



Government  
Communication  
Service

# COVID-19 Communications Advisory Panel Report



## Contents

### **3 Foreword**

### **4 Introduction**

### **6 Exploring the impact of COVID-19 on professional communications**

- 1. The shift to the virtual communication team 7**
- 2. Communication as a strategic management and leadership function 9**
- 3. The communication hub 11**
- 4. Inside out communication 13**
- 5. The shift to digital media accelerates 15**
- 6. Multi-agency working and the power of networks 17**
- 7. Achieving best practice communication equality 18**
- 8. Dealing with disinformation and misinformation 20**

### **22 Reflections from members of the Government Communication Service (GCS) COVID-19 Advisory Panel on behalf of the professional communication industries**

- The COVID-19 Advisory Panel 23**
- 1. Maintaining skills as the pace of change accelerates 25**
  - 2. Local communications as a means of information, engagement and building trust 27**
  - 3. Managing the challenge of communication in multiple markets with different local messaging 29**
  - 4. Are we all ready for the normal that is not coming back? 31**
  - 5. People powered 33**
  - 6. How PR can power the UK's recovery 35**

### **37 Lessons learnt**

### **39 List of verbal contributions**

### **40 Bibliography**

### **43 Acknowledgements**

# Foreword

The coronavirus pandemic is a unique and unprecedented scenario. It has had profound and far-reaching consequences for citizens and businesses, their communities and industries, in the UK and across the world.

Undoubtedly, the virus will continue to shape local, national and international agendas for months and years to come.

It has impacted every sector, and communication is no different.

It has shown the critical nature of our work in listening and engaging with internal and external stakeholders.

It has forced us to adopt new ways of working, bringing the virtual team to the fore as the majority of colleagues have worked from home, and highlighting the importance of wellbeing at work for those physically isolated from colleagues.

It has reframed the way we communicate, with owned media platforms taking centre stage, and organisations everywhere adopting a more empathetic, personal tone in both their internal and external communication.

Finally, it has displayed the fundamental significance of our profession in responding to crises, with communication being a central and fundamental pillar of the national response, and communication professionals demonstrating their value in helping leaders engage with internal and external audiences.

This report documents these changes, shares examples of best practice, identifies lessons we can learn, and calls attention to the opportunities we have been presented with.

I am grateful to the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM), the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), the Institute of Internal Communication (IoIC), the Local Government Association (LGA), the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) and to other colleagues across the Government Communication Service (GCS) for their support during this time and in publishing this report.

**Alex Aiken**

**Executive Director, Government Communication Service**



# Introduction

**Stephen Waddington**  
**Managing Partner, Wadds Inc.**  
**Visiting Professor, Newcastle University**

As the UK has emerged from lockdown following the COVID-19 crisis, I have been reading and listening to the experiences shared by colleagues in the marketing and communication professions.

I have had the privileged position of recording the huge changes in how organisations have communicated during lockdown.

This report records these experiences. It tells the story of a profession demonstrating resilience, agility and innovation.

The report is based on two sets of evidence:

- A literature review of articles, case studies, opinion articles and research submitted to the project
- Interviews with colleagues in senior communication roles about their personal and professional experiences



This analysis is set out in the first section of the report. It explores the impact of the crisis and the opportunities it presents for the professionals working in communications and marketing and the organisations they serve.

It reflects on people's experiences during an unprecedented period and shares lessons for professionals working in marketing and communications.

COVID-19 has accelerated many of the changes already underway in media, public engagement and organisational communication such as more human conversations and the role of communications as a strategic management function.

It has shown the strategic role of communications.

Practitioners have shown compassion and care and have adopted a positive attitude to help their organisations and people navigate the crisis. They've supported organisations making tough decisions on reorganisations, helping advise and shape the response and plans accordingly.

They've demonstrated the agile, innovative and reflective nature of their practice.

The project has identified eight distinct areas of opportunity for professional communications.

The crisis has changed the nature of the relationship between work and the office, underpinned by technology; it has placed a focus on local communities; and brought about a more human approach to communication.

It has accelerated changes in the media; created new partnerships based on mutual support; established best practice for communication equality; and placed a renewed focus on disinformation.

The second section of the report consists of responses by members of the Government Communication Service (GCS) COVID-19 Advisory Panel. These cover: the assertive role of internal communications, local engagement, the critical importance of upskilling, and the future opportunity for marketing and Public Relations (PR).

My thanks to everyone who submitted evidence, participated in interviews and contributed essays.

# Exploring the impact of COVID-19 on professional communications

## 1. The shift to the virtual communication team

- The crisis accelerated shifts that were already underway to support remote working within organisations
- The health and wellbeing for homeworkers away from the office and physically isolated from colleagues was a priority for organisations
- Hybrid models combining home and office working are likely to provide organisations and their employees with flexibility in the future

The COVID-19 crisis had a dramatic impact not only on the workflow for communication professionals but also the way in which they engaged with their organisations and leadership.

Most communication and marketing professionals worked from home during the crisis. The exception were people in public sector roles in emergency and crisis response.

This rapid shift to homeworking accelerated many of the changes that were already underway in the workplace.

The move to the virtual enterprise, built on remote working and internet-based cloud applications, may have taken a decade to reach its full potential. Instead it was achieved in a matter of weeks and months.

As the UK went into lockdown, the immediate crisis response, coupled with the loss of physical working environments, quickly gave rise to new ways of working. These were often based on emergency response protocols.

Public sector organisations and large businesses typically already had resilience plans in place that were well tested. Smaller organisations quickly created new processes and workflows. These were maintained throughout the lockdown.

A cycle of standing meetings for management and communication teams became the norm. These meetings took place online using video technologies such as Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams and Zoom.

“Simple activities have been highly effective in supporting engagement and productivity. Time is blocked in diaries to prevent meetings being booked. A social exchange matches people in different locations and departments, including the CEO, for a virtual coffee.”

**Justine Stevenson, Head of Internal Communication, London Stock Exchange Group (LSEG)**

Physical events cancelled during lockdown shifted online as COVID-19 disrupted conferences, meetings, training sessions and workshops.

This has been an area of rapid innovation as new applications and platforms continue to emerge. Digital design and production skills are in demand as physical events move online.

Video conferencing is not the only technology to have seen rapid adoption during lockdown. Enterprise social networks, messaging and workflow applications have supplemented and replaced existing IT applications to facilitate team working.

“We use Workplace by Facebook as an internal enterprise-wide social network. Engagement rates are high, typically 70%. Colleagues know what they are doing because of the familiarity that people have with the personal version. Governance is strong in the top groups for the company and business units, but otherwise staff are free to post, comment, share and like.”

**Maxine Goff, Head of Colleague Experience Communications and Helen Willetts, Director of Internal Communication, BT.**

Communication and IT teams worked together to harden information security policies to protect data and systems as organisations moved out of physical offices.

The response to these new ways of working has generally been welcomed by communication professionals, albeit with some reservations. Isolation for people living alone, home schooling and in shared or limited household accommodation have all been issues. Work shadowing for those earlier in their career journeys is also seen as problematic.

Health and wellbeing came to the fore during the crisis as colleagues were separated from each other. Organisations created initiatives and new channels for employees to engage with advice and support.

“Our internal communication architecture has proved effective. Each of our 16,000-cabin crew has an iPhone 10 with a range of apps that enable a sophisticated means of two-way dialogue.

“The focus on employee engagement has also been directed at the employee hub with content and services prioritised for health and wellbeing as well as an app to support coaching.”

**Drew McMillan, Director of Colleague Communication & Engagement, British Airways**

As the pandemic eases, organisations are exploring hybrid workplace models that combine home and office working, providing staff with flexibility. This gives rise to a range of issues including health and safety, insurance, London weighting, and other issues.

There is also a shift in organisational culture that enables choice and trust, and balances the diverse needs and circumstances of employees.

The new model that emerges could provide access to a wider talent pool, increased productivity, reduced infrastructure costs and an improved employee experience.

## 2. Communication as a strategic management and leadership function

- Communication has been a critical management priority for organisations throughout the crisis
- Communication teams have supported leaders in listening, planning and engaging with internal and external stakeholders
- Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) is likely to be a major issue on the corporate agenda for the next decade

The communication function has risen to the top of the organisational agenda during the COVID-19 crisis. If it was not an executive management role within a leadership team before the crisis, it is likely to be now.

COVID-19 hasn't been the only challenge facing communication teams. At the same time as navigating the crisis communicators played a critical role in monitoring unforeseen issues such as cyber-attacks, data theft, the Black Lives Matter demonstrations and the subsequent internal and external communications response.

Organisational leaders turned to internal communication teams because they recognised the critical role of communication in engaging with staff. According to a poll by the IoC, two-thirds of internal communicators said that leaders looked to them for more guidance during the crisis.

Two-way communication has been applied as a strategic function throughout the crisis to support organisations and their leaders in listening, planning and engaging with internal and external stakeholders.

“As Head of Communications, I joined the Council’s Executive Leadership Team for both daily COVID-19 response meetings and weekly corporate leadership meetings. I advised top management on internal and public relations issues, gave feedback from social listening and took my understanding of the management strategies to incorporate within our communications.”

**Clare Saul, Head of Communications, Brighton & Hove City Council**

We have learned during the COVID-19 crisis that a campaign or event created for traditional media or a physical space cannot be retrofitted for digital. They need to be planned and built from the ground up based on research, data and insight. That typically means human-led, conversational content and consideration of screen time.

Communicators joined daily leadership meetings alongside colleagues in HR, IT, operations and marketing to provide insight from research, polling and social media listening and to help support strategic decision making. Hub teams have provided a centralised communication function within organisations, bringing together data points and skills from across departments.

“The first contingency meeting with senior managers was held at the beginning of March, looking at how to continue our business and deal with an outbreak at one of our sites. It soon became clear that a regular meeting was required, so a small team was stood up: the CEO, Health and Safety Manager, HR Operations Manager and Head of Communications. Keeping the team small meant it was agile, able to respond rapidly to emerging issues and make quick, informed decisions. At times this group met twice a day before moving to three times a week in July.”

**Clare Parker, Head of Communications, Forest Research**

Internal communicators led on employee engagement, supporting the relationship between employees and management. Employees were a particularly complex stakeholder group during lockdown. The furlough scheme and home working meant that internal communicators had to adapt their channel approaches.

Organisational leaders, for their part, recognised that they would be defined by the crisis. They sought out communication teams to support a strong and frequent drumbeat of two-way communication with both internal and external audiences. Practical approaches included Ask Me Anything (AMA) sessions, daily bulletins, podcasts and video messages.

“IBM over-communicated internally -- and we were able to use contemporary means to solve problems and answer questions such as creating dedicated Slack channels, CEO videos, and a regular cadence of integrated communications across our business. We saw an eight point increase in how employees trusted the information they were receiving from the company from previous polls.”

**Justina Gilbert, Communications Leader, IBM UK and Ireland**

Digital led creative, rooted in an audience insight, cut through noisy channels. Original content was in short supply because so much creation and production was stopped during lockdown. There was a reduction in audio and video production quality during lockdown, driven by broadband and web conferencing.

As we head out of the pandemic, the role of professional communication in navigating complex stakeholder environments gives it an assertive position in helping organisations develop strategic plans.

The crisis has had a devastating impact on financial capital but has led to a significant rise in social capital. Companies that have invested in their local communities during the crisis continue to benefit from a reputational dividend.

This is likely to be an issue on the corporate agenda for the next decade. Investment and financial performance will drive the economic recovery, but this will need to be balanced with other factors related to the environment, society and governance. This is the shift to Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) reporting.

### 3. The communication hub

- Organisations created cross-functional hub teams to lead the crisis communication effort, enabling them to respond quickly and effectively
- Agile management techniques, originating from the software development industry were used to manage teams
- Owned media platforms, typically websites, sat at the heart of an organisation's communication effort

The COVID-19 crisis flattened the hierarchy within communication and marketing teams. It also removed silos within organisations.

Public and private sector organisations created cross-functional teams to lead their emergency and crisis response effort.

Hub teams worked in a physical or virtual configuration, bringing together representatives from different departments and skill backgrounds. The latter included research, data, insight, content, marketing and measurement.

Agile methods, originally developed in the software industry, were used to manage and expedite team working. A daily rhythm of standup meetings, leading with data and insight, enabled rapid decision making and response.

Bringing together staff from different departments within an organisation, with a mix of skills, proved to be a highly effective means of working. It reduced work cycles and created shorter approval timelines.

At the heart of Government, GCS created a Communication Hub. It designed and delivered the main campaigns but also provided the research, behavioural insight, evaluation and international communication coordination.

Critical to its success was an ability to use skills from the civil service, wider public service, armed forces and the private sector. Staff were based together in the Hub to create public health information, tackle disinformation and work with wider public services. Its work informed the main ministerial and official groups taking decisions throughout the crisis, and continues to this day.

The hub approach enabled communication teams to quickly respond to policy changes and insight. For example, in the public sector, around key dates such as Bank Holidays when lockdown compliance was likely to be reduced, teams produced bespoke creative.

Communication teams created content for a variety of media, but owned media, both internal and external, was typically at the heart of communication activities.

Both public and private sector organisations used email, social channels, intranets and websites as a primary means of rapid response and engagement with stakeholders throughout the crisis.

The organisations that have invested in their own media have been able to use it throughout the

crisis to communicate with staff and stakeholders. They operated like media outlets, publishing content across multiple owned social channels.

“When COVID-19 hit, we were able to use our Growth Hub as a platform to share content and toolkits with local businesses. Traffic rose three-fold in the initial phase of the crisis. It is a rapid response that was rooted in data from previous campaigns, most recently the EU exit.”

**Jen Robson, Head of Communications, North East Local Enterprise Partnership**

Public information and campaign materials were added to local authority websites, while private sector organisations added COVID-19 areas to websites and created microsites to engage with customers.

In recovery, hub communication teams are being dismantled and returning to business as usual, but owned media platforms continue to sit at the core of communication efforts.

## 4. Inside out communication

- The COVID-19 crisis has had a humanising effect on internal communication within organisations
- Organisations reported a significant increase in employee engagement during the crisis as virtual connections replaced physical
- Some organisations, keen to ensure that they engaged all employees, took the unusual step of sharing internal messages via external channels

COVID-19 has had a humanising effect on work life. We invited each other into our homes during lockdown. Video replaced the telephone. Desks and meeting rooms shifted to kitchen tables, bedrooms and home offices.

This shift has been reflected in the tone and nature of internal communication. Senior internal communicators persuaded organisational leaders to reassure colleagues.

Leaders had recorded unscripted podcasts and video messages for staff. Management and team meetings that were previously scripted and carefully produced, became conversations.

“There has been a significant change in the form of internal communication. Heavily scripted presentations have been replaced by conversation and corporate communication by a human voice. CEO Philip Jansen runs a weekly call each Friday with the company’s senior managers and talks openly and candidly.”

**Maxine Goff, Head of Colleague Experience Communications and Helen Willetts, Director of Internal Communication, BT**

The shift to video communication as a replacement for physical meetings was a feature of internal communication as team meetings shifted to video. Organisational leaders switched their webcams on to communicate with staff.

Internal communicators firmly led engagement with colleagues during the crisis by listening and engaging with colleagues. Bots, Pulse surveys, hotlines and questionnaires were used to survey employee communities. The results guided the communication response.

Levels of employee engagement rocketed during the crisis. Ten-fold increases were typical in attendance in team meetings, as colleagues sought out virtual connections to replace the lack of physical contact created because of lockdown.

Furloughed colleagues were a particularly sensitive audience during the crisis. They were unable to work but needed to keep in touch with employers. Some organisations took a highly innovative approach to reach this community, and other colleagues, displaced by firewalls and remote working technology.

“Tata Steel UK’s Hub Director, Martin Brunnock has published a daily blog for employees through the crisis. These personal messages have covered a diverse range of topics such

as business performance, home working, social distancing guidance and mental health, with the aim of pulling people through these difficult times.”

“Each message was shared via the intranet, Yammer and by email, as well as with the hub’s significant external contractor population. They were also shared publicly on Facebook to reach many of the contractors, self-isolating, vulnerable and offline employees, as well as their families, the local community and, latterly, furloughed employees.”

**Tim Rutter, Head of Internal Communications, Tata Steel UK**

Internal messages created for staff were edited to remove sensitive information and shared externally. This ensured that they reached contractors, furloughed and remote employees.

The changes that we have seen to the nature and approach of internal communication during the crisis are unlikely to ever be reversed.

## 5. The shift to digital media accelerates

- Audiences for mainstream media brands grew during lockdown as the ongoing shift to digital continues
- Consumers turned to the internet to seek out new ways to keep connected, informed and entertained
- Social media, messaging and video services saw significant growth in subscriptions and usage

The COVID-19 crisis accelerated long-term trends in media to digital. The audience for mainstream media increased substantially during the lockdown against a declining trend. The increase in government communications through traditional media **also** increased **trust**.

Consumers turned to television news and online news sites for information. At its peak, the Downing Street daily news conferences attracted an audience of 27.5 million and routinely five million people per day.

The consumption of printed newspapers fell during lockdown due to distribution and retail issues, but consumption doubled via apps and websites. Local newspapers and their websites remained the top source for a local area, reaching four in ten consumers, closely followed by social media platforms, used by a third of consumers.

UK adults spent a daily average of four hours and two minutes online during lockdown, up 30 minutes from six months previous. We sought out new ways to keep connected, informed and entertained. Social media, messaging and video services saw huge growth in subscriptions and usage. These platforms now reach more than 85% of the UK adult digital population.

GCS built a WhatsApp Chatbot tool to communicate automated responses for common inquiries from citizens on COVID-19, delivering 24/7 instant updates. The service was accessed by more than 375,000 unique users, with more than three million messages sent and received on the platform.

Instagram and TikTok were a boon for creators providing entertainment or information to their community. Mainstream examples include Joe Wicks' daily exercises, Martin Lewis' financial information and Sophie Ellis-Bextor's disco sing-a-longs. Emerging examples include comedian Victoria Emes and Emily, an English teacher from King's Lynn, whose English LIVE! sessions attract more than 20,000 viewers.

TikTok, which allows users to create and share short dance, lip-sync, comedy and talent videos, reached 12.9 million UK adult visitors in April, up from just 5.4 million in January. Twitch, the popular live streaming platform for video gamers, saw visitors increase from 2.3 million to 4.2 million adults.

Houseparty, an app which combines group video-calls with games and quizzes, grew from 175,000 adult visitors in January to four million in April. The biggest lockdown growth however was seen by Zoom, the virtual meeting platform, which grew from 659,000 users to reach 13 million users.

Putting together these trends and the impact on the media landscape we can see that the crisis has accelerated the move to digital - in internal and external communication. This reinforced some fundamental principles - that people generally want authentic stories from people they trust rather than contrived marketing; basic information rather than spin or justification and clarity, not complexity.

## 6. Multi-agency working and the power of networks

- Informal partnerships and networks were established in the fight against COVID-19
- Relationships maximised information gathering and amplified the reach of communication
- The multi-agency approach, engaging a broad section of society, is a powerful legacy of the crisis

Throughout the crisis, organisations utilised partnerships to gather data, maximise the reach of messages and build trust with the public.

Informal networks were created based on mutual support and the common goal of fighting the virus. These consisted of a cross section of society, including central and local government, companies and the voluntary sector.

The most powerful partnership was the relationship between the Government and the NHS in the sharing of public health information and making the case for lockdown. Business support, provided by the Treasury, was shared via a network of local enterprise partnerships and business associations. This network was also used to gather research to inform Government decision making and strategy.

“We aligned with multiple agencies including the CBI, Chamber of Commerce, Entrepreneurs’ Forum and Federation for Small Business to amplify our reach.”

**Jen Robson, Head of Communications, North East Local Enterprise Partnership**

Local councils throughout the UK engaged the voluntary sector to match volunteers with organisations as part of a local response effort. Information was added to website hubs to enable people that were shielding or vulnerable to access support.

Companies stepped up and supported their local communities through the voluntary sector and direct networks, providing access to educational equipment, food and personal protective equipment (PPE).

PPE was an area that was also an area of focus for local authorities and Local Enterprise Partnerships. They mobilised communication efforts via their networks to identify sources of PPE and potential manufacturers.

The GCS Advisory Panel bringing together membership organisations in professional marketing and communication associations as a critical friend of Government was itself an example of public and private partnership. The group provided industry insight to Government and helped create employment opportunities for 60 practitioners.

GCS built a coalition of more than 50 partners, working in conjunction with trusted brands, to reinforce the credibility of campaign messages and remind millions to stay home, get tested, get business support and more. It provided toolkits to local authorities and police forces.

A new-found sense of community based on mutually supportive relationships is a powerful legacy of the pandemic.

## 7. Achieving best practice communication equality

- Communication teams tackled communication equality by making content available in different formats and languages
- Special campaigns were developed to reach groups that might otherwise not pay attention to the lockdown messaging
- Activity during the COVID-19 crisis has helped establish best practice and set a new standard for communication equality

The accessibility of information was critical during the crisis to ensure widespread understanding of both public health information and Government support.

The use of language as a communicator is also an important factor in addressing diversity. Organisations have examined their internal and external communication to understand the words they use along with the actions they take.

Communication teams worked hard to ensure that information was available in easy to read, braille and multi-language formats. Special campaigns were developed for several target groups to level-up inequality and reach groups that might otherwise not pay attention to the lockdown messaging.

“We put strategic communication activity at the heart of the hub with a focus on ensuring communication equality through content, materials and audience specific campaigns.”

**Alastair Campbell, Deputy Director - COVID-19 Comms Hub (Strategic Comms), Government Communication Service**

GCS identified a 10% to 15% gap between BAME and non-BAME audiences on key indicators of awareness, understanding and action. A plan was developed to level-up the difference.

Paid and earned media activity was focused specifically on this audience. This included up-weighting paid targeting and engagement with international media. This is typically a trusted source of media for members of the BAME community, for whom English is a second language.

Trusted influencers within the BAME communities were also engaged as part of the communication effort. These included author and TV chef Nadiya Hussain, Tottenham football player Dele Alli and TV presenter Adil Ray. This initiative reached more than five million people.

Young people are a challenging audience for a public health campaign. Those still going out posed a significant risk in terms of spreading the virus and encouraging others to break lockdown measures. Bank Holidays and annual celebrations such as Easter and Ramadan, combined with all warm weather, meant these all became critical periods for potential lockdown breaches.

The challenge was to find ways to reach and engage with young people aged 18-to-24 years old likely to ignore Government guidance and trigger changes in behaviour and a cascade effect among their family and friends.

Social media usage rose significantly during the lockdown measures, especially so for young people becoming more isolated.

The response was to recruit and brief influencers that were prominent on Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok, to create unique and inspiring content, underpinned discreetly by key Government measures.

Using subtle hashtags such as #stayhomesavelives as a nod to the overall message, influencers used humour, music, games, tips, cooking, encouragement and support to demonstrate themselves and their families following the rules. In this way they encouraged others to do the same.

It was an effective approach. Total active engagements reached 4.8 million, including 4.5 million video views, with positive sentiment at 97%.

The murder of George Floyd in May and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests highlighted actual and felt inequality and questioned whether the communication industry and wider society sufficiently understood and valued significant numbers of our fellow citizens.

The CIPR Race in PR report published in June highlighted a number of issues which PR, marketing and internal communication leaders will have to address in the years ahead. We need to see a more diverse leadership, more inclusive working practices and celebration of different experiences and heritages.

In time this will make us stronger and better able to address the communication challenges of modern Britain, but for the moment it is a problem we identified and where urgent work is required.

## 8. Dealing with disinformation and misinformation

- Disinformation was a critical issue during the COVID-19 crisis. The Government created a rapid response unit to work with social media platforms to tackle the issue
- Tech companies removed harmful content and ensured that public health campaigns were promoted through reliable sources
- Proactive campaigns sought to address disinformation through data, insight, content and channels

Social media was an effective platform to promote public health messages during the pandemic. However, disinformation and misinformation became a significant issue.

At the height of the crisis, around half of UK adults said that they had seen content that they identified as false or misleading information in the past week.

Themes of disinformation and misinformation included 5G and quack remedies. Conspiracy theories included the creation of COVID-19 by malign states and lockdown was being used for state takeover.

The GCS FACT (Find, Assess, Create, and Target) and RESIST (Recognise disinformation, Early warning, Situational Insight, Impact analysis, Strategic communication, Track outcomes) models are well proven within Government communication to rogue information spread via social media.

Its Rapid Response Unit operated at the heart of Government, coordinating responses with appropriate departments and external partners. Google, Facebook and Twitter stepped up to the challenge of supporting the public health effort. This included removing harmful content and ensuring that public health campaigns were promoted through reliable sources.

In an example of a direct response to disinformation, GCS partnered with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the National Poisons Information Centre to monitor content about fake COVID-19 “cures” circulating in BAME communities.

Insight and checklists for communicating with BAME communities were circulated and integrated into campaigns. The outcome was that the BAME disparity between understanding of the risk and the actions required to keep safe was levelled-up with non-BAME groups.

Throughout the peak of the crisis the Rapid Response Unit identified up to 70 incidents a week. These were often false narratives containing multiple misleading claims.

The unit was one of the teams feeding into the wider Counter Disinformation Cell led by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), made up of experts from across Government and in the technology sector.

The Army’s 77 Brigade, a combined regular and reserve unit, dealt with hostile state and dangerous disinformation. This included audience, actor and adversary analysis and information activity and outreach to support partners across Government.

In the private sector retailers had to deal with disinformation that contributed to behavioural change on the part of customers. In supermarkets, product shortages such as cleaning products, fresh vegetables and toilet rolls, were managed by limited purchasing and communication via earned, shared and owned media.

Tackling disinformation and misinformation will continue to be a focus of any public engagement campaign as we emerge from the crisis.

# **Reflections from members of the Government Communication Service (GCS) COVID-19 Advisory Panel on behalf of the professional communication industries**

## The COVID-19 Advisory Panel

**Cheryl King-McDowall**  
**Deputy Director, Government Communication Service**

This section of the report highlights short essays by members of the Government Communication Service (GCS) COVID-19 Advisory Panel.

The Advisory Panel was convened at the start of the COVID-19 Communication Hub to provide expert external advice, challenge and support to the Communication Centre on all elements of national public awareness campaigns and wider communication strategy.

Panel members were Chief Executives and senior leaders from communication industry bodies and advisers including; the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM), the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), the Institute of Internal Communication (IoIC), the Local Government Association (LGA), the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) and the Government Communication Service (GCS).



The panel met weekly to:

- Provide expert ‘critical friend advice’ and recommendations that could be integrated into campaign planning and activity.
- Ensure that a clear and robust process for measurement of performance was in place to enable decisions on impact to be made during live campaigns.
- Review communication strategy and recommend potential improvements.
- Review the measurement of performance, advise on how to better understand the impact communications were having and recommending improvements based on professional best practice.

It highlighted the significant impact of the pandemic on the communication industry. In April a joint offer of support for the industry - the GCS Comms Industry Support (CIS) Initiative - was launched by the panel and the COVID-19 Communication Centre.

In addition to this, the panel provided leadership for the communication industry through practical support for comms professionals who had been impacted by COVID 19. A portal to register CVs for interim work within government and undertake GCS professional development.

We are pleased that more than 900 candidates registered with the service and over 60 roles have been filled by our candidates across departments to date with many more in the pipeline.

In addition to securing roles, many colleagues undertook GCS Professional Development courses to fresh and update their skills.

“These newsletters and tasks keep me going..I work through a little of the training every day and it makes me feel like I am in an office... you are doing lots of things keeping me going: reducing isolation, developing my skill-sets so I don't fall behind.”

Another said of being hired for a role in Public Health England (PHE):

“This was totally down to your wonderful scheme... Thank you so much!”

Various elements of the Government's communication response were scrutinised, including its communication strategy, campaign performance, business support policy and communication, polling insights, local outbreak responses, international perspectives and countering misinformation. There were also important discussions about the implications of the pandemic on ways of working, innovation and wellbeing, as well as the significance and real impact on individuals of global events like the tragic death of George Floyd.

The next section highlights essays written by the COVID-19 panel members or on behalf of the organisations that they represent. These cover a range of reflections and lessons related to the future of professional communications:

- Critical role of ongoing professional development in communications to ensure practitioners are fit for purpose
- Importance of local engagement in building trust within communities
- Role of human communication in leadership in engaging with stakeholders
- Application of data and behaviour science in shaping a communication response
- Assertive role of internal communications in two-way dialogue with employees
- Need for ethical professional communicators to play their part in building the recovery

It was a privilege to work with colleagues during this challenging time, my thanks to panel members for their support in publishing this report.

## 1. Maintaining skills as the pace of change accelerates

**Chris Daly, Chief Executive, Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM)**

- Investing in continuous professional development is critical to developing skills for the fast-changing work environment.

The pace of evolution of technology, society, and consumer behaviours has meant that our working environment has fundamentally changed. The nature of marketing's role, and the skills required to be effective, have also significantly evolved to meet that change.

Digital competencies continue to get more complex; the breadth of marketing roles continues to increase and the longstanding issues of data, trust and fake news all highlight an ever greater need to stay up to date and invest in continued professional development.

And, with the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic currently weighing heavily on the minds of businesses globally, there is a real need for marketers to demonstrate their value in driving critical growth and keeping brands engaged with their customers.



### **Digital knowledge gap**

For young professionals tasked with entering a turbulent business environment, an understanding of what it means to be an up-to-date marketer is crucial to face off fierce competition for entry-level and junior roles. The challenge that these marketers face to differentiate themselves from their competition is significant. And for those businesses looking to invest in future marketing talent, it can be a challenge to truly gauge just how up to date a marketing professional is beyond a qualification or certification.

Organisations are also facing an unprecedented challenge to align and utilise the knowledge that is coming into the marketing profession. As Sarah Ellis, author of *The Squiggly Career*, told [Exchange.cim.co.uk](http://Exchange.cim.co.uk), “You could now be at the very early stages of your marketing career and know more about digital than your marketing director.”

This knowledge pool was highlighted in the latest Digital Skills Benchmark report from Target Internet, which revealed that junior marketers have significantly increased their knowledge of digital marketing since 2018. While this reflects a promising improvement in the time invested in training and learning, it also underlines the importance that we are all required to stay up to date. Indeed, with these proficient digital skills present in junior marketers, businesses are increasingly putting their brands in the hands of the next generation. As such, investment in keeping them up to date and skilled beyond tactics is vital to business success.

**Continuous professional development**

But this issue is not unique to fledgling marketers. Marketers in senior roles must also take their professional development seriously. For the future of any organisation, it is essential to demonstrate an ability to stay up to date and engaged with the core principles underpinning all marketing activities, providing direction, and getting a full view of how modern tactics meet strategy. Soft skills are another significant element to this. There is an ever-present need for strong communication, management and relationship building skills, and the further you get in your career, the more these matter. Ultimately, marketers at all levels must commit to lifelong development.

However, it is not solely down to individuals to take the time to invest in themselves. Businesses need to look beyond learning and development as just a tick box exercise. For those organisations who understand the importance of investing in their people, the benefits go beyond just increased productivity and effectiveness; improved retention and attraction of key talent is all part of providing a strong employee experience, and the value of brands starts from within.

Ongoing learning allows marketers to build up a tapestry of skills and experience that they can apply to their role, delivering value across the full business function. It can also help professionals to identify where skills are lacking and need further development. Either way, it is of crucial importance for marketers to maintain their skills to stay relevant, improve their decision making and continue to have a positive impact on their working environment.

## 2. Local communications as a means of information, engagement and building trust

**David Holdstock, Director of Communications, Local Government Association**

- People sought out information close to home during the COVID-19 crisis. Councils have played a leading role.

The communications challenges that councils have faced during the COVID-19 crisis have been wide-ranging. This includes continuously shifting circumstances and a huge amount of information about COVID-19 from a wide variety of sources. Interpreting that information for local audiences is a real skill and an area in which councils have excelled.



### **Public council-led engagement**

The evidence speaks for itself. 70% of people are 'very satisfied' or 'fairly satisfied' with the way their local council is supporting them and their household during the COVID-19 pandemic.

That work has also translated into high levels of trust. As part of our regular public polling, the latest round in June shows trust and satisfaction with local councils at a record high – all that hard work has paid off.

69% of residents say their council keeps them well informed about the services they provide and 73% trust councils most to make decisions about how services are provided in their local area.

This clearly shows that the work councils have been doing to support their communities during the pandemic is reflected in what residents feel about how their council is supporting them.

These levels of trust also extend to councillors who remain by far the most trusted to make decisions about how services are provided in their local area – at 71%.

As we move into the next phase of dealing with the pandemic, councils are already thinking about what comes next. As we all work to continue to reduce cases, local communications will be key as has already been shown in Leicester, Blackburn, Preston, and Greater Manchester. All have successfully tailored their messages locally, so people adjust their behaviour accordingly.

### **Rebuilding local economies**

Councils will also play a key role in supporting the national effort to rebuild the economy. Work is already underway as councils start to develop new place narratives, supporting their local com-

munities and businesses into the next phase. That local knowledge means councils are uniquely placed to understand what works in each area and what is needed to get local places moving again.

At times of national crisis there is always much that we can learn as professional communicators. Regular reviews and resets where needed are important so that we all learn what has worked and what needs more thought. Shared learning and best practice are well established across local government through the sector-led improvement model. This has been a feature of how councils have checked, reviewed and developed local communication strategies and a model that could work across other sectors.

What the last four months has shown us is that in a quiet and unassuming way, council communicators, working with their partners across local public services have done an extraordinary job of helping to support their local communities through these most difficult of times and continue to do so as we move into the next phase of dealing with this pandemic.

### 3. Managing the challenge of communication in multiple markets with different local messaging

**Yasmin Diamond, Non Executive Director, Government Communication Service (GCS) Board and Executive Vice President, Global Corporate Affairs, InterContinental Hotels Group**

- A principle-led approach is the backbone of any strong communications operation, but it is vital when trying to cut through the chaos and complexity of a crisis.

Clear management principles guide your approach, inform your tone and perspective and enable a level of control in even the most challenging of circumstances.

Organisational decisions will define your communications, so close collaboration with key teams and leadership is crucial. This will ensure that your story is one you want to tell. Core principles must be embedded into an organisation's strategy and response from the start and be aligned to its broader purpose and culture. These principles will ultimately provide a test for each action proposed and pave the way for a consistent narrative that is authentic to both the organisation and its audiences.

#### **Keep it simple**

Principles must be succinct – the likelihood of your story being understood by stakeholders decreases if they are too complex. Getting this process right will provide a framework for tailoring messages and communicating to specific audiences and markets.



In responding to COVID-19, IHG's principles have been simple – do what's right by each stakeholder; protect the company's reputation and financial health; and communicate regularly and transparently. Actions have included financial assistance for hotel owners, accommodating frontline workers, and taking hard but necessary steps to reduce costs considering historically low industry demand.

Messaging will require tailoring for different stakeholders, markets, and cultures, but the narrative brings the audience back to a consistent story around each action's importance for the greater good. This is how you add substance to a company's principles and reinforce core values that extend beyond profit, to caring for others and the world around you. With many stakeholders now sharing an interest in a company's understanding of its ESG responsibilities, this is increasingly important.

#### **Go with the flow**

Maintaining your principles in a crisis is critical, but so is keeping your narrative attuned to the fast-moving landscape. Consumer opinion ebbs and flows, as do environmental hot topics and societal trends. Government decisions influence a nation's actions, public policy differs interna-

tionally, and financial markets are unpredictable. Unbound by borders, these shifting elements can change the global agenda in hours. Using the framework of your principles, a narrative must continually evolve to keep communications relevant to what stakeholders care about here and now.

For organisations in multiple markets, another important factor in the evolution of both your response and narrative can be found closer to home. During this COVID-19 crisis, lessons learnt from our different international markets at the beginning of the outbreak informed the way IHG later responded and communicated in other markets.

### **Open communications**

A consideration to emerge from COVID-19 is increased transparency – something that can take a backseat when trying to control a message. However, in today's always-on world, audiences expect quicker, more human interactions and they expect to be heard. Provided you can demonstrate accountability and visibility, it's OK to communicate without all the answers.

In recent months, more companies have taken to sharing difficult internal announcements on social media, others have swapped formal, traditional hierarchical communications for a more inclusive, one-team mentality, and conversations have replaced a broadcast approach.

Adopting more open communications relies on having leaders with humanity and comfort working in ambiguity; but it also comes back to principles. Defining a clear set will bring confidence in the actions you take, the story you tell, and provide stakeholders with reasons to believe and trust in your organisation.

## 4. Are we all ready for the normal that is not coming back?

**Mandy Pearse, President Elect, Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR)**

- The COVID-19 crisis has put the communication professions under sustained pressure, month after month, and shown us more clearly than ever where we need to adapt to succeed in the future.

PR needs better leadership, able to act with greater confidence, to lead remotely, and to engage at the top level to guide decisions with reputational impact.

It is important for us to improve diversity at senior levels. All the evidence continues to tell us that the industry becomes less diverse the more senior the role. If we are to move away from having a top level that is white, middle aged and middle class, we have to tackle the glass ceilings, the imposter syndrome, and the recruitment and promotion practices which are holding us back. While some professions in the accountancy and medical fields are diversifying thoroughly, PR seems stuck in a time warp.

We claim that PR is an essential function that connects an organisation to its stakeholders, so our claim to adding value is that we understand and can engage with groups who might otherwise not be heard and who make challenging points. However, the evidence from the CIPR's recent 'Race in PR' report suggests we're not as good at that as we like to tell ourselves. Far from helping organisations reach out and engage, we are too often letting our own immediate colleagues down.



### **Alignment with management**

The need for much stronger stakeholder management skills is evident right across the board. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed some major private sector organisations who have been weak on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), brand and finding the right tone as opposed to just pushing out more product PR. This means we need less fluff and more meat. Our industry is still heavily populated by publicists and propagandists with an overemphasis on creating a media moment or product awareness rather than delivering long-term behaviour change and managing reputation.

In the public sector we need to see greater collaboration between national and local government communicators with better professional development for both. This needs to be an equal partnership, acknowledging strengths on both sides. That way UK Government communications can better understand engagement, communities, and local politics. For their part, local public service PRs need the opportunity to work in Government, understand difficulties, build analytic tools and work at pace.

Overall, we need to create a generation of PRs who understand numbers, analytics and statistics and can then translate that into insight to drive effective communications strategies. I still see reach touted as evaluation by large agencies who should know better in award submissions. We also need a better understanding of the role of automation and artificial intelligence in communications.

## 5. People powered

### Jennifer Sproul, Chief Executive, Institute of Internal Communication (IoIC)

- Effective communication within organisations links directly with employee engagement and underpins productivity and long-term organisational survival.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the perception of internal communication at work, leading to its re-categorisation as business-critical. When the UK entered lockdown in March, many organisations across the country had to quickly adapt to remote working. This was only achievable by the rapid adoption of communication technologies to support business continuity alongside the creation of accessible hero channels to ensure organisations were informing their people of how they were responding with consistent and clear messaging.

For more digitally-oriented organisations, this shift was straightforward. For others, it meant the rapid implementation of key technology infrastructure and ‘standing-start’ learning curves.

Enforced remote working has also precipitated an overnight transformation of organisational leadership and management styles, quickly leading to new behaviours and habits.

Humans are social creatures who depend on communication and connection to community for optimal wellbeing. This is never truer than during periods of crisis and profound change. Without conversation and information, we ‘fill in the gaps’ – making up our own stories to find meaning in our lives.

These shifts in organisational behaviours have focused on human connection, shared understanding and community. We’ve witnessed new levels of empathy hitherto unseen in our workplaces, as conscientious leaders have recognised the emotional distress that sudden and enforced isolation, fear and uncertainty can bring.

#### **Leadership: listening and transparent communications**

Many leaders have been coached to embrace a clear and transparent communication style. Internal communicators have helped leaders and managers connect and listen to employee concerns, shifting internal communication away from more traditional styles of ‘broadcast communication’ towards two-way, and even multi-directional, dialogue.

This has led to a shift in perception, positioning leaders as more approachable and ‘human’, increasing their visibility and encouraging them to strip their corporate armour to demonstrate more authentic leadership. This reinforces a sense of community, trust and commitment to shared purpose. Ultimately, this improves performance and strengthens organisational resilience.



Long-term organisational survival and UK economic recovery will depend on internal cultures that support human collaboration, ideation and co-creation. The quality of shared intelligence is contingent on the quality of internal communication.

This means listening as well as speaking. It means communicating for knowledge exchange, not just for knowledge transfer. It means exploring the ‘art’ of meaningful conversation, and practising techniques that build connection, belonging, trust and rapport.

The range of activities that modern internal communication professionals undertake is dynamic and fast-moving and, we believe, forever transformed by the events of 2020.

As we navigate into a new work future, the near-term will be filled with ambiguity and challenge. Conversation and inclusive communication will help us unpack these challenges and reframe them as opportunities.

Internal communication is the linchpin by which organisations will survive and thrive. An organisation that communicates well internally will achieve greater productivity, innovation, brand reputation and resilience. Best practice internal communication is going to be key to UK economic recovery.

## 6. How PR can power the UK's recovery

**Francis Ingham, Director General of the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA); Executive Director, LGComms; and Chief Executive, International Communications Consultancy Organisation**

- The power and purpose of public relations has never been more apparent than during these months of shock and challenge.

Just as PR has played such a central role during this crisis, it is now vital that our profession plays an equally critical role in the recovery that lies ahead. And our duty as the organisations which guide and represent our industry must now be to ensure that we embrace this moment of opportunity and maximise PR's positive impact on our changed economies and societies.

### **Engagement with community and society**

It is naturally hard to find recent changes that we would wish to celebrate. But one stands out for society, and another for our practice. For society, it has been the revived sense of community and togetherness: the sense that we are all in this together. For PR it has been the simple truth that when all that organisations and businesses used to consider normal and vital has been rendered impossible, the only thing that remains is our ability to communicate. And hence the importance of getting that communication right.



In a world where we cannot meet, COVID-19 has underlined the salience of communication - communication between individuals; between businesses and their consumers; and of course between public bodies and the general population they serve.

What has also become apparent is that the societal shift towards a new norm of expectation in which organisations need to have purpose at their heart has accelerated. We have seen how consumers have punished companies which have chased only profit at the expense of humanity; and rewarded those which have done the opposite.

We need to see this change embedded. And communications must be at the heart of the change.

From where I stand, ethical communications are already the norm. But now, they need to become not just the norm but the absolute requirement. Communicators need to retain those top table seats, not out of vanity or self-interest, but to be the constant ethical and purposeful nudge at their colleagues' elbows.

**PR leading the recovery**

As our country and our world embrace welcome recovery, we need to also embed a new form of communicating with employees, residents, and stakeholders. 2020 has surely seen unprecedented public willingness to follow the communications advice of the Government even when that advice has been painful. But it has also and ironically seen an increase in scepticism against what one might, to use a 1990s term, describe as organisational spin.

The new economy will be built on more remote engagement - between fellow workers; and between consumers, citizens and those who provide services - most likely between an even wider range of interlocutors. That new model needs ethical, professional practitioners to play their parts, to provide the sometimes discreet - sometimes not discreet - voice of truth to power.

Our industry has risen to its recent challenge in an unparalleled way, changing attitudes, changing lives - and saving lives. That will be the legacy of the past few months. But embraced wisely, true economic and societal change for the better will be the well-deserved prize of these months of transformative work.

## Lessons learnt

This report shows how a national crisis brought the power of communication to bear on protecting people's health and saving lives. It has acted as a great accelerator to develop communication practice towards a model of integrated, direct, digital communication.

The crisis has forced communicators and organisations to collaborate and boards to rely on their leading marketers and PR professionals working together to tell the story of how the business can navigate the health, economic and societal consequences of a deadly illness.

Within organisations, internal communication helped leaders develop a new model of working, at home and in the office, and public services embedding new combined models of working and ways to tackle disinformation.

Marketing and communication rose to the top of the organisational agenda during the COVID-19 crisis. It has become firmly aligned with leadership and executive management as a strategic management function.

This status places a responsibility on practitioners to take a progressive approach to professional development. The table on the next page sets out the areas that should be a focus for practitioners in recovery.

	<b>Professional communication trends</b>	<b>Skills needed by the communication professional</b>
1.	The shift to virtual communication - enabling more agile, flexible and trusted working environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Culture change</li> <li>● Employee engagement and experience</li> <li>● Workflow</li> </ul>
2.	Communication as a strategic management and leadership function - influencing with data and audience insight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Data analytics</li> <li>● Leadership communication</li> <li>● Listening</li> <li>● Measurement and insight</li> </ul>
3.	The communication hub - cross-functional working and collaboration to a shared goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Content and channel planning</li> <li>● Influence</li> <li>● Relationship management</li> </ul>
4.	Inside out communication – the future shape of human and authentic leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Coaching and mentoring</li> <li>● Content and channel planning</li> <li>● Storytelling</li> </ul>
5.	The shift to digital media accelerates - changing content and media consumption landscape	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Audience understanding</li> <li>● Content and channel planning</li> <li>● Horizon scanning</li> <li>● Technology adoption</li> </ul>
6.	Multi-agency working and the power of networks - implementing powerful partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Community management</li> <li>● Engaging networks and partners</li> <li>● Relationship management</li> </ul>
7.	Achieving best practice communication equality - creating inclusive and equal communication that makes a difference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Diversity and inclusive communication</li> <li>● Language and translation</li> <li>● Understanding the equality of access to information</li> </ul>
8.	Dealing with disinformation - building trusted communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Communication monitoring</li> <li>● Working with platforms and media channels</li> </ul>

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