

Public Communication Scan of the United Kingdom

Using Public Communication to Strengthen Democracy and Public Trust



Public communication can be an asset to improve citizens' perceptions that they are listened to and that their voices matter to what the government does.

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This **Public Communication Scan of the United Kingdom** analyses how the UK Government Communication Service (GCS) is building a more effective communication function amid challenges to the information ecosystem. It considers how GCS can help make policymaking more responsive to citizens' needs. Overall, the analysis and recommendations in this Scan highlight opportunities for GCS to align ongoing communication reforms with actions to promote more inclusive and people-centred communication that contributes to greater engagement, improved public trust, and better policy outcomes.

To read the full report visit

<https://oe.cd/il/uk-scan-public-communication>

At a glance

- GCS has built a mature and professional function: it is investing in the right priorities to upskill its people and harness innovation to its advantage. This has earned GCS recognition and puts it in a favourable position to pursue more ambitious goals.
- Communicators have the potential to help improve policy outcomes and address the causes of low trust in institutions. They can do so by enabling a feedback loop with citizens and making policy more responsive to their preferences. GCS is well positioned to lead at the frontier of this field.
- The operating environment for communicators has become highly challenging and trustworthiness is a prerequisite to succeed. There are steps GCS can take to overcome legacy perceptions of politicisation and maintain the social licence to use new technologies and methods for the public good.

Introduction

Understanding the ways public communication can support open and inclusive policy-making processes, foster citizen engagement and public trust is core to this analysis

This Public Communication Scan of the United Kingdom, the first of its kind, brings new evidence to the [OECD's work](#) on understanding public communication's contribution to democratic governance. Although this government function is becoming increasingly recognised and valued, its contribution to governments'

transparency and to citizen participation in policymaking remains a complex and understudied area. This makes this report a valuable additional resource for public officials, civil society, and researchers.

With many countries facing similar challenges, the Scan's takeaways carry timely reflections for all governments on how to rethink the role of public communication and ensure that the function maximises its value for democracy.

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION FOR BETTER POLICY, TRUST AND DEMOCRACY: a new OECD framework for public communication's role in government

Public communication is the government function for delivering information to and listening and responding to citizens in the service of the common good. It is distinct from political communication that is linked to political parties or election campaigns.

Three key roles for the communication function:



Provide citizens with the information they need to make choices that improve their lives, and enable them to participate and provide input on matters of public interest.



Support the design, implementation and evaluation of policies and services.



Build trust in public institutions and help further social cohesion by enabling government-citizen/stakeholder dialogue, and by countering mis- and disinformation.

The UK is among the leading countries to recognise the value of its public communication and to invest significantly in enhancing its capability to support more ambitious objectives.



Unlocking public communication's potential for stronger democracy and increased trust

The UK, like most OECD countries, is navigating multiple crises while grappling with low levels of trust, growing polarisation and greater disengagement from traditional democratic processes.

The resilience of democracies is threatened by weak public trust in institutions, growing political polarisation, and disengagement with traditional democratic processes. The impact of years of health, geopolitical and economic crises as well as a complex information environment, has highlighted the urgent need for governments to reconnect with citizens, while increasing the difficulty of doing so.

Public communication offers clear opportunities to help address these challenges and contribute to stronger democracies that deliver for their citizens. This is the focus of the [Public Communication Scan of the United Kingdom](#).

Public communication can be an asset to improve citizens' perception that they are listened to and that their voices matter

The [OECD Trust Survey](#) highlighted that public trust is strongly associated with the perception that government listens to and acts on citizens' feedback. Today, there is an opportunity for enhanced interaction and engagement across communication channels to complement formal participation initiatives and give citizens a bigger say.

UK citizens' views on government responsiveness



thought it unlikely a poorly-performing service would be improved if many complained about it



thought it likely that a policy would be changed if a majority of people were against it

Source: 2021 OECD Trust Survey

Communication can help make policy-making more responsive to citizens' needs and preferences by channelling their voices to decision-makers. Communicators are uniquely positioned to do so by tapping into the virtual public square made up of mass communication channels (social media, websites, etc.).

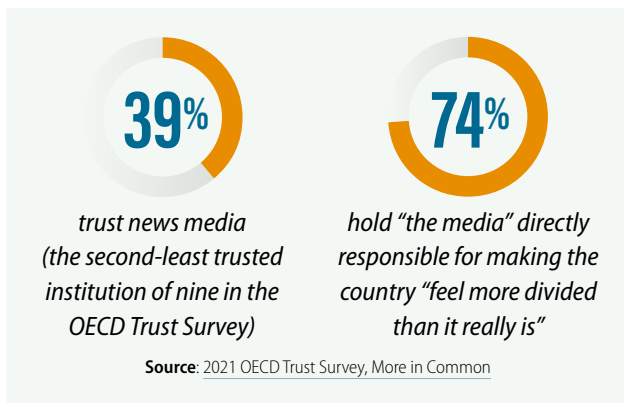
Numerous UK government campaigns have demonstrated communication's potential to improve outcomes once policies are implemented. Yet, despite some progress, policy and communication teams in UK government departments do not collaborate sufficiently towards shared goals. This is especially true at the early stages where insight gathered by public communicators can inform priorities and decisions.

The UK Government Communication Service (GCS) could put a greater emphasis on dialogue with citizens as part of its drive to reform and innovate

GCS stresses that “communication is one of the four levers government has to affect change, alongside legislation, regulation and taxation.” It therefore has a key opportunity to change how the government engages with the public by building on the many good practices for two-way dialogue visible across departments. GCS can go further in seizing the frontiers in the field, such as mechanisms for organisational and social listening and greater personalisation of content. These stand to strengthen better two-way communication and to enable policy to be more responsive to public feedback.

Public communication’s effectiveness in a complex information ecosystem rests on its trustworthiness

Despite the many benefits of more connected societies, communicators in the UK and in other countries have to navigate a media and information landscape that is fragmented and vulnerable to polarising and false narratives. The trend for an often sensationalist media in the UK is fuelling divisive narratives at the expense of social cohesion, while mis- and disinformation complicate the picture further. A growing number of people are resorting to avoiding the news altogether, out of frustration with political headlines that they feel are disconnected from what matters to their lives.

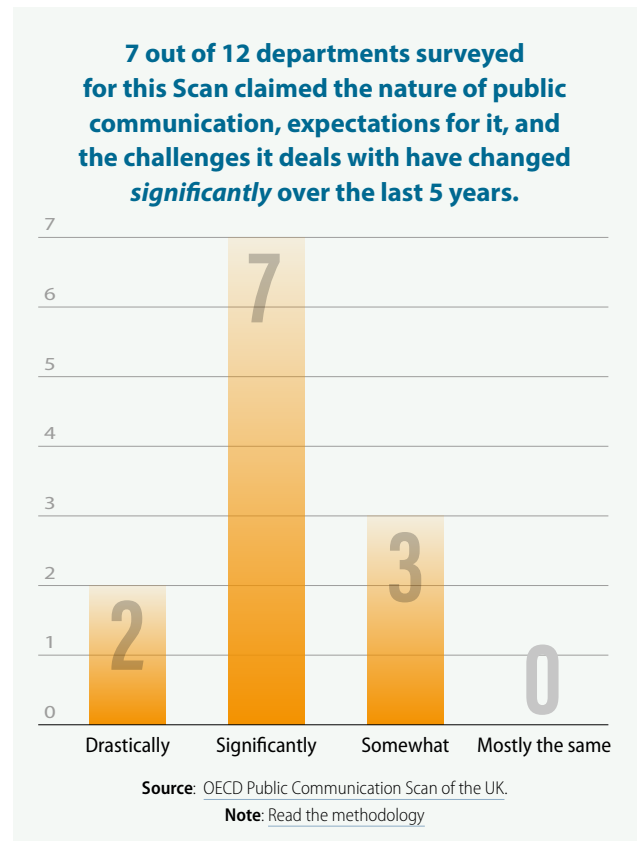


Public communication has an important role to play in providing citizens with reliable information in order to make better choices and form opinions. To do so, however, the function must be trustworthy. It ought to rise above divisive narratives while upholding high standards for ethics and shielding itself from politicisation. Communication’s trustworthiness is also

key to maintaining the social licence to use new methods and technologies responsibly and for the public good.

Empowering, modernising and innovating this essential government function is the way to unlock its potential

Succeeding in such a complex and changing environment comes with challenges: traditional communication methods and tactics are losing efficacy, and governments are under growing pressure to match and outdo innovations in other sectors. Rapid digital transformation and the rise of AI are testing communicators’ ability to adapt their skills and ways of working to remain effective, particularly against ill-intentioned actors.



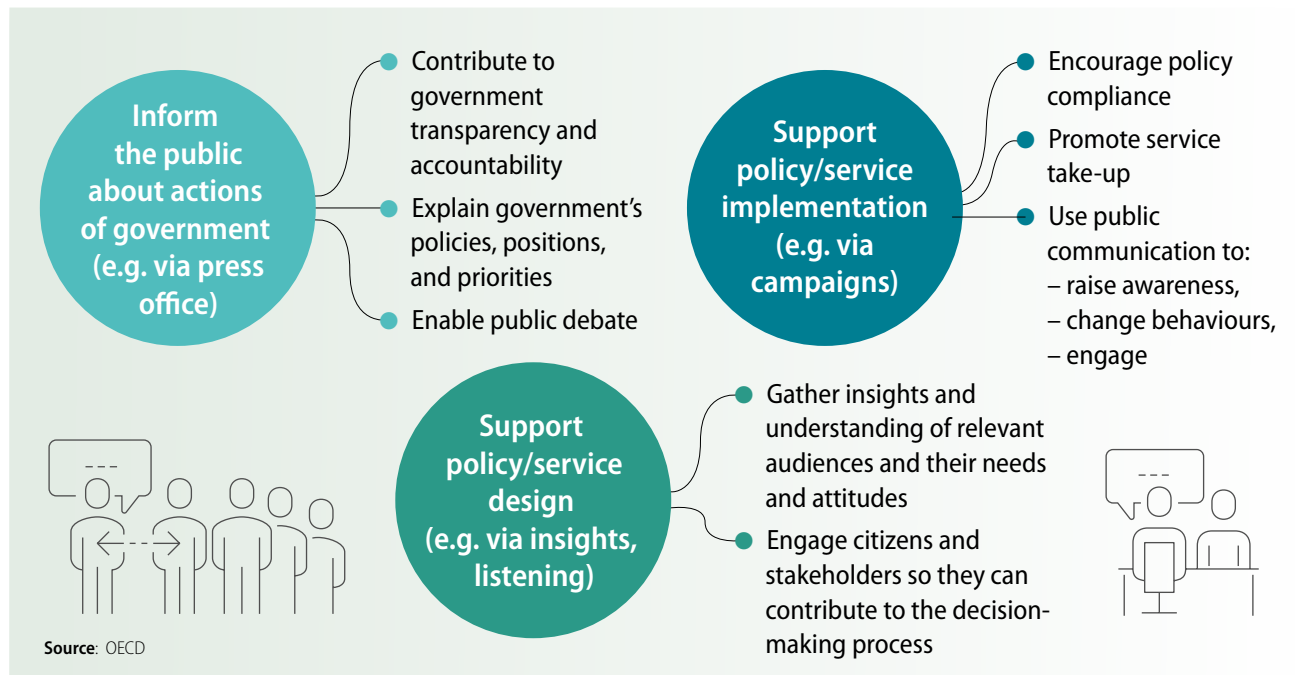
The UK is among the leading countries to recognise the value of its public communication and to invest significantly in enhancing its capability to support more ambitious objectives. The GCS’ current reform strategy provides a strong path to weather these changes to the profession and the landscape in which it operates. This analysis, and the recommendations therein, thus complement an already comprehensive agenda for internal reform and innovation.



Public communication improves policy outcomes. It could add greater value if properly integrated from the outset

Public communication can play a valuable role in maximising the impact of policies and services. When used to support the defining of priorities and designing of policies, it can contribute real-time analysis of citizens' needs and expectations, gathered through open listening across the communication channels people interact on. When helping to deliver a policy or service, public communication can provide citizens with essential information so they can make informed choices for themselves and society.

Public communication contributes to policy and services at each stage of the process





GCS communicators are uniquely positioned to analyse vast amounts of data to understand what people think and prefer on a given policy issue.

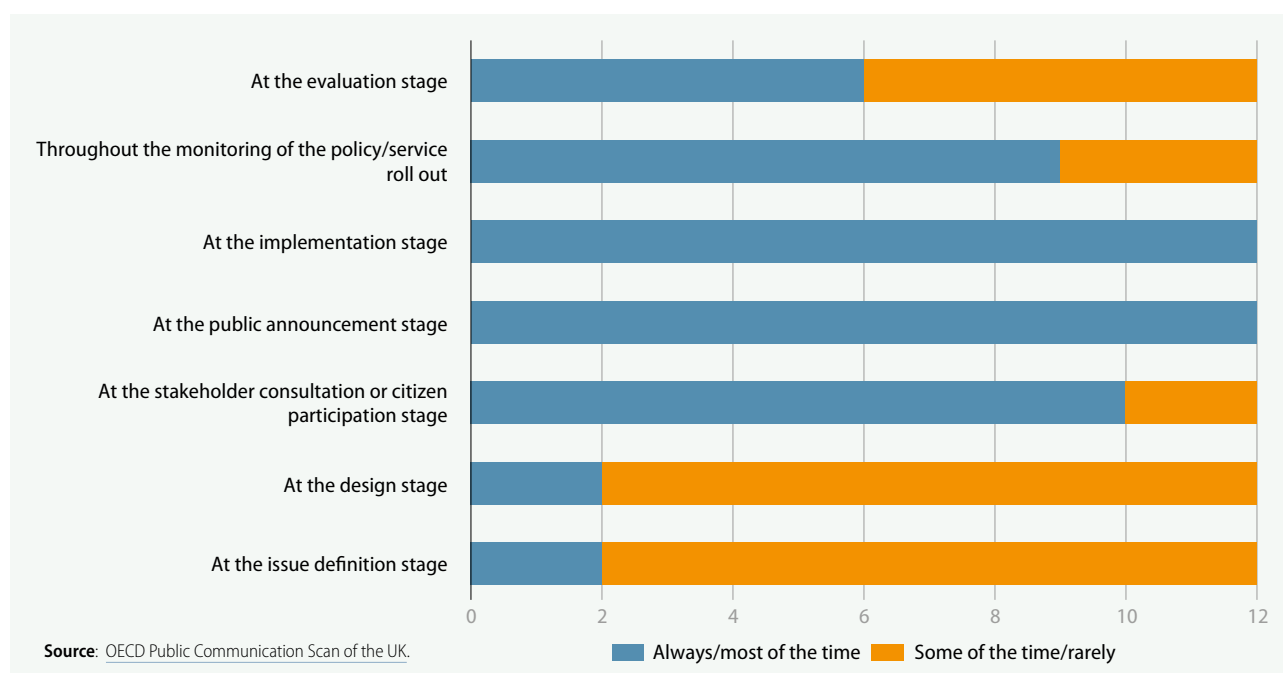
GCS has built excellence in strategic, audience-centric communication campaigns that help meet policy objectives, from driving COVID-19 vaccinations to helping households access government assistance during the recent cost-of-living crisis. With its strong focus on insights and measurement, this area has emerged as the one where public communication's contribution to policy is most visible.

Conversely, there is an opportunity to strengthen the role of communication from the beginning of the policy-making and design process. Communicators interviewed for this Scan often stressed their role within

departments as “bringing the public into the room” where decisions are made. Thanks to the advanced analytical tools and practices deployed by GCS, its communicators are uniquely positioned to analyse vast amounts of data to understand what people think and prefer on a given policy issue. They can thus help their institutions responsibly harness the information exchanged via this public square to make policies and services more responsive to citizens’ inputs and feedback.

However, communication teams tend to be brought too late into the policy-making process to maximise their value.

Share of departmental communication teams who always/most of the time co-operate with policy or service teams, by stage of the policy cycle



Public communication improves policy outcomes

ENABLING A FEEDBACK LOOP BETWEEN CITIZENS AND POLICY: BETTER LISTENING FOR BETTER OUTCOMES AND HIGHER TRUST

For institutions to be reliable and responsive, the public communication function needs to listen to citizens as much as speak to them. This is critical to improving public trust, which is strongly associated with the perception that government listens to and acts on citizens' inputs.

Trust in UK government among those who:



feel they have a say in what the government does



feel they don't have a say in what the government does

Source: 2021 OECD Trust Survey

Acting as a vehicle for open-ended and continuous listening by institutions, the public communication function can contribute to efforts for growing citizen participation in government decision-making.

The emerging practice of organisational listening offers a key avenue to build on the already extensive use of insights



and data from open communication channels by GCS communicators. It can also be joined up with the established External Affairs discipline in GCS dedicated to engaging with representatives of core interest groups and with functions such as citizen correspondence offices.

Along with GCS's focus on innovation, the practice of organisational and social listening could be consolidated and scaled across departments. Combined with a greater use of interactive features of communication channels and more regular engagement, this can help engender two-way dialogue with citizens. However, the value of listening for responsive policy-making and trust will require that communicators work effectively with policy and programme teams within their institutions to transfer these insights. In doing so, they can enable a feedback loop with citizens.



The value and recognition of public communication in government has been improving, but not sufficiently to make the most of its potential

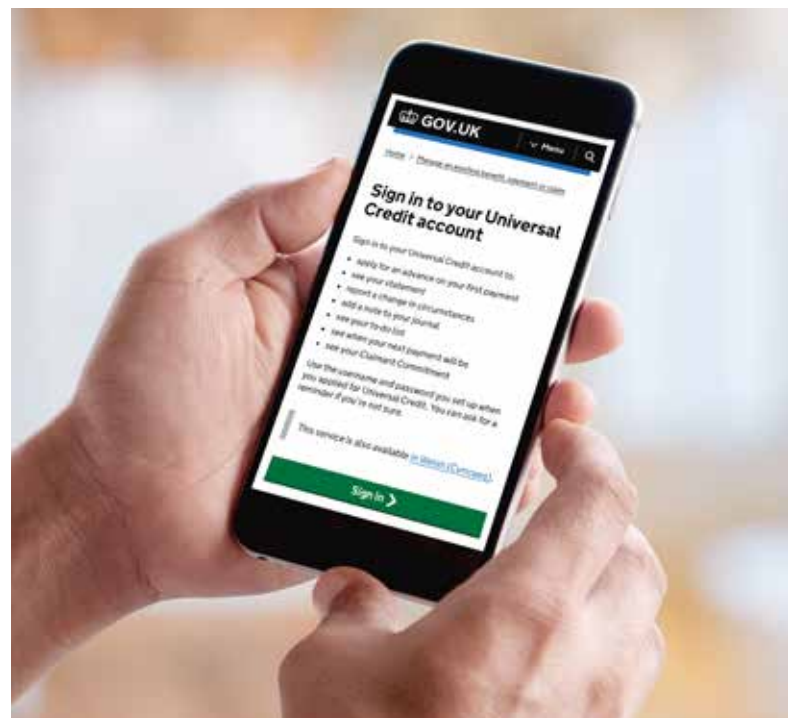
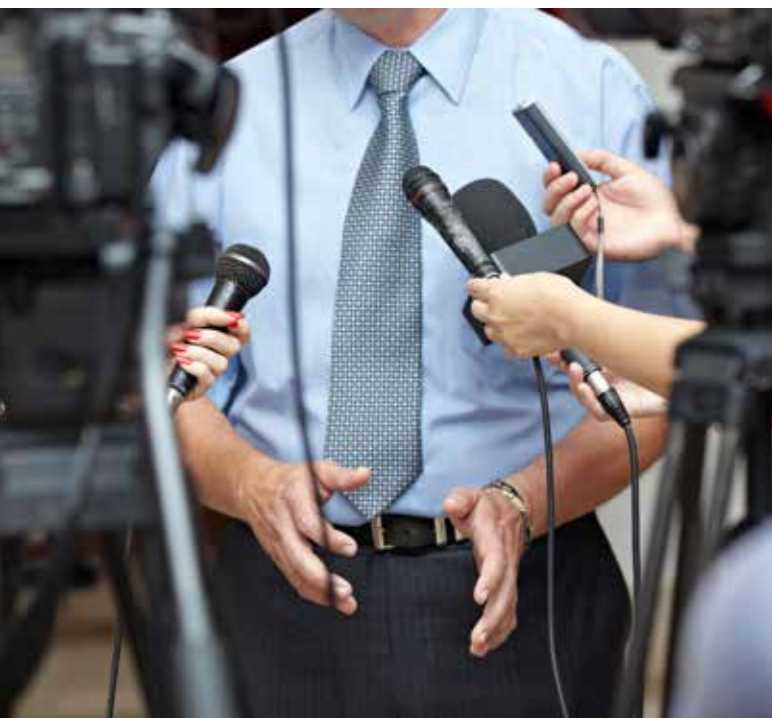
There are several hurdles to the effective integration of public communication into the policy process. Among them, some legacy misperceptions of its role among policy-makers and top officials remain a significant obstacle. Two thirds of departments surveyed claimed that policy teams “understand some of the main aspects of communication but not sufficiently to maximise its added value to policy/service design and delivery”. Most of the remaining third claimed that communication is seen primarily as a means to “sell” policies and services to the public.

Communicators have nevertheless seen positive progress in how the function is becoming valued and recognised as a lever of government. Several of the senior communicators interviewed attributed this improvement to the strong emphasis on demonstrating their impact through evaluation. Many also highlighted the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which senior communicators were often involved at the highest levels of cross-government decision making. The pandemic likewise demonstrated the centrality of effective communication for achieving public health objectives.

This positive trend has earned a majority of Directors of Communication a seat at the decision-making table. Two thirds of departments surveyed claimed that their Director participates in their institutions’ Executive Committee (ExCo) meetings.

Recommendations for better intergrating public communication in policy:

- Provide more practical guidance to both communication and policy teams on building effective collaboration at all stages of the policy process
- Promote two-way data and insight-sharing between communication and policy teams
- Consolidate expectations for communication in policy in the Government Functional Standards on Communication and the Modern Communication Operating Model (MCOM) 3.0.
- Reinforce the focus on an inclusive, audience-centric, design for campaigns that support policy goals (including co-creation with target groups)
- Expand the focus on listening in communication, including through a dedicated framework and capability building





The information space in the UK calls for trustworthy, unifying communication to counterbalance divisive narratives and misinformation

Open public debate is core to healthy democratic systems. However, in the UK, like many other OECD countries, the space for such open debate is giving way to polarising narratives and to mis- and disinformation, which are amplified above moderate views by social media algorithms.

Besides reducing the space for debate based on a common set of facts, the trend for divisive discourse is also driving public disengagement from political and civic participation. Many in the UK are increasingly finding the news cycle and political headlines unrelatable and disconnected from what matters to their lives.

public communication is more important than ever to counterbalance the divisive aspects of the information ecosystem. While regulatory and media literacy initiatives have a longer-term horizon, communication is a readily available means at institutions' disposal to mitigate the spread and impact of falsehoods.

UK audiences are growing disenchanted with the media:



find themselves actively trying to avoid the news sometimes or often



believe the media are independent from political influence

Source: Digital News Report 2022; Digital News Report 2023

Reaching, informing and engaging with all segments of the public is increasingly challenging in this context, and traditional communication approaches are less likely to be adequate. At the same time, effective

For public communication to inform, unite, and fight misinformation it is necessary for it to be perceived as trustworthy by its audiences. Despite significant efforts to uphold clear boundaries between political and civil service communication, the function remains vulnerable to perceptions of politicisation. Interviews conducted for this Scan have confirmed the persistence of grey areas between political and public communication.

A heavy focus on reputation management and the often-divisive political rhetoric associated with it, is one of the main factors behind this tension. This plays into to legacy issues with politicisation that were prominent in the public eye at the time of the Phillis Review (2004) and Leveson Inquiry (2012) concerning ethics in government communication, media and politics.

The information space in the UK calls for trustworthy, unifying communication

Nefarious uses of personal data by ill-intentioned actors and exposure of the manipulative effects of algorithms have additionally made the public suspicious about the methods and technologies employed in communication. Yet technology and data, used responsibly, are also powerful enablers of better communication. This makes up-to-date ethical standards and guidance a cornerstone of the function.

Overcoming perceptions and risks of politicisation and demonstrating unwavering integrity and responsibility should be a priority for GCS. Numerous actions, from updated frameworks compatible with the use of AI to new mandatory ethics and propriety training, aim to reinforce standards and compliance. Still, further steps are required to increase transparent oversight of public communication and make explicit public commitments to meet citizens' expectations for the function.

Recommendations for a trustworthy communication function

- Limit the risks of perceived politicisation through more rigorous applications of the GCS Propriety Guidelines
- Introduce an independent oversight mechanism for public communication, for instance through Parliament
- Expand the representation of stakeholders on relevant advisory boards to ensure diverse perspectives inform top-level decisions
- Consult or co-create with citizens a charter or set of principles for public communication, building on those proposed in the 2004 Phillis Review
- Continuously reinforce ethics and propriety standards along with technological change and societal expectations

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION WITHIN A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY EFFORT TO COMBAT MIS- AND DISINFORMATION

Strategic communication efforts and expertise are deeply embedded across most of the UK's counter-disinformation actions, both domestically and internationally. The role of specialists in monitoring and understanding developments in the information space, and in deploying both preventive and reactive tactics against falsehoods has made GCS one of the international leaders in this space.

As for other sub-disciplines of public communication, GCS has consolidated experience and practice into guidance such as its RESIST 2 and Wall of Beliefs toolkits, which leverage

evidence from behavioural science. It is also expanding training and coordination to strengthen responses. The focus of departments on preventive approaches is especially valuable and could be increased (see figure).

Going forward, GCS could invest in formalising and consolidating a future-proof strategy against mis- and disinformation, particularly in light of developments in AI. This should be embedded within the government's broader efforts against this threat.

Departments take multiple actions to prevent and respond to mis- and disinformation concerning policy areas

Number of surveyed departments having chosen the given option



New approaches and better use of technology will help UK communicators overcome current challenges in their work

Innovation, collaboration and skills provide the foundations to unlock the potential of public communication for government

The communication profession and the challenges it deals with have evolved dramatically over the last decade. Rapid digitalisation has revolutionised information consumption habits, making it both possible and necessary for governments to reach citizens with personalised content at scale.

Big data analytics allow precise understanding and targeting of specific audience groups. Recent leaps in generative AI have made automated content creation a reality. Digitalisation has equally transformed the working methods within teams.

Adjusting to these changes and proactively seeking improvements through innovation requires agility, an innovation mindset, and more diverse technical skillsets. On this front there are gaps between departments, as

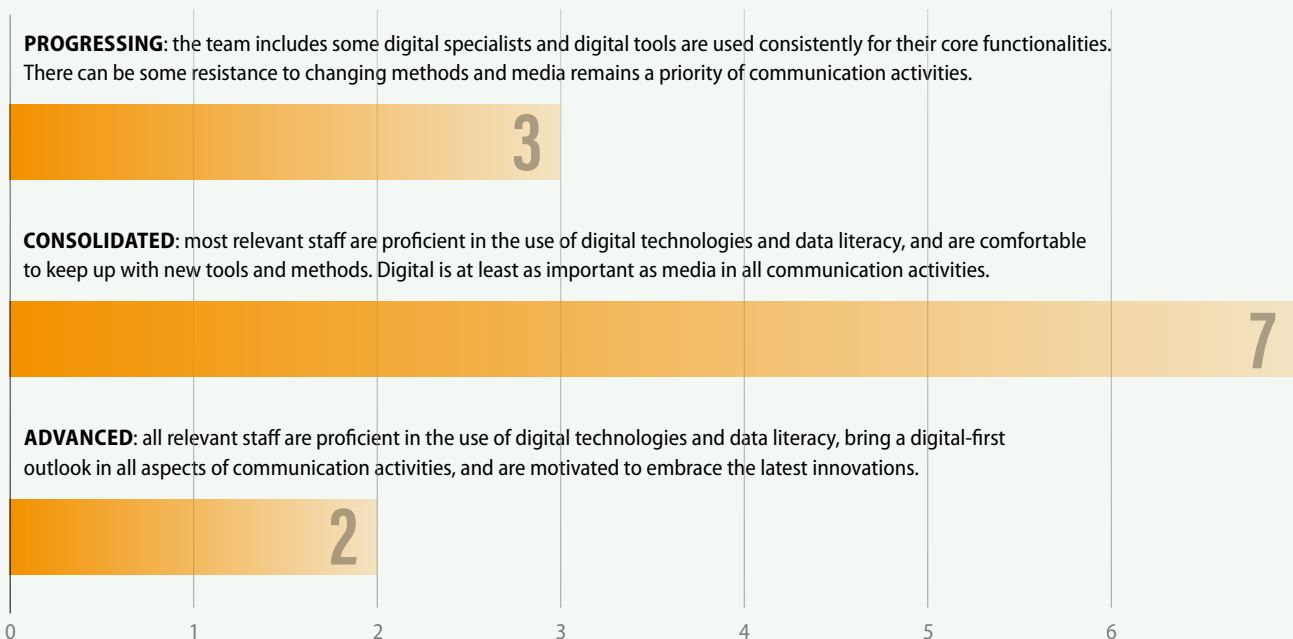
well as some “pockets of excellence” that need to be consolidated into standard practice. Digitalisation and the use of data have emerged as key areas where the skills gap stands to hamper efforts for innovation and best practice.

Recognising this, GCS embarked on an ambitious reform of the function in a 2022-2025 Strategy that is focused on leveraging innovation, collaboration, and investment in skills and specialisations to strengthen its efficacy.

DEPARTMENTS ARE SPLIT ON THEIR LEVELS OF AGILITY AND DIGITALISATION

Half of the 12 surveyed UK government departments considered their communication unit to be “highly agile” in adapting to transformations in the field and seizing innovation. The other half claimed that they can sometimes struggle to update approaches but have managed to navigate challenges.

Similarly, a slight majority of departments has attained an intermediate level of digitalisation of practices and working methods. Only two consider themselves highly proficient in this area, and a quarter are dealing with some resistance and insufficient skills (see figure).



Source: OECD Public Communication Scan of the UK.

The Strategy, which is largely implemented, aims to address one of the top challenges raised across departments – that of personnel. Most departments noted for example their challenges with attracting and retaining the right talent, as well as a mismatch between the skills sought and those available. Ambitious professional development and training schemes are being rolled out by GCS to support departments with growing the necessary competencies at all levels of seniority.

Other initiatives, such as the informal roles of “heads of discipline” (senior experts who lead knowledge- and practice-sharing in a given domain across GCS), the GCS Innovation Lab, and the introduction of a proprietary GCS Large Language Model (LLM), serve to accelerate innovation.

Overall, new approaches and better use of technologies will help UK communicators overcome current challenges in their work. They will likewise enable them to pursue new and more ambitious goals, linked to those explored in this Scan.

Recommendations for strengthening and innovating GCS’s capabilities

- Consolidate standards of practice in all departments and teams according to those found in top-performing teams
- Maintain the focus and investment on skills and professional development
- Improve the use of data across departments
- Support experimentation and interdisciplinary collaboration
- Direct innovation efforts towards practices that improve dialogue with all citizens and make for better policy outcomes
- Ensure innovation is grounded in ethical principles



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