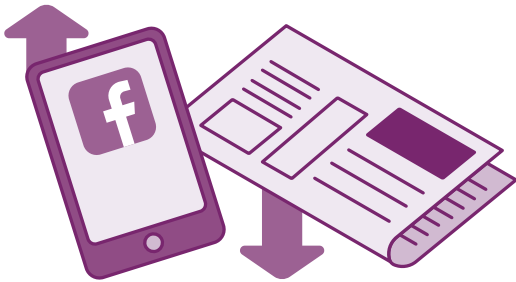
Home Office

The world of communication is changing

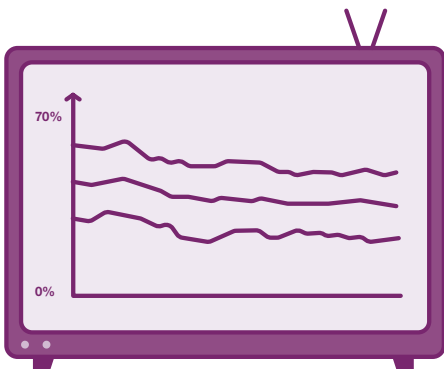
Government has traditionally communicated with the public via the media or through advertising campaigns but...



newspaper circulation is in serious decline



more people get their news from Facebook than The Sun



advertising is becoming less effective



trust in key institutions continues to decline

We're competing with an echo chamber effect. People are listening less to views and organisations



We need to communicate directly with people and via trusted advocates to provide credible voices that can rise above the noise, which we see as the core purpose of External Affairs.

Government policy matters to millions around the country. That's why we need trusted advocates to cut through the noise and reach out to priority audiences.

What is External Affairs?

The background of the slide features a complex network diagram. It consists of numerous circular nodes of varying sizes, colored in shades of purple and blue. These nodes are interconnected by thin, light-colored lines, creating a web-like structure that represents a global network or communication system. The overall aesthetic is modern and digital.

Definition

The External Affairs Forum has developed a definition for the profession focused on building relationships and obtaining balance.

Building and maintaining relationships
with influential individuals and organisations
for the public benefit

Listening

Allowing us to gather intelligence to inform internal thinking, horizon scan and provide early warning



Dialogue

Obtaining balance (encourage supportive voices, mitigate criticism) and disseminate messages through stakeholder channels



Awareness

Explaining government policies to influential individuals and organisations for public benefit



Best practice

Co-ordinating high-level stakeholder engagement, providing advice based on gathered intelligence and evaluating impact



External Affairs best practice



Governance model

Effective External Affairs relies on having a clear governance model as set out below.



Working in partnership across government

Engagement continuum

External Affairs professionals should work in partnership with other teams engaging stakeholders to co-ordinate messages and share intelligence.



Engagement to develop better policy

Engagement with external organisations who are essential to good policy making

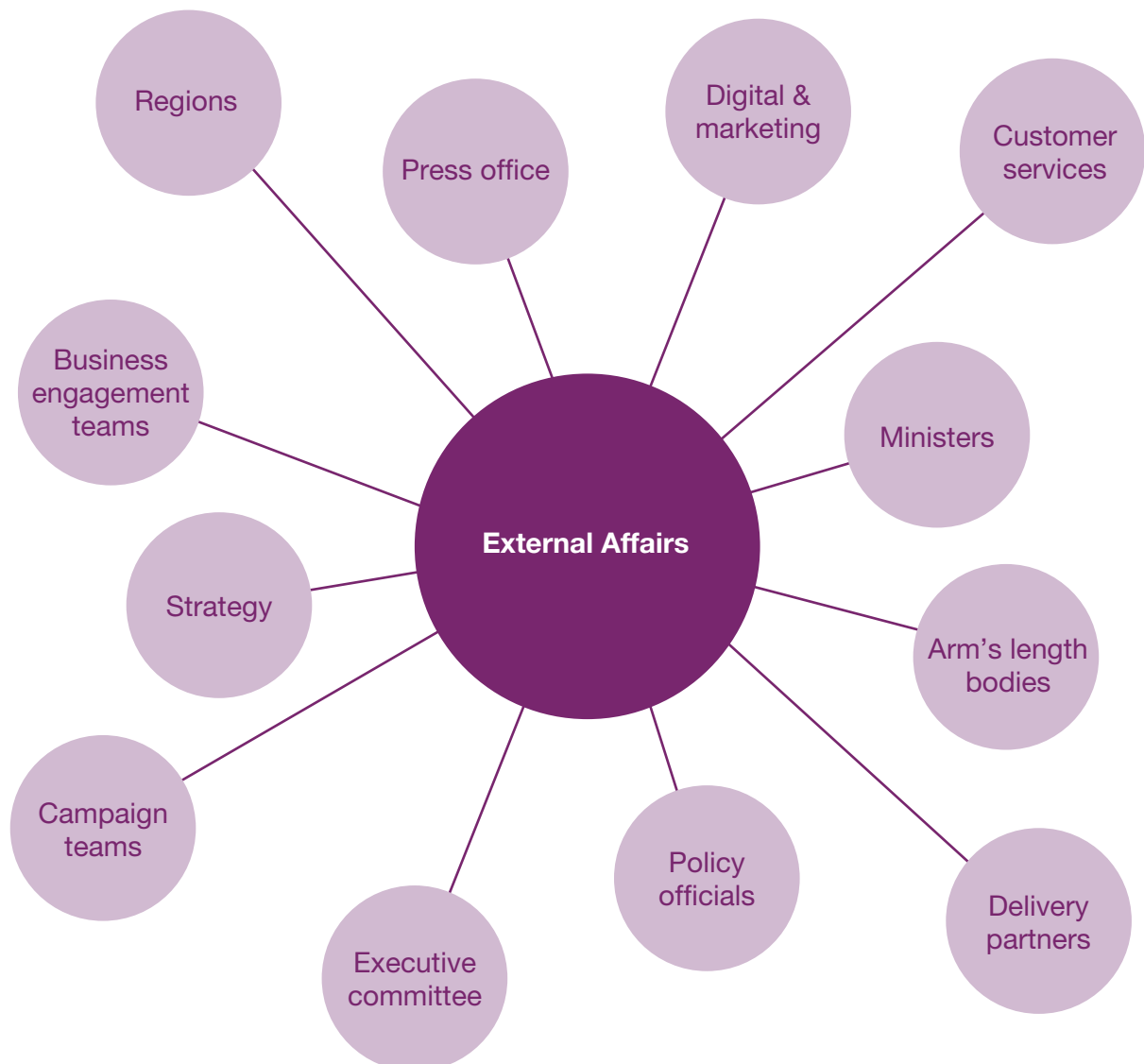
Engagement on announcing policy, including advance warning of concerns/issues/announcements, seeking balance and sharing content

Engagement with external organisations and influential individuals who are trusted by our priority audiences

External Affairs colleagues are likely to engage with public affairs professionals from external organisations. This diagram might be useful when explaining to colleagues how they can support the work of External Affairs.

The government landscape

We would recommend that External Affairs teams should sit as part of the central/corporate communications directorate, co-ordinating and setting best practice as per the External Affairs definition.



Considering capability against objectives

Maturity model

This model is intended to help departments establish the maturity of their existing External Affairs capacity.

| | External Affairs team, strategy and activity |
|---------------------------|--|
| Exemplar | <p>Experienced team in place delivering on clear strategy agreed by ExCo.</p> <p>Chairing ALB forum to further expertise.</p> <p>Strong relationships with a range of influential individuals and organisations.</p> <p>Clear horizon scanning.</p> <p>Clear examples of shifting sentiment on key policy issues.</p> |
| Significant impact | <p>External Affairs is a core part of communications offer and well understood in the organisation.</p> <p>External Affairs is an integral way of working and linked to an overall strategy and clear objectives.</p> <p>Effectively managing relationships with a range of influential individuals and organisations, sharing intelligence, horizon scanning and securing more balanced coverage around key policy announcements.</p> |
| Early impact | <p>There is a dedicated External Affairs team in place delivering to an agreed strategy.</p> <p>External Affairs is recognised and respected as a part of the communications profession.</p> <p>Building strong relationships with a range of influential individuals and organisations, sharing intelligence and helping secure more balanced coverage around key announcements.</p> |
| Early promise | <p>New team in place and/or being recruited for. A strategy is being developed and early relationships made.</p> <p>Teams at this stage have tools and practices set up and are identifying potential ways to implement strategic engagement more widely within their department.</p> <p>Member of cross-government External Affairs Forum.</p> |
| Discovery | <p>No dedicated team, but activities undertaken on an ad-hoc basis.</p> <p>Exploring value of different activities.</p> <p>Limited sharing of intelligence.</p> |
| No interest | <p>No team or strategy in place.</p> <p>Do not believe that External Affairs team will be useful or improve the way the department works.</p> |

Capability model

Departments should consider the following questions against departmental priorities and whether they are resourced to deliver against these.

Strategic priorities (objectives)

Who are your top 50 stakeholders?

Do you have a clear strategy in place for managing stakeholders?

What insight/intelligence do you have of the landscape?

What is the quality of your current relationships?

Are you proactively managing corporate/ministerial engagement programme?

Design principles (what you can achieve)

What are your policy objectives and priorities?

Who are your supporters and critics? How could you shift sentiment?

Where are your gaps in intelligence/horizon scanning?

How could stakeholders help you achieve your objectives?

What are the risks of engaging stakeholders? What are the risks of not engaging them?

What level of support or resource will you need internally to achieve this?

What relationships/capabilities already exist i.e. business engagement teams, ALBs?

What does success look like?

Operational assessment (capabilities)

Who is managing stakeholders from a communications perspective?

Is anyone prioritising proactively managing key stakeholder relationships?

Do you have people with the right skills and experience?

Are there any gaps in capabilities in this area?

Are you confident in the advice you can provide to senior officials and ministers?

Taking a strategic approach

Strategy

All departments should have a clear External Affairs strategy, agreed with ministers and the Executive Committee. The below provides a best practice example which may be of use.

Building external relationships



Roundtables, visits, events and receptions with ministers and senior officials, helping to reach the right organisations, with the right message, at the right time, and listen to stakeholder opinion.



Manage an active network of Directors of Communications, external organisations who are influential to the work of the department.



Active listening for stakeholder responses to key issues and events, providing insight and analysis through, for example, a Listening Post.

Becoming trusted advisers



Advise at regular communications meetings with ministers on stakeholder engagement and visit opportunities e.g. roundtables, meetings and conferences.



Advise and support policy teams on major announcements, working together on stakeholder handling plans and advising on engagement best practice.



Ongoing tracking and evaluation, mapping key organisations by influence and favourability, monitoring shifts in sentiment, and taking action as a result.

Delivering against clear outcomes



Better two-way dialogue with key stakeholders, improving our ability to listen to external views and identify and mitigate risks to support.



Better reputation measurement, allowing us to track how we are doing on engagement in the short and medium term.



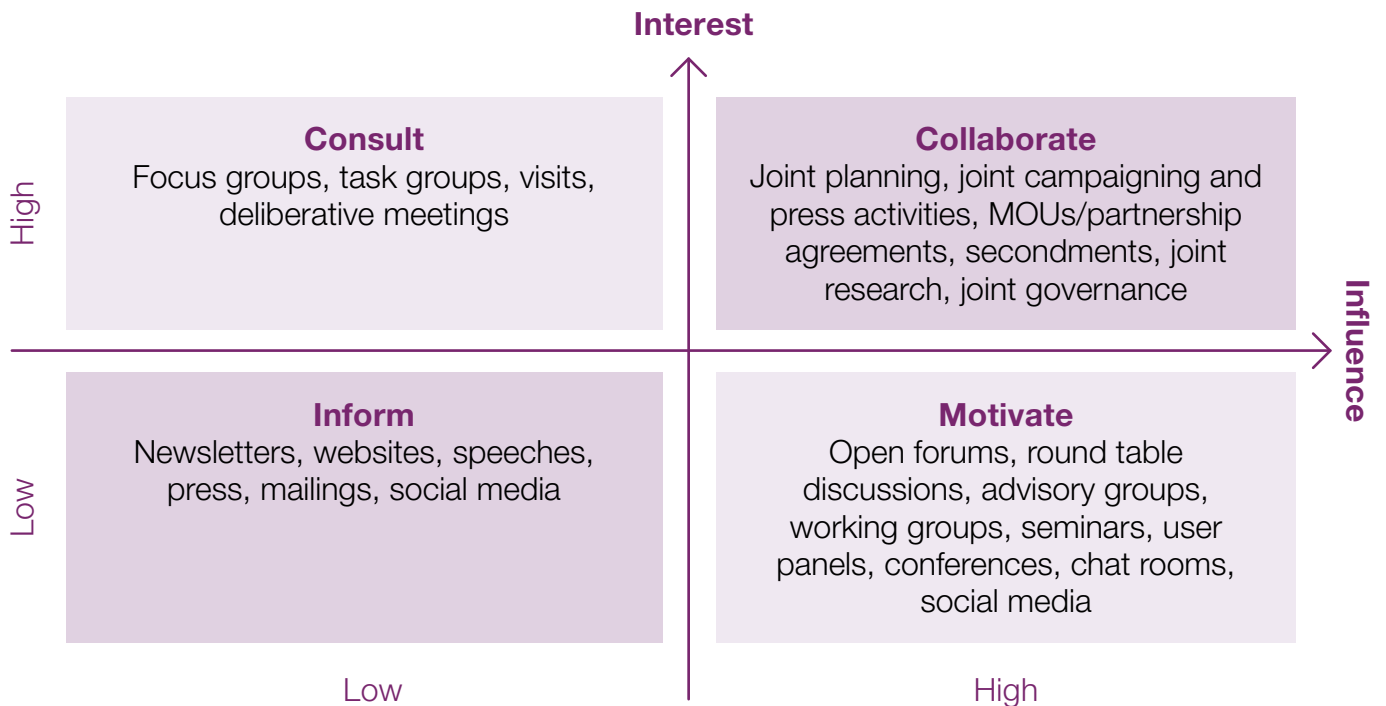
Greater stakeholder engagement, support and advocacy. External organisations know our story.



Better policy as a result of early engagement with stakeholders and listening to their views.

Understanding your stakeholders

Stakeholder mapping is essential to identify and prioritise influential individuals and organisations against policy objectives. The diagram below provides a template which may be of use.



Once you have identified your priority stakeholders it is important to consider their current sentiment. The diagram below provides a template which may be of use allowing you to demonstrate how stakeholder sentiment has shifted over time.

| Stakeholder group | Very positive | Positive | Neutral | Negative | Very negative |
|----------------------|---------------|----------------|----------------------------------|----------------|---------------|
| Business groups | | | | Organisation A | |
| Charities | | | Organisation B | Organisation C | |
| Environmental groups | | Organisation D | | | |
| Industry bodies | | | Organisation E Organisation F | Organisation G | |

Aim to move sentiment to the left

Recruiting the right team

Team structure

We recommend all departments consider having a dedicated External Affairs team. We have set out some recommendations that teams might want to consider below.

Dedicated Head of External Affairs

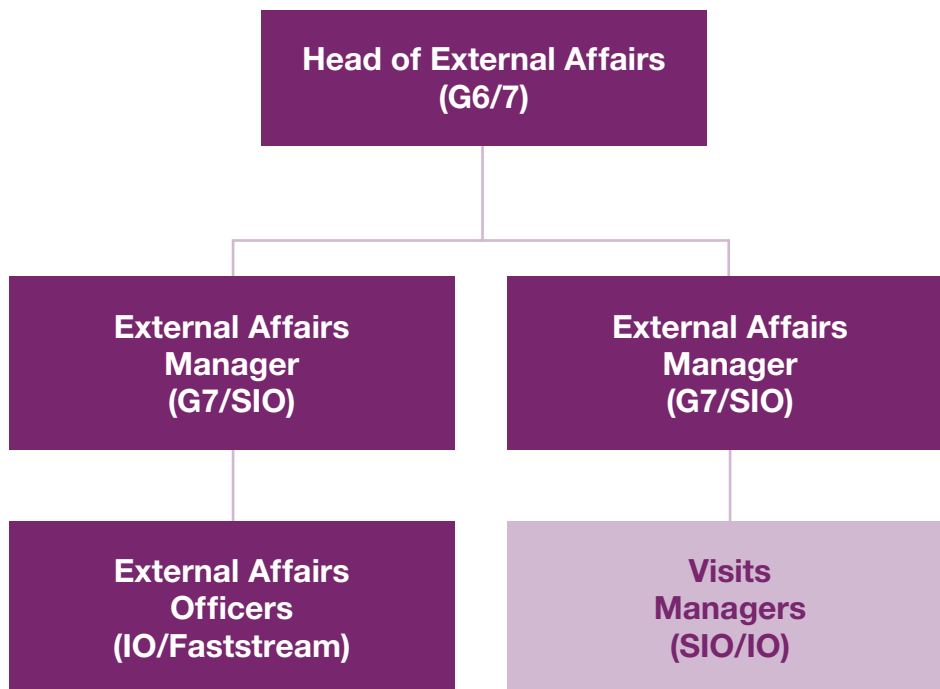
- This role should be at G6/7 depending on the size of the team
- This person should be a member of the Senior Leadership team
- They should report to SCS-1 with clear responsibility for External Affairs
- They should have relevant experience, including public affairs

Recruiting the right team, with the right experience

- Sizes of teams will vary depending on the size and focus of the organisation
- We recommend aiming for 3-6 people in the first instance to ensure that a good strategy can be developed and implemented
- While we should encourage people from other disciplines to work in External Affairs, it's important to recruit a team with the right experience

Ministerial visits

- There can be some advantage to having the visits team as part of the External Affairs team
- This helps ensure that, where appropriate, proactive stakeholder engagement is considered as a part of ministerial visits



Success profiles

It's important to recruit the right candidates from a range of backgrounds. We've included an example job description below.

Key responsibilities

Build effective and proactive relationships with key organisations to support the department's objectives.

Provide strategic advice to ministerial Team and Executive Committee on stakeholder engagement and handling, and develop a programme of high quality engagement events to support this.

Deliver the department's strategic engagement strategy.

Develop stakeholder handling and engagement strategies for high-profile and often controversial issues.

Produce briefings and communications material for key audiences, such as businesses and industry organisations, to promote better understanding of key issues and initiatives.

Gather intelligence and analyse the effectiveness of external engagement to help inform current and future engagement strategies.

Champion the establishment of common engagement principles and best practice to improve the quality of stakeholder engagement across the department and its agencies.

Core competencies

Insight: promote and encourage the early integration of strategic communication and policy development to advise ministers.

Ideas: lead the development and implementation of innovative communication strategies that meet objectives.

Implementation: develop strong relationships with ministers, policy colleagues and key stakeholders. Build influential networks to enable communication teams to deliver quality solutions.

Impact: evaluate the effectiveness of communication against objectives. Review lessons learnt and compare with industry best practice to identify areas for improvement for future communication strategies.

Knowledge and skills

A strong track record in External Affairs/ government relations and/or communications.

The confidence to work alongside ministers and senior officials, strong influencing skills and the ability to prioritise and manage competing demands.

A commitment to delivering world-class communications and championing best practice stakeholder engagement.

Case studies

An overhead view of a business meeting around a wooden table. Three people are visible: a woman with curly hair at the top, a man in a suit in the middle, and another man in a suit at the bottom. They are looking at documents and a laptop. The table has a calculator, a coffee cup, and a small plate. The entire image has a purple tint.

Sharing stakeholder intelligence within a newly established department

Each week the External Affairs team at the Department for International Trade publishes an External Affairs Listening Post. Using the social listening tool Brandwatch, this product captures in a short and snappy email key stakeholder comment and activity from the course of the working week relevant to the department.

Audience

The snapshot is distributed by email to a wide list of recipients in the department, including senior leaders, policy teams, ministerial private offices and permanent secretaries offices, and officials in DIT's regional and international posts.

Developing the product

Since our first publication in September 2017, and in response to the snapshot's warm reception within the department, the External Affairs team thought about how we could improve the product and its impact across the department.

In January 2018, we decided to expand the focus of the snapshot to incorporate a forward look of stakeholder events. This is to respond to the rapid increase in trade-related events among our key stakeholders, particularly the Big 5 business organisations and influential think tanks, and to include summaries of, and links to, reports published by key stakeholders.

Impact over time

The snapshot has become a valued product across the department for communications and policy officials as well as ministers' private offices.

The snapshot has been credited with better informing policy teams of stakeholder activity, providing an early warning system on stakeholder risks, increasing the department's awareness of and presence at our stakeholder's events, being a source for identifying advocates and ensuring that the communications team and ministers are kept informed of what stakeholders are saying about the department day in day out.



Alison Culshaw

Head of
External Affairs,
Department for
International
Trade

"External Affairs is about building relationships, it's about listening to our stakeholders, building common ground and thinking of ways we can bring them alongside... you can't do this without knowing your stakeholders, viewpoints and positions."

Our External Affairs listening post has been incredibly useful. Ministers find it extremely helpful and find themselves far more informed about what our stakeholders are saying about the department."

Providing insight on the attitudes, sentiment and opinions of stakeholders

In 2012, HMRC's External Affairs team decided to undertake a survey of the department's key stakeholders to measure attitudes towards the department. Working together with an external research agency, the team worked together to draw up a brief for the research, draft questions and identify key audiences to poll. The final product sought to measure the attitudes and opinions of their key audiences, with a particular focus on stakeholder perceptions and understanding of HMRC.

Audience

Now taking place each year, the research surveys the views of close to 400 stakeholders and influencers across a wide spectrum of HMRC's stakeholder groups. This includes corporate stakeholders, politicians, journalists, devolved legislators, delivery partners and organisations in the charity and civil society sectors.

Utilising the survey

The External Affairs team utilise the research to gain feedback from stakeholders on how HMRC can improve stakeholder communications. The results also illustrate how attitudes towards HMRC are changing over time, and give insight into the concerns, motivations and reputational drivers of HMRC among key stakeholders. The results inform the communication strategies of the department's major projects.

Impact over time

HMRC's stakeholder survey has become a valued product across the department for both communications and policy officials. The research acts an early warning system for HMRC, flagging emerging issues or groups of stakeholders that may require greater engagement. For instance in 2016, engagement scores among agent representative bodies were shown to have remained the same as 2015 scores. A programme of proactive engagement was launched to address this including new roundtable discussions with the CEOs of the agent bodies to strengthen board level relationships. HMRC's new, online agent forum also provided a platform for agents to raise queries, provide examples, and receive updates on current issues, and also to access information on HMRC process changes and service updates. The 2017 research subsequently showed a significant increase in engagement scores with agent bodies.

Stakeholder survey best practice

More broadly, the survey itself has also been used as a best practice example among External Affairs teams across Whitehall, leading to a number of other departments rolling out similar stakeholder surveys as best practice evaluation.



Cindy Ferguson
Deputy Head of
External Affairs,
HMRC

“Our stakeholder survey is the most effective way for us to

find out the views and attitudes of our stakeholders, and measure how they are changing over time. As a team, it allows us to quickly identify where to focus our efforts to improve customer service.

The results of the survey inform everything we do in the department, whether it's the planning of future stakeholder engagement or the communications strategies of HMRC's major projects.”

Engaging effectively with stakeholders

The Department for Transport's Transport Communications Network (TCN) is an active network of senior communications professionals from more than 70 influential organisations that have an interest in transport.

The objective of the network is to build and maintain open, trusted and mutually beneficial relationships, sharing intelligence and offering an insight into how government works.

As well as regular dialogue, members of the network are invited to attend quarterly meetings where we cover a diverse range of topical issues ranging from EU exit to the future of mobility.

They also have the opportunity to hear directly from some of the department's most senior representatives, including ministers, special advisers and our Permanent Secretary, as well as leading experts offering unique insights such as Britain Thinks and Edelman Trust Barometer.

Each session is attended by more than 40 external stakeholders from across the transport industry. We invite guests to share their feedback after every event, and stakeholders consistently tell us they find the Transport Communications Network useful, well organised and relevant to their work:

- 86% of attendees told us they found the events either 'useful' or 'very useful'
- 75% of attendees told us they felt the speakers talked about subjects that were 'relevant' or 'very relevant' to their work
- 95% of attendees told us they thought the events were 'well organised' or 'very well organised'

(Based on a survey of attendees at events in 2017 and 2018).



Sian Morgan
Head of
External Affairs,
Department for
Transport

"Our Transport Communications Network meets quarterly and

brings together all of our key stakeholders from across the transport industry, and beyond.

It's a great opportunity for us to network and update stakeholders on the work of the department, but also to listen to their concerns and feed that intelligence back to the department."

Attendees tell us they value the opportunities Transport Communications Network meetings provide to build networks across the transport industry:

"For me the Transport Communications Network is about building networks with the department but also the wider aviation industry and other colleagues in transport."

Katie Roscoe Government Relations, Rolls-Royce

"The Transport Communications Network is a really useful way of getting to know colleagues in the industry which is important for us to do as a regulator."

Will Nathan External Relations, Civil Aviation Authority stakeholders

Recognising stakeholders' contributions

The External Affairs Team at the Department for Education (DfE) organised a reception for 100 of its major stakeholders, representing all areas of the DfE's priorities. Stakeholders play an invaluable role in the life of the department – advising, challenging and advocating – and the event was held to recognise their contribution.

The reception took place shortly after a new Secretary of State was appointed and gave stakeholders the opportunity to meet with him in a more relaxed and informal setting. It was also a way for the department to set out its commitment to continue listening and working together. Stakeholders responded very positively and welcomed the opportunity to be thanked and to meet with ministers, senior officials and each other, helping to strengthen long-term relationships.

The External Affairs team worked with a range of organisations, including Action for Children, EEF, and a secondary school to create displays for the reception.



“I really look forward to listening, learning and working with you in the great family that is education and children’s services in the United Kingdom.”

Damian Hinds, Secretary of State for Education

“Privileged to be at @educationgovuk reception with @DamianHinds last night. A lovely way to meet our new Secretary of State.”

Leora Cruddas CEO, Freedom and Autonomy for Schools – National Association (FASNA)



Katherine Pateman
Head of External Affairs,
Department for Education

“The ministerial reception brought together our most valued stakeholders to recognise the contribution they make to the work of the Department for Education – from informing policy to helping to share our messages.

It was a very well received event, which gave stakeholders the opportunity to meet with the ministerial team as well as to network with each other. Many of the stakeholders told us how much they appreciated being invited and valued.”

“Good to meet @DamianHinds @educationgovuk and hear him share his top priorities with us. Also good to share with him how @TeachSchCouncil is already working with his department.”

Andrew Warren Chair, Teaching Schools Council

“Really pleased to have been at last night’s event @educationgovuk and to hear @DamianHinds affirm his commitment to improving social mobility for our most vulnerable children. @actnforchildren look forward to working with him and his team.”

Carol Iddon Managing Director of Children’s Services, Action for Children

Securing stakeholder support for the launch of the Industrial Strategy

The External Affairs team at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) worked with colleagues from across government to secure stakeholder support for the launch of the Industrial Strategy in November 2017.

The launch was supported by an evening reception at the Crick Institute attended by all BEIS ministers with over 260 stakeholders in attendance. In addition 13 ministerial visits were organised to support the launch, including the Prime Minister, Chancellor, Wales Office and Scotland Office.

More than 600 stakeholders were pre-briefed, resulting in positive statements from 87 stakeholders, as well as sharing of BEIS Industrial Strategy digital content.

Professor Brian Cox shared the Royal Society's positive response to the announcement via Twitter, showing how encouraging stakeholders to amplify our announcements can help improve our reach and impact online.

"This announcement shows the government has its eye firmly on the horizon, not just the next few years. We welcome the recognition that success will require urgent action in partnership with business."

Carolyn Fairburn Director General, CBI

"A new, long-term industrial strategy for the country is important and welcome."

Phil Thomson President of Global Affairs, GSK



Jo Gok
Head of
External Affairs,
Department for
Business, Energy
and Industrial
Strategy

"The launch of the Industrial Strategy was a huge milestone for government, and a significant piece of policy that stretched far beyond just the remit of BEIS.

Stakeholder pre-briefing was co-ordinated by my team and ensured we could drive positive engagement with the announcement.

The real challenge for us was using our cross-government contacts to amplify the announcement on launch day."

"Businesses will welcome the sense of mission that infuses the Industrial Strategy, as well as its assessment of the challenges and opportunities that the UK faces."

Adam Marshall Director General, British Chambers of Commerce

"We welcome the government's new industrial strategy, which invests in our strengths as a knowledge-based economy and sends a bold, positive message that the UK is a global leader in research and innovation."

Venki Ramakrishnan President, Royal Society

Further information

A photograph of a group of people in business attire, including a woman in a white shirt and a man in a dark suit, clapping their hands. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent purple filter. The text 'Further information' is positioned in the upper left quadrant.

ASPIRE Introduction to External Affairs

In early 2017, the External Affairs Forum decided to create an Introduction to External Affairs course to match the [Aspire](#) courses available for the three other communications disciplines in MCOM.

The three hour, interactive course offers an introduction to External Affairs, giving attendees an insight into how it fits into the Modern Communications Operating Model (MCOM).

Delivering the Introduction to External Affairs

The course is delivered by senior External Affairs professionals from different government departments.

Through various group and individual exercises attendees are given a clear definition of what External Affairs in government means and the type of activity External Affairs practitioners undertake.

Attendees are offered an introduction to stakeholder mapping, guided through successful stakeholder engagement case studies, given mock stakeholder planning exercises and offered an introduction to evaluation techniques.

Audience

The full day course is recommended to all newly joined External Affairs practitioners, but also attracts a wide cross section of communications professionals from different disciplines. The course is available in a number of condensed versions.



Richard Knight
Head of External Affairs, Legal Aid Agency

“I really endorse the introduction to External Affairs training. It’s an exciting, interactive course that will tell you all you need to

know about how External Affairs works in government communications.

The course attracts attendees from all different disciplines and grades, and really helps upskill policy and communications professionals to ensure they embed External Affairs in all their stakeholder thinking, and offers the perfect induction for new practitioners.”

Rolling out the course to all GCS members

In 2018 the course was expanded into a full day communications training course. The introduction to External Affairs was also embedded as a part of the GCS Introduction to Government Communications, a two day induction course for all new entrants to the GCS.

Further information, including dates for the Introduction to External Affairs course, can be found at:

gcs.civilservice.gov.uk

Contact us

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